

**Road Safety Research Report No. 74**

**The Good, the Bad and the  
Talented: Young Drivers'  
Perspectives on Good Driving  
and Learning to Drive**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The impact of young people's attitudes and mindsets on their driving, and the possible implications for interventions to improve road safety among this group, were investigated in a series of two workshops with each of six groups of young people (55 in total). The workshops and analysis focused on understanding how young people experience the learning process, their definition of its goal, good driving, and the implications of these for driving behaviour.

Participants defined being a good driver as the mastery of three different and parallel kinds of activity.

Driving as a **physical** activity is about safely controlling and guiding a physical object through a complex physical environment. Key components of good driving are:

- knowing how to control a car (a basic prerequisite) and, more specifically, the particular car you are driving – including having a good awareness of the car's size and capabilities;
- reading and reacting to road conditions, weather, road signs and other aspects of the environment; and
- reading and anticipating the behaviour of other drivers.

Driving as a **social** activity is about operating in a shared space in a way that ensures everyone is kept happy, and in a way that builds and maintains a desired image of oneself as a driver. The fact that driving is a social activity (it takes place in a shared space) does not mean that it is sociable: most of the requirements of good driving as a social activity mentioned by participants were about keeping out of other people's way and not annoying them. In particular, good driving means being a 'good obstacle', by being consistent, confident and predictable, and conforming to general patterns of behaviour.

Driving as an **emotional** activity is about preserving an appropriate frame of mind to drive well in the face of distractions and annoyances:

- In order to perform well at driving as a physical activity, a driver needs to maintain the right level of **mental alertness** – neither too relaxed ('zoned out') nor too stressed ('in a panic').
- In order to perform well at driving as a social activity, a driver needs to maintain the right level of **assertiveness** – neither too aggressive nor cowed and unconfident. However, participants were more forgiving of their own tendency to get aggressive than of other people's.

Drugs (including alcohol) can have an impact on driving ability by shifting one of these balances; but different drugs are believed to have different effects. For instance, some participants felt that alcohol would reduce mental alertness or increase aggression, and so make one a worse driver, but that cannabis, by reducing aggression, might make one a better driver.

A small number of participants included **being law-abiding** in their definitions of good driving, but this was disputed by other participants. The majority perspective was that the laws and rules of driving were things to be followed not for their own sake, but only:

- if they were judged to be genuinely relevant to the safety of driving as a physical activity;
- if they coincided with what were believed to be the norms of driving as a social activity; and
- in order to avoid penalties.

However, it is striking that when participants talked about the laws and rules of driving, they tended to focus on the ones they found objectionable. Laws and rules are only noticed when they are seen to be ‘stupid’ or ‘pointless’. One of the reasons why the formal laws and rules of driving were perceived by some to be distant from the realities of driving was that laws or rules thought to be sensible and relevant (like stopping at a red light) were seen as commonsense or part of the ‘unwritten rules’ of driving.

Participants were sceptical about whether the process of learning for and passing the test contributed to good driving, for a number of reasons:

- the kind of driving required in the test is believed to be very different from ‘real driving’;
- the learning experience leading up to the test is not believed to cover enough real situations – with motorway driving being a particular concern;
- the nature of the assessment (a single time-limited test) is seen as inadequate; and
- urban myths about the test process (e.g. that examiners have quotas) continue to circulate.

Many of these beliefs are reinforced by others around the young driver – including, in some cases, the instructor. A number of participants had had instructors who distinguished learning to pass the test from learning to drive, and reinforced the sense that real driving is about following ‘unwritten rules’ rather than the actual rules and laws of driving.

As a result, a number of participants drew the conclusion that passing the test has very little connection with actual competence – and most took the view that it is only **after** one has passed that one really starts to learn to drive.

This post-test learning is seen as a process of learning from experience. Although this process may also be described as one of acquiring bad habits, the habits in question are seen as bad only against the standards of the test. As one participant put it, 'I've got better now I don't have to concentrate so much on driving properly'.

Learning from experience can happen as a result of observing others driving, but, for the most part, it is seen to be about learning from one's mistakes. The form this process takes varies depending on how confident a young driver is after completing their test:

- Drivers who are low in confidence experience the loss of their instructor as a negative event. They are likely to be very cautious and therefore to annoy other drivers. The mistakes they are most likely to make are transgressions of driving as a social activity, and the main feedback on which their learning is based is therefore the negative reactions of others. Such drivers may feel pressurised by this negative comment to drive in ways with which they are not comfortable.
- Drivers who are high in confidence experience the loss of their instructor as a release. They lack caution and have a tendency to take on challenges that are beyond their capabilities. The mistakes they are most likely to make are errors of driving as a physical activity, and the main feedback on which their learning is based is therefore accidents and near-misses. There is a widespread fatalism about the inevitability of accidents as part of the learning process.

As being confident is seen to be an important part of a being a good driver, a dangerous feedback loop can develop in the latter group of drivers: the **feeling of being confident** in more and more challenging situations is experienced as **evidence of driving ability**, and that 'proven' ability reinforces the feelings of confidence. Confidence feeds itself and grows unchecked until something happens – a near-miss or an accident – to break the cycle of increasing confidence. Some young drivers are therefore passing the test with a potentially fatal combination of attitudes and beliefs:

- a belief that much of what they have been taught is irrelevant to what really constitutes good driving;
- confidence that they are masters of what really constitutes good driving; and
- a natural tendency for this confidence to feed itself until an accident or near-miss finally shakes them out of it.

This does raise the question of where their initial confidence comes from. Two kinds of possible explanation for the overconfidence of many young drivers were identified.

First, many participants took the view that driving ability is a matter of natural talent. Even where they recognised that one cannot drive without any experience, these participants argued that it is natural talent (if one has any) that is brought out by experience. This **talent model** provides a clear basis for confidence in one's driving ability. It also makes the post-test phase more dangerous in other ways, as young people with a talent model are more likely to:

- see instruction and the requirements of the test as an artificial constraint, and dismiss what they have been taught;
- dismiss feedback from friends and family, other drivers or, indeed, from accidents and near-misses; and
- take on extreme challenges that they think they are capable of rather than increase the level of challenge by small increments.

Secondly, participants (mostly but not only young men) emphasised the extent to which their own behaviour was influenced by the need to build and maintain a particular image and identity for themselves. This need can be very important for some young drivers, and may persist until they find other, more secure, foundations for the image they desire (e.g. when they can afford a better car) or indeed change the desired image (e.g. when they become a parent). It may also explain the overconfidence of some young drivers, if that overconfidence is understood not as a dysfunctional cognitive assessment of their abilities but as a purposive social action by which they seek to position themselves in a particular way in the shared space of driving. This possibility has implications for the kinds of measure that may be required to change young people's driving behaviour. If overconfidence is a cognitive failure, then it can be corrected by facts, evidence and argument. If it is a purposive act, however, facts, evidence and argument may have very little impact.

Aspects of the way in which young drivers – some more than others – understand good driving and the learning process clearly raise problems for road safety. However, an understanding of the experiences, perspectives and motivations of young drivers also provides a constructive basis for change. Four broad areas of intervention were identified which could start to turn young drivers' perspectives on driving from a problem into the basis for solutions:

1. **Reposition the rules.** Young people have a real appetite to learn the 'real rules of driving'. A campaign drawing lessons from the 'Frank' approach to drugs could help to provide information and guidance to young people in a form they would be motivated to absorb and act on.

2. **Co-opt the culture.** In so far as overconfidence is a purposive action rather than a cognitive failure, it cannot be corrected by facts, evidence or arguments. However, it can be challenged by making the images or identities that these young people are seeking to project seem undesirable, ridiculous or shameful.
3. **Tackle the talent model.** The talent model may be very hard to shift, not only because it is very prevalent across contemporary culture but also because it has a possible basis in fact in so far as driving as a physical activity is concerned. However, the impact of the talent model might be reduced by doing more to emphasise the social and emotional aspects of driving, and qualities such as wisdom and maturity, in driver learning and testing.
4. **Re-think the test.** The learning regime currently employs a master–apprentice model which is appropriate to the acquisition of skills, but not to the social and emotional aspects of driving. Opportunities for young drivers to interact with each other, think about what good driving means to them or consider how they will continue learning after the test may all have a place in a revised approach which addresses driver development alongside driver training and driver education.



# 1 INTRODUCTION

Young drivers remain a critical audience for road safety interventions, with one statistical study after another confirming the general theme that young people in general, and young men in particular, are far more likely to be involved in an accident than older drivers. But why is this happening? What is different about young drivers?

It would be foolish to expect a single answer to a question such as this. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA), for instance, concludes from a review of existing research that ‘there are a wide range of reasons why young and novice drivers have a higher accident risk’, including ‘age, lack of driving experience, overconfidence in their abilities, under-estimation of risk, poor hazard perception, poor attitudes to driving (which are usually linked to personal characteristics and general social attitudes), gender, peer pressure (from passengers), parental influence’ (RoSPA, 2002, p. 14). Driving is a complex activity; and the causes of poor driving are equally complex.

The current research was designed to investigate one piece of this picture: the impact of young people’s attitudes and mindsets on their driving, and the possible implications for interventions to improve road safety among this group. In particular, we were keen to understand how young people experience the learning process, what they think its goal – good driving – looks like, and what the implications of these are for driving behaviour.

