

graham hole



the psychology of
DRIVING

THE
PSYCHOLOGY
OF **EVERYTHING**

ROUTLEDGE

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF DRIVING

Do we become better or worse drivers as we age? Why do we indulge in risky behaviour when driving? Will technology remove the human role in driving forever?

The Psychology of Driving is a fascinating introduction into the psychological factors at play when people get behind the wheel. Exploring the role of personality traits and cognitive functions, such as attention in driving, the book considers why human error is most often to blame in road accidents, and how we can improve driver safety. The book debunks the myth that men are better drivers than women and considers why some people indulge in knowingly risky behaviour on the road, including using mobile phones and drink/drug-driving.

In a time when driverless cars are becoming a reality, *The Psychology of Driving* shows us how human behaviour and decisions can still affect our lives on the road.

Graham Hole is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Sussex, UK.

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GRAHAM HOLE

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In memory of my mum, Joyce Alice Hole



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PREFACE

There is a disease that kills roughly 1.25 million people *every year* and causes harm to around 50 million more, often leaving them with life-changing disabilities. It's the ninth most common cause of death in the world, and it's the leading cause of death for 15- to 29-year-olds. And the really sad thing is that it's largely preventable.

Since you're reading this book, you've probably guessed what this disease is: road accidents. These statistics come from the World Health Organisation's *Global Status Report on Road Safety, 2015*. Great Britain is one of the safest countries in the world for driving – only Norway and Sweden are safer. Even so, in 2016 the Department for Transport reports that there were 1,792 deaths on the road in Britain, 24,101 serious accidents and perhaps as many as 700,000 accidents in total. That's five deaths on the roads every day.

Psychology is relevant to all this because the vast majority of road accidents are due to human error, not mechanical failure. Drivers crash for many reasons. They fail to see each other; they take risks, such as overtaking in silly places or driving too fast for the conditions; and they drive while affected by alcohol, drugs, lack of sleep or while they are distracted by their phones. Sometimes they crash because they get angry or frustrated with one another. A minority of elderly drivers crash because they can no longer cope with the mental and

physical demands of driving. Perception, attention, fatigue, aggression, risk perception, ageing and so on are all issues that have been studied extensively by psychologists, often for many decades. Psychologists know an awful lot that is relevant to understanding how humans manage to drive and why sometimes they fail.

This book can only be a brief introduction to psychological research that is relevant to driving. There are literally thousands of research papers on each of the topics covered in this book. My emphasis will be on *cognitive* psychology (specifically perception and attention), partly as a reflection of my own background but also because we are very visual animals and driving is a very visual business. However, social psychologists also play a very important role in understanding how and why we drive like we do. Social psychology deals with topics such as attitude formation, attitude change and risk perception, and knowledge of these topics is essential for understanding why drivers take risks and how they can be persuaded to drive more safely.

This book is intended for anyone who has an interest in driving, and I hope there is something here for everyone. Driving is a topic that many people have strong opinions about, but opinions are not necessarily based on good evidence. Psychology is a science: it uses the scientific method to investigate issues. Psychologists are trained to obtain and assess evidence as objectively as they can. “Intuitive plausibility” has no place in psychology. The topic of driving abounds with claims that seem plausible, such as “car drivers pull out on motorcyclists at junctions because motorcycles are hard to see”, “old drivers are involved in more accidents because their eyesight is bad” and “mobile telephones are safe as long as the driver has both hands on the driving wheel”. As we shall see, there is little evidence for any of these statements: in each case, the truth is more complicated and more interesting.

If psychology is so relevant to driving, why do non-psychologists know so little about it? Part of the problem is that although there is a huge scientific literature on driving and related topics, much of it is rather inaccessible to the non-specialist, because of the jargon and statistics used. Hence my intention in the following pages is to use as