

# TRYING TO VALIDATE SUBJECTIVE REPORTS WITH NATURALISTIC DRIVING DATA – A CASE AGAINST QUESTIONNAIRES AND SURVEYS TO QUANTIFY DRIVER DISTRACTION

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**ABSTRACT:** The effects of different forms of driver distraction on driving performance have been studied for years and are comparatively well understood. How often drivers actually engage in different distracting activities, however, is less clear. Available methods are either not able to provide a complete picture, or are extremely expensive. Post-drive questionnaires and surveys might provide a cheap solution to the problem. As part of a naturalistic driving pilot study, we tried to validate a post-drive survey/questionnaire that is intended to capture the occurrence and duration of different secondary tasks. However, for a variety of reasons, this attempt was unsuccessful. It became clear that there was a huge discrepancy between the drivers' naïve understandings of secondary tasks (what is it, what is part of it, how long is it, etc.) and scientific definitions of the same concepts. Further problems arose from the fact that even though questioned directly after the trip, many accounts appeared to have been reconstructions, rather than recollections of secondary task engagement. We conclude that subjective accounts of secondary task engagement are largely inappropriate to quantify driver distraction.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The fact that certain distracting activities have a negative influence on driver behaviour and driving performance is well established through a large number of laboratory and on-road studies (for an overview see Regan, Lee, & Young [1]). However, how frequently or for how long drivers actually engage in these activities is often unknown. The analysis of crash data [2] cannot provide the required information, experimental studies cannot capture natural user behaviour, and observations from outside the vehicle [3] are limited in what can be observed. Unfortunately, large scale naturalistic driving studies [4], which are able to overcome most of the issues of other methods,

Naturalistic Driving Studies are extremely time and resource consuming. Drivers' own reports, either in form of surveys or questionnaires, might provide a cheap solution to the problem.

However, few efforts have been made to use questionnaires or surveys to systematically assess how often or for how long drivers engage in secondary tasks and other activities. Feng, Marulanda and Donmez [5] proposed a "Susceptibility to Driver Distraction Questionnaire (SDDQ)", in which participants are asked (among other facts) about their engagement in distracting activities. However, the possible answers are "never; rarely; sometimes; often; very often", and hardly allow for a good estimate of prevalence or duration (which, admittedly, is not the declared goal of the questionnaire). Similarly, the American "National Survey on Distracted Driving" [6] asked participants by phone how often they would engage in certain activities while driving, again only with answer categories such as "always; almost always; sometimes; rarely; never".

McEvoy, Stevenson and Woodward [7] assessed the prevalence of distracting activities through a telephone survey in which they asked their participants to provide "the frequency of distracting activities during the most recent driving trip" (p. 243), going through a typical list of distracting activities in the process. Here, it appears that respondents provided actual numerical frequencies (although this does not become clear from the analysis). The authors reported an estimate of one distracting activity every six minutes, however also acknowledged that "the time spent on each activity may vary" (p. 245). Huemer and Vollrath [8, 9] finally provided an attempt at capturing the actual duration, asking participants for how long they have been engaged in specific secondary tasks during the last 30 min of driving. They proposed to approach drivers at parking lots directly after they finished a trip, so the memory of their recent driving behaviour would still be rather accessible.

Unfortunately, it appears that so far, there has been no attempt to validate such a questionnaire or interview on naturalistic driving data. It is unclear how well reported frequency or duration of secondary task engagement reflects actual objective engagement in these activities. As part of a German naturalistic driving pilot study, we tried to find out if there is any correspondence between reported and observed distraction.

## **2 METHOD**

We instrumented a van (Volkswagen T5) with an improved version of a data acquisition system that had been developed in a previous project [10]. The van was part of the German Aerospace Center (DLR) car pool and used by 15 different drivers during the study (all of which had consented to being recorded). The main goal of this pilot study was to test the system under naturalistic driving conditions. As part of the project, however, we also intended to showcase the whole process, including actual data analyses. Driver distraction was identified as an ideal pilot research topic, as its assessment required extensive video annotation (which is a vital part of naturalistic driving data analysis).

We used the Huemer and Vollrath [9] survey and administered it as a questionnaire. The questionnaire contained a list of activities that is based on a review of studies (many of them naturalistic approaches) and statistics in which different categorisations of distracting activities could be found [11-13]. We directly transferred this approach to a post-drive questionnaire, keeping all the categories, explanations and scales identical (Table 1). Drivers were asked whether they had engaged in any of the listed activities in the last 30 min of their drive, and if so, for how long. While our drivers were made aware when they consented to participate that they might be asked certain questions about their trips at some point, they did not know in advance when they would have to report on their activities, nor were they aware of the nature of the eventual questions. As drivers filled in the questionnaire with experimenters close by, any questions and problems while completing the questionnaire were recorded as well.

To compare our drivers' subjective reports of secondary task engagement with their actual behaviour, we annotated the video material from all their drives, including the 30 min of driving that were covered by the questionnaire. To allow for a comparison, we designed our video annotation scheme based on the questionnaire. We used the same secondary task categories that were included in the questionnaire, and added explanations and guidelines for the annotators following Stutts et al. [13] and VTTI [14].