Six groups of young people (55 in total) took part in two two-hour workshops, involving a range of exercises (e.g. character-profiling exercises, image exercises). Insights from the first series of workshops were used as the basis for the design of the second series, enabling us to ask questions of the young people that were based on what they had already told us about their experiences and perceptions of driving.

Participants were recruited to ensure a mix of age (across the 17–25 age range), gender, social class and ethnicity. All drivers were holders of a driving licence, though not all owned their own car. Workshops were held in three locations (Sheffield, Solihull and Farnham), selected to ensure a mix of urban and rural drivers. Table 1.1 summarises the composition of the six groups.

<b>Table 1.1: Composition of workshops</b>				
<b>Workshop</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Age range</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>	
			<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
1	Farnham	17-21	4	5
2	Farnham	21-25	5	5
3	Sheffield	21-25	7	1
4	Sheffield	18-25	0	9
5	Solihull	17-21	5	4
6	Solihull	21-25	5	5
			<b>26</b>	<b>29</b>

Young people are, of course, as diverse as any other group of people, and it would be foolish to suggest that there is a typical ‘young person’ or ‘young person’s experience’. In the sections that follow, we draw attention to a number of important dimensions of difference between young people. However, to frame effective policy and interventions, it is also important to identify points of commonality that can help us to get a handle on the diversity of individuals. In this report we have sought to illustrate key themes with extensive quotation, so that readers may check our interpretation against the words of young people themselves. The age and gender of the participants quoted, along with any other incidental details, are provided in each case.

## 2 GOOD DRIVING

There are perhaps almost as many experiences of driving as there are drivers. Talking to the young people who took part in this research, we heard a wide diversity of views on what it is like to drive and the benefits and drawbacks of doing so. The quotations that follow provide some illustration of that diversity:

‘I’ve got a van and would be lost without it. I need it for work – it was given me by my boss. But I use it for my hobbies as well – football and so forth.’ [M, 22]

‘My boyfriend lives in a dodgy area, so I can drive him home. And I look after my nan and friends so they get home safely.’ [F, 21]

‘It bores me. I can’t stand it. I work all over England, driving a van on the motorway, and the speed’s restricted because of the trailer. I can’t stand it. It’s boring because of everything about it.’ [M, 21]

‘I’m quite thoughtful in the car. Quite dreamy. Thinking about things you don’t normally get time to think about in the day, when you’re busy. In the car you’ve nothing to do apart from get to where you’ve got to go. That’s why I like driving by myself.’ [F, 19]

‘I’m a hazard to others. I’m scared about what I’ll do to other people. I’ve had five crashes in six years. My concentration isn’t there. I’ll get on the phone while I’m driving, and can’t get out of the habit. I can’t turn my phone off or I’ll miss a call.’ [F, 24]

‘I do the same route each day to work, and get behind some old man doing 30 in a 40mph zone. I shout a lot in the car – not out of the window though! At the other end I immediately forget it and think about work. . . . I like to . . . not exactly race people, but if someone won’t let me out I’ll put my foot down and say sod you!’ [F, 24]

‘I’m a boy racer. I’ve modified my car quite a bit. I race radio-controlled cars . . . By watching toy cars, you can see how it works and it makes for a better experience. You feel more secure, go round quicker, have more control, learn about the physics of driving and understand how the machine works . . . My girlfriend drives me in her car, because I won’t park my car in some places, because it’s been broken into. I’ve done all this work to it so I want to protect it.’ [M, 21]

‘To me, passing my test meant freedom, the freedom to go anywhere by myself, and go and see my mates all round the country . . . I find it more

stressful to drive now than when I first started though. The novelty has worn off.' [M, 21]

'I hate driving places where I don't know where I'm going. I get really confused. In town I stop and cry.' [F, 21]

'I love classic cars. We used to have a 2CV in the family. It'd be something to show off about if you had one. Show off to friends and to strangers. I turn my head to watch others who have them.' [F, 18]

Behind this wide diversity of experiences, however, we found a high level of agreement around the question of **good driving**. For instance, in the exercise in which we asked participants to give unprompted individual definitions of a good driver, the same themes and phrases kept recurring within and across groups;<sup>1</sup> and participants readily assented to the collective definition of 'good driving' generated by combining their individual contributions, with only a few areas of potential disagreement (which are noted in the discussion that follows). Moreover, further analysis revealed a simple structure behind these collective definitions. At the highest level, the young people involved in this research defined being a good driver as the mastery of **three different and parallel kinds of activity**:

1. Driving as a **physical** activity – interacting with the car and with the environment.
2. Driving as a **social** activity – operating in a shared space governed by social rules.
3. Driving as an **emotional** activity – maintaining the right frame of mind.

The next three sections look at these types of activity in more detail. Section 2.4 examines one possible aspect of good driving that they seem to omit: not breaking the law.

## 2.1 Driving as a physical activity

Driving as a **physical** activity is about safely controlling and guiding a physical object through a complex physical environment. As a basic prerequisite for good driving in this physical sense, you need to know how to control a car and, more specifically, how to control the particular car you are driving:

'You need the ability to handle the car. Knowing how to drive a front wheel drive vs four wheel drive car, for example.' [M, 25]

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1 Participants wrote down the words and phrases they would use to define 'a good driver' before sharing them in the group, and their written responses were collected to avoid the possibility that one participant's responses might influence others.

‘Knowing what gear to be in. I hate being in the car and hearing that the car is in the wrong gear and it’s crying out to be changed because it’s wasting petrol.’ [F, 18]

Knowing how to control a car also means having a good awareness of the car’s size and capabilities:

‘You need to be spatially aware, someone who understands the limitations of the car and themselves. Some people going down the road leave six foot down the side. There’s no need.’ [M, 21]

‘When it comes to roundabouts, knowing you have enough space to go. For parking as well.’ [F, 18]

‘Knowing the ability of your car – particularly for people who drive faster. You need to know your car can get past in time or can go round the bend at speed.’ [F, 23]

‘Some people will go really fast thinking the car can take corners fast, but it can’t.’ [M, 21]

Three participants (all male) mentioned the need to ensure that your car stays roadworthy. In each case, the participant had a personal interest in this maintenance side of good driving:

‘My father is an ex Royal Engineer, and he’s big on making me make sure my car is safe. Brakes, for example. If you don’t pay attention to these things you may not be able to stop.’ [M, 25]

‘Stuff like the tire tread – you’ll break the law and have less grip when you brake.’ [M, 21]

Other participants accepted the importance of checking the car is roadworthy, but clearly saw this as something they would rely on others for.

Knowing how to control a car and being aware of its size and capabilities represent one side of the physical activity of driving. On the other side, one needs to read and react to a complex and changing environment. This includes road conditions, weather and road signs – although the general view seemed to be that some road signs mattered more than others:

‘Awareness – of other drivers, weather conditions, speed cameras, pedestrians, red lights, checking mirrors.’ [M, 21]

'Reading the conditions of the road and driving accordingly – e.g. the weather, daylight or not, country lanes, things like that.' [F, 24]

'Understanding all the road signs you see. My dad doesn't understand half of them.' [F, 18]

However, while there was general agreement on the criticality of awareness of environment, there was some disagreement on points of detail as to what one needed to be aware of (for instance, some questioned whether road signs mattered that much) and how one maintained awareness (for instance, how often one needed to check the mirror):

'I never notice the signs. I knew more when I took the test. I don't know what signs mean. I don't think it matters.' [F, 21]

'You're meant to check your mirrors before you indicate. But I don't do it any more, and I don't think I'm a bad driver.' [F, 19]

The aspect of the physical activity of driving to which participants drew most attention was the ability to read and anticipate the most troubling part of the environment: other drivers. The importance of being able to see in advance what other drivers might be about to do was one of the strongest themes in the definition of 'a good driver' offered by the participants:

'Being perceptive. You need to look ahead and see if things are going to happen. If you look ahead at a junction and see a car about to pull out, you can stop before it does.' [F, 22]

'You need to be a proactive thinker. You can tell that that person is going to pull out without indicating. You know a learner is not going to hare out of a junction at 90 miles an hour. Some lad of 17 who just passed the test will probably try it. It's a stereotyped approach, but that's what you do.' [M, 25]

'Expect everything, think of everything that might happen. For instance, that cyclist could come out.' [M, 17]

'Be prepared for every scenario. You shouldn't trust people.' [F, 19]

Driving seen as a purely physical activity is somewhat analogous to classic computer driving games. The physical challenge of driving is to steer one's own car through a rapidly changing, complex environment, anticipating and avoiding hazards from the road, the weather or from other drivers. But there is more to driving than this. Other people are, at the purely physical level, very complex and often unpredictable obstacles in the environment. But they are also **other people**,

who share the same social space. This leads us on to the second kind of activity involved in driving: the social activity of driving.

## 2.2 Driving as a social activity

Driving as a **social** activity is about operating in a shared space in a way that ensures everyone is kept happy. It is worth noting that, in describing driving as a **social** activity, in no way do we mean to imply that driving is a **sociable** activity. A few of the social requirements of driving mentioned by participants did indeed involve interaction:

‘It’s basic courtesy. You should say thanks to other drivers when they let you in.’ [F, 24]

But the vast majority are about keeping out of other people’s way and not annoying them:

‘Being courteous keeps everyone calm and happy. Also being smooth, not someone who changes gears in a jerky fashion. And confident: if you’re coming out of a junction, it’s horrible to be behind someone who could have gone out. It causes other people to get angry.’ [F, 18]

‘You should be considerate – say, when you’re queuing, letting other drivers in. Not blocking people in.’ [F, 23]

‘It’s all about working together on a motorway. People need to move over, if they see you coming down they’ll move over to give you room.’ [M, 17]

‘Just give people time and don’t drive up people’s arses.’ [F, 24]

‘Motorway usage – always looking to be on the inside lane when possible.’ [M, 25]

Although focused on avoiding unnecessary interaction, these requirements remain essentially social norms, repeatedly described by the participants with words such as ‘polite’, ‘considerate’, ‘patient’ and ‘courteous’. (By way of comparison, consider travelling on the London Underground, where a large number of rules and conventions exist to ensure that people can get on and off crowded trains without having to speak to each other.)

