1. The concept of risk acceptance

My contribution to our workshop will not present empirical results. The following reflections stem from a social psychological perspective and intend redefining the conceptual framework of our aim of accident prevention. They are based on my interest in analyzing the conditions of responsible acting (SCHMIDT, 1988a, SCHMIDT, 1989).

The concept of accepted risk is central in the RHT (Risk Homeostasis Theory, WILDE 1981, 1986). The importance of subjective evaluations for concrete acting of road users is also inherent in other risk models like those of KLEBELSBERG (1977, 1981) and NÄÄTÄNEN & SUMMALA (1976, 1988). The following postulates can be derived from these risk models:

- behavior is an interaction between person(s) and environment;
- the degree of risk of an action depends on the relationship between objective risk and its subjective evaluation;
- environmental influences are a function not only of the physical but also of the social environment;
- terms such as expectancy, risk perception, accepted risk, motivation and norms refer, at least indirectly, to the concept of values.

2. Relationship between the concept of risk acceptance and responsible acting

Traffic participation may be considered as a social interaction which is determined by a social learning process. The degree of accepted risk can be regarded as an expression of a certain value system. Action theoretic concepts (e.g. ECKENSBERGER 1985, FIETKAU 1984) are useful to explain the action relevance of value orientations like accepted risk.

The application of action theories for socially relevant issues (see SCHMIDT, 1988 a, b, c) stresses that each individual action is purposive and therefore influenced by functional and terminal values. Action theories regard the individual as an active, self-reflecting subject, while risk models view the traffic participants in a more reactive role. The evaluation of a concrete action as more or less risky in the risk models is derived from the position of the observer, not from the position of the acting person and his evaluation of the action's consequences.

A consequent pursuit of the subjective perspective, which is an inherent part of all risk models, should aim at an action-theoretic point of view, taking more explicitly than hitherto the influence of values on concrete actions into account. The distinction of different action levels in the HRM of BÖTTICHER and VAN DER MOLEN (1985, 1988) and the implication of expectations and motives other than safety at the strategic and tactic action level is an important step in this direction.

In the field of environmental psychology FIETKAU (1984) has pointed out how action-theoretic considerations can help to clarify the shift of values and indicate various possibilities of influencing human
action.

The often recommended "responsible acting" in road traffic can be considered as a synonym for "value orientated acting". Acting in a responsible way means taking into account long-term and indirect consequences of individual actions.

Nowadays road accidents are not the worst traffic related risks. Long-term and indirect consequences of individual mode of traffic participation refer to various environmental problems. That means problems like e.g. noise pollution, exhaust fumes, and increasing need of space for the automobile-dominated traffic system - with their consequences upon life quality in villages and towns, destruction of landscape and menace to plants and animals - are at least as serious as traffic accidents. This ecological dimension of traffic related risks is especially threatening because it does not progress in a linear function. Furthermore, the long-term, partly irreversible impacts on our ecological system which affect interests of future generations should be a sufficient reason to support research strategies and traffic policies which integrate solutions for ecological problems of nowadays traffic as well as for road safety problems.

3. Conditions for responsible acting

There exist a lot of interesting social psychological theoretical framework and empirical results in the field of environmental consciousness and environmental learning (FIETKAU 1984, 1985). FIETKAU formulated five prerequisites for ecological determined acting which are developed out of an action theoretical point of view. Applied on road traffic the following conditions for traffic participation which is orientated at a low level of "risk acceptance" can be formulated:

- **Knowledge** about the connections between different modes of traffic participation and their consequences for accident risks and environmental impacts;
- **Orientation at values** like "life", "health", "social responsibility", "environmental protection" instead of "maximum performance capacity", "rivalry", and "speed";
- **Creation of infrastructures** which facilitate walking, cycling, or to use trains, trams, and busses and - on the other hand - make it more difficult to use a car everywhere and to drive at high speeds;
- **Providing materialistic and idealistic incentives** which promote traffic behavior that is desirable from the point of view of road safety and environmental protection;
- **Experiencing positive and pleasant consequences** of a materialistic or idealistic kind as a reward for responsible acting in road traffic.

It should be mentioned that an overall analysis of road safety problems arrives at the same hierarchy of significance of different modes of traffic participation as an analysis of the ecological compatibility (see fig. 1, SCHMIDT, 1988 c).

Hierarchy of socially and ecologically compatible modes of traffic participation
4. Mode of traffic participation and speed as central pre-accident criteria

Taking into account the reflections I presented before one has to define - in accordance for instance with WHITELEGG (1983) who diagnosed a bankruptcy of science in the field of road safety due to the exclusive concentration on the automobile - new criteria for the evaluation of the degree of accident liability. The following goals are necessary conditions for a new view of the concept of "risk acceptance" which takes into account not only traffic accidents but also other traffic related hazards:

1. regarding traffic safety inseparably linked with the necessity of reducing driving speeds, car use, and mobility in general;
2. paying increased attention to the ecologically and socially most desirable forms of traffic participation, i.e. walking and cycling;
3. comprehending the choice of travel mode as an inherent traffic safety factor;
4. promoting a shift of values to encourage safer as well as more socially and ecologically compatible modes of traffic participation

If we look at mode of traffic participation and speed as central pre-accident criteria we can not only succeed in reducing traffic accidents but also in establishing a socially and ecologically compatible traffic system.

References


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