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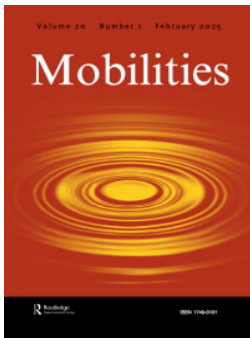
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'In the name, she lives on': responsibilities and rehumanization in survivor narratives of vehicular violence

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ABSTRACT

Motor vehicle crashes form a global, though unequally distributed, violence that has killed more people than World War II. Yet, dominant discourses in politics, industry, and media render invisible this violence itself and its political roots in the social and material reconstruction of space in favor of speed, efficiency, and, predominantly, automobility. The narratives of people impacted by vehicular violence remain unstudied, however. Crash survivors regularly participate in public debate, and survivor narratives more widely can have a strong influence on public perception. Drawing on mobilities literature as well as trauma and memory studies, this paper analyzes how survivors and deceased victims' relatives in the Dutch context narrate three different themes of responsibility, and a fourth theme of rehumanization, in in-depth interviews. On the one hand, we find that the need to make sense of an impactful experience while surrounded by dominant discourses in society, leads survivors to adopt some of those discourses in their narratives. On the other hand, we identify their rehumanization of survivors and deceased victims and their absolution of individual drivers from culpability as hopeful starting points for resisting the automobility system's dehumanization and for rethinking a-spatial perspectives on 'safety' that place responsibility solely on individuals.

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Introduction

When I read such an article, I think, oh, there's a drama behind that. Yes, I know that.

Jacqueline

Yearly, traffic crashes injure between 20 and 50 million people and kill 1.3 million worldwide (WHO 2022). Motor vehicle crashes specifically have killed more people than World War II (Braun and Randell 2022). Their impact exceeds these direct victims, however, and extends to the other people involved in the crash, next-of-kin, staff of emergency services and witnesses (Te Brömmelstroet 2020). As such, motor vehicle crashes arguably constitute a globally present yet largely hidden

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example of the direct violences that Philo (2017, 258) calls ‘less-than-human geographies’, that ‘[diminish] the human’ and ‘[cut] away at [...] life, [...] physically and psychologically’.

Critical scholars (e.g. Te Brömmelstroet 2020; Culver 2018; Norton 2008; Virilio in Ruby 1998) in the new mobilities paradigm, which ‘examines the embodied nature[,] experience’ and ‘social relations’ of travel (Sheller and Urry 2006, 213–14, 208), have argued that motor vehicle crashes are not random facts of nature, tragic though unpreventable, but the result of politics. Their physical impact is due to the mass and speed of automobility (Culver 2018), a form of mobility that has come to dominate public space as streets were socially and materially reconstructed into spaces for the speed and efficiency of vehicles rather than for messy human living, matching business interests (Culver 2018; Norton 2008). ‘Walk in the city, and you are pushed to the sides of the road’ (Short and Pinet-Peralta 2010, 44). Hence the term ‘vehicular violence’, as coined by Culver (2018), which we will use from here onwards. The injustice of vehicular violence is exacerbated by its manifestation along lines of existing inequalities: national income (Short and Pinet-Peralta 2010), age, class, and race (Culver 2018).

To use the words of Springer and Le Billon (2016, 1), and as stressed by Culver (2018), vehicular violence is both an ‘overt appearance’ and ‘hidden beneath ideology [and] mundanity’. In both North America (Culver 2018; Vardi 2014) and the Netherlands (Te Brömmelstroet 2020), such violence has been legitimated by the establishment of discourses that obscure its political history and the resulting human suffering. Through the use of statistics, ‘early automobile clubs, the private insurance industry, safety movement and establishment, and printed media’ in the US affected the present understanding of crashes as ‘a “necessary evil”’ (Vardi 2014, 345). While in the first half of the 20th century, angry citizens in US cities campaigned against the then new emergence of vehicular violence using a moralist ‘justice’ framing (Norton 2008), the current popular conception captured in the word ‘accident’ constructs it as unpredictable (Culver 2018), a natural rather than a socially constructed phenomenon. Western media have placed responsibility for safety onto individuals (Te Brömmelstroet 2020), as has traffic law and policy by spatially disciplining adults and children who are not in cars to better protect themselves (Te Brömmelstroet 2020; Culver 2018). Media reports of individual crashes are dehumanized (Te Brömmelstroet 2020), matching the wider impunity and tolerance surrounding a killing that Braun and Randell (2022) see within the particular space of ‘the road’ that was appropriated and constructed for the automobility system. Worldwide, the lives lost to vehicular violence are hardly memorialized (Braun and Randell 2022).

While these findings constitute crucial macro-level discourses, it remains unknown how the people affected by vehicular violence themselves understand and narrate their experience. The strength and importance of survivor narratives must not be underestimated. Jeffery and Canda (2006, 289) note that ‘victimhood’ – which could be rephrased as ‘survivorhood’ – ‘establishes a space for a specific kind of politics; but it clears the ground, it poses itself as the neutral or indisputable starting point from which discussion, debates, and action—in a word, politics—can and must proceed’. To speak from the position of a survivor gives a ‘moral authority that no one can deny’ (Bateson 2022, 2), and survivor narratives can have a strong influence on the perception of an issue (Newman 2003). Because trauma literature has shown how survivors of trauma both draw on dominant discourses in their social environment (Jirek 2017) and have resisted trauma’s structural causes (Pain 2021), a focus on survivors reveals both the ‘common sense’ through which subjects understand and possibly legitimate violent conditions (Laurie and Shaw 2018), and may also identify potential counter-narratives that interrupt that common sense.