In a very small number of cases, participants offered definitions of good driving that pointed beyond the need to avoid annoying others towards a responsibility for others’ safety, for instance arguing that good driving involves ‘taking care of the other people around you’ [M, 21]. At the other end of the spectrum, one participant queried whether ‘being considerate necessarily makes you a good driver – like

letting others in when you're queuing, I don't think it's always necessary to do that anyway' [F, 23]. What is striking about these variant points of view, however, is that they throw into relief the overwhelming consensus among the majority of participants that **a good driver is one who does not annoy other drivers.**

Given that, at the level of driving as a physical activity, other drivers are identified as the most difficult obstacles on the road, it is perhaps not surprising that participants' definitions of good driving at the social level focused, to a large extent, on one's responsibility to minimise these difficulties for others, by being consistent, confident and predictable in one's behaviour:

'Being a committed driver – if you decide to go at a roundabout, you go, you don't start then stop. That's how a lot of accidents happen.' [F, 23]

'If you're sitting at a roundabout and you are not confident to go you will annoy the people behind you.' [F, 20]

'Precise and clear manoeuvres – indicate, positioning on the road.'  
[CHRIS, Sol ygr]

'A person who is predictable – for example, use your indicators to let other drivers know your intentions.' [F, 25]

Being a 'good obstacle' can also mean conforming to general patterns of behaviour, especially on the point of speed:

'In some situations it's safer to go the same speed as other cars because otherwise other drivers get angry and overtake you.' [F, 18]

'You have to follow commonsense. If you don't fit in then you will be the one who causes an accident.' [F, 25]

'If you drive too slow, you're prone to make other drivers tailgate you.'  
[F, 19]

Indeed, these requirements of driving as a social activity were presented as grounds for breaking another kind of requirement: the law. This point is discussed further in Section 2.4.

In Section 3.4, we shall argue that the social activity of driving is not just about conforming to social norms and keeping others happy. Operating in shared social space also means building and maintaining a desired image of oneself as a driver with others – what the Driver Behaviour Research Group have described as the **expressive** activity of driving (Driver Behaviour Research Group, 2001, cited in RoSPA, 2002). 'Being seen to be good' was not, unsurprisingly, part of the



definitions of good driving offered by participants, which is why it is not discussed further here. It is, however, an important element of driving as a social activity – for some drivers more than others.

## 2.3 Driving as an emotional activity

Driving is a demanding activity, both physically and socially, requiring a considerable degree of mental effort. Many of the definitions of good driving offered by participants drew attention to the need to maintain oneself in a state in which one is able to cope with these varied demands. Driving as an **emotional** activity is about preserving an appropriate frame of mind to drive well in the face of distractions and annoyances.

In describing the emotional requirements of good driving, participants used a wide range of words: ‘calm’, ‘confident’, ‘assertive’, ‘cautious’, ‘focussed’, ‘alert’, ‘concentrated’, and so forth. Many also talked about the need to strike an appropriate balance between extremes – for instance, between being aggressive on the one hand and insufficiently assertive on the other. An analysis of participants’ responses revealed two basic emotional balances that need to be struck.

First, in order to perform the physical activity of driving effectively, a good driver needs to achieve and maintain the right level of **mental alertness**. The physical activity of driving, as was discussed in Section 2.1, requires a high level of awareness of the environment and, in particular, of other drivers. Drivers who become too relaxed – what some participants described as being ‘zoned out’ – are therefore not driving well:

‘You can never relax too much because something could run out. A badger. You see people drumming on the steering wheel – if something ran out, you’d smack into the back of them.’ [F, 21]

‘You need complete concentration – not messing about with the radio when you’re coming up to a junction.’ [F, 19]

On the other hand, participants argued that **too much** mental alertness creates a different kind of challenge, reducing one’s ability to process information and putting one ‘in a panic’:

‘If you have a calm manner, you probably notice things more, whereas if you’re stressed or tense you tend to focus on one thing rather than everything around you. If you’re calm, you can focus on everything.’  
[F, 25]

In between the extremes of being ‘zoned out’ and ‘in a panic’ is an optimum mental state, what we might call being ‘in the moment’, in which a driver is able to

maintain awareness of everything in the environment without being overwhelmed by it.

A number of participants noted that the ability to process all the information coming in from the environment was a function not just of one's emotional state but also of other potential influences on one's mental capacity. Alcohol, for instance, was mentioned in this respect, as were passengers:

'If you're upset and thinking about other things, you can't be the best driver, you can't be concentrating fully.' [F, 22]

'I get distracted when they [my friends] are there . . . I'm safe when I'm by myself.' [F, 19]

Another commonly mentioned reason why people might not be able to strike the right balance of mental alertness was age:

'Good drivers are under 65. Old people drive too slow and are too cautious. Everything slows down as you get older. They forget things.' [F, 24]

'When you get to a certain age, 40 or 50, you should have a retest.' [M, 25]

The second emotional balance a good driver needs to strike relates to driving as a social activity, and is probably best described as **assertiveness**. Being assertive needs to be distinguished from being aggressive, which was universally condemned as bad driving:

'You need a positive attitude. If someone goes out and they've just had an argument, and they have a mardy attitude, they're almost looking for road rage or to cut someone up or generally to piss everyone else off. If they're in a happy mood they're going to be thinking straight, looking in their mirrors and so forth.' [M, 25]

'You see people, they're all F this, banging on the window, just getting themselves more agitated. You just have to think: I'll ignore you, you're a moron and I'm not.' [F, 21]

'All sense goes out of the window – I don't think rationally, I'm just thinking about getting the irritating driver in front of you out of the way.' [F, 24]

However, while participants were clear that one should not become aggressive, they also emphasised the need not to be cowed or lose confidence – because having low

confidence, as we saw in Section 2.2, leads one to become unpredictable and inconsistent:

‘If you’re a hesitant driver, you can get in other people’s way.’ [M, 20]

‘It’s no good being behind the wheel and panicking.’ [M, 19]

Two additional points are worth noting in connection with this second area of emotional balance. First, while participants were clear that aggressive driving is bad driving, many participants identified a tendency to get annoyed as their own principal weakness as a driver. Indeed, while participants tended to be condemnatory of anti-social behaviour in others, many appeared to be rather tolerant of, and even find funny, their own lapses. This may be a consequence of the pattern noted by previous research in which ‘the impression of security and anonymity that being in a car provides’ can lead to a ‘propensity to act in a more primal way than when off the road, where this combination is less evident’ (Cragg Ross Dawson, 2006, p. 8).<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, it is interesting to note that participants who mentioned **cannabis** linked its effects to this second dimension rather than to the first, and this may go some way to explaining differing attitudes to cannabis and alcohol. Rather than being seen as something that reduced mental attention and made one a worse driver, cannabis was mentioned as something that reduced aggression and so might make one a better driver. For instance, the young man who talked about the importance of ‘positive attitude’ (above) went on to suggest, albeit half in jest, that one should:

‘probably have a spliff before you go out! I think some people, it’s in their nature that they’re calm, some people have to take a few deep breaths or . . . a Paul McKenna tape, something like that.’ [M, 25]

This is quite different from the situation with alcohol, which was more likely to be linked to a reduction in mental alertness, or even to increased aggression:

‘He thinks he’s a better driver when he smokes cannabis because he drives slower. It’s safer to smoke cannabis and drive than drink-driving. He’s been told this by some of his friends. Drink-driving you’re more stimulated, while cannabis is more of a depressant. You’re not eager to overtake people, you’re quite chilled out.’ [M, 21]

This differentiation should serve as a reminder that simplistic labels like ‘drug-driving’ are unlikely to support effective interventions to change behaviour. Different drugs are perceived and used in different ways and contexts by young people, and their relationship with driving understood accordingly in different ways.

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2 An analogous case is the well-documented and researched phenomenon of ‘flaming’ on the internet.

What applies to alcohol and cannabis will also apply to other recreational and party drugs as well. Extreme care is needed about conclusions drawn by researchers – generally older researchers – that the ‘growth in drug driving amongst the young adds further weight to existing academic research that describes the need amongst some teenagers/young adults for sensation, thrill-seeking, excitement, risk and even anti-social behaviour’ (Holder, 2006, p. 30): drugs mean many things to young people beyond sensation, thrill-seeking, excitement and risk.

## 2.4 What about the law?

A small number of participants included a reference to the ‘rules’ of driving in their definitions of good driving (three suggested that a good driver observes the speed limit; two talked about being law-abiding in general; and one argued that knowing the Highway Code was important ‘in certain situations’, though later clarified that this was more a matter of environmental awareness, e.g. being able to understand gantry signs on motorways). In each case, these references prompted debate and disagreement in the groups. The majority perspective among participants was that the laws and rules of driving were things to be followed not for their own sake, but only if they fitted with other considerations.