**Table 1: Questionnaire with distracting activities for participants to complete**

|   | Yes/No | For how long (in min)? |
|---|--------|------------------------|
| Eating & drinking   |        |                        |
| Smoking   |        |                        |
| Grooming & clothing related activities<br><i>e.g., manicure, change clothes</i>   |        |                        |
| Operation of vehicle functions & built-in devices<br><i>e.g., adjust seat, mirror, tune the radio</i>   |        |                        |
| Operation of nomadic devices<br><i>e.g., operate iPod, mobile phone</i>   |        |                        |
| Activities related to passengers<br><i>e.g., converse, gesture, hand over objects (e.g., food)</i>  |        |                        |
| Other activities<br><i>e.g., pet related, search for objects, read / write, tidy up / clean the car</i>   |        |                        |
| "Self-initiated" activities<br><i>e.g., soliloquy, sing, think about something, look at something intensely (inside vehicle)</i>  |        |                        |
| Distraction from outside the vehicle<br><i>e.g., route related (e.g., work zone), look at something (e.g., pedestrian, billboard), listen to something (e.g., music from another vehicle, horn)</i> |        |                        |

### 3 FINDINGS

Initially, we planned a statistical comparison of subjective and annotated data. However, already when our drivers completed the questionnaire, it became apparent from their inquiries that this might prove difficult. This impression was corroborated very early in the analysis process, when we found substantial differences between the two datasets already during a first inspection of the raw data. As a consequence, we decided to instead focus on these differences and investigate them on a descriptive level. Soon, it became clear that trying to validate a questionnaire with naturalistic driving data is not such a good idea after all, for a variety of reasons.

One central issue is the fact that the overlap between scientific definitions of distraction and secondary tasks (as they are used for video annotation) and the common understanding of what a secondary task is (as it would turn up in a questionnaire) is limited. This results not only in problems determining what a secondary task is and what not, but also causes difficulties for the

assessment of secondary task duration (when does it start, when does it stop?) and the segmentation of secondary tasks (is it one long task, or several short ones?).

For example, the SHRP2 data dictionary [14] lists the categories “reaching for food-related or drink-related item”, “eating with utensils” and “eating without utensils” as the three categories under which some eating-related activity would be filed. From the definitions, it becomes clear that the annotators’ main concern lies in the motor activity that is associated with either locating or holding the item, whereas chewing food (with both hands on the wheel) would, at least from the definition, not be considered a distracting activity. Based on an understanding of motor distraction (mainly hands-off-the-wheel) as a major factor in incidents and crashes, this appears to be fully reasonable from a scientific perspective. However, it hardly follows an everyday understanding in which chewing (and finally swallowing) is the very essence of eating. In our data, we found instances in which participants reported eating for 15 min during their 30 min drive, which was not reflected in our annotations. Reinspection of the video revealed that participants were just chewing gum all the time, and apparently considered this an activity that had to be labelled eating.

The eating category causes other problems as well. For Stutts et al. [13], eating “starts when food is brought to mouth (or mouth to food) and stops when food or hand is removed from mouth” (p. 25). In our dataset, we found a participant eating from a bag of chips. According to the definition, every single instance of reaching for a chip and bringing it to the mouth would be annotated as a separate episode of eating (again with chewing not being part of the annotation). Understandably, our participant expressed difficulties when requested to quantify the amount of time he spent eating during the last 30 min of driving. He might have been even more troubled when asked about the number of separate eating episodes had we followed the approach of McEvoy et al. [7].

Such issues are not limited to the activity of eating. We found several instances in which participants reported to have been involved in a conversation for 30 min, i.e., for the whole trip segment that was covered. Again, this was not reflected in our annotations. Stutts et al. [13] consider a

conversation as active “as long as someone is responding within ~10 seconds” (p. 26), which is a somewhat artificial criterion, that does, especially for longer trips, result in a considerable number of separate conversations (with a substantial amount of time that is not labelled as conversation). However, when our drivers were asked directly about their trip, they hardly differentiated into separate conversations when they were travelling with the same passenger for the complete trip. Again, this would have been even more problematic had we asked our participants not about the duration, but about the number of conversations during the trip. It can be suspected that even if a differentiation in separate conversations would be made, it would rather occur along the lines of conversation topics (e.g., conversing about private issues first, and then talking about business - two conversations), and not follow some seemingly arbitrary criterion that is based on the duration of silence between the drivers’ and passengers’ contributions.

The estimation of task duration is also a problem in secondary tasks that are comparatively short (e.g., tuning the radio). The questionnaire asks for the duration of certain activities to be reported in minutes, which appears to be reasonable, as a driver cannot be expected to be much more precise anyway (it has to be acknowledged, however, that some participants reported fractions of minutes). In contrast, video annotation is done frame by frame. This can lead to serious overestimations of total task time in the survey data for the shorter tasks. Several of our participants reported to have been operating vehicle functions and built-in devices for as long as five minutes. Our annotations showed that the participants indeed had operated the radio several times, but total duration did not even come close to the reported five minutes. Especially when there are several short interactions, it might be suspected that participants just infer total task duration based on a subjectively generated mean task duration and the number of individual operations. Our participants often seemed to reconstruct, rather than actually recall, task duration.

