



Simulating risky decision making under social pressure with “tunnel of choices”

Mika Hatakka, PhD, Psychologist

Research and Training Humaani Ltd and UAR Finland Ltd

The safety problem

Serious accidents of young drivers include often three risks: not using seat belts, speeding and use of alcohol. These risks are present more often, when there are young passengers in the car. Young drivers and passengers are more prone to make risky decisions when in a group.

Safety related topics are usually approached simply by providing facts to support safe and wise decisions. However, making a risky decision is not always a matter of not knowing the risks. Factors such as social pressure, willingness to comply and personal enhancement may have an effect on the decisions in a social situation. Preparation for real-life situations with appealing (but stupid) options is typically not done in training process. Modern pedagogy emphasises personal reflection and use of emotional processes to make an effect on factors described above.

Idea of the tunnel

To create a good atmosphere for discussion in in-class teaching is a challenge. Tunnel of choices is a technically supported discussion method used in the post licensing phase of driver education in UAR Finland driver training tracks in Helsinki area Finland. Young drivers are presented a scenario where they have to make a rapid decision. The scenario includes influence of emotions and group effects. The idea is to simulate a social situation.

Four scenarios are available. Two scenarios deal with use of seat belts as a driver or a passenger. One scenario is about being a passenger in a car with a drunken driver. The last scenario is about a Friday evening drive of a young driver with a group of passengers and things starting to be risky. The driving instructor or the group can select the scenario to be used.

The scenario is explained and the group goes one by one through a “tunnel”. The tunnel is a honeycomb shaped system with ten audio spots. Participants listen individually to ten short comments, safety positive or safety negative, related to the selected scenario. Responses are recorded with a touch panel “thumb up” or “thumb down”. After recording personal responses in the tunnel, the group gathers to a discussion facilitated by the instructor.

The idea of the discussion is to reflect upon personal feelings caused by responding to comments and previous experiences on similar situations. The tunnel creates an experience that it is sometimes easy to make a stupid decision. The goal is to be prepared and to develop strategies in advance to avoid stupid decisions in a possible real-world situation. Responses of the group and also responses of previous groups are produced automatically on a screen and can be used to support discussion.

Results of a feedback study

A feedback questionnaire was presented to driving instructors (58) and driving school students (random sample 300 respondents) in the second phase of driver instruction. The students had already from half a year to two years of solo driving.

Young drivers and driving instructors gave very positive evaluation of the method. On a traditional Finnish school-grade scale from 4 to 10 instructors gave the mean evaluation of 7,76 and young drivers 7,64. The typical grade was 8 which can be considered a good grade.

The instructors evaluated also six statements about the tunnel. Instructors agreed especially with statements about tunnel's suitability for activating a good quality discussion on young driver's risks (Fig 1).

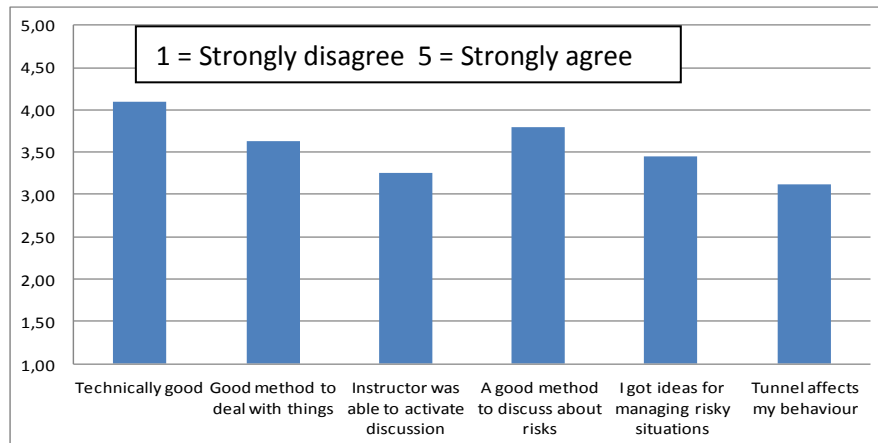
Fig. 1. Instructors' evaluations of the tunnel of choices



The instructors were asked to describe their experiences with the tunnel. Almost all instructors 78% reported positive experiences with the tunnel. The main content of instructors' comments was active participation of learners and the quality of their ideas. Critical comments were connected to difficulties to facilitate discussion.

Also the learners evaluated six statements on the tunnel. The learners agreed especially with statements on technical realization and suitability to activate discussion and to deal with risks (Fig 2).

Fig. 2. Learners' evaluations of the tunnel of choices.



The learners were asked to describe their ideas to an open question "What kind of ideas the tunnel brought to you?" Most of the responses (70%) were positive varying from general positive comments to specific safety ideas or activation of personal thinking. 27% of the responses included criticism or lack of any effects. Four percent of the comments were miscellaneous.

Conclusions

The results of feedback study show that the tunnel of choices supports the young drivers' thinking of risks and majority of them seemed to like the approach. The tunnel of choices brought a good new tool for driving instructors to be used to activate discussion. Majority of instructors have started to use the method.



Author

Mika Hatakka
PhD, Psychologist

Born in Turku, Finland 1960. Received PhD in 1998. Started his academic career in University of Turku with themes and projects such as evaluations of road accident trends, development and evaluations of driver education. Involved in several EU-funded projects on development of driver education (e.g. Gadget, DAN, ANDREA and BASIC).

Development manager in the Finnish Road Safety Council, responsible for training and education 2006-2007.

Freelance consultant since 2008.

The chairman of the board in Research and Training Humaani Ltd. since 2014.

Member of scientific committee of traffic accident investigation in Finland

Behavioural science expert in the Finnish national accident investigation authority

Co-operation with e.g.

- The Finnish road safety council
- Finnish driving school association
- Training institutes for traffic instructors
- Daimler (Development of Mercedes Benz Driving Academy)
- Finnish national traffic safety agency.