The excerpt of dialogue that follows neatly illustrates the three situations in which participants believed it might be a good idea to follow the rules:

Researcher: ‘Are all laws the same?’

‘No, there’s a danger scale.’ [F, 25]

‘It’s what you can get away with.’ [F, 24]

‘And what everyone else does too.’ [M, 24]

First, laws may be important because they do indeed relate to critical elements of the **physical** activity of driving: there is a ‘danger scale’, with some laws providing a useful guide on sensible driving behaviour – though obviously this provides a rationale for ignoring those laws which one does not believe really reduce the dangers of driving:

‘I don’t keep to the law-abiding bit though. It doesn’t make me a worse driver because I keep it in reason, e.g. not sticking to 30 on a country road when it’s not dangerous.’ [M, 24]

‘It’s hard to stay within the speed limits when you **know** you’re safe.’ [F, 18]

‘I don’t think keeping the speed limit makes you a perfect driver. It actually makes you a worse driver if you’re not prepared to make a decision about what you’re doing. If you did 70 on a free-flowing motorway you’d be a mobile chicane.’ [M, 25]

Secondly, laws may coincide with the norms of driving as a **social** activity and with ‘what everyone else does too’ – although, again, failure to coincide with these norms may therefore provide a good reason to ignore a law:

‘I’d question the speed-limit one. If the car in front is doing 90, you’ll cause more problems by doing 70.’ [F, 24]

‘If everyone stuck to the unwritten rules it would be fine. Like if it’s dark why not go a bit over the speed limit.’ [M, 25]

Thirdly, it may be a good idea to follow a law not because it corresponds to any particular aspect of good driving, but simply to **avoid penalties**: ‘It’s what you can get away with’:<sup>3</sup>

‘I’m very aware, never got caught speeding, never had a near-miss. I’m a good driver even though I speed.’ [F, 24]

This last attitude also applies to a number of rules or best practices which one needs to acquire to pass the driving test but then, according to participants, can forget about:

‘I don’t think you need to know the Highway Code in great depth. It’s good to know it to pass the test.’ [M, 24]

For the majority of participants in our workshops, the formal ‘rules’ of driving (laws, the Highway Code, test requirements) were perceived as, at best, in line with, and at worst contrary to, the real requirements of good driving as a physical, social and emotional activity. However, it should be noted that this perception may, in part, be a consequence of the fact that **rules only tend to be noticed when they are thought to be ‘stupid’ or ‘pointless’**. For instance, discussions of speeding tended inevitably to lapse into group whinges about a particular speeding limit on a particular stretch of road that everyone agreed was too low. In another instance, when a (recently passed) participant suggested that there was value in the Highway Code because ‘you need to know to stop at a red light’ [M, 17], another immediately responded ‘but that’s just commonsense’ [M, 21]. And a number of the other ‘unwritten rules’ cited by participants are in fact parts of the Highway Code. If all the formal rules that actually make immediate sense are co-opted by the realm of

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3 Cf. the discussion of passive respect in Cragg Ross Dawson (2006). This report argues that respect for the Highway Code and the authorities that enforce it is ‘largely based on two factors: the safety rationale of the law, and the threat of penalties for breaking it’. These correspond to the first and third of the rationales identified by participants in the current research. The omission of conformity with social norms as a rationale for following the law is in line with a general tendency in existing research to underplay the importance of driving as a social activity.

informal unwritten rules and commonsense, it is hardly surprising if the rump of rules left over seem distant from the realities of driving.

Rather, as many speakers of good grammatical English instinctively associate 'the rules of grammar' with split infinitives and saying 'whom' rather than 'who', so too there appears to be a tendency for drivers to identify the rules of driving with the few rules they question or fail to observe, rather than the many they take for granted and follow daily.

## 2.5 Summary

Participants defined being a good driver as the mastery of three different and parallel kinds of activity.

Driving as a **physical** activity is about safely controlling and guiding a physical object through a complex physical environment. The key components of good driving are:

- knowing how to control a car (a basic prerequisite) and, more specifically, the particular car you are driving – including having a good awareness of the car's size and capabilities;
- reading and reacting to a road conditions, weather, road signs and other aspects of the environment; and
- reading and anticipating the behaviour of other drivers.

Driving as a **social** activity is about operating in a shared space in a way that ensures everyone is kept happy, and builds and maintains a desired image of oneself as a driver. The fact that driving is a social activity (it takes place in shared space) does not mean that it is sociable: most of the requirements of good driving as a social activity mentioned by participants were about keeping out of other people's way and not annoying them. In particular, good driving means being a 'good obstacle', by being consistent, confident and predictable, and conforming to general patterns of behaviour.

Driving as an **emotional** activity is about preserving an appropriate frame of mind to drive well in the face of distractions and annoyances:

- in order to perform well at driving as a physical activity, a driver needs to maintain the right level of **mental alertness** – neither too relaxed ('zoned out') nor too stressed ('in a panic'); and
- in order to perform well at driving as a social activity, a driver needs to maintain the right level of **assertiveness** – neither too aggressive nor cowed and unconfident. However, participants were more forgiving of their own tendency to get aggressive than of other people's.

Drugs (including alcohol) can have an impact on driving ability by shifting one of these balances, but different drugs are believed to have different effects. For instance, some participants felt that alcohol would reduce mental alertness or increase aggression, and so make one a worse driver, but that cannabis, by reducing aggression, might make one a better driver.

A small number of participants included **being law-abiding** in their definitions of good driving, but this was disputed by other participants. The majority perspective was that the laws and rules of driving were things to be followed not for their own sake, but only:

- if they were judged to be genuinely relevant to the safety of driving as a physical activity;
- if they coincided with what were believed to be the norms of driving as a social activity; and
- in order to avoid penalties.

However, it is striking that when participants talked about the laws and rules of driving, they tended to focus on the ones they found objectionable. Laws and rules are only noticed when they are seen to be 'stupid' or 'pointless'. One of the reasons why the formal laws and rules of driving were perceived by some to be distant from the realities of driving was that laws or rules thought to be sensible and relevant (like stopping at a red light) were seen as commonsense or part of the 'unwritten rules' of driving.

### 3 BECOMING A GOOD DRIVER

In Section 2, we examined the definitions of good driving offered by participants. In this section, we go on to explore the accounts given by participants of **how one becomes a good driver**.

#### 3.1 The role of the driving test

The event which allows one to become a driver, of course, is passing the driving test. But does passing the test make you a **good** driver? The participants in this research were sceptical about the relevance of passing the test, for a number of reasons. First, many participants argued that the kind of driving behaviour required in the test fails to correspond to the real requirements of good driving (the few partially dissenting voices are discussed in the next section):

‘If you actually did drive like they taught, you would be a hazard.’ [M, 20]

‘You don’t drive the way they teach you.’ [F, 21]

‘Coasting as well, there’s no problem with that. I don’t really see the problem. I said to the instructor – you do that too!’ [M, 17]

‘Why do they teach you to feed the wheel? Nobody does it.’ [M, 25]

‘You have to check your mirrors, but not as much as on the test. You have to keep moving your head on the test so they know you are checking your mirrors.’ [M, 24]

‘No-one drives the way the DVLA teaches you.’ [M, 20]

‘The test isn’t the true way of driving.’ [M, 20]

This perception of the test seems to be reinforced by others around the learner, such as family members and friends – and also some driving instructors:

‘After the test my driving instructor said you can drive how I do now – like a loon.’ [M, 25]

‘My driving instructor told me to drive correctly for the next 40 minutes [on the test] and then after that drive however I wanted to.’ [M, 25]

‘My new instructor was open and honest. He knew how the book worked – and said the book was crooked, but we’ll do it this way. He used to say “we don’t have to do this, because it’s not in the test, but I’ll teach you



because it will make you a better driver”. He gave me ways round things, the unwritten rules of driving. I always let bus drivers out, because the bus drivers don’t own the bus so they won’t care if they run into you. He taught me the wisdom, the law of the road.’ [F, 18]

‘My instructor taught me how to drive on the test and how to drive in the real world. Certain things are unwritten rules of driving that you wouldn’t know otherwise. Like letting people in.’ [F, 18]

Instructors who talk in this way may only be meeting a demand already created by popular views about the gap between the ‘written’ and ‘unwritten’ rules of driving (see the earlier discussion in Section 2.4). A few participants expressed concern that they had not been taught the ‘wisdom of the road’ by their instructors:

‘There’s loads of these unwritten rules. Don’t hog the fast lane, move over when someone’s joining the motorway, when two lanes of traffic feed in you should go alternately from each lane. You don’t get taught these in your lessons.’ [M, 25]

‘If someone’s making mad hand signals, I don’t know the unwritten rules. I don’t think you can know these straight away. I just think I’m not going to do that again, it was a bit scary.’ [F, 21 – recently passed]

The perception of the test as unconnected from the realities of driving is also reinforced by the view that the learning experience leading up to it does not address real enough situations, in particular motorway driving:

‘Motorways need to be covered. Lots of my mates are scared of motorways. They don’t know about Pass Plus. I reckon it should be required.’ [M, 17]

‘Motorway driving should be taught. My friend thought it was so easy until she did it. She was really scared in the dark, with no lights. I felt comfortable in the daytime, but not at night.’ [F, 23]

‘It was only on the motorway that I realised how big the blind spot is – it does amaze me how much of a blind spot there is.’ [F, 18]

‘Our ideal learning situation would focus on realistic situations, like going into a car park and going up the spiral. I remember the first time, thinking: do I go round in first? More realistic situations would be good, rather than tootling round the same old roads, and reversing round the corner.’ [F, 19]