This paper analyzes how a group of Dutch vehicular violence survivors and relatives of deceased victims come to understand and narrate the crash that affected them in response to its media coverage, and how this relates to dominant understandings of vehicular violence. Within the confines of this paper, we focus on constructions of responsibility and (de)humanization, but we acknowledge that the experience of a traffic crash is much broader and deserving of additional academic research. Drawing on theoretical insights from trauma and memory studies, we find that vital processes of meaning-making after a traumatic experience lead

survivors and relatives to both reproduce and resist dominant understandings of vehicular violence. In their efforts to counter (potential) victim-blaming, some survivors and relatives focus on the individual responsibility of drivers. This echoes larger discourses of individual responsibility previously identified in media (Te Brömmelstroet 2020), 'road safety' research (Braun and Randell 2022), and traffic policy (Culver 2018; Verkade and Te Brömmelstroet 2020), that absolve the automobility system from 'causality and responsibility' (Braun and Randell 2022, 60). Giving the crash a 'function' rather than let it remain a seemingly senseless coincidence within their individual lives, others stress societal responsibility to increase safety. This counters the normalization and naturalization of vehicular violence (Culver 2018) but in some instances reflects the notion of conventional 'road safety' studies that 'safe driving' is possible (Braun and Randell 2022), again absolving automobility. We also identify two new narratives of rehumanization and absolution. Wanting to do justice to that which was lost or those who were lost, survivors and relatives rehumanize, countering the general dehumanization, tolerance and social impunity for human killings within the space of 'the road' (Braun and Randell 2022). Finally, some absolve all from responsibility or blame, allowing the former to live their lives without resentment. Although this absolution sometimes reproduces the understanding of vehicular violence as a natural and unavoidable characteristic of the environment (Culver 2018), its move away from individual responsibility could also be a base for interrupting the cycle of vehicular violence and the subsequent violent spatial disciplining and marginalizing of bodies to keep themselves safe. Thus, we identify the latter two narratives as hopeful possibilities to change the 'common sense' (Laurie and Shaw 2018) surrounding vehicular violence.

The survivors and relatives in our study made efforts to spread all four narratives mentioned above among a larger public. As such, this paper contributes to the literature on vehicular violence by showing how it is understood, legitimated, and resisted in a previously unexplored realm of survivors, through more intimate and everyday processes of victimhood, coping and meaning making than those that shape the macro-discourses previously identified. Moreover, while the broader literature on (urban) violence has importantly focused on making violence and the discourses that sustain it visible (Pavoni and Tulumello 2020; Springer and Le Billon 2016), our additional contribution is to demonstrate how the embodied view of survivors can be a source of inspiration for reframing dominant understandings of (vehicular) violence and safety to stimulate political change.

Dominant discourses of vehicular violence

As mentioned above, scholars have pointed out multiple discourses, mainly in the North American context, that have rendered vehicular violence hidden in plain sight. In this section, we outline three specific dimensions of those discourses that have informed our analysis: naturalization, responsibility, and dehumanization. In the interviews we conducted, informants reacted to the media articles that we used as an elicitation method. Therefore, we lay specific emphasis on how these discourses appear in the media¹.

Firstly, vehicular violence has been reconstructed from a social and political phenomenon to a *natural* phenomenon. Culver (2018) contends that this is evident in the dominant use of the word 'accident'. Historically, while discourses of moral injustice were quite prevalent in the first couple of decades of automobility (Norton 2008; Vardi 2014), in the later part of the 20th century, the quantification of traffic crashes helped to construct 'normal' and 'acceptable' death rates, making vehicular violence a 'necessary evil' (Vardi 2014, 361). Braun and Randell (2022, 54, mobilizing Agamben 2017) observe that at present, the space of 'the road' is one in which a 'state of exception has become normalized', where people 'may be killed without homicide having been committed'.

This naturalizing 'accident' discourse has also been identified in traffic crash coverage in the US (Connor and Wesolowski 2004; Ralph et al. 2019), UK (Fevyer and Aldred 2022), and the

Netherlands (Te Brömmelstroet 2020). It obscures the structural threat and violence of automobiles (Culver 2018) as well as how vehicular violence is enabled by avoidable political choices in the historical reconstruction of public space towards the efficient flow of automobility (Culver 2018; Norton 2008). Therefore, scholars studying these media discourses prefer terms such as 'crash' or 'collision' (Goddard et al. 2019; Ralph et al. 2019), or even 'systemic traffic violence' (Te Brömmelstroet 2020; Verkade and Te Brömmelstroet 2023), to the dominant 'accident'. Magusin (2017, 84) points out that 'crash' is not ideal either, as it 'implies two vehicles or hard objects of equal force colliding and breaking', which obscures the inequality in speed, mass, inflicted damage and suffered physical harm that exists when a motorized vehicle strikes the bare human body of a pedestrian or cyclist. It also limits the event to the moment of physical collision, obscuring the physical and emotional impact on human lives. However, in the absence of a better alternative, we choose 'crash' to refer to this type of event.

A second discursive dimension is *responsibility*. During the first decades of automobility, public safety campaigns in the US shifted responsibility for safety onto people who were not in cars, inventing the concept of the 'jaywalker' (Norton 2008), which spatially marginalizes people to the side of the street (Culver 2018). Today, this perspective on safety has been mainstreamed in the US (Culver 2018) and in the Netherlands; the Dutch government, for example, funds education that teaches children how to behave in traffic in order to stay safe (Te Brömmelstroet 2020; Verkade and Te Brömmelstroet 2020). Even when 'traditional 'road safety' research' focuses on the responsibility of drivers, this remains a narrow focus on individual behavior that relieves 'automobility in its entirety' of 'causality and responsibility' (Braun and Randell 2022, 60).

Media coverage varies in the construction of responsibility for traffic crashes. Multiple studies find that car drivers are absolved from responsibility (Fevyer and Aldred 2022; Magusin 2017; Ralph et al. 2019). Ralph et al. (2019) find that responsibility is then shifted onto pedestrians and cyclists. However, Bond, Scheffels, and Monteagut (2018) argue that the term 'accident' ascribes motorists and cyclists equal responsibility, and Connor and Wesolowski (2004) find that responsibility is attributed to any single party in a victim/villain storyline. In contrast with other studies highlighting the coverage of crashes as isolated incidents, Fevyer and Aldred (2022, 13) observe that referrals to a pattern of earlier crashes construct killings of cyclists as the result of cycling as a dangerous activity 'in and of itself', while deceased pedestrians *were* constructed as victims of isolated incidents. In the Netherlands, most headlines do not attribute responsibility at all (Te Brömmelstroet 2020), reinforcing the notion that a crash comes 'out of nowhere' as in a natural disaster. What the media coverage in all of these studies lacks is the responsibility of a larger structure that transcends the crash itself and its 'socially constructed blame' (Culver 2018, 149), whether that be road design (Ralph et al. 2019), the unequal distribution of vulnerability and danger between road users (Culver 2018), or the predominance of automobility to begin with (ibid.). As such, systemic responsibility is obscured.

