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DEVELOPMENT OF A HANDBOOK FOR TRAFFIC CONFLICT OBSERVATION IN AUSTRIA

The main problem is not how to identify risks on the roads by means of observation but how to do it effectively. Policemen or other officials usually have only practice in doing observations in a determined way: estimating speeds, finding out technical defects i.e. defective lights or maybe brakes. They know how can they find out individually impaired conditions like driving under the influence of alcohol. But there is a deficiency in observing processes of interactions.

The traditional way of observation concentrates on finding out individual faults and on correction of those faults by punishment. That is experienced by road users as a negative reinforcement for a usual behavior. The individual who has been punished now attributes that to external factors, for example to his individual bad luck. This way the risks of the traffic situation observed can not be minimized in a degree expected.

The problem mentioned above could be solved by developing a handbook for officials which could improve their sensibility to observe dangerous situations and could teach them skills to understand and observe interactional processes. What we expect from such a handbook is that the officials using it put more stress on the prevention of accidents instead of merely punishing traffic offenders.

It is well known from cognitive psychology that the input-information is encoded in an individual way and is integrated into scripts. If there is no script in which the new information fits it is suppressed in this comprehensive process. So there is a need for a code-system which allows officials to observe risks without a deep knowledge of psychology. This way the traditional mistake to think that better road surfaces or less curves will reduce the risk of accidents could be corrected. People observing traffic can be taught that the whole human "information-system" that includes an individual level of risk (Wilde's risk compensation model) has to be activated to avoid accidents, and that those road users who have higher risk level may represent danger for the others. The handbook should help to identify black spots and offer solutions to reduce them.

The Austrian Road Safety Board does not want to wait longer for more accidents to occur and then study the black spots but wants to contribute actively to the prevention of accidents by means of this handbook.

The handbook can promote the application of traffic conflict technique on different

areas. Some of the possibilities are as follows:

- As a method to identify black spots in road traffic as well as to identify different types of dangers, potential accident situations, and different types of driving behavior.
- To evaluate measures by before-and-after studies (e.g. at newly built or adapted spots of the road network).
- As a criterion to assess the general traffic quality, to detect construction deficiencies or deficiencies as far as traffic signs are concerned.
- For the practical evaluation of various measures taken to influence road traffic (e.g. traffic lights, traffic restraint, etc.)
- To establish a catalogue of causes of accidents or a catalogue of types of conflicts respectively.

The following officials would be the target group to receive the handbook for traffic conflict observation in Austria: lawyers and other experts at the local authorities, representatives of local councils, local and county police, representatives of the authorities responsible for the federal road network and road maintenance, the Austrian Road Safety Board and representatives of citizens' initiatives.