

**Summary: Impact of traffic safety and traffic endurance problems.  
Objective and subjective factors  
Part II: subjective traffic safety**

This research project consisted of two parts. The first part is a study of the psychological impact of traffic accidents. The second part aimed at sounding the subjective perception of traffic safety.

*a. Psychological impact of traffic accidents*

We started with a survey of the existing literature. On the one hand we studied empirical studies aimed at finding indicators for the development of posttraumatic disorders, while on the other hand we tried to find a theoretical model to explain the emergence of posttraumatic disorders.

The literature survey concerning the empirical studies allowed us to restrict our own study. First of all we found that there is a high degree of co-morbidity of PTSD with other psychiatric diagnoses. The most frequently named disorders, aside from PTSD, are depression and phobia.

Second, we encountered some general problems with regard to PTSD. A first problem is the diversity on the definition of the stressor or the trauma. There seems to be little consensus on how to define this concept. Furthermore there exist two definitions of PTSD that differ substantially on some points. The first of these is the one given by the Diagnostic Statistical Manual IV (DSM-IV), the other is given by the International classification of diseases 10 (ICD-10). The different questionnaires that are used to diagnose PTSD also allowed little consensus.

For this reason we choose not to use the diagnosis of PTSD but to limit ourselves to the more general term of posttraumatic disorder (including PTSD, depression, phobia, ...)

Third, we found that empirical literature showed little agreement on what are indicators of posttraumatic disorders. It seemed that every indicator that was found by one study, was negated by another study.

This was the main reason why we studied a theoretical framework accounting for the development of PTSD. We studied the psychodynamic literature concerning traumatic neuroses. A trauma is defined as something for which the subject has no adequate narrative; there was no verbalization of the trauma. The second implication is that the trauma is not integrated in the broader context of the subject's life story. A posttraumatic disorder is due to absence of a translation in a narrative.

Subsequently we studied some findings from cognitive neuroscience in order to find evidence for this psychodynamic model. Which was the case.

We decided to study the way in which people who were subject to a traumatic event tried to fit the trauma in their life history, i.e. how they integrated the traumatic event in autobiographic memory. Our hypothesis was that an adequate integration into autobiographic memory could prevent the development of posttraumatic disorders.

We interviewed some subjects shortly after they were involved in traffic accidents, by means of a semi-structured in-depth interview. We asked the subjects to give a detailed account of the accident.

We also asked them to describe their life as it was before the accident and to estimate the impact of the accident on their lives. Furthermore we asked for a description of their injuries.

Apart from these topics, the subjects were left complete freedom as to what they wanted to tell us. The aim of our research was to study the way in which they integrated the traumatic event in their life story.

We asked them if they still tried to prevent the accident or whether they didn't see it coming at all. We wanted to know what their first thoughts were immediately after the accident. We presume that the integration of the traumatic event starts immediately after the trauma.

In fact, what we investigated was the effect of a short intervention aimed at helping the subjects to integrate the traumatic event in their life story. As a result of the small number of subjects and the absence of a control group, this study can only be considered an explorative one.

We contacted several hospitals in Flanders and finally cooperated with two. The head of the emergency department contacted the subjects and asked them if they were willing to cooperate.

With all the subjects we found that there were one or two elements that structured the subjects' narrative concerning the traumatic event. A first conclusion from this study seems to be the importance of verbalization, i.e. of the construction of a narrative with regard to the traumatic event and its integration in the life story. Victims of traffic accidents should at least be supported in this process by the hospital staff.

Second conclusion: A number of people use elements in this structuring process that are accessible to common-sense understanding (for instance the death of a child in the accident), while another part makes use of more irrational topics (for instance the fear of having 'bent' legs). On the basis of this discrepancy it might be concluded that the first group is given greater opportunity to structure a narrative with regard to the event. People are inclined to listen more willingly to what makes sense than to nonsense. It is important that the patient gets the opportunity to construct his own narrative.

Furthermore we found that the narrative doesn't need to be an objective account of what happened. It seems more important that the trauma gets its particular place in the life story of the subject.

#### *b. subjective perception of traffic safety*

Traffic accidents are one of the most frequent death causes in Belgium. And, even when they are not lethal, they often involve major injuries or material loss.

Data with regard to the causes of traffic accidents are mostly objective data. Drivers are the largest group of injured, followed by passengers and cyclists. Most of the deaths are aged twenty to twenty-four, followed by senior citizens. We wanted to know if these differences are "by accident" or whether they can be related to psychological variables such as differences in attitudes and opinions on traffic safety.

One of the points which has been given little attention is the part played by subjective perception of traffic safety. Do young people have

a different perception of traffic safety than elder people? Is there a difference between frequent drivers and less frequent drivers? Is there a gender-related difference? The way in which people perceive traffic safety can account for the way they will behave in traffic.

Recently the interest in these psychological variables, which may be at the basis of unsafe behavior, has increased. Most of these studies were performed at a small scale.

We found three topics in a literature survey.

First we wanted to find out to what degree people feel safe when they are driving.

Second, we wanted to find out what explanation people give for this.

A third topic is the attributed causality of motor vehicle accidents.

This resulted in a questionnaire with 26 Likert-type items that the respondents had to judge from one (I completely agree) to five (I completely disagree). Besides that, some demographic data of the respondent were asked for.

The questionnaire was distributed in the town of Mechelen. 3469 questionnaires were distributed, of which 1214 were returned.

We found that most of the respondents are sensitive to the topic of traffic safety. A majority of the respondents rated traffic as unsafe. Furthermore we found that most of the respondents did not take this into account when they were actually driving. The reigning opinion seems to be: a lot of accidents do happen, but they will not happen to me. This optimism seemed to be present especially in young drivers.

Furthermore we found that most of the respondents feel safer when they are driving themselves. This seems to point at an overrating of ones own behavior as safe. This overrating seemed to be present especially with older drivers.

A substantial majority of the respondents thought that it were the other drivers who are responsible for unsafe situations. People seem to consider themselves as better and safer drivers than the others.

It might prove useful to attempt to weaken this optimism and this overrating by means of campaigns. This optimism and overrating may be a cause for unsafe behavior.