

How to collect information on elderly drivers' subjective risk through focus group interviews

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Introduction

The topic “Elderly car drivers” has been in the centre of attention for the last couple of years. One of the prime reasons for this is that many of the populations in the European countries are currently undergoing an aging process due to the expanded life length. The number of people older than 65 years old is increasing both in number and as a share of the population. Another reason is that car dependence also is increasing; driving a car has become a necessity in the everyday life in order to meet our personal needs and social obligations. In Denmark car ownership is growing both in numbers and size and the mileage driven and number of trips by car is increasing. The mobility, freedom and independence the car provides are also compelling to the older drivers.

Recent research findings show that keeping the elderly mobile reduces the pressure on the public health programme because the mobility helps them to stay independent, vibrant and maintain a good life quality [Hakamies-Blomqvist et al., 1999]. This enforces the society's inclination to keep the elderly people mobile, but it also raises questions as how illness and health status effect driving? What are the connections between age, health and accidents? Are elderly drivers unsafe drivers?

Gerontologists have taught us that people age very differently. It is not possible to classify a person's health status just by knowing their age. The variety between individuals is big. People age very differently and accordingly to their genes and the life they have lived. What can be said is that with increasing age the prevalence of age related impairments and diseases increases and they can affect the cognitive, sensory and motoric skills. [Larsen, 2001]

It has been said that elderly drivers are at a greater risk in traffic, which is partly true. The greater risk consists of an enlarged risk for having a serious accident than other drivers. This is due to a higher fragility, it is not due to a poor driving ability. Elderly drivers have though a distinct accident pattern in traffic – especially problems connected with crossing intersections, making left turns, judging the safety gaps and changing lanes [Sagberg, 2003; Larsen, 2001]. Previous research has also shown that elderly drivers use different compensatory driving strategies; they avoid driving under bad weather conditions, during rush hour, at night, or avoid certain situations. [Ramund, 1996; Hakamies-Blomqvist et al., 2001].

A lot of research on elderly drivers has been carried out; gathering accident data and viewing other parts of elderly drivers' objective risk. Even if the objective risks are important for the authorities it is the perceived or subjective risks that are important for the driver and the drivers' behaviour. And this must be the next step within the research area.

Purpose

The primary objective of this study is to investigate how elderly drivers perceive their own risk while driving in traffic and what they characterize as risky situations. The purpose of this paper is to describe and construct a methodology to investigate the elderly drivers' subjective risk measurements.

In order to investigate the elderly drivers' subjective risk measurements a focus group study is planned. This study will produce data on how elderly car drivers' perceive their own and other elderly drivers' risk in traffic. These results will form the foundation for a national questionnaire where the population can elaborate and quantify these subjective risk assessments. This paper will only report on the focus group study.

Methodology

A focus group study is a qualitative research methodology to gather inductive data. Focus group interviews can be helpful in assessing needs, generating information for construction of questionnaires or finding out how people make decisions to use or not use a product or a service or to uncover factors that influence behaviour or motivations. Focus group interviews can provide insights into complicated topics when opinions are conditional or when the area of concern relates to multifaceted behaviour or motivation [Krueger & Casey, 2000].

The focus group study is a planned series of interviews designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interested, in this case elderly drivers' risk in traffic. Each group consists of 3-12 participants that discuss and share their ideas and perceptions. The focus group interview uses group dynamics as a force. The size of the group is small enough so each participant can get an opportunity to present their own thoughts and ideas to the group and the group is also large enough to provide a diversity of perceptions. The participants are able to influence each other by responding to their ideas and comments. The purpose of the interview is not to conduct a serial group interview on an individual basis or to obtain group consensus but to discover the different perceptions and ideas that exist within the group and its interactions.

Focus group interview could very well be called a focus group discussion instead since it consists of a discussion among the participants - the researcher only decides the topic but the input and output comes from the participants. This also implies that the researcher must keep her knowledge and own opinion to herself – the interesting information comes from the group and should not be contaminated by the researcher.

In order to gather this qualitative data the researcher forms a kind of a questioning guide or a discussion agenda. The purpose of the guide is to keep the discussion focused and lead the participants to discuss more specific situations or details. A questioning guide should have an easy beginning, be sequenced, move from general to specific questions and use the time available wisely. Krueger & Casey (2000) recommend the questioning guide to be divided into 5 parts.

Opening Questions
Introductory Questions
Transitions Questions
Key Questions
Ending Questions

Figure 1. The five parts of the question guide [Krueger & Casey, 2000].

The guide begins using opening questions, which are intended to get the participants to talk and get to know each other. Hereafter the introductory questions introduce the topic of discussion and get the participants to think about their connection to the topic. Transition questions go a bit deeper into the topic and prepare for the Key questions. Key questions are the most important questions and should have most time available; these questions drive the study. Finally bring Ending questions disclosure to the discussion and enable the participants to reflect on the discussion and add comments. For further information on designing a questioning guide see Krueger & Casey (2000) or Wibeck (2000).

It is important that the guide consists of open ended and semi-structured questions, so that the participants freely can influence and change direction of the interview if they feel like talking about something of personal relevance in preference to the researchers understanding of the topic [Wibeck, 2000]. This feature is one of the great advantages of the focus group interview enabling the researcher to explore new data.