‘Our ideal learning situation is in a bubble-wrapped car, and Jeremy Clarkson is teaching. You get real-life danger. You need to learn how to

brake properly.' [F, 24] – 'Yeah. Would you rather know how to feed a wheel or brake in time?' [F, 24]

Not only is the learning experience leading up to the test limited, the actual nature of the assessment – a single time-limited test – is also seen as inadequate by a generation used to GCSE coursework and modular assessment:

'Rather than tick tick tick, just driving around and generally being evaluated, rather than just sitting there doing the points, ticking off a piece of paper and then you fail, the whole learning process should be part of it. They should look at how aware you are.' [M, 21]

'Your driving instructor knows how you drive best. A half hour doesn't show how you drive.' [F, 25]

'Instead of one test, you could do it over a two- or three-day period. One of them could be a motorway test, have it as a standard. Maybe another test, but with another instructor to show it wasn't a fluke. Better judge of what you are.' [M, 21]

Suspensions of the testing process are further strengthened by enduring 'urban myths' about quotas:

'A lot of it is to do with examiners because some pass a lot and some don't pass any more. And they have numbers to meet.' [F, 18]

'I've heard go late in the day because they've already met their quota.' [F, 19]

Putting all these factors together, a number of participants had drawn the conclusion that passing the test was no guarantee of actual competence as a driver, a conclusion a few had applied to their own driving as well:

'I think people are getting passed too quickly. My sister only learned for three months. She's so impractical. When she got in the car afterwards she couldn't drive. It was like she was still learning. Me and my mum had to go out with her every night.' [F, 19]

'A lot of people fluke their way through the test.' [M, 24]

'I've talked to a lot of people who think they shouldn't have passed the test or you have friends who drive badly and you wonder how they passed. I know I shouldn't have passed: I cut across traffic and I drove above a 30 mph limit.' [F, 22]

There may well be a considerable amount of erroneous belief behind these perceptions, but the fact of the perceptions remains. For the majority of the young people who participated in this research, the learning they had undertaken to pass the test was seen as, at best, peripheral to learning how actually to drive. In fact, a number argued that learning how to drive only begins **after** one has passed the test:

‘One of the best things people say is that you don’t really learn to drive until you’ve passed.’ [M, 20]

‘You learn to pass your test, and then learn to drive afterwards.’ [F, 24]

‘You learn more once you pass and you’re on the road. That’s when the learning really starts.’ [F, 23]

## 3.2 The role of experience

If learning how to drive starts **after** one has passed the test, how does one learn? The short answer given by many participants is experience:

‘I’ve only been driving three months, and put it [current ability level] down to inexperience in certain situations. I will get better with more experiences and knowing the roads round where I drive.’ [M, 17]

A very small number of people questioned whether learning from experience actually improves the quality of one’s driving:

‘I disagree. I know experience helps and confidence increases, but I’m not sure actual driving standard increases. You get into bad habits, your comfort zone gets bigger. You think you can handle things but someone who just passed their test might be more cautious.’ [F, 19]

‘When you pass your test you start learning it all over again. You’ve only just started to learn then. You get bad habits creeping in.’ [M, 21]

With the single exception of the first participant quoted above, however, references to ‘bad habits’ did not seem to be entirely sincere, in that those who spoke about them did not seem to think the bad habits made them any worse as drivers. Instead, there was evidence of a kind of double-speak in operation, with ‘bad habits’ being defined in terms of the original lessons learned for the test and therefore peripheral to the real qualities of a good driver. Consider, for instance, the interesting distinction made between ‘technique’ and ‘ability’ in the first quotation below, or the odd use of the phrase ‘driving properly’ in the second:

'Your technique is good [when you've just passed] but your actual driving isn't. I'm a better driver now than at 17. My actual ability is better.'  
[M, 24]

'I've got better now I don't have to concentrate so much on driving properly – so I can drive with one hand on the wheel. You can steer faster with one hand going round a corner rather than going 10-to-2.' [M, 17]

'When you first get your licence you are still along the right lines, but then you pick up habits like crossing your hands and then you get a worse driver . . . But you've just got to get out on the road and learn for yourself. You get more confident but the politeness goes out. But thinking ahead and being observant gets better.' [M, 19]

How does experience actually improve one's driving ability? Some participants noted the value of various kinds of observation – although in this respect it is worth noting other research which has pointed out that the behaviour being observed may not itself be good driving:<sup>4</sup>

'You can learn from watching people. I used to drive around in the car park with my dad.' [M, 21]

'I learned some driving skills from watching my parents as well.' [F, 18]

'Having experience observing others so I can be prepared for the nutters. Get a sense of what I'll come up against.' [F, 21]

Far more common, however, was the view that, as one participant put it very simply: 'you learn from your mistakes, don't you?' [M, 21]. The form this 'learning from mistakes' takes, however, varies depending on how confident a young person is of their own abilities at the time they pass the test.

On the one hand, some young people (a small number and mostly women, if our sample is anything to go by) are relatively **low in confidence** at the time they complete the test – and may even question whether they were ready to pass. These young people are likely to experience the loss of their instructor as a negative event.

'I got the test, went out in my first car – it was scary without the instructor, in a new car.' [F, 20]

'I was scared on the day of the test – and more scared afterwards when I was on my own in the car, and it's really weird.' [F, 21]

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4 For instance, research carried out for Direct Line by YouGov (2006), and cited in Holder (2006), warns that parents are passing bad driving habits on to their children.

These low-confidence new drivers are likely to be very cautious – making them less likely to have accidents, but more likely to annoy other drivers. The mistakes they are most likely to make, that is, are transgressions of driving as a **social** activity, which are, in turn, likely to be met with unpleasant or uncomfortable feedback from other drivers:

‘I learned the hard way, by getting sworn at. You don’t do it again.’ [F, 25]

‘If you’re with someone who’s a very cocksure driver, they don’t understand why you drive a different way. They say come on, why didn’t you go then. I start thinking maybe I should.’ [F, 23]

Some of these drivers will actually feel pressured by other drivers into doing things they are not confident about, for example driving faster than they feel able to:

‘Sometimes I have to drive faster because I’m a hazard, but I feel uncomfortable. Other road users are forcing me to be in a position where I’m uncomfortable.’ [F, 23]

This is very much in line with findings from other research: for instance, nearly two-thirds of respondents in one survey said that they felt pressured ‘by other drivers to go faster’ (TNS Think, *Safety Campaign Tracking Survey (2005/06)*, cited in Holder (2006)).

On the other hand, other young people (a larger number, with a preponderance of men, if our sample is anything to go by) are **high in confidence** at the time they complete the test – though looking back, many describe this as **overconfidence**.<sup>5</sup> These young people experience the loss of their instructor in a very different way:

‘The first time you’re on your own you feel really alone. You sit there thinking I can do what the hell I want now! That’s when you get your accidents.’ [M, 20]

‘Around two years ago I passed my test and I started driving stupidly, speeding and stuff. And then the novelty wore off of being a driver, not just a learner. When you’re a driver, you feel like you have a right to drive at the speed you want because you passed your test. I knew I was speeding but I didn’t think anything of it.’ [F, 19]

‘When you pass your test you go a bit wild. You think: I can do what I want now. Well, I did anyway.’ [F, 19]

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5 The overconfidence of many young drivers has been implicated as a factor in crashes by much research, as well as popular wisdom. See, for instance, the discussion of overconfidence in Stradling *et al.* (2006).

Not surprisingly, these young drivers are less cautious in their driving, and tend to take on challenges that are beyond their capabilities. As a result, the mistakes they are most likely to make are errors of driving as a **physical** activity. The feedback for such errors, of course, takes the form of near-misses and accidents.

This point is worth emphasising: **for the more confident young drivers, learning by experience means learning through accidents**. Indeed, there is a widespread fatalism about the inevitability of accidents as part of the learning process:

‘Near-misses have an impact. I’m glad my young cousin’s had an accident because he’ll learn from it. It’s like a rite of passage.’ [M, 25]

‘He’s one of those young lads that cuts in on you and waves just to wind you up. He is probably a good driver, but will have a serious accident and learn from that, and he’ll then have to sell his car and get something really slow, and he’ll learn from that.’ [M, 21 – describing a 17-year-old character]

‘After the test I drove like a bit of a prat really. I passed first time, was a bit arrogant and thought I was a very good driver. I then had a crash. I thought I was excellent until I had the crash.’ [M, 21]

‘I crashed into a bollard, reversed the car really fast over the bollard, and then learned my lesson after crashing into someone head on. You think you’re the dog’s bollocks [when you pass], but you’re not.’ [M, 22]

‘Lads are worse when they start driving, get cocky. The danger is four months after the test. The accident corrects the cockiness.’ [M, 25]

‘I’ll learn my lesson one day.’ [M, 17]

It would be more accurate, of course, to talk about a spectrum of confidence here rather than two groups, with some young drivers sitting in a middling position with a reasonable level of confidence that matches their current ability. Nevertheless, the contrast between low and high confidence helpfully throws into relief the very different experiences of different young drivers. As one participant put it:

‘For unconfident drivers like me and [other participant], the pre-test stuff is important to build our confidence up. Then there’s the aggressive guys, and it’s the stuff afterwards that matters to them. Anyone is allowed to drive – they don’t test your personality. But you can’t have a one size fits all approach. It’s a totally different ball game.’ [F, 23]

There is reason to believe that, where a young driver does have it, confidence breeds more confidence. This is because **being confident is itself seen to be an important**

**part of being a good driver** – and a key part of the emotional activity of driving (see Section 2.3; it was also striking that, when asked to draw a graph of their ability over time, almost all participants drew a graph of their confidence over time). The result is a feedback loop, in which the **feeling of being confident** in more and more challenging situations is experienced as **evidence of driving ability**, and that ‘proved’ ability reinforces the feelings of confidence:

‘Speed gives him a feeling of control, just the fact he can go quite quick.’  
[M, 21 – describing a 17-year-old character]<sup>6</sup>

The belief in one’s own ability feeds itself and grows unchecked until something happens – a near-miss or accident – to break the cycle of increasing confidence.