Non-observable aspects of a task might add to the distortion, as they are not part of the annotated data set, but might be included in the drivers’ post hoc duration estimate. Deliberate thought processes that might precede an observable distracting activity (e.g., trying to remember a phone number

before actually placing the call, thinking about the route before starting to interact with the navigation system) could be included in a subjective assessment of the activities' duration, but cannot be annotated based on the video recording, which, again, can lead to discrepancies between reported and observed task duration. For tasks that are purely cognitive, the aspect of observability is an even bigger problem, as the actual cognitive activity that is suspected to occur cannot be observed directly. In a naturalistic driving study, all that can be done is to infer such a form of distraction based on observable behaviour. Consequently, in their analysis of the SHRP2 dataset, Victor et al. [15] did not include the annotated activities "lost in thought", "looked but did not see" and "cognitive, other", "as they were believed to be questionable categories" (p. 43). Drivers, on the other hand, might well be able to report instances of purely cognitive distraction.

The category of distraction from the outside is equally problematic. In video annotation, the analysts have to rely on observed head position and glance behaviour, at times aided by one of the outside views. A judgment on what glance can be "considered to be part of the driving task" [14] is usually difficult (even more so when there is no usable information from the outside views available), and may differ between the clearly defined driving task on a highway and the highly dynamic and variable urban environment. Especially in an urban environment, it might be a challenge to define what is part of the driving task in the first place (e.g., is taking the eyes of the road when looking for parking spot part of the task?). The driver, on the other hand, will tend to report instances in which he clearly recalls to have been specifically captured by an outside stimulus, which might or might not have resulted in an observable change in gaze direction. He might have been looking straight ahead, but report that his attention was captured, for example, by some object in the vehicle he was following.

Further issues arise from the fact that some activities cannot be easily ascribed to one of the categories, or are composed of sub-tasks that belong to different categories. In a survey or questionnaire, for reasons of economy, drivers are confronted with very broad categories of secondary tasks and provided with examples that are instructive, but not exhaustive. For example, in the Huemer and Vollrath [9] survey, there is the example "search for

Naturalistic Driving Studies objects” listed under “other activities”, whereas “operate mobile phone” is an example for “operation of nomadic devices”. Now, in most cases, operating a mobile phone requires the driver reaching for the mobile phone in the first place. But when does “reaching” for the phone become “searching” for the phone? While in video annotation, some arbitrary distinction can be made and consistently followed (e.g., the SHRP2 dictionary [14] has the category “Cell phone, locating/reaching/ answering”, which is distinct from locating other objects), drivers will follow their individual understanding of the distinction between the categories.

Finally, a very basic, but nevertheless crucial issue is the time window from which participants are required to report. While for annotation the required segment (be it 30 min or any other duration) can be easily selected, it is difficult for drivers to recall when they did what during their trip. Especially after longer trips, routine activities that drivers might engage in repeatedly (e.g., tuning the radio) might be misplaced in time. Our participants often reported to recall that they had engaged in a certain activity during their overall drive, but admitted having considerable difficulties in remembering whether the respective activity had occurred during the last 30 min of their trip, or sometime earlier.

## **4 CONCLUSIONS**

All the mentioned aspects made the validation of questionnaires through naturalistic driving data difficult, if not impossible. No driver can be expected to follow a scientific approach in the assessment of his own activities while driving. At the same time, it is hardly possible to translate the naïve understanding of distraction and secondary tasks into a format that is usable for scientific purposes. To some degree, it might be argued that this is not really a disadvantage, as both approaches can be valuable. After all, aspects that are difficult to observe, such as cognitive distraction or distraction from the outside, might be covered more appropriately by drivers’ subjective accounts of their driving behaviour. Yet, it appears that, overall, drivers’ assessment of their engagement in secondary tasks cannot be trusted. Estimates of frequency and duration of secondary task engagement must be suspected to be severely biased for a variety of reasons. Scientific definitions

of secondary task categories and task elements often do not follow the everyday definitions of driver distraction. This is not necessarily the fault of the drivers. Very often, categorisations are relatively artificial, and not always follow common sense. Yet, most of the time, scientific definitions used in video annotation at least are consistent and clearly described, and follow underlying theories of the effects of driver distraction and secondary task engagement. Annotation guidelines and detailed information on categorisation decisions are usually accessible for everyone, allowing not only for an understanding of the data, but also for a judgment of its value and validity. Such guidelines and decisions are mostly implicit when a driver is asked for his judgment, and may differ not only from the scientific understanding, but also from driver to driver. Although it would be possible to give the same elaborate guidelines to drivers explicitly, this is hardly feasible, and also cannot really be expected to increase data quality. Drivers' reports will still be retrospective accounts, and must be assumed to rely substantially on reconstruction based on experience, rather than actual recollection. Therefore, subjective accounts of secondary task engagement might provide information about what drivers believe they are doing, but should not be understood as a means to actually quantify driver distraction.

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