

## **Crash Investigation Team Technical Alert: Number 15**

Date: March, 2006

This technical alert focuses on peer pressure situations that can lead to high risk driving behaviors, including techniques used to increase the likelihood of individuals complying with such pressure, as well as methods employed to resist it. The Crash Investigation Team hopes that parents and educators can use this information to arm individuals against peers who encourage dangerous activities. An unusual type of car racing that is growing in popularity in the United States and is being introduced in Virginia is discussed as well.

In the early morning hours at the end of a weekend, a male in his early twenties drove his sedan-style car at a high rate of speed on a four lane limited access highway. He carried several other passengers, all in their late teens and early twenties. The car was traveling in the left lane and began to close rapidly on a slower vehicle in the same lane. The driver swerved to the right to avoid a collision and lost control of his vehicle. It began to spin, passing and then crossing in front of the other vehicle. It continued to rotate as it moved through the left lane, across the shoulder and into the median, where it struck a large tree. The driver and several of the passengers were killed in the catastrophic collision.

After the crash, the Team was alerted to an unusual piece of evidence discovered in debris that had been thrown from the vehicle during the collision: a video camera containing an unedited film made the day of the crash by several of the victims. The film included footage of activities that had occurred earlier in the day, as well as some discussions and actions later that evening. It appears that the video camera was also used to record events just prior to the crash. Although the Team did not conduct a full

investigation, members reviewed and analyzed the content of the tape. This recording, approximately one hour long, presented a unique opportunity to observe peer pressure at work, providing insight into the immature attitudes and actions of these individuals, as well as techniques used to persuade the driver to take extreme risks. The driver's techniques for resisting the persuasion were also noted, along with his reluctant but ultimate compliance, which resulted in this horrific crash.

The tape recorded a conversation that took place when the young men were sitting around and partying. All but the driver had been drinking. The subject of "drift racing" was raised when one person asked the driver to demonstrate his car's ability to "drift" to the others. Drift racing is a new type of motor sport that combines speed and maneuvering skill. The form originated with Japanese mountain racing, where professional drivers would slide their cars through treacherous curves during competitions. Now it has evolved into a sport where drivers attempt to keep their vehicles traveling sideways as much as possible, just on the brink of rotating out of control, while traveling through a course of curves. The tires are sliding much of the time, heating up and wearing down quickly. Thrill-seekers who flock to the sport celebrate squealing tires and smoke.

When the subject of drift was introduced into the conversation the evening of this crash, it set up a conflict between three of the individuals in the group. One young man (A) wanted to race his car against the car owned by the individual who would later be the driver (D) in the fatal crash. The third person (C) wanted the driver to at least take his car out and demonstrate its speed and handling, because he had been the lone witness to similar activities the previous day. He wanted to film the car going fast and drifting. The driver resisted the request to show off his car's capabilities. The interaction between the three was a persistent and varied process of persuasion and resistance. These two individuals, who would later become fatal victims, focused on convincing the driver to take his car out and race. The driver resisted to a point, but he finally complied, with tragic results.

Persuasion and social influence have been studied by social psychologists for decades. The form of persuasion applied in the context leading up to this crash is focused on compliance gaining: it is "communicative behavior in which an agent engages so as to

elicit from a target some agent selected behavior” (Wheless, Barraclough & Stewart, 1983, p. 11). The agents (A and C, in this case) tried to get the target (D) to race his car. He resisted. So, they employed a series of strategies to increase their persuasiveness, in combination with other strategies to decrease his resistance, with his compliance as their ultimate goal.