The third discursive dimension that informed our analysis is *dehumanization*. While citizens resisted vehicular violence using humanized and emotional discourses in the US of the 1920's (Norton 2008) and in the Netherlands of the 1970's, the latter movement being called 'Stop de Kindermoord'/'Stop the Child Murder' (Te Brömmelstroet 2020), these temporary discourses are marginal compared to the prevailing global absence of memorialization of traffic deaths (Braun and Randell 2022) and the rationalization of vehicular violence through statistics (Vardi 2014). Braun and Randell (2022) contend that within the constructed and delineated space of 'the road', human killings are predominantly met with tolerance and impunity, compared to other spaces.

Media coverage in the Netherlands (Te Brömmelstroet 2020) and North America (Bond, Scheffels, and Monteagut 2018; Goddard et al. 2019; Magusin 2017; Ralph et al. 2019) is overwhelmingly dehumanized as well. While some studies (Te Brömmelstroet 2020; Goddard et al. 2019; Ralph et al. 2019) find verbatim and grammatical dehumanization of sentences that directly describe the physical crash, an alternative notion of dehumanization is more relevant for our

analysis of survivor narratives, i.e., how deceased victims' identity or individuality (Magusin 2017) and their value to the social networks around them is exposed only in a small minority of cases: 'we do not learn about their families, their favorite sports teams, or of the hand life may have dealt them' (Bond, Scheffels, and Monteagut 2018, 51). As such, media coverage offers a factual and distant image that obscures the far-reaching human impacts and grief following a traffic crash (see, for example, Breen and O'Connor 2010).

Personal narratives, trauma, and memory

We approach the narratives of people impacted by vehicular violence as inevitably subjective and constructed, and therefore as possibly differing between the people who (unconsciously) do the constructing. This is informed by the notion of memory as a practice (Douglas 2010; Lambek and Antze 1996): rather than reflecting an objective past reality, memory can be seen as the 'act' of viewing that reality (ibid.), which is dependent on conditions in the present (Douglas 2010; Leavitt, Antze, and Lambek 2001), including the existent ways of thinking reflected in the discourses reviewed above, as well as socio-economic class and profession, such as depending on a job in public or private transport. While we as authors have the critical realist ambition to provide 'plausible accounts' (Charmaz 2006, 132) of informants' meaning making, we acknowledge that our own analysis requires a construction of reality as well (see Willig 2016 on how a realist ontology goes together with a constructivist epistemology and might indeed be inherent to the practice of research).

Social conditions do not necessarily have to limit personal narratives to dominant ways of thinking, however: emerging counter ideologies can enable people with trauma to tell new narratives that 'write back' to dominant notions of particular life experiences (Douglas 2010, 41). For example, Pain (2021) reviews how Black, postcolonial and queer analyses of trauma have long centered survivors' awareness of and ongoing resistance against trauma's structural causes, especially when this is 'situated in collective histories of violence' (idem, 984). While traffic crashes are predominantly perceived as isolated incidents rather than a collective trauma, the danger of traffic is a structural presence in society that existed long before the informants in this study experienced a traffic crash and will most likely continue to exist for the rest of their lives. Even when it does not affect people physically, it 'produces landscapes of fear and anxiety, and hence social and physical exclusion, marginalization, and immobilization' (Culver 2018, 162) to those vulnerable to it.

Whether focused on resistance or on overcoming, the notion of trauma narratives as inevitably constructed does not in any way reduce their importance (Lambek and Antze 1996; Leavitt, Antze, and Lambek 2001). People with trauma construct narratives as vital coping strategies (Jirek 2017; Park 2016), as they 'seem compelled to make sense of the [traumatic] incident or find meaning in their experience' (Jirek 2017, 168). As such, they are 'real in [their] consequences', to echo William I. Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas (1928, 571–572). Logically, then, for the media to take full control over the construction of this story can be an impactful experience for survivors: they are affected by 'misframings' because those undermine their goals, spread a wrong or negative image of them, or fail to do justice to their view of reality, through '*a product that makes authoritative truth claims*' (Palmer 2017, 8, emphasis in original).

Method

Interviews were conducted with 11 informants who were impacted by a motor vehicle crash that received media coverage, and who were either physically involved in the crash itself or were a relative of a victim who had died because of a crash. Within the limits of this project, this small number of cases allowed us to seek depth rather than breadth. As Small (2009) shows,

for qualitative interview studies to reach representativeness is both practically unrealistic, whether conducted with 10 or 40 informants, *and* besides the point of qualitative research. Instead, when interviews are conceived of as a collection of *cases*, each one informing the analysis of the next, rather than as a *sample*, they have the unique ability to uncover (some of) the *mechanisms* that influence particular empirical outcomes rather than the *distribution* of the outcomes (ibid.). That is what we have tried to do in this study.

Six informants were relatives of deceased victims; three had been injured by the driver of a motorized vehicle while they were cycling, and survived; one had hit two people in another motorized vehicle while driving a motorized vehicle, leading to the death of one of the people in the other vehicle; and one had fatally hit a pedestrian with a motorized vehicle, who had walked onto the highway with the possible intention of committing suicide, as reported by a news article and later confirmed by the police. Most informants were recruited through an advertisement on the website and private Facebook group of Vereniging Verkeersslachtoffers (Association for Traffic Victims) and through a journalist working on this topic. Two informants got involved initially to distribute the recruitment advertisement on the social media of their foundation and then decided to also be informants in the research. All names of informants and other directly identifying information such as age and locations are substituted by pseudonyms.

