

# **THE PERCEPTIONS OF THE TRAFFIC POLICE AS TO THEIR ROLE WITHIN THE TRAFFIC SYSTEM – CASE STUDY FOR ILHA DO GOVERNADOR, RIO DE JANEIRO**

**JOSÉ CARLOS TEIXEIRA PISTILLI**

MUNICIPAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

RIO DE JANEIRO MUNICIPAL DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

**MARILITA GNECCO DE CAMARGO BRAGA**

TRANSPORT ENGINEERING PROGRAM

COPPE/FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF RIO DE JANEIRO

**MARIA CECÍLIA MOLLICA**

LANGUAGE FACULTY

FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF RIO DE JANEIRO

## **INTRODUCTION**

Enforcement has a valuable role to play in traffic management and, in addition to embracing the functions of control and supervision, should also perform an educational role. This control and education is of particular importance in countries such as Brazil, where traffic accidents are frequent, as a means of accident prevention. Such accidents are part of the generalized violence that jeopardizes the quality of life in this country, especially in urban areas. According to Adorno (1995), the problem of violence, in any sphere, is linked to the educational dimension of any human activity, to which all other dimensions are subordinate.

In Brazil, the accidents involving the most vulnerable road users (pedestrians and cyclists) reveal a high level of aggression towards those who do not have motor vehicles. In 2002, approximately 34% of traffic accident fatalities in Brazil were pedestrians or cyclists (DENATRAN, 2002). Traffic enforcement should take this into consideration and adopt an approach that emphasizes non-violence and the safety of non-motorized road users.

The object of this work, therefore, is to study the perceptions of the traffic police in municipal Rio de Janeiro, seeking to answer the question: what is the perception of the municipal traffic police regarding the education and safety of non-motorized road users and are thus more vulnerable (denominated NMVs) in urban traffic? Their views on the nature of their work and the causes underlying the problems that arise in the exercising of their duties were also examined.

In this context, perception may be understood as an active process in which views as to the object are built up. The term *views* is used here in relation to the *manifestations, declarations or expressions* that might provide insights into whatever guides the officer's professional conduct.

## **FACTORS DETERMINING A TRAFFIC POLICE OFFICER'S PERCEPTION**

Among those factors that might be considered decisive to forming their perception, the ones that stood out in this study were professional training, working conditions and wages. According to Nosella (1980), the expression of ideas and attitude of people with poor critical thinking capacity, generally those with a low level of education (like most traffic police officers), can easily be moulded in accordance with predetermined values imposed by groups that have ascendancy over them. This idea is supported by Fiorin (1998), when he adds that "one can say that speech materializes ideological representations. Ideas, statements and representations do not exist beyond the bounds of linguistics". Based on these arguments, one can find an explanation for the alienating or robotic roles assumed by so many of these officers; such a posture has no connection, necessarily, with their professional training, working conditions or wages.

In sum, one might say that the professional performance of a traffic police officer is a function of the individual's awareness, expressed in their perception, in the consciousness of their social importance, which, in turn, depends on their professional training, bolstered by the education they acquire over the course of their life.

However, one might surmise that the meagre wages, lack of professional appeal and adverse working conditions, allied to the generalized violence of the streets and the dishonourable conduct of some officers, are all factors that demean the image of the traffic police, undermining their prestige, respect for the profession and, ultimately, their self-esteem.

## **THE STUDY'S PARTICIPANTS**

The study was conducted on Ilha do Governador, an island district of the city of Rio de Janeiro (area of 32 km<sup>2</sup>, with 200,000 inhabitants). The location has population characteristics and socio-cultural and economic resources that give it a level of autonomy comparable to that of many important Brazilian cities.

On September 26, 1994, the Municipal Guard of Rio de Janeiro established the Special Traffic Corps (GET), to act as a support unit. With the introduction of the new Brazilian Highway Code, on October 9, 1997, the GET began to control and regulate all the city's traffic, from January 1998. With respect to the Ilha do Governador Municipal Guard, their administration informed us that their total number of active staff amounted to 60 and that the number of officers in the traffic division amounted to 41, not counting those on leave or on holiday.