## **TECHNIQUES TO INCREASE PERSUASIVENESS**

The simplest way to get a person to comply is to make a direct request. If the target resists, then the speaker can try different approaches to increase their movement towards compliance. Social psychology researchers focusing on persuasion have identified a number of such tactics (Knowles & Linn, 2004), including the following:

- (1) **Make the message more persuasive**, either by trying stronger arguments, embellishing beneficial outcomes, and/or by using powerful speech techniques such as decisive phrasing and fast talking.
- (2) **Emphasize consistency and commitment** to past behaviors. If the target has taken similar action in the past, this can be used to prod compliance for the new behavior.
- (3) **Add incentives**, including additional rewards for compliance.
- (4) **Engage a norm of reciprocity**. By giving the appearance that they are providing something or giving up something of value, the agent can influence the target to comply in order to “even the score”.
- (5) **Provide consensus information**: appeal to the group, which pressures the target to go along with everyone else.

On the tape, C introduced the idea of drift racing into the conversation with a simple request. When resisted, he countered by emphasizing D’s actions from the previous day.

*C: Let’s go out for a ride. Show ‘em a drift. Show ‘em that sick a— drift you were doing yesterday, dude. Seriously, show ‘em so we can get it on camera.*

*D: That car can’t drift that much.*

*C: You did yesterday, man!*

*D: It's got a G track.*

*C: You did yesterday!*

Later in the conversation, both A and C emphasized the driver's past behaviors to get him to race again.

*D: I don't race. That's just it.*

*A: But I heard you were balling last night.*

*C: [He] was hitting the curve at sixty!*

The other visitor added an incentive, which, if accepted, would trigger a norm of reciprocity as well, pressing the driver to give something back.

*A: Do you need a full tank of gas? Free gas.*

Later on, A appealed to the group to put pressure on D to race. When he didn't get the support he sought or the compliance, C brought up the incentive idea gain.

*A: How 'bout this. Why don't we race this cat, in my Trueno?*

*C: How about we just take him to 7-11 and give him a tank of gas?*

This offer was repeated several times during the half hour conversation. When these two techniques and the direct request failed to budge the driver at the outset, C switched to a slightly different tactic that also utilized the notion of behavioral consistency. Called the "foot in the door" technique, this approach involves asking the target to engage in a lesser behavior. Once the target complies on the lower level, the agent increases the request until it gets to the level originally intended. Salesmen, for example, know that if they can get their target to open the door just wide enough to get a foot inside, they are well on

their way to making a sale. On the recording, instead of continuing to pressure D to drive his car, C stepped the request down.

*C: Do you have a T-35 turbo, the one you said yesterday?*

*D: It's just a regular T-40, but it's got an inner cooler. It's stock.*

*C: Can I see it, dude?*

*C: You have a turbo hood?*

*D: It's just a regular Intrigue.*

*C: Can I see it, dude? I really want to see it.*

## **TECHNIQUES TO DECREASE RESISTANCE**

In addition to trying to increase persuasiveness to get a person to move toward compliance, there are strategies that can be used to reduce and overcome resistance away from the target behavior. These approaches are not aimed at making the desired behavior appear better; instead, they attempt to weaken the concerns and/or psychological barriers the target has against compliance. Some of the strategies used by individuals on the videotape are illustrated below.

**(1) Sidestepping the resistance** may lower it by going around the initial psychological defense, pulling the target's attention away from the bigger goal and making it weaker. There are multiple ways to accomplish this, including depersonalizing the interaction (talking about hypothetical situations instead of the actual situation) and minimizing the request. The "foot in the door" technique mentioned earlier is thought to operate psychologically along this path. As already discussed, it increases the likelihood of compliance because, if successful, it gets some level of compliant behavior already occurring. In addition, however, it avoids dealing directly with opposition to the goal behavior, siphoning attention and mental energy from it.

*C: Can I look in your car and see your turbo?*

*D: It's underneath, you can't see it.*

*C: Promise you a hundred dollars. I'm a mechanic, dude, I can see it.*

**(2) Addressing the resistance indirectly** by making the agent appear weak and vulnerable leads the target to feel that he has an advantage, prompting him to focus more on why he should comply (likelihood of winning a race) rather than being steadfast in his resistance.