For the first group of low-confidence drivers, learning from experience can be a stressful and potentially unpleasant experience, but at least they are less likely to be involved in a serious accident. For the second group of high-confidence drivers, learning from experience involves a far-riskier kind of mistake. This group of young people are passing the test with:

- a belief that much of what they have been taught is irrelevant to the what really constitutes good driving;
- confidence that they are masters of what really constitutes good driving; and
- a natural tendency for this confidence to feed itself, until an accident or near-miss finally shakes them out of it.

For the most overconfident and least lucky, **this is a fatal combination of beliefs and attitudes**.

It also leaves a mystery: if these young people believe that much of what they have been taught, and the test they have just passed, are largely irrelevant to what really constitutes good driving, what is the basis for their high levels of confidence? Sections 3.3 and 3.4 explore some possible solutions of this mystery suggested by the evidence from this research.

### 3.3 Talent

Are good drivers born or made? Participants in this research expressed a range of views on this question. At one end of the spectrum, some participants took the view that one’s ability as a driver is entirely a function of experience – what we might call a **competence model** of driving:

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6 Cf. a survey conducted in the Midlands which found particularly high levels of agreement among 17–24-year-olds with the statement: ‘Although I drive fast I’m always in control’ (Step Beyond, Midlands Partnership Group, *Drivers Attitude Study* (2006), cited in Holder (2006)).

'I think you can pick it up whoever you are, with practice.' [F, 21]

'Anyone could learn to be a good driver. It doesn't make any difference how intelligent you are.' [F, 17]

'If you're driving a lot, you become overconfident. If you drive rarely, you're unskilled. If you are somewhere in-between, you have that extra sharpness.' [M, 24]

At the other end of the spectrum, some participants took the view that driving ability is something innate – what we might call a **talent model** of driving:

'Some people are born with it. My boyfriend is a born driver. That's his thing.' [F, 20]

'Look at Michael Schumacher, the best natural driver around. He was born with that. You couldn't teach him.' [M, 25]

'Everyone's got a different control limit. Some people are happier and safer when they go faster.' [M, 20]

For some, this belief was based less on examples of great driving than on examples of people who seemed constitutionally bad at driving:

'A girl I work with is the worst driver, she will never change.' [F, 20]

'My sister had lots of accidents in a month – it's the kind of person she is. She's not aware and goes round corners not in gear.' [M, 21]

In many cases, participants recognised that one cannot drive without any experience, but still argued that it was natural talent that was being brought to the surface by this experience:

'Once you're taught, your ability comes through.' [M, 21]

'Practice makes perfect. You have to learn, like speaking or walking. Some people are born good drivers but they still need to learn.' [M, 21]

The talent model has a clear potential to make the post-test phase much more dangerous, as young drivers with a talent model are more likely to:

- see instruction and the requirements of the test as an artificial constraint, and dismiss what they have been taught;



- dismiss feedback:
  - from friends or family, who can be dismissed as nervous drivers;
  - from other drivers, who can be seen as the cause of any problems; and
  - from accidents, which can be blamed on other drivers, bad luck or the inadequacies of the car;
- take on extreme challenges that they think they are capable of rather than increase the level of challenge by small increments.

The examples that follow provide illustrations of these patterns in some of the talent-model drivers among the participants in this research.<sup>7</sup> The numbers in the quotations refer to the scores out of 10 the participant gave him or herself when asked to rate driving ability over time:

‘I gave myself a 9. I’m a very confident driver, aware, spatially aware, always signal, just tend to drive fast but I don’t see that’s a problem. If I’m going through a neighbourhood where there’s children I slow down. I am probably overconfident.’

Researcher: ‘What would it take to get to a 10?’

‘A better car would probably get me there.’

‘. . . I’ve always been pretty confident. Even when I crashed at uni. I got very drunk and jumped in the car because I wanted bacon and eggs, and I drove into the statue in the middle of Southampton, which was quite amusing. It was only a little metro and it couldn’t really handle 60 mph. The problem was I did my test at university. When I did my lessons, the guy just wound down the windows. In my test I was sweating alcohol. When I passed my test, I had the arrogance of “I’m a good driver”.’

[M, 25]

‘I started as an 8, then went down to a 7 or 6. Someone from the outside would give me a 3. Smoking, on the phone, driving. You are talking to someone but you need to smoke. I know it’s ridiculous. I’m very competent, but dangerous and stupid. Well, not dangerous . . . but these are the rules they say make you a bad driver.’

Researcher: ‘Do you want to get better?’

‘I’d love to get better. Sat nav is amazing. How many people can say they’ve not looked at their map on their steering wheel?’ [M, 25]

‘I know my capability, I know my car’s capability, but I don’t know about everyone else.’

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7 For an example of a young driver with a talent model in another piece of research, consider the following quotation from the Transport for London (TfL) study of London drivers: ‘I drive quite fast sometimes, but I know I’m safe. I’ve never had a crash and if I do, it won’t be my fault’ (TfL, *London Drivers’ Attitude to Road Safety* (2006), cited in Holder, (2006)).

Researcher: 'How do you judge your capabilities?'

'The fact that I . . . well, I have had a crash, but that was years ago and a little old dear's fault.' [F, 24]

Unfortunately, the only ways of correcting the talent model that participants were able to identify were accidents:

'I spent a good time thinking I was really good, but really I was rubbish. I couldn't believe it when I had an accident, but then I got much better. My awareness might have gone down but I am not driving like a nutter any more, so it kind of balances out. I used to think I was a great driver. I was always asking to drive, I was desperate to drive – I just really liked driving. Looking back, I was pushing the boundaries when I first passed. It wasn't a conscious decision but it's just that it's lucky I had a small accident to make me realise. I thought I was in control all the time, but I didn't know the limits before . . . My instructor was always telling me how good I was, and I probably believed it too much.' [M, 20]

In the most extreme cases, moreover, participants suggested that these accidents would need to be serious ones. Mere 'near-misses' may even serve to reinforce the impression of talent:

'He's a typical lad, very arrogant with his driving, thinks he can get away with things. Probably always has a fairly fast car, may have had some accidents, but has got away with it, nothing too serious. So now he's got it in his head that he can survive anything. He feels a bit immortal, even more so when he's had a few drinks. He knows he's doing something a bit dangerous, but the immortality kicks in.' [F, 23 – describing young male character]

### 3.4 Life-stage factors

A number of participants described reckless driving as a 'phase' associated with one's age, something one would naturally grow out of with time. In many cases this phase was associated specifically with being a young **man**:

'You get older and realise you don't have to do 160 mph. If you have to get from A to B and are in a convoy, you don't have to race it. Going round a corner, you don't have to handbrake it. Everyone crashed – I was lucky.' [M, 25]

'I think he had his boy-racer days, went out with his mates just joyriding. He grew up a lot when he started work.' [M, 17]

The characteristic feature of what we call ‘life-stage’ accounts of poor driving in young people is that they see this poor driving as a symptom of attitudes or motivations which go far wider than driving. For example, one research study which found that young people were the least likely to rate a number of dangerous driving behaviours as ‘extremely unacceptable’ (including using a mobile phone while driving, carrying on driving when too tired, driving after two pints), also found that they were least likely to rate a number of **non-driving** behaviours as unacceptable (such as shoplifting, dropping litter in the street, not buying a licence for your television) (TNS Think, *Safety Campaign Tracking Survey* (2005/6), cited in Holder (2006)). This, one might speculate, could be explained by a general lack of respect among young people for authority and rules, of which poor driving is just one symptom. This explanation of bad driving was offered by a few of the participants in our research:

‘Probably my boyfriend was a bad influence. He’s a terrible driver. I think it was just being around him, and being at an age when you don’t want to be responsible and boring. He was probably a bit more rebellious.’ [F, 23]

A second rather different life-stage account of poor driving with currency in the literature focuses on attitudes to risk-taking and sensation-seeking, especially among young men (see, for instance, the discussion of sensation-seeking and risk-taking in Stradling *et al.* (2006)). There was a limited amount of evidence of participants offering this kind of account, mostly in references to behaviour that had once been fun or ‘a laugh’ now being boring:

‘They don’t do it now [joy-ride] because they all find it boring.’ [M, 17]

Far more prominent among the participants in this research, however, was a third kind of life-stage account which emphasises neither ‘rebellion’ nor ‘thrill-seeking’, but the need to create and promote a particular identity and image for oneself. Holder (2006, p. 47) has provided an excellent description of the way in which this need might impact on driving behaviour.

Driving is also an expressive activity – what you drive and how you drive expresses your individuality on ‘the theatre of the road’ – and this is especially important to young people and particularly young men in its associations with masculinity, feeling positive, powerful and in control. Attitudes towards driving and the benefits young people expect from it – autonomy, independence, freedom, excitement – are present from a young age and most drivers bring these attitudes with them when they drive – ‘people drive as they live’, and the young are no exception.