The primary author conducted interviews at informants' homes, in an online meeting or in public places with relative silence and privacy that were chosen by the informant. They usually lasted approximately one hour, the shortest lasting half an hour and the longest four hours. The interviews were semi-structured, always starting with broader questions about how the crash happened and how the informant generally experienced its subsequent media coverage before going into specific articles that were published about the crash that affected them. Articles were selected to include a minimum of two and a maximum of six per informant, and to represent different genres, if available. Thus, the selection for each informant included news articles at least, while some also included interviews or longer background articles. The usage of articles in the interviews was similar to photo elicitation (Peroff et al. 2020) but with text instead of visual material: the primary author presented the article to the informant, first asking 'What do you think of this article?' before asking them to share their thoughts about specific characteristics of the article that the author had identified based on the discourses described above. Throughout the interview, there was room for questions that came up spontaneously, and at the end, the primary author asked informants if they wished to share anything else. The interviews were audio-recorded and verbatim transcribed.

It is important to note that the interview set-up and initial analysis were guided by a slightly different research goal at the outset: how existent media frames impacted survivors of traffic crashes and deceased victims' relatives. During her thematic narrative analysis (Riessman 2005), however, the primary author found that any sincere concerns informants expressed about media coverage were always inextricably linked to the common thread of their own constructed narrative which they kept circling back to. Moreover, some informants' common threads were not or barely linked to media coverage. In an iterative process between data and literature, informants' own narratives, and their relation to the wider societal perspective on vehicular violence, emerged as much more salient and consistent patterns than reactionary concerns about media coverage and thus became the primary focus. By making this shift, we hope to have prevented the risk of thematic analysis to render invisible the 'ambiguities, [the] "deviant" responses that don't fit into a typology, [and] the unspoken', (Riessman 2005, 3). The primary author selected those themes that had political implications for how vehicular violence is understood and addressed in society, in keeping with the focus of current academic debate on discourses of vehicular violence. For example, while there was also data on how informants viewed the journalistic process and its professional ethos, this data was excluded from the report.

This research was approved (number: 2021-AISSR-14235) by the Ethics Review Board of the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences, University of Amsterdam, who stimulated us to consider both the benefits and risks of participation for people impacted by traffic crashes, and how to accommodate those. Informants were informed of those benefits and risks in the consent form. At multiple moments during the research process, measures were taken to give informants space and control over the information they shared, while we retained power over final decisions in analysis and writing, and to ensure that the interviews were not experienced as harmful. Further information about the ethical considerations in this project can be obtained by contacting the authors.

Narratives of survivors and relatives

Informants actively constructed narratives of the crash by collecting and reading documents such as news articles and police reports, or by talking to the other party in the crash, their family, or emergency workers who were involved. Below, we discuss four different themes around which their narratives revolved, and how they form vital coping strategies.

Narratives of individual responsibility

Some informants narrated their crash, or the general issue of traffic crashes, around individual responsibility, also wishing for media coverage to follow this narrative. They held individuals involved in crashes responsible, rather than structural factors such as automobility or spatial design. When discussing what could have prevented the crash, or what could prevent future crashes, they focused on personal behavior.

The narrative of Bart showed this theme most strongly. In a quiet restaurant on a sunny spring morning, he explained how his young brother was killed. Sem was riding his motorcycle, his favorite pastime, when a car driver who was on the wrong side of the road, overtaking the vehicle in front, hit him head-on. Sem was dead immediately. Bart said this happened in a dangerous curve with a continuous line, and a media article mentioned warning signs. Before the police could disclose any information about the crash, the first news article aired, stating: 'A motorcyclist collided with a car and died'. Bart finds this article infuriating, not only because it made him aware of Sem's death before being properly informed by the police, but also because he thinks it portrays Sem as culpable. It assigns agency to Sem and includes explicit pictures of his ruined motorcycle, which Bart thinks stimulates a pre-existent stereotypical image of motorcyclists who drive recklessly and thereby cause their own deaths. He says this image was expressed by Facebook comments on the article:

Yea, people comment, and so the most common comments were now: 'Oh, yea, another one who must have been driving insanely', 'Oh, yea, it's a motorcyclist again, he asked for it'. Yea, and that, that's not what, at least in this case, firstly: it's not what happened, and secondly: not what Sem deserves either, because he has zero culpability in this, it just really happened because of someone else.

Bart's indignation comes back as he starts talking faster and louder: '[...] such a journalist who throws something like that into the world, where is his moral compass, you know? What on earth were you thinking?'

After the legal trial, an interview with Sem's family was published to set the record straight. It emphasized that not Sem, but the driver was responsible and did not discuss how more structural factors may also have contributed to the crash. While looking at it together, the primary author asks Bart: 'And here, yea, the driver is not asked for commentary, in this article, do you think that's... good? Do you like that?' He answers:

Yes, that was a conscious decision, right. Look, we've got eh... the gist is ultimately to say that Sem is not guilty and that [the driver has] just taken someone's life. [...] And the driver does not deserve even a letter in this article, in that sense. Of course, he's mentioned somewhere, right, because he knew how dangerous the road was. [...] He, he was driving home, and he would have just been home two streets further down, and he drives that road six, seven, eight times a week. So, he just *knew* that that, that it was a very dangerous road. So no, he, I'm, er, I'm very happy with the article.

Bart wanted to raise attention through coverage of the driver's individual responsibility. While he mentions that the road where it happened is very dangerous, this seems a given in his account. The road is not what should have been different; the actions of the driver are what should have been different, and that is what he wants coverage to reflect. This type of coverage draws attention to the individual behavior of 'rogue drivers' (Fevyer and Aldred 2022), but away from the systemic and political causes of motor vehicle crashes.