The present Municipal Guard is run by an outsourced business – Empresa Municipal de Vigilância - EMV (Municipal Surveillance Company) – and the officers are specially selected, (with signed work papers, and subject to a probationary period). The individuals are chosen through a public selection examination and must have completed their secondary education.

Following the public examination, the chosen candidates enter the second phase, that of the training course. It is a three-month course, divided into two stages: "Basic Training" and "Professional Training". Assessment is done by means of tests and an interview, which decide whether or not the candidate will be accepted. The successful candidates are allocated to sectors (one of which is the traffic division), at the company's discretion. In other words, the officer does not have the right to choose the sector, hours or location, among other things, of the job they are about to begin.

Thirty-six officers were interviewed as part of this qualitative research. The semi-structured interviews were conducted individually, in order to preserve anonymity, based on a questionnaire, and sought to obtain the following information:

- Personal and professional details relating to age group, gender, socio-cultural and economic situation, professional experience in this line of work and schooling;
- Reason for choosing this profession, the interviewee's connection with the profession, their views regarding their professional experience, addressing professional tasks within the daily traffic environment;
- Officers' perceptions as to their social role, particularly in regard to education and traffic safety, as well as any suggestions to improve their work in the urban traffic environment.

The information was analysed in the following manner:

1. Skimming all the interviews (reading without going into details), to get an overall picture of the officers' perceptions, as well as a broader vision of the possible elements involved, taking into consideration not only what was stated but also what was implied;
2. Analysis of the contents of the interviewees' statements, through successive reading of the texts, in order to identify preliminary indications of recurrent themes, agreements and divergence in the views of the participants in the study, in relation to their perceptions on education and traffic safety.

Attention, with regard to the information obtained in these interviews, was focused on the following issues:

- aspects and situations linked to traffic that are most important to these professionals;
- hazardous situations and risk factors, according to the officers' perceptions;
- problems that make the job more difficult for the officers;
- the traffic police officer's capacity for discernment in traffic situations, with a view to making the best possible decisions while maintaining a posture that is cooperative, orientational, punitive, educational and humanizing, and without straying outside the guidelines of the Brazilian Highway Code (DENATRAN, 2003).

The sample of the officers interviewed was defined according to age group, professional experience and education level, as shown in Tables 1, 2 and 3. There was a balanced distribution among the three age groups, while more than half the sample (55.6%) had between 6 and 14 years of experience (henceforth referred to as veterans). Of the nine officers with less than one year of experience (considered rookies), eight were in the lower age group (between 21 and 30 years old). With regard to schooling, only seven officers had attended higher education (completed or otherwise).

Table 1 - Age groups of the interviewees

Age Group	Number of Officers	Percentage
21 to 30 years old	12	33.3
31 to 40 years old	13	36.1
41 to 55 years old	11	30.6
Total	36	100

Table 2 - Professional experience of the interviewees

Experience	Number of Officers	Percentage
< 1 year	9	25.0
1 to 5 years	7	19.4
6 to 14 years	20	55.6
Total	36	100

Table 3 - Educational level of the interviewees

Schooling	Number of Officers	Percentage
Secondary education	29	80.6
Higher education	7	19.4
Total	36	100

## PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE PROFESSION

When asked about the reasons that drew them to the profession, 22% responded in terms of vocation. According to Bohoslavsky (1997), a vocation is not innate, but depends on many factors, involving not only the individual's interests and talents, but also the socio-cultural environment and the opportunities that present themselves.

The analyses suggest that potential of these professionals is being under utilized. The group demonstrated dissatisfaction with the organization, in terms of the lack of dialogue, right to express an opinion or choice or respect for their needs, and disdain for their potential and ability. There were complaints about authoritarianism, insensitiveness and incompetence on the part of the company in its dealings with its professional staff. To quote one of the responses: *"... the stress is more intense here than if you were trying to win an Olympic medal. (With this company) one is beating one's head against a brick wall. They take pleasure in making life difficult and bossing people around for no reason. (The worst thing is that) they're just hurting themselves and throwing away the chance to do things right"*.