Many of the participants in our research (especially, but not only, the young men) talked about this theatrical aspect of driving:

'Because there were people in the back, I was showing off. People were watching and I was the opposite to everything on the flipchart [the group's definition of good driving]. When I passed my test and was giving lifts, I was showing off then too. I stopped because once everyone else can drive, it's no big deal.' [M, 21 – initially describing his experience of driving when only 14]

'He's keeping up the appearance just for his mates. If there was no adrenaline he'd just fall asleep. He knows he's drunk but keeps going because his friends are jeering him on. If his friends weren't there he'd probably get a taxi'

Researcher: 'Why does it make him look big?'

'Because he can drive drunk. He thinks he's driving OK. It's like a rollercoaster. Your friends chicken out, but you'll still go on it. I've been on it, you haven't.' [M, 17 – describing an 18-year-old character]

'Maybe I need more driving lessons. But vanity would stop me. You don't want to tell your friends you're taking driving lessons again.' [M, 24]

'It's not good to be seen as a slow driver by your passengers. You don't want to be seen as an old person.' [F, 18]

Some also noted how this need to perform in certain ways might decline as one found other foundations for one's identity and image:

'A large percentage of young lads think driving is a good laugh. You grow out of it as you grow older, get a nicer car or don't need it so much, maybe save it for the motorways in the late evening. I think everyone's done it at some stage.' [M, 21]

Particularly important in this respect is having children, which brings with it the need for a new more responsible image of oneself – although some participants admitted that, when the children were not in their car, they might enjoy a brief return to less responsible days:

'I've thought about it and I think having my baby will improve my driving.' [F, 22]

'I'm looking to buy a family car because I'm having a baby. I need to start growing up. Need something practical . . . When you've got a little kid you've got someone else to look after.' [M, 21]

'She's got better since she had children. This is not an imaginary friend! She had a good time when she had loud music and drove crazily. Even now without the children she has the music on a bit louder, talks on her

phone when she's not meant to. She know's it's wrong, but she's a bit of an airhead.' [F, 19]

'I've normally got kids in the car so I'm quite sensible. But when I'm on my own I go faster than when they're in the car or I answer the phone, which I know I shouldn't.' [F, 25]

It is important to distinguish this 'image and identity' account of poor driving from 'thrill seeking'. In the case of the latter, the pay-off of bad driving behaviour lies in the actual performance of the activity: the activity is intrinsically satisfying or fun. In the case of the former, by contrast, the activity itself may be uncomfortable and unpleasant:

'Subconsciously he thinks he may crash. He knows he can't really drive. But he knows his friends will rip the piss out of him. He's subconsciously thinking of the crash, but does it.' [M, 25 – describing a 17-year-old character]

The pay-off of bad driving behaviour when it is motivated by a desire to build or maintain a particular image or identity lies in **having done** it – in having got a way with something and thereby demonstrating something about yourself – rather than in **doing** it.<sup>8</sup>

The emphasis placed by the participants in this research on the 'theatre of driving' is fully consistent with the importance of driving as a social activity in their definitions of good driving (see Section 2.2). Driving is, for young people, about much more than just safely controlling and guiding a physical object through a complex physical environment. It is also about operating in a shared space in a way that ensures everyone is kept happy and – to extend our earlier definition of driving as a social activity – **builds and maintains the desired image of oneself as driver**.

So how does this relate to the mystery originally raised at the end of Section 3.2: that many new drivers think what they have been taught is largely irrelevant to what really constitutes good driving, yet seem to have very high levels of confidence in their driving ability. The discussion of this section suggests a **possible** resolution of this mystery: that young people's overconfidence is not a dysfunctional cognitive assessment of their abilities, but **a purposive social action by which they seek to position themselves in a particular way in the shared space of driving**.

The stage model of learning to drive developed by the Driver Behaviour Research Group provides a useful context for this point (Driver Behaviour Research Group,

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8 'Rebellion' could fall into either of these categories. On the one hand, someone might be motivated to rebel by the sheer joy of cocking a snook at authority. On the other hand, rebellious behaviour might be motivated by the desire to position oneself with others as, for example, an independent-minded person.

2001, cited in RoSPA, 2002). According to the group, there are three stages of learning to drive, the first two of which clearly correspond to what we have called the physical activity of driving, and the third of which moves into the sphere of social and emotional activity:

1. **Technical mastery** – learning how to control and manoeuvre the vehicle.
2. **Reading the road** – learning to read the clues and information to anticipate the actions of other road users, and how to handle unfamiliar road situations.
3. **Expressive phase** – the manner in which the driver drives is an expression of his or her personality, attitudes and motivations.

The overconfidence of young drivers is usually seen as a failure in their estimate of progress against the first two stages of this model. The current suggestion is that it may, instead, be an active part of the third stage.

This possibility has profound implications for the kinds of measure that may be required to change young people's driving behaviour. If overconfidence is a cognitive failure, then it can be corrected by facts, evidence and argument. **If it is a purposive act, however, facts, evidence and argument may have very little impact** – until the risks to the individual are presented in a forceful enough way to override the motivation behind the act (e.g. when a serious accident makes a young person realise being safe is more important than being seen to be good). Different kinds of intervention are needed to shift this kind of behaviour.

These alternatives are discussed in Section 4, which looks at the practical implications of these findings for interventions to increase road safety among young drivers.

### 3.5 Summary

Participants were sceptical about whether the process of learning for, and passing, the test contributed to good driving, for a number of reasons:

- the kind of driving required in the test is believed to be very different from 'real driving';
- the learning experience leading up to the test is not believed to cover enough real situations – with motorway driving being a particular concern;
- the nature of the assessment (a single time-limited test) is seen as inadequate; and
- urban myths about the test process (e.g. that examiners have quotas) continue to circulate.

Many of these beliefs are reinforced by others around the young driver – including, in some cases, the instructor. A number of participants had had instructors who distinguished learning to pass the test from learning to drive, and reinforced the sense that real driving is about following ‘unwritten rules’ rather than the actual rules and laws of driving.

As a result, a number of participants drew the conclusion that passing the test has very little connection with actual competence – and most took the view that it is only **after** one has passed that one really starts to learn to drive.

This post-test learning is seen as a process of learning from experience. Although this process may also be described as one of acquiring bad habits, the habits in question are seen as bad only against the standards of the test. As one participant put it, ‘I’ve got better now I don’t have to concentrate so much on driving properly’.

Learning from experience can happen as a result of observing others driving, but for the most part it is seen to be about learning from one’s mistakes. The form this process takes varies depending on how confident a young driver is after completing their test:

- Drivers who are low in confidence experience the loss of their instructor as a negative event. They are likely to be very cautious and therefore to annoy other drivers. The mistakes they are most likely to make are transgressions of driving as a social activity, and the main feedback on which their learning is based is therefore the negative reactions of others. Such drivers may feel pressurised by this negative comment to drive in ways with which they are not comfortable.
- Drivers who are high in confidence experience the loss of their instructor as a release. They lack caution and have a tendency to take on challenges which are beyond their capabilities. The mistakes they are most likely to make are errors of driving as a physical activity, and the main feedback on which their learning is based is therefore accidents and near-misses. There is a widespread fatalism about the inevitability of accidents as part of the learning process.

As being confident is seen to be an important part of a being a good driver, a dangerous feedback loop can develop in the latter group of drivers: the **feeling of being confident** in more and more challenging situations is experienced as **evidence of driving ability**, and that ‘proven’ ability reinforces the feelings of confidence. Confidence feeds itself and grows unchecked until something happens – a near-miss or accident – to break the cycle of increasing confidence. Some young drivers are therefore passing the test with a potentially fatal combination of attitudes and beliefs:

- a belief that much of what they have been taught is irrelevant to what really constitutes good driving;

- confidence that they are masters of what really constitutes good driving; and
- a natural tendency for this confidence to feed itself, until an accident or near-miss finally shakes them out of it.

This does raise the question of where their initial confidence comes from. Two kinds of possible explanation for the overconfidence of many young drivers were identified.

First, many participants took the view that driving ability is a matter of natural talent. Even where they recognised that one cannot drive without any experience, these participants argued that it is natural talent (if one has any) that is brought out by experience. This **talent model** provides a clear basis for confidence in one's driving ability. It also makes the post-test phase more dangerous in other ways, as young people with a talent model are more likely to:

- see instruction and the requirements of the test as an artificial constraint, and dismiss what they have been taught;
- dismiss feedback from friends and family, other drivers, or indeed from accidents and near-misses; and
- take on extreme challenges that they think they are capable of rather than increase the level of challenge by small increments.

Secondly, participants (mostly, but not only, young men) emphasised the extent to which their own behaviour was influenced by the need to build and maintain a particular image and identity for themselves. This need can be very important for some young drivers, and may persist until they find other more secure foundations for the image they desire (e.g. when they can afford a better car) or indeed change the desired image (e.g. when they become a parent). It may also explain the overconfidence of some young drivers, if that overconfidence is understood not as a dysfunctional cognitive assessment of their abilities but as a purposive social action by which they seek to position themselves in a particular way in the shared space of driving. This possibility has implications for the kinds of measure that may be required to change young people's driving behaviour. If overconfidence is a cognitive failure, then it can be corrected by facts, evidence and argument. If it is a purposive act, however, facts, evidence and argument may have very little impact.