Simultaneously, Bart's narrative is explainable as a logical mechanism of coping with the first news article's victim blaming. He feels that his dear brother, a unique person who is now forever lost, 'deserves so much more than being portrayed as the motorcyclist who is the one to blame'. To save his brother's image, he counters the culpability of the victim with its polar opposite within the individual responsibility frame that the first article established at the outset, which is the culpability of the driver. Similar logics behind individual responsibility narratives also came up in other interviews: when the blame threatens to be wrongly distributed among the people involved in a crash, especially by the surrounding community (in response to coverage), a public emphasis on the other party's responsibility can feel like the best remedy to survivors and relatives. It resembles the need for transferring 'the burden of disgrace from victim to offender' through an 'acknowledgment of harm' and 'community denunciation of the crime' that Herman (2005, 585) finds in the context of sexual and domestic violence.

Aart, a truck driver who drove on the highway when someone committed suicide by walking in front of his truck, also positively noted an article's focus on individual responsibility, this time on the part of the person who died. The confirmation from both news articles and police that it was an intended suicide released him from his ruminations of a few days over whether he could have done something to prevent it: 'For me personally, that's... because then it's not the driver. Who did stupid things [...]'. Conversely, language that implied *his* responsibility provoked his resistance. When the primary author asked him whether the sentence structures 'hit by a truck' or 'a truck hit...' (passive or active) made any difference to him, he started defending himself, as though her question showed that it was not clear that none of it was his fault:

Yeah, but... the fact is, she jumps in front of my truck. [...] I didn't go her way with my truck. [...] I didn't eh, because she was standing on the side eh, drive into her. Let that be clear. She jumped in front of my truck, and I didn't... actually hit her.

The primary author apologized and explained that the active sentence was something hypothetical that a journalist could have written and did not reflect her own impression of his story, and that it was clear to her that he had no responsibility in it. In his interpretation of that sentence, there is no demarcation between the physical vehicle ('truck') and movement ('hitting') on the one hand and the driver and his responsibilities and intentions on the other hand. This resembles Braun and Randell's (2022, 59) notion of a 'car-driver assemblage' forming a 'cyborg entity'. Aart's perspective suggests that people could also perceive human driver and machine as inseparable when it comes to responsibility and causality. To relieve himself of responsibility and causality, which he indeed did not have, he has to take away responsibility and causality from the entire 'human-machine entity', feeling inextricably part of it. In this way, efforts made to relieve an innocent driver of responsibility could unintentionally conceal the vehicle's potential for violence.

Importantly, not all interviewees whose narratives invoked individual responsibility arrived there from a wish to emphasize the culpability of the other party. Agnes, a woman who was

hit by a truck driver, invoked an absolution narrative (as described in the third sub-section of the results) when talking about her individual crash, but when she talked generally about traffic crashes and how to prevent them, she focused only on measures that individual road users should take to protect themselves. What she wanted to see in the newspaper was 'I think the awakening, like, guys, I see so many school students or young people with a telephone, still, despite the fact that it costs 90 euros, messing around with their telephone, on their bicycle. Then it's bound to happen that one time you will plummet upside down'. Even though the measure of eliminating phone use on the bicycle would not have helped in her case: she was not using her phone at the time of the crash and still it happened. This individualization of responsibility, if not rooted in a defense against victim blaming, is perhaps best interpreted in light of the individual responsibility frame through which crashes are commonly narrated, not only in Western media (Te Brömmelstroet 2020), but also, notably, in Dutch legislation, which Agnes explicitly refers to here (the fine of 90 euros).

Narratives of societal responsibility

In contrast to the individual responsibility narrative, multiple interviewees held larger institutions responsible for their crash or crashes more generally, such as influential companies or the government. To them, coverage that merely reported rather than explained was not sufficient; it left them with a desire for a thorough treatment of the 'real' cause, which transcended the moment of the crash itself, in their view (Koen: 'I've been searching so much for what the cause was, from my perspective, and I still don't have it').

Theo and Jacqueline told one such narrative. Their young daughter Ella died after being hit by a taxi driver while cycling to work. The primary author interviewed them separately while Ella smiled from the picture frame that stood prominently in the middle of their kitchen counter. As they had emphasized in interviews with journalists, Theo and Jacqueline attributed responsibility to both the dangerous and exploitative driving practices and poor safety measures of the taxi company, and to the chaotic traffic design at the location of the crash. Theo: '[...] how can you send such a young boy on the road, who can't drive, or at least has too little experience to be crossing around [the city] this much?'

Coverage that did not put the crash in this context was inadequate for Theo and Jacqueline. Theo said:

I'm not exactly sure if you know the location, but it's just a location that's extremely cluttered, where trams, buses, taxis, cyclists, cars, everything is at once, pedestrians, with five different roads, basically. [...] And then you get, when you then look at the news reports, or read them again, you say: well, hello, why isn't there a closer look at: hey, where did this happen? What kind of situation is that? Does this happen more often there? Right, talk to a few people, like, could this have been prevented or erm... Is this actually the result of...?

When the primary author asked Jacqueline how she felt about the fact that none of the articles they discussed mentioned a societal pattern, Jacqueline said:

They should do that right away. Include a little tail: 'This month five taxi drivers have already caused accidents, one of which was fatal', or 'two fatal', or, you know, immediately include a little tail like that. I would find that very helpful. Or actually, necessary.

They demand that the crash be placed in a societal context (Theo: '[...] this is not what you can accept as a society'). That it is interpreted, rather than just reported within the temporal boundaries of the event itself. This wish is directly related to who or what is considered responsible: someone who would have merely seen the individual driver as responsible might have been satisfied with coverage that did not transcend the roles of those directly involved. But for Theo and Jacqueline, this does not address the true cause as they see it. This narrative

counters the dominant discourse of crashes as isolated incidents for which no responsibility or merely individual responsibility can be attributed. Its acknowledgment of the political construction of the built environment comes closer to scholarly critique of vehicular violence (Culver 2018; Norton 2008), especially Theo's remarks about street design. On the other hand, the focus on improving safe driving practices reproduces the idea that there *is* such a thing as safe automobility (Theo: 'But here we are dealing with a professional driver who is expected to drive completely safely'), placing the source of danger within drivers rather than vehicles and thus relieving the automobility system of causality (Braun and Randell 2022). There was only one informant, Koen, who placed responsibility onto automobility in general, in addition to worn and unsafe infrastructure at the location of his individual crash, during which he was cycling and a driver hit him from the side with his car. About a media article on his crash, he said: '[...] this paints a picture that cycling is simply dangerous, while I have been saying for a long time, even before the accident, like: *cars* are dangerous'. And later in the interview: 'If there had been no cars, cycling would not have been dangerous'. While he blamed cars, he absolved the individual driver in his crash: 'Yea, that motorist was just allowed to drive there [...]. And it really caught him off guard that this happened'.