*A: I don't have as much power right now. I got a broken crank shaft and a broken crank barrier.*

And:

*A: But yeah, man. For real, let's race. I'll go home and get my Tercel. My broken crank shaft Tercel.*

**(3) Distracting and/or disrupting attention** interferes with counterarguments that the target is developing or stating. These techniques are apparent on the tape when the driver tries to give explanations but A interrupts with unrelated comments.

*D: The Neon, the engine stalled out when I bought it. The engine stalled out, and it was completely kaput. When I took it back in...*

*A: (making fun of D) Why are you speaking German? Spreken zie Deutsch?*

*D: When I took the car back in...*

*A: (in a derogatory tone) Spreken zie Deutsch? If you can say kaput, you Spreken zie Deutsch.*

Later, the driver openly resists racing and A disrupts his thinking again.

*D: I don't race on the street anymore.*

*A: Because you're in the military?*

*D: I'm in the reserves.*

*A: Reserves? You gotta reserve, like in the government? F— that. Just in case somebody got killed, you gotta go in? F— that. You'd be better off working for McDonalds.*

*[D just looks at him, silent.]*

**(4) Using the resistance to promote change** is a paradoxical approach that involves attacking the target, usually to injure his self-esteem, and then offering way to remedy the injury, which is through the selected behavior.

*D: The Mustang accelerates to 238. That's what I've gotten it up to.*

*A: The one out front?*

*D: No, not that. No.*

*A: Cause that thing out front is a piece of sh—.*

*D: It's a 98 Mustang that's been completely modified.*

*A: Yeah, right.*

And later:

*A: Yessir, so you can kiss your dreams good-bye about that T-35 million turbo. I don't think there is a T-35 in your sh—. In your Taurus?*

*D: No, in the Intrigue out there. It comes stocked with a 3800 CC series twin cam.*

*A: I think you're lying about that. Show me.*

**(5) Consuming resistance until target complies.** This approach is actually the combination of the other techniques, applied persistently and repetitively until the target runs out of personal energy to resist, relents and does what the agent wants. In this case, both A and C hammered away at D's reluctance. For example, midway into the conversation, A applied pressure with multiple, repeated techniques used in rapid succession: by using the resistance through insult, boasting to increase his own credibility, giving direct orders, and offering incentives.

*A: I'm not the one who hesitated about that sh—. Cars are my main build. Show me. I'll give you a free tank of gas. Show me. It'll be like one of those bar Navy people where they try, and you f—ing show 'em up, and then they throw a hissy fit... Show me dude.*

Later he continued to push by repeating direct requests interlaced with lesser requests.

*A: Yeah, but your turbo car... whatever. You can race me or I'll race you. Or you can just ride me around in it. I'll show you. You show me and I'll show you. Okay? Done deal.*

## **TECHNIQUES USED TO RESIST PERSUASION**

Although this area does not appear to be as well researched as methods of influence per se, a review of the driver's responses on film revealed that he did counter the attempt to get him to comply with several different techniques. He tended to remain focused on facts and logic, and did not rise to emotional prompts, especially when insulted by A. Some of his techniques were similar to those used to resist persuasion.

**(1) Refuse to comply.** At several points, the driver would simply refuse to take the action requested. In response to direct requests, he replied, "*I don't race off street anymore,*" and "*I don't race. That's just it.*"

**(2) Resist by distracting or disrupting the agent.** D would shift the focus from racing to a related topic or change the subject of the conversation. He diverted talk from his vehicle to another car.

*D: If I wanted to have fun, I'd go out and get the um...*

*C: Mustang?*

*D: You know that dude's 98. There's a guy that's got a 98 with 502 Boss engine in it. Twin TX 100's.*

He also would ignore a direct insult and focus instead on something related.

*C: Your Ferrari will get whapped. I don't care if it's your Dyno GT or your f—ing Ferrari GT, you will get whapped in the first race.*

*D: What's your accel...your stats and time in an eighth?*

When offered an incentive, he shifted the topic to a previous accident A had mentioned.