A focus group study should be conducted at least 3 or 4 times with similar types of participants in order to identify general trends and patterns across the groups [Krueger & Casey, 2000].

Designing the focus group study

One of the first things to consider when creating a focus group study is the development of a questioning guide. This study's focus groups interviews focus on the topic elderly drivers' risk perception. What do the elderly drivers experience as dangerous and/or unsafe situations in traffic while they are driving? How do they perceive other elderly drivers in traffic? Do they have different perceptions on risk depending on the means of transport? These questions lead to the formation of a simple model.

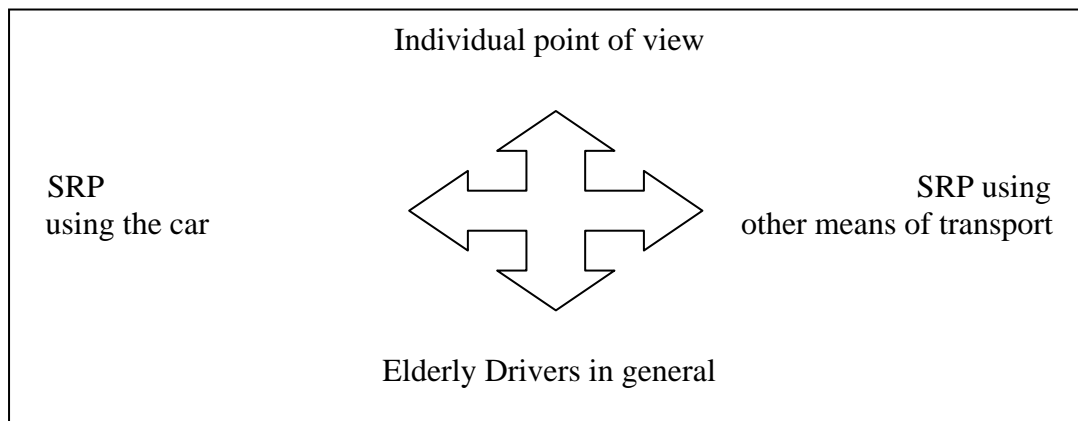


Figure 2. Model on how Elderly Drivers' subjective risk perception (SRP) differs from using the car and other means of transport on an individual level or in general.

Another issue the study wished to investigate was if the elderly drivers differed between the use of the word “safety” and “security” as these two words reflexes perceived subjective risk and objective risk.

The questioning guide was formed accordingly to the SRP model (figure 2) and the thoughts about “safety” and “security” and adapted the 5-part structure (figure 1) as Krueger & Casey (2000) suggested it.

According to Krueger & Casey (2000) a well-planned focus group is characterized by homogeneity but with sufficient variation among the participants to let contrasting opinions surface. The points of resemblances give the participants a sense of safety and comfort and this increase their inclination to share their thoughts and perception with the group instead of being a representative from a certain neighbourhood, gender or culture. The points of resemblances chosen for this study were; all participants were aged 65+ years old and drove a private car on a regularly basis. This means that participants must be active elderly people, who make trips on a daily basis, since this study doesn't target working elderly drivers but elderly drivers in general. Possible participants can be sought at hobby or association activities. The heterogeneously factors between the groups are; municipality size and degrees of urbanity, number of inhabitants, different connections and classes of accessible road system and participation in a voluntary training course for elderly drivers or not.

The participants were contacted partly through a car-driving course for elderly car drivers and partly from different meetings in the DaneAge Association¹ local committees. The recruitment from the latter part was very time-consuming probably due to a minor interest in “an interview about car driving and traffic safety” as the interview was announced to potential participants. A helpful tool showed to be the promise of a minor acknowledgement for their help – a small box of chocolates. The recruitment provided participants for 4 focus group interviews. Two of the interviews consisted of former participants from a training course for elderly car drivers and the two other interviews consisted of randomly chosen elderly drivers. The actual group size varied from 4 to 7 participants. All groups were exposed to cancelling at least one persons engagement due to sudden illness or attending funerals.

It was decided to videotape all the interviews. This makes it feasible for the researcher to concentrate on the process that take place during the interview and let the camera record all details.

The questioning guide was first tested in a group consisting of former participants from a car-driving course. The test group showed that the question guide was too complex. Alterations were made on several levels. The guide needed to be simplified and loose some of technical questions as the difference between the words when they felt safe or secure. The questions were change so that they encouraged the participants to describe different situations. The

¹ DaneAge Association is a Danish national membership organisation with approximately 500.000 members organised in 16 regional committees and 211 local committees. One of the main objectives is to act on behalf of older people in relation to central and local government and other decision makers, who influence older people's quality of life.

Introductory questions still aimed at the participants experience being in traffic and the transition questions on being a car driver – but without the safe/secure aspect. The key questions focuses on situations perceived by the drivers as unsafe or difficult.

Summery conclusions

This paper reports to have found a useful method to explore elderly drivers' subjective risk measurements. The method have helped finding and constructing a focus group study. The paper considers different aspects of this type of study and concludes that it is a feasible way to explore elderly drivers' subjective risk measurements. The analyses from these interviews are still to be completed.

Literature

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