Narratives of societal responsibility gave the crash a 'function' or bigger meaning for survivors and relatives, an event which can otherwise feel like a senseless coincidence within an individual life. This function consisted of stimulating political action. The primary author asked Henk, for example, whether he would have liked it if articles had put the crash that killed his mother in a societal context. Referring to societal debate at the time about reversing the lowered speed limit back to its higher precedent in relation to nitrogen emissions, he said:

Yes, certainly, because you, because you do somehow hope that something will be done with it. Every death is one death too many, especially with a traffic accident. And and now very often it's, in the discussions, it's just a business case about 'are we going to drive 120 instead of 100?'

And Koen, whose story had previously appeared in a journalistic book, said:

Well, the reason why I like it that I'm in [that book] is that it still, in that sense... that the accident did have a function. Whether that's meaning making, but... It hasn't completely disappeared. It is part of a whole of what happens in reality and what the consequences are of choices. But it's only this little of a piece. But it does give the attention that is supposed to come with it.

Theo and Jacqueline took this 'meaning making', as Koen called it, a step further by giving interviews to journalists in which they critiqued the taxi company's practices and put their daughter's death in that context, arguing that more people might die if the company did not change its policies (a prophecy that came true). This can be understood as what Douglas (2010, 41) called 'a need to "write back"' to a dominant narrative in society. It gave them the opportunity to re-align the story in the news with what 'I think I have experienced' (Theo). Moreover, these kinds of active interventions, which most informants undertook in realms not limited to media coverage, form a 'survivor mission' (Herman 1992; Jirek 2017) to help other survivors or prevent that more people will be affected in the future.

Narratives of absolution

Multiple interviewees narrated their crash around what we came to call 'absolution'. Some perceived the crash as a true, unavoidable accident, whereby responsibility disappeared entirely. Others viewed it as caused by a mistake of the *veroorzaker*² that was, however, understandable and human. Most of them wanted to spread this perspective on crashes to the rest of society, partly through media coverage.

Gijs articulated absolution most explicitly. His daughter Anne, also a young woman cycling to work, died after getting hit by the driver of a van. Afterwards, Gijs and Anne's stepmother,

Tessa, felt that friends and acquaintances made assumptions about mistakes that the driver must have made which caused him to drive into Anne. That did not feel right at all: they dealt with their experience by instead seeing ‘the human behind the *veroorzaker*’ – ‘this man [...] didn’t leave that morning with the thought: *I’m going to drive into someone*’, as Gijs put it. Their perspective expanded to the world and its public space, as Gijs explained:

[...] Sometimes you have to accept that an accident is an accident. Because you cannot create a world that is one hundred percent safe. Tomorrow, when I pull out of the driveway here, I could also get fully hit at once. [...] statistically you have a very low chance, but it is possible. And you can never rule it out one hundred percent. So, anyone could become a perpetrator *and* a victim tomorrow. And I think that... very little attention is actually paid to that.

In this view, the danger of traffic is a tragic but unavoidable state of the world, which should lead to the absolution of, or at least some empathy with *veroorzakers*, as it could happen to anyone.

In another version of the ‘absolution’ theme, it is admitted that the *veroorzaker* *did* make an *avoidable* mistake, which is absolved, nonetheless. Such is the case with Agnes, the woman who was hit by a truck driver and survived. She narrated the crash as a random occurrence (‘it could happen to anyone’; it was ‘bad luck’) until she tried to explain her positive relationship with the driver and her forgiveness (‘My question to the judges was like, yeah, be lenient to the driver’):

But yeah, there are also plenty of people who do not want contact with the *veroorzaker* and that also depends on what the cause is right, if someone is drunk behind the wheel, or with laughing gas, or fumbling on his phone, and then causes an accident, or drives twice as fast as what is allowed, then that is of course a completely different... has a completely different impact on you, because that really could have been prevented. This could also have been prevented, because he should have just gone in the direction where he... he stood, right, so he should have just turned left, then nothing would have happened, but yeah... yeah...

In the midst of narrating unavoidability to explain their positive relationship, Agnes gets stuck by her own acknowledgement that the driver *did* make an avoidable mistake. The relationship and her absolution are in spite of that. These absolution narratives draw on and perpetuate the dominant discourse of the ‘accident’, which naturalizes vehicular violence (Culver 2018) by denying both individual and societal responsibility. They also reproduce the ‘constant threat of automobility violence’ as ‘a permanent state of normality’ (Braun and Randell 2022, 59). However, through their empathy for all parties involved, they do counter dominant dehumanizing discourses and perspectives on safety that foreground individual responsibility.

Absolution formed different mechanisms of meaning-making and coping for survivors and relatives. Tessa and Gijs made it one of their goals to prevent the premature condemnation of *veroorzakers* and make the public understand the perspectives of all parties involved by starting a foundation and providing education. This can be understood as giving the crash a ‘function’, similar to Theo and Jacqueline in the previous section. This time, however, the function is apolitical, aimed at mutual understanding and mediation rather than justice and prevention.

Moreover, absolution allows survivors, relatives and *veroorzakers* alike to live their lives with less resentment towards someone else, themselves, or a structure in society. Agnes, for example, explained her motivation to give interviews to journalists: ‘[...] I want to tell my story. Yes. Because, well, what you said, also to, well, just a little piece of awareness. Like: yes, people, you don’t have to be angry about everything all the time’. For Gerda, a professional bus driver who hit a couple in a car during her work, which later led to the death of one of them, forgiving herself was an emotional necessity. How she viewed her own actions had far-reaching consequences for her self-image. About accusatory comments below journalistic articles, she said:

I think, if they know me, or if they know the person, in this case that's me, then I've been a professional driver since I was 38 and I've had my driver's license since I was 18 and this is my first accident that happened in my whole life, let's say. I am *not* a reckless driver.