## 4 IMPLICATIONS

As we noted in the introduction (Section 1), attitudes and mindsets are by no means the only factor in the dangerous driving of young people. It follows that interventions based on a better understanding of those attitudes and mindsets cannot be a complete solution to the problem. However, we believe that the evidence from this research confirms that attitudes and mindsets are a very important factor in the dangerous driving of young people. The cause of road safety is not served well when there are young people:

- for whom the driving test and rules lack credibility;
- for whom accidents are a normal part of the post-test learning process;
- for whom the mere feeling of confidence provides grounds for greater confidence;
- for whom a belief in innate talent justifies riskier behaviour; and
- for whom overconfidence, being a purposive act rather than a cognitive failure, is largely impervious to facts, evidence and argument.

The way (some) young drivers think about driving is a significant problem.

Effective interventions to bring about change start from where people really are (not from where they ought to be) and co-opt their perspectives and motivations in the process of change. We may believe that the talent model is demonstrably false, that negative views of the driving test are unwarranted, or that trying to prove oneself is childish: but being right is not going to save lives. In this section, we set out four broad areas of intervention which could start to turn young drivers' perspectives on driving from a problem into the basis for solutions.

### 4.1 Reposition the rules

We have seen in the previous sections how a number of formal structures which are critical to the promotion and maintenance of road safety – the Highway Code, the driving test – suffer from a serious lack of credibility with many young drivers. The test, in particular, suffers from its (perceived) focus on arbitrary constraints on driving as a physical activity and its (perceived) silence on the real rules of driving as a social activity (the testing regime is discussed further in Section 4.4). Moreover, this lack of credibility is clearly not limited to young people or indeed to those formal structures highlighted in this research (consider, for instance, the widespread view that speed cameras are merely a money-making scheme). If young people are rebelling against authority, so are the rest of us.

Some circumspection is needed here. As we noted in Section 2.4, there is a tendency for people to highlight those rules which seem to them 'stupid' or 'pointless', and we should avoid any temptation to do likewise, overlooking the many driving laws that people do generally follow, and the many skills that young people learn, get tested on, and then use. The lack of credibility of formal structures has not yet created total anarchy on the roads because people continue to conform to those structures nonetheless. In doing so, however, they describe them as 'common sense', 'unwritten rules', 'good judgement' or in other ways that appeal to **informal** rather than to formal structures. Unlike the law of driving, the **lore of driving** has considerable credibility.

Moreover, the very same young people who dismiss the test as irrelevant to real driving show an enthusiasm and appetite to be initiated into this lore of driving, and talk with sincere gratitude about instructors who have revealed the unwritten rules to them. Some instructors, as we have seen, even reinforce the distinction between law and lore, between learning for the test and learning to drive. One might argue that these instructors are being very irresponsible. On the other hand, one might argue that, in the circumstances, they are being rather clever. After all, if young people end up driving in the way that will keep them and others safest, does it really matter whether they do so thinking they are following formal or informal rules?

Put simply, if young people are turned off by the formal structures but have an appetite to learn the unwritten rules, why not give them what they want? A number of the supposedly unwritten rules identified by our participants, for instance, are in fact part of the Highway Code. The problem is that people do not want to read rule books, and do so only under duress (e.g. to pass a test). The simple step of repackaging the same content in a form that matched the motivations young people do in fact have – as a 'Rough Guide to Driving', for instance, telling you 'everything you'll not learn on the test' – could solve this problem at a stroke.

There are almost certainly lessons to be learned here from the approach taken by the 'Frank' campaign on drugs, which has steered a difficult course between the need, on the one hand, to support laws which are there for a good reason, and the reality of the widespread disregard for those laws. For example, everyone – including new drivers – knows that the 70 mph limit on the motorways is meaningless. So, as a new driver, how do I decide whether I should set my personal limit at 80 mph, 90 mph, 100 mph, or what? What is at stake in my decision? A 'Frank-style' resource that helped young people to make the decisions they actually **do** make (whether we like it or not), while holding the line on the illegality of certain choices, could help breathe new life into the 'rules'.

## 4.2 Co-opt the culture

In Section 3.4 we discussed the possibility that overconfidence may be a purposive act rather than a cognitive failure, and the unfortunate implication that facts,

evidence and argument are likely to have very little impact on this kind of overconfidence.

However, overconfidence is only one of many ways in which a young driver may seek to build and maintain a particular image and identity for themselves. If the image I have in mind for myself is modelled on Jeremy Clarkson, then bravado may be just what I need. If, however, I think Jeremy Clarkson is a prat, I may behave very differently. Overconfidence as a purposive action may be impervious to facts, evidence and argument, but it can be challenged by ridicule and shame.

The starting point for any intervention here is to take more seriously the fact that driving is a social activity as well as a physical activity. Interventions that focus on raising people's skills or educating them about risks are critical; but for many young people in particular, the risk of being thought a prat, something of which most will have plenty of experience, is a far more important motivator than the rather abstract idea of killing or injuring oneself. Finding new ways for people to be thought of as prats – that happen to coincide with genuine risk behaviour – is a potentially powerful tool for change. (It is also a far more powerful tool than its positive flipside, finding new ways for people to be 'knights of the road', which is why this section has such a negative focus).

This is no small challenge. The way in which Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) have reputedly become 'badges of honour' for some young people is a reminder that shame only kicks in when the people whose opinions really matter to you judge your actions as shameful. But it is at least the **right** challenge. Talking about risks will never shift the attitudes of those young drivers (mostly male) for whom overconfidence behind the wheel is a matter of personal identity. Our only alternative – other than waiting for them to grow up or kill themselves – is to make this identity an unattractive and untenable one.

### 4.3 Tackle the talent model

Of all the challenges identified in this research, we believe that the talent model may prove one of the hardest to address, for two reasons. First, 'talent models' are enjoying something of a resurgence in contemporary culture as a result of what we might call the 'X Factor' effect. Secondly, and rather worryingly, there may, in fact, be some truth in the model, in that many of the basic psychological and manual skills which underpin physical driving ability do indeed differ between individuals, making one individual naturally better than another. Given this, it is hard to see how the talent model could easily be rooted out.

There may, however, be ways of reducing the negative impact of the talent model without having to challenge the model itself. In particular, we should ask how much current approaches to road safety inadvertently exacerbate this negative impact. The concept of talent makes much more sense in the context of driving as a physical

activity than it does in the context of driving as a social or emotional activity, where concepts such as wisdom and maturity seem more appropriate. Unfortunately, it is precisely this physical aspect of driving activity which is emphasised both by the current testing regime and by approaches to information which focus on providing facts about risks (e.g. how far one will travel if one brakes at particular speeds). To the extent that these interventions promote a sense that safety is all about physical control (as opposed to social responsibility and emotional balance), so too they risk increasing the overconfidence of those who have a talent model of driving.

The issue here is not that there is something wrong with interventions which focus on physical control, which clearly **is** critical to road safety. The issue is what has been left out. For instance, the evaluators of the Brake Young Driver Education Scheme note a useful distinction between **driver training**, which is 'practically based and focussed on building skills and competencies over a short period of time', and **driver education**, which 'involves the teaching of safe driving behaviour with the advancement of knowledge, attitudes and behaviour through publicity, propaganda, exhortation and legal restraint' (Stradling *et al.*, 2006, p. 28). The talent model is a formidable obstacle for both of these kinds of activity; but the suggestion is that we need to add a third strand – **driver development** – which addresses the social and emotional aspects of driving.

#### 4.4 Re-think the test

Participants identified a number of possible improvements to the current testing regime, many of them predictable, such as an extension of the range and realism of experiences, a 'portfolio' approach to assessment, smarter use of simulation, and a requirement of more driving time before the test could be undertaken. There was also some debate, though little agreement, about the age at which the test should be taken. Some of these ideas might indeed have practical merit – though in other instances, participants admitted that they themselves would have been very unhappy if they themselves had had to go through the regimes they had designed. In light of the discussion in the last section, however, one of the most striking things is that, notwithstanding participants' own definitions of good driving and the emphasis they placed on driving as a social and emotional activity, their suggestions for improvements in the testing regime still focus entirely on driving as a physical activity.

Looking at the testing regime from this perspective, the most striking thing is the extent to which it is structured entirely around the classic master-apprentice model of acquiring skills. Young learner drivers do not interact in a structured way with any other young learner drivers as part of the learning process. They are not invited to think about what good driving means to them, or why it matters to them. They are given no guidance about how they can carry on **learning** after the test – how they can assess their progress, how they might steadily increase the level of challenge, or how to get what they need from other drivers. The master-apprentice approach will

always have a central place in driver learning because driving remains first and foremost a complex physical activity; but should it really be the only model of learning for an activity that is also social and emotional?

Broadening the scope of driver learning in this way could help all young people, not just those who pose the greatest risk to themselves and others. As a contribution to efforts to improve road safety, this section has inevitably had to focus on those young people who are most likely to drive dangerously – the ones who see driving laws as irrelevant, or whose overconfidence is part of a particular desired image, or who have a talent model of driving. But what of the other young people described in the previous sections, the ones who think one ought to abide by the speed limit, or who worry about safety, or who lack confidence, or who do not believe in talent. These young drivers face challenges too – not least the social demands they experience from other drivers to be faster, more confident, riskier. Equipping these young people with the confidence, maturity and understanding to be the good, safe drivers they want to be is another kind of contribution to road safety, and one that definitely should not be overlooked.

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