



Overly cautious and dangerous: An empirical evidence of the older driver stereotypes

Mélanie Joanisse^a, Sylvain Gagnon^{a,b,*}, Mihnea Voloaca^a

^a School of Psychology, University of Ottawa, Canada

^b Elizabeth Bruyère Research Institute, Canada

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 July 2011

Received in revised form 2 November 2011

Accepted 4 November 2011

Keywords:

Older driver

Ageism

On-road behavior

Driving simulation

ABSTRACT

Negative comments regarding the competency of older drivers are frequently heard in the general population. While negative stereotypes of older drivers seem to be present, their existence has yet to be empirically validated. We thus investigated the stereotypes pertaining to older drivers in two experiments. In both experiments young adults viewed 12 simulated clips of three categories of driving behaviors (i.e., younger adults' unsafe behaviors, older drivers' unsafe behaviors and appropriate-safe driving behaviors) without knowing the driver's age. They were asked to rate how representative the behaviors were of a typical younger, middle-aged, or older driver. Experiment 1 showed that older drivers' unsafe behaviors were rated as significantly more representative of the typical older driver, while young adults' unsafe behaviors were perceived as significantly more representative of the typical younger driver. In Experiment 2, younger participants viewed the same clips but were only asked to indicate whether the observed behavior was representative or not of the typical older driver. The main findings were replicated. When asked to describe the main features of the typical older drivers, participants qualified them as being overly cautious, uncomfortable behind the wheel, and unsafe and dangerous. The potential implications on driving performance of older drivers and on driving cessation and are discussed.

© 2011 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Older drivers are the fastest growing segment of the driving population (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001), which has led to an intensified presence on the road as they use their cars to maintain mobility (Martinez, 1995; Rosenbloom, 2004). Furthermore, in contrast to the previous generation, today's and tomorrow's older drivers are expected to use their vehicle more frequently and travel longer distances (Hakamies-Blomqvist et al., 2005; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001). It is now recognized that driving is more than a mode of transportation for the older drivers; it helps maintain their independence and feelings of autonomy, and it even fosters their identity (Classen et al., 2009). Conversely, driving cessation often results in a significant decrease in quality of life and may even induce depressive symptoms in those who stop driving (Azad et al., 2002; Marottoli et al., 1997, 2000; Oxley and Whelan, 2008).

* Corresponding author at: School of Psychology, University of Ottawa, Cognitive Aging and Driving Laboratory, 136 Jean Jacques Lussier, Vanier Hall (3042), Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5, Canada. Tel.: +1 613 562 5800x2515; fax: +1 613 562 5147.

E-mail address: sgagnon@uottawa.ca (S. Gagnon).

Consequently, understanding the factors that mediate older drivers' on-road performance and safety is critical to help them maintain their driving privileges for as long as possible. The main focus of earlier driving research has generally been the identification of the physical, cognitive, and perceptual changes, as well as the medical conditions commonly seen in old age, which can mediate or moderate the driving performance of older adults (Anstey et al., 2005; Bieliauskas, 2005; Daigneault et al., 2002; Lafont et al., 2008; Owsley et al., 2001; Zhang et al., 2000). While these studies are essential, the emphasis was mainly on variables stemming from the individual (i.e., health, cognitive status, vision). In almost all cases, influences related to the older drivers' social context have been neglected. This is of importance given that recent driving models of older adults posit that the social context and perceptions could impact driving performance (Anstey et al., 2005; Lindstrom-Forneri et al., 2010). Negative stereotypes of the older driver have been identified as one variable that can influence driving competence (Lindstrom-Forneri et al., 2010). However, this view remains hypothetical as the impact of negative stereotypes on older drivers is yet to be reported.

One potential reason for this lack of data could stem from the dearth of empirical findings regarding the older driver stereotype per se. This lack of data is most certainly in contrast with the negative perception entertained by the general population towards older drivers (Martin et al., 2005). If research on the influence of