Viewing her crash as a human mistake that could have happened to anyone ('And it's wrong, but it's human, I think') allowed her to both cope with the guilt and to maintain her sense of identity as a skillful driver.

Narratives of rehumanization

The majority of survivors and all of the relatives rehumanized and repersonalized themselves, deceased victims, and sometimes *veroorzakers*. This was nearly always a response to a perceived absence of *menselijkheid* ('humaneness') in coverage – a term that was used independently by many informants, while the primary author never mentioned it in her questions.

In response to anonymous and impersonal descriptions of deceased victims in coverage, some relatives rehumanized their deceased loved one by mentioning personal details, interests, and passions, making them unique again. Gijs, for example, read an article that announced his daughter's death and said: '[...] only when you read it now, I think, yes, 'the woman'... it would, if it had read: 'Anne', it would actually have been a completely different story'. And: '[...] on the other hand, this could have included a picture [of her] with: 'Her passion was baking' [...]'! He rehumanizes his daughter by giving her a name (Prickett and Timmermans 2022), by imagining a picture of her that depicts her as a unique person, and by stating her life passion. Other relatives rehumanized by stating the social relations that tied them to their deceased loved one, reinstating the meaning of the deceased as a social being. Jacqueline, for example, called out her mother-child relationship with her deceased daughter: 'Yes, I do find 'cyclist' very impersonal, of course, right. Yes. I really think so... That you're like, yeah, that is my child, alright!'

Other survivors and one *veroorzaker* rehumanized less in response to impersonal descriptions of people, and more in response to the failure of articles to surpass the temporal and spatial boundaries of the crash itself to describe the larger life story surrounding it. Countering that, they told the continuous story of how the crash impacted and shaped their lives. Agnes, for instance, said about the first news articles published about her crash:

I do understand that anonymity, but I am not an anonymous person. I *am* someone. And I'm not just a mere... little dot in a newspaper... And a dot... that you turn over and that dot is gone. Not that I have to linger in everyone's head, but it's so... For yourself it is... you know, it cost me my job, you get... well, I am in pain every day, I take such a pile of drugs that I could become a pharmacist, and it is [counts] 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 lines. And I find that difficult.

First, similar to Gijs and Jacqueline, Agnes rehumanizes herself by turning herself from *anyone* (the anonymous person in the article) back into *someone*, and then by showing that her life actually continues after the page is turned and continues to be shaped by the crash in the present.

Two informants explicitly mentioned that they missed a shift in coverage from stating only verified details to showing their subjective experience, the latter actually feeling *more correct* and more revealing of *reality*. Jacqueline said:

I think I would go for as personal as possible, but that is of course, how do you say that, then you're dramatizing it, right, I'm actually not really into that, into pulp journalism, so to speak, and at the same time, for me personally that makes more sense now. 'Young woman on her way to work', of course they didn't know that at the time, but the depiction of... but that *is* more of a depiction of reality to me.

Some interviewees wanted coverage to also make *veroorzakers* more *menselijk* ('human(e)'), mainly by describing their perspective on the crash in addition to that of the other victim(s), and the impact on their lives. However, Bart, who considered the *veroorzaker* a clear culprit,

wished that he be not allowed to speak at all – see his second quote in the first results section: ‘And the driver does not deserve even a letter in this article [...]’. Meanwhile Jacqueline and Theo wished that less attention had been given to the perspective of the *veroorzaker* not because they considered him the only culprit but because it took room and focus away from what they saw as the real – societal – cause. As such, highly sensitive attributions of responsibility limit who is rehumanized.

These rehumanizing narratives show victims’ and survivors’ individuality (Bond, Scheffels, and Monteagut 2018; Magusin 2017), and the continuous impacting of survivor’s lives and partial rehumanization of *veroorzakers*. Thereby, they counter the general dehumanization, tolerance and social impunity for human killings within the space of ‘the road’, upon which the automobility system depends (Braun and Randell 2022).

Inciting societal change, however, does not seem to be the primary motive behind survivors’ and relatives’ rehumanization; it is sometimes expressed, but a deeply disturbing feeling of disconnection between their loss and the cursory, distant coverage usually precedes it. Henk, for example, said:

It’s like, you read: oh, someone died on the highway. That’s just what you get in front of you, while for yourself that’s not the case. Because it’s your mother who died. So, there’s just a really big disconnect between sort of the impact it has on your personal life and the level of detachment with which it’s written, and that did strike me. Because I thought: yeah, that actually doesn’t do any justice at all to who a person is [...].

Survivors’ and relatives’ rehumanizing statements can be understood as coping with loss by doing justice to that which was lost or those who were lost (Fernández and González-González 2022), as Henk says. Insofar as a person’s being arises in relation to others (Butler 2003), recognition of a deceased person’s being by the wider community may be essential to mourning any loss to begin with: ‘if someone is lost, and that person is not someone, then what and where is the loss, and how does mourning take place?’ (idem, 21). By rehumanizing, survivors and relatives narrate this being *and* the loss of it back into existence: ‘[...] say her name. In the name, she lives on’ (Jacqueline).

Conclusion

Vehicular violence remains a ‘less-than-human-geography’ (Philo 2017) hidden in plain sight (Culver 2018) by discourses that naturalize, individualize, and dehumanize. This paper analyzed how vehicular violence is narrated by survivors and deceased victims’ relatives – those who speak with a ‘moral authority that no one can deny’ (Bateson 2022, 2) – to both expose the ‘common sense’ upon which survivors draw that can normalize violent conditions (Laurie and Shaw 2018) and to identify narratives that resist or reframe. Drawing on theoretical insights from trauma and memory studies, we find that vital processes of meaning-making after a traumatic experience lead survivors and relatives to both reproduce and resist dominant discourses of vehicular violence.