It is important to note that, among the specific reasons given for entering this profession, the most commonly cited (39% of the interviewees) related to the need for work (financial aspect). Some mentioned, more generally, a lack of a better alternative or even chance as the defining factor. These findings raise the suspicion that the majority of the group suffer from an identity crisis or, at the very least, a lack of any meaningful identification with the profession. An illustration of this is the following quote: *"Nothing to do with me [...] This was never my dream. Being an officer doesn't turn me on. I just can't take to it, and the normal gang think the same way, but they need it, so they don't say anything an' just lie because they're scared."*

The officers marked their degree of satisfaction with the profession on a Continuous Semantic Differential Bipolar Linear Scale, ranging from *totally dissatisfied* (value of zero) to *totally satisfied* (value of 10). The mean for the 36 interviewees was 3.9, indicating a group that is more dissatisfied with their work than satisfied. The most dissatisfied were those in the 21 to 30 age group (mean of 1.5) and those with up to 5 years of professional experience (mean of 2.3 for those with less than 1 year and a mean of 1.9 for those with 1 to 5 years' experience). In other words, the least experienced, subject to a probationary period, lower wages and discrimination. It is possible that these factors are determinant to the perceptions of the officers and, consequently, to the quality of their work.

When asked about satisfaction derived from their professional experience, not one of them made any reference to the educational function and only two expressed any concern over traffic safety. On the other hand, 36% cited "recognition (of their work)" as a cause of satisfaction, which could indicate the group's strong desire for self-esteem and to assert themselves. A relationship may be established between emotional considerations and the way in which the company treats its staff. This is important, for herein appears to lie the source of many of the problems linked to the dissatisfaction of the interviewees, as illustrated in the following response: "[...] *not much money and superiors who act in bad faith, authoritarianism: lots of demands, insufficient pay for thankless work [...] lack of stimulus and dialogue, the high command is inaccessible [...] a lot of discrimination [...] Up to now I've been doing an excellent job, but this isn't recognized by the company.*"

The interviewees showed concern about their image (33% of the responses), when they described the qualities of a good officer, which might be a sign of apprehension regarding their approval by the general population. This could be due to the tarnished image of figures of authority in Brazil, together with the stigma, rooted in history, associated with the abuse of power and corruption. The word "authority" was mentioned by 31% of the officers. Only 4 of those interviewed thought that the traffic police had a positive image amongst the general population, while 16 of them considered that the image was a negative one (the others either did not respond or made some other kind of observation).

When asked to evaluate their peers, on a scale ranging from *terrible professionals* (value of zero) to *excellent professionals* (value of 10), the mean value obtained was 5.1. Based on the hypothesis that evaluating one's peers may be a way of evaluating oneself, it can be seen that the group considers the professional performance of the others, and perhaps their own, as quite mediocre.

It is interesting that the great majority were unable to explain their assessment and that, amongst the few who did, only one officer proffered criticism directed at the social importance of the work, which may reflect their awareness of the importance attached to education and traffic safety: "*We are professionals who are not properly trained for the job [...] many do not understand what it means to be a traffic police officer, the social impact and the importance of setting a good example, particularly on the part of the high command.*"

## PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR FUNCTIONS IN TRAFFIC

Most of the interviewees considered that helping the traffic to flow is the most important function of the job (39% of those interviewed). One of the officers even stated: “[...] *the company’s basic concern is to demand that the traffic flows smoothly, as a practical priority*”.

On the other hand, according to Table 4, less importance is given to safety (11% of those interviewed) and education (6% of the interviewees), which, in terms of the aims of this study, is of great significance. Yet again, there are indications of how relatively unimportant these considerations are in the professional conduct of the municipal traffic police officers in the study. The following response from one of the officers sums up the situation: *“The pay is not enough. I have to do odd jobs on the side. I don’t have time for my wife and children. It’s hard to think about traffic education when I can’t even manage to educate my own children. This profession is decadent, has lost its prestige and is no longer trusted, because the general population sees the traffic police as a bunch of crooks [...]”*.