*C: He's rich, he's got the gas card for life. So, come on, man. You'll get a whole full tank of free gas, 93 octane.*

*A: If it's before 12, I'll buy you a case of beer.*

*D: How did the accident happen?*

He even offered excuses and alternatives to the illegal street racing that was being pushed by A and C.

*A: My Tercel with a little wing and a little 30 dollar intake can beat that sh—.*

*C: Damn. Seriously, son. Better watch yourself, what you're saying 'bout cars.*

*D: Gonna race a lot of cars in Richmond in 3 weeks.*

*A: F— Richmond. Let's do it right now.*

*D: I don't have the car with me.*

Eventually, however, A and C were successful in getting D to drive to the store. Once in the car, he was easily influenced to take risks, on empty roads, in parking lots and, finally, on an interstate highway. In each new situation, the others in the car laughed and joked, giving their approval for his high risk behaviors and egging him on to do more. They rewarded his risk taking and alternately insulted him to overcome any resistance that might have lingered. In the last taped segment, the view reveals the car traveling on an interstate highway. The film shows the speedometer at 100 mph, when another vehicle passes on the right. The driver begins to back off. His back seat passengers challenge him.

*A: You gonna let him beat you like that, n—? Come on, take 'em man! You're past the point.*

*D: It could be a cop.*

*A: Aww, come on!*

*D: This is an open area for cops.*

*A: Aww, come on! Put that thing in second...*

The footage cuts to another shot of speedometer, showing 80 mph, with a quick shot of A standing on the seat behind the driver with his upper body out the window. His head and shoulders are not visible from inside the car. Then the film cuts off. Shortly thereafter, the vehicle crashed, killing most of the occupants, including the driver and both of the individuals who had worked hard to persuade him to take such high risks. The camera was thrown clear of the vehicle during the crash sequence and found nearby, its tape intact.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this technical alert is to inform readers about how peer pressure can be used to influence and persuade individuals to take actions that they know are unsafe. Perloff (2003, p. 8) defines persuasion as “a symbolic process in which communicators try to influence other people to change their attitudes or behavior regarding an issue through the transmission of a message, in an atmosphere of free choice.” He notes (p. 9):

*“People persuade themselves. One of the great myths of persuasion is that persuaders convince us to do things we really don’t want to do. They supposedly overwhelm us with so many arguments or such verbal ammunition that we acquiesce. They force us to give in.*

*This overlooks an important point: People persuade themselves to change their attitudes or behavior. Communicators provide the arguments. They set up the bait. We make the change or refuse to yield.”*

In this crash, the communicators use a variety of approaches, including some with strong emotional bait. Ultimately, however, the driver made a choice of his own free will, as did each of the passengers, to a tragic conclusion.

The taped conversation provided a unique opportunity to “observe” persuasive and resistance techniques being applied in a real life setting, followed by the worst possible consequences for surrendering to the persuasion. The Team recommends that educators, especially driver’s education instructors, apply the insights gained from this technical alert to their curriculum. Being able to identify persuasive techniques can decrease their influence and arm “targets” to better resist requests for high risk, unsafe behavior. Additionally, more research needs to be conducted on repelling strong peer persuasion, including strategies for helping individuals identify and separate the emotional content of persuasion from the factual, rational content. Teens, especially, need to develop such skills so that they can decide to not comply with peer pressure and still walk away with their self-esteem intact.

## REFERENCES

Knowles, E., & Linn, J. (2004). Approach-avoidance model of persuasion: Alpha and Omega strategies for change. In E. A. Knowles & J. A. Linn (Eds.), *Resistance and persuasion* (pp. 117-148). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Perloff, R. M. (2003). *The dynamics of persuasion*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Wheless, L. R., Barraclough, R., & Stewart, R. (1983). Compliance-gaining and power in persuasion. In R. Bostrom (Ed.), *Communication yearbook 7* (pp. 105-145). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.