In reaction to media coverage of their crash, survivors and relatives reproduced narratives of individual responsibility: the idea that vehicular violence could and should be prevented through better human behavior in traffic. While this counters media narratives that fail to attribute any responsibility (Te Brömmelstroet 2020; Magusin 2017) or that shift responsibility onto people who are not in cars (Fevyer and Aldred 2022; Ralph et al. 2019), it is consistent with the attribution of responsibility for violence to driver behavior in both ‘traditional ‘road safety’ research’ and the wider automobility system, through which ‘*automobility in its entirety* is thus relieved of causality and responsibility’ (Braun and Randell 2022, 60, emphasis in original). Simultaneously, survivors and relatives narrated societal responsibility, wishing that companies or government would limit speed and the presence of cars, build safer infrastructure, and/or implement safer driving practices. While this narrative partly and importantly counters the

naturalization of vehicular violence by stressing the political construction of the built environment (Norton 2008) and the inherent danger of automobility (Braun and Randell 2022; Culver 2018), another part still ends up reproducing the idea of conventional 'road safety' science (Braun and Randell 2022) that there *is* such a thing as 'safe driving', thus saving automobility again.

Survivors and relatives also invented two new narratives that rehumanized and that absolved all from blame. The rehumanizing narrative counters the general dehumanization that underlies the establishment and maintenance of the automobility system, and the tolerance and social impunity for human killings that take place within the appropriated and constructed space of 'the road' (Braun and Randell 2022). The counter-portraits of deceased victims' individuality and meaning to their communities and the ongoing impact on survivors' lives bring them back to life as a fully human being. While some analyses of discourses of vehicular violence have stressed the importance of this type of rehumanization (Bond, Scheffels, and Monteagut 2018; Magusin 2017), others focus narrowly on advocating human-based nouns in media articles to reveal responsibility (Goddard et al. 2019; Ralph et al. 2019). This paper confirms the importance of the former, both for the personal meaning to survivors and as a counter-narrative that delegitimizes violence.

Finally, in absolution narratives survivors realized and accepted a globally shared vulnerability to become not only a victim but also a *veroorzaker* of vehicular violence, and this led them to absolve *veroorzakers* from blame. While this narrative partly naturalized vehicular violence as a tragic but unavoidable characteristic of the environment, it could also be a first step towards more critical perspectives in society. Pavoni and Tulumello (2020, 64) suggest 'accepting violence as an inevitable (if problematic) component of urban life' as a 'necessary step' towards breaking the cycle of urban violence and subsequent violent security responses. Along a similar vein, this absolution narrative seems a strong starting point for breaking the cycle of vehicular violence and the subsequent 'safety' response of law enforcement. Accepting that anyone could accidentally run their car (provided that they can afford one) over another living being, even if they want and try to stop it, could generate political pressure to direct 'safety' efforts away from individual responsibility, providing space to redirect them towards automobility and its corresponding appropriation and construction of space. Meanwhile, it should remain central that the globally shared vulnerability to vehicular violence is distributed unequally across people (Culver 2018). In this way, (elements of) survivor narratives, combined with the critical perspective of social science, could be leveraged to publicly push for a reframing of violence itself which correspondingly requests less violent and more just policy responses.

Notwithstanding these hopeful starting points, our findings show that even to most of these people who experienced the direct violence of vehicles, whose skin touched the metal, glass, and rubber, or who lost a loved one, the spatial domination of speed and automobility seems a given. By this, we do not mean to attribute responsibility to them for raising such awareness – attempting to make sense of what happened to their lives, they draw on dominant narratives already present in society. Rather, it shows the need for mobility scholars to create more knowledge about vehicular violence – not only its physical collisions but also its role in spatially marginalizing and restricting life in public spaces – and to amplify emerging resistance. While we conducted this study against the background of predominantly media discourses, commonsensical discourses of vehicular violence are reproduced in multiple areas of society at once, including 'traditional 'road safety' research' (Braun and Randell 2022, 60), civil society organizations for 'safe traffic' (Te Brömmelstroet 2024), and the tech and car industry (Norton 2021). These discourses seem to fit in larger cultural structures that have recently been coined 'motor-normativity' (Walker, Tapp, and Davis 2023; Walker and Te Brömmelstroet 2024). Critical research on these societal actors, and on lobby work, is extremely limited outside of the North American context and requires further attention. In such efforts, it is crucial to engage more closely with the various injustices of vehicular violence (Culver 2018): how might understandings of vehicular

violence be different among populations that have long been disproportionately affected by such environmental injustices, or in places where cars are for the elite? And how does that affect our collective understanding of vehicular violence? When governments or municipalities *do* increase walkability over automobility, which areas tend to be prioritized? Who benefits from this safety and whose vulnerability to danger remains? With attention to ‘power and equity’ (Laliberté 2016) rather than a false binary between violence and ‘safety’, such questions ought to be scrutinized.

Notes

1. Previous findings on this are limited to Western media: North America (Bond, Scheffels, and Monteagut 2018; Connor and Wesolowski 2004; Magusin 2017; Ralph et al. 2019), the UK (Fevyer and Aldred 2022), and the Netherlands (Te Brömmelstroet 2020).
2. The Dutch word ‘veroorzaker’ refers to someone who caused something in a physical sense without connotations of intent or misconduct, as opposed to the English word ‘perpetrator’.

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Research ethics and consent

Written informed consent was provided by the informants in this study. The agreement covered the recording and transcription of an interview, the permanently embargoed archiving of pseudonymized journalistic articles and pseudonymized interview transcripts for ten years, and the usage of findings for scientific publications, for the website of the research project and for an event with journalists.

Disclosure statement

In accordance with Taylor & Francis policy and his ethical obligation as a researcher, Marco te Brömmelstroet reports that he receives funding from a company that may be affected by the research reported in the enclosed paper. He has disclosed those interests fully to Taylor & Francis, and he has in place an approved plan for managing any potential conflicts arising from that involvement. He also reports that he has a financial interest in a foundation that may be affected by the research reported in the enclosed paper. He has disclosed those interests fully to Taylor & Francis.

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Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.

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