Table 4 - The most important function

Objective	Number of Officers	Percentage
Keep traffic flowing	14	39
Safety	4	11
Education	2	6
Guidance	2	6
All of the above	10	28
No response/ Others	4	12
TOTAL	36	100

\* each interviewee gave a single response to the question.

The greatest problems are identified as: the road infrastructure (52.8%), factors relating to the road users (38.9%), the excessive number of vehicles (33.3%), application of the Brazilian Highway Code (30.6%) and factors relating to the Municipal Guard itself, and its members (41,7%). It should be pointed out that each interviewee was allowed to mention a maximum of 3 problems.

When we deepened the analysis of the interviewees’ statements regarding the problems that hamper their work, the working conditions came to the fore. In this regard, the results show that the great majority of the study’s participants (83%) made some reference to the difficulties of the relationship with the company, its bureaucracy and the intransigence of their superiors. It is significant that sixteen officers (44%) referred to road users. In addition, around 61% of the interviewees mentioned other factors, such as working hours, pollution (air and noise), the weather (sun, heat, rain), hazardous locations and operations, and the company’s precarious installations.

Some examples of the responses to the questionnaire are shown here, by way of illustration:

- *"The problem is the hypocrisy. There's no room to improvise. Lack of time and the demands of the company, which worries about its image and is only interested in quotas and fines."*
- *"People are stubborn, careless and badly behaved in traffic, so what can they expect the traffic police to do?"*
- *"Pedestrians and cyclists are imprudent. They want to challenge the cars on equal terms [...] end up causing problems. A lot of talk about human rights, what about us? Punished for what we do and what we say [...] by those who don't give a damn about the safety and education of the rude and ignorant in the streets, who hinder our work and make us look bad."*
- *"[...] it's hard to talk about education and safety when all hell is breaking loose. You get distracted from your prime function."*
- *"The responsibility for education and safety is a question that each one has to deal with, within their own limitations. The top brass make their demands and we have to respond."*
- *"For an officer in Brazil, education is limited to punishment; it's better to punish than to educate."*
- *"It's fairer, in terms of educating the law-breakers, to hand out fines based on (infringement of) the Highway Code and moral authority."*

When we reflect on these statements, it appears that questions relating to traffic safety and education are relegated to a secondary level. The worst thing is that they are used in the accusations against the road users, particularly pedestrians and cyclists, precisely the ones who are most vulnerable. One notices in the simplistic arguments that officers still confuse education with punishment.

In one of the items in the questionnaire, the subject had to mark, on a scale of 0 to 100%, the level of responsibility he should assume as educator for traffic. The mean of the replies was 47.2%. When the replies are matched against the age groups of the interviewees, the lowest mean (42.9%) was for those aged 41 to 55 (with 45.5% for those aged 21 to 30 and 52.4% for those aged 31 to 40). One of the veterans observed: *"[...] less hypocrisy, talk about education and nothing ever happens. It's of no interest to the higher command, as it doesn't bring them any benefits, and we haven't been trained to educate anybody"*.

With regard to the traffic police officer's responsibility for the safety of the more vulnerable road users, who do not have motor vehicles (NMV), 50% of the interviewees replied that they did not give special attention to this matter, two officers didn't consider it a priority and nine didn't answer the question. The younger officers (between 21 and 30 years old) and those with less than one year's experience in the profession gave the lowest percentages of responsibility for the safety of the NMV (on a scale of 0 to 100%): the means for these two categories were 50.3% and 46.1%, respectively.

## PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE TRAINING OF A TRAFFIC POLICE OFFICER

When they spoke about their professional training, the interviewees provided important information that led to a better comprehension of the aim of this study. In general terms, there was constant criticism levelled at the Municipal Guard training courses - both the initial basic training and that carried out subsequently to update knowledge and skills. The comments pointed out the limitations of these courses, with their excessively technical nature and no attention given to developing skills related to traffic safety and education, contrary to what had been promised, as the following examples show:

- *"Training courses are very weak and the instructors are not up to the task".*
- *"Nothing important beyond rote learning and the instructors' jokes. They keep apologising the whole time, saying they're not teachers, so what are they doing there?"*

In seeking out more information about Municipal Guard training, an essential source is the contents of the study notes (Rio de Janeiro City Hall, 2004) used to supplement the course. It is interesting to see the number of references to education and safety as a priority in the exercising of an officer's professional duties, though this appears to be empty rhetoric, in the light of the interviewees' responses. The notes also reflect a concern over discipline, image and regulating the behaviour and attitude of the officers, particularly in relation to the honesty of these professionals.

The excerpts below are taken from the official study notes of the Municipal Guard Training Course, Basic and Professional Modules (Rio de Janeiro City Hall, 2004). They are shown here as an aid to reflection on the thinking that governs the company, when dealing with the social role of the traffic police and the commitment towards education:

- *"The Municipal Guard offers a vision that is pedagogical [...] educational [...] An officer must be the 'good guy', adopting procedures and attitudes that are consistent with 'firm moral rectitude', radically opposed to the perverse transgressions of his antagonist: the delinquent."*
- *"The exemplary actions of the Municipal Guard are, for the most part, more conspicuous in the lives of the population than the endeavours of the educator by trade: the teacher."*

The analyses presented in the preceding item show that the officers' perceptions conflict with the supposed teaching of the training courses, particularly with regard to the function of traffic education. The criticism of the courses showed up the need to rethink not only their content, but also the way in which they are conducted, because the resulting training is not very effective preparation for the important role they will play in the traffic system. And this in a country that has a serious problem with traffic accidents, particularly in urban areas.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this study of the traffic police officers' perceptions regarding the job they do, and particularly the responsibility for traffic safety, 36 members of the Municipal Guard were interviewed, out of a total of 41 members working on Ilha do Governador, in the city of Rio de Janeiro. This qualitative research is intended to assist contemplation of the need for measures that will promote a better understanding and commitment among these professionals towards traffic safety and education, essential features in the process of humanizing the traffic system and in the prevention of accidents. It is hoped that this study will be one more tool to identify proposals for improving the quality of the work of the traffic police.

The present manner in which this group is introduced into the professional sphere impairs their quality of life, generating stress and other problems that are reflected in the quality of their work, in detriment to their professional image. On top of this, there are the precarious working conditions of the traffic police in the Municipal Guard. The group that was interviewed specified problems relating to pay, working conditions, professional training, and the relationship with the company, among other areas.

Given the need to reverse the historical process of erosion of the image of authority, we draw attention to how the feeling of impotence, evident in the officers' responses, with regard to their role of ensuring the education and safety of the most vulnerable road users, those without motor vehicles, as well as their lack of faith in the possibility that this function will be put into effect, have negative consequences in terms of accident prevention.

It was possible to discern an eminently conservative and authoritarian tendency in the conduct of these officers in traffic, reinforced by inflexibility and punitive measures, to ensure a supposed education or "order" in the traffic. Clearly, it is impossible to do serious and effective educational work, involving traffic, without the adequate conditions, which requires much more than oversimplification and the use of force and authoritarianism instead of enlightened authority. One gets the impression that a better understanding by the officers of their role in traffic education and safety will not be possible without developing their awareness of their social role. The officers who participated in this study (can they be very different from other officers?) tend to come across as professionals who are oblivious of the social problems relating to traffic, with a mechanical and limited view of the day-to-day problems afflicting them in the streets.

In the light of this result, and bearing in mind the importance of the up-to-date training of officers, it is necessary to put into practice all the talk about giving priority to professional qualifications and the policy of humanizing the traffic, by giving safety and education the importance that is systematically registered in the supplementary study notes for the Municipal Guard training courses.

It is high time that the professionals in this field who are in positions of authority and able to take decisions face the fact that the high level of traffic violence is associated with issues relating to awareness of the role of each individual, to commitment and to efficient investment in the area of traffic safety and education.

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