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Responsibilization: The case of road safety governance

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Abstract
Governments are increasingly turning to new modes of governance to induce nonstate actors to voluntarily take responsibility for societal problems. Using the concept of responsibilization as a theoretical lens, this article analyzes changes in road safety governance in Sweden. How, why, and to whom has the responsibility for road safety been attributed in Swedish policymaking, and how have state authorities engaged in processes of responsibilization during its implementation? The results show a shift in attribution of responsibility from individual road users to a broad set of so-called system designers, based on moral, causal, and preventive rationales. Responsibilization both occurs within the state apparatus and is imposed by state authorities on nonstate actors using soft governance measures. Responsibilization provides a fruitful theoretical lens for governance studies by identifying shifts in responsibility (including deresponsibilization), explicating normative/ethical underpinnings of new governance modes, and helping to open the “black box” of the state.

Keywords: governance, policy implementation, responsibility, state intervention, Sweden, vision zero.

1. Introduction

“While obedience had been the practical master-key of top-down bureaucracies, responsibility is the practical master-key of governance.” (Shamir 2008, p. 4)

As the ability of states to maintain a strong regulatory presence is being challenged on the grounds of lack of democratic legitimacy and effectiveness, traditional command-and-control regulation is increasingly complemented with new modes of governance in which state actors facilitate, engage, and persuade private companies, organizations, and individuals to voluntarily take action to address societal problems and support public values (Shamir 2008; Hysing 2009; Coglianese & Mendelson 2010; Levi-Faur 2011; Segerson 2013; Yasuda 2016).

As argued by Shamir (2008), these new modes of governance necessitate processes of responsibilization in which social actors are mobilized and persuaded to assume responsibility for handling public problems or supporting public goals and values. This process of attributing or imposing responsibility among actors is recognized as a fundamental element of regulatory governance (Shamir 2008; Barkay 2009; Parker & Nielsen 2009) but limited empirical attention has been devoted to its actual workings, that is, the processes through which actors are responsibilized in complex governance processes. In order to more fully appreciate and engage with this critical dimension of governance, this article uses the concept of responsibilization as an analytical lens and applies it to the case of road safety governance in Sweden.

Road accidents claim more than 1.2 million lives annually and are estimated to cost 3 percent of the GDP globally (WHO 2015). Historically, road accidents have been treated as isolated incidents caused by bad drivers and as an unfortunate side effect of increased mobility. Consequently, responsibility has been ascribed to individual road users whose behavior government responses have sought to influence through education, regulation, and control. This approach to road safety governance has been questioned. The systems approach to road safety, which is advocated by the World Health Organization (WHO 2015) and the European Commission (2017) and is being applied in various countries (e.g., Norway, the United Kingdom, and Canada) as well as in cities such as New York, instead treats accidents as collective and largely predictable and preventable public health problems...
The aim of this article is to analyze how, why, and to whom responsibility has been attributed in the Swedish Vision Zero (VZ) policy for road safety, and how state authorities have engaged in processes of responsibilization during its implementation. The guiding research questions are as follows: (i) To whom has responsibility been attributed and why in the Swedish road safety policy?; and (ii) How have such processes of responsibilization been conducted within the state as well as with regard to nonstate actors?

Following this introduction, the concept of responsibilization is introduced and elaborated into a multidimensional analytical framework. The research design, including case selection, and the methods and materials used in the study are then presented. In Section 4, Swedish transport governance is analyzed in terms of how responsibility for road safety is attributed. The paper concludes with a discussion of implications for theory and practice.

2. Analytical framework: Responsibilization

New modes of governance are argued to rely on processes of responsibilization, in which social actors are mobilized and persuaded to assume responsibility for their actions in support of public values (e.g., road safety or decarbonization) and to voluntarily (without direct coercion) integrate them into their operations and actions, i.e. to behave in a socially responsible way (voluntary self-regulation). Responsibility is a highly ambiguous and multilayered term (Giddens 1999; Pellizzoni 2004), which is likely to be one reason why policymakers increasingly make reference to it as part of various governance efforts. Responsibilization is understood as a process whereby actors are made responsible for a task (tackling a societal problem or upholding a public value) which previously was an obligation of the state (or was not recognized as a responsibility at all) (Shamir 2008; Barkay 2009; Parker & Nielsen 2009). It is theorized as an increasingly pervasive and powerful (if often indistinct) technique of government that is not necessarily less intrusive than traditional state interventions (Rose & Miller 1991). The concept has been discussed in terms of “politics of responsibility,” in which assigning responsibility is seen as a political struggle (Thörn & Svenberg 2016), as part of a neoliberal governmentality transferring responsibility from the state to individual consumers and corporations (Shamir 2008; Soneryd & Uggla 2015), and as a key feature of regulatory capitalism (Barkay 2009; Parker & Nielsen 2009). Drawing on insights generated in this research, the concept of responsibilization is here elaborated into a framework comprising three analytical dimensions. This views responsibilization as a praxis of governance in which public and private actors assume responsibility and attribute it to others based on certain rationales and using various techniques or strategies. As such, the framework enables an actor-centered analysis, but it also recognize that rationales and actions are always framed and shaped by the actors’ institutional and discursive contexts (which in turn are shaped by these actions) (Hysing & Olsson 2018) (Table 1).

The first important dimension in analyzing responsibilization concerns who is rendered responsible by whom, that is, the actors involved and their respective roles. Theorization on responsibilization largely connects the concept to discourses of neoliberalism by emphasizing responsibility-taking by rational and autonomous (rather than socially situated) individuals (Soneryd & Uggla 2015) or by socially responsible corporations (Shamir 2008). This parallels classic debates on responsibility; libertarians defending individual freedom (and responsibility) against

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“the nanny state” go head-to-head with interventionists arguing for government’s responsibility to intervene to safeguard public values (Jochelson 2006). In today’s governance context, responsibilization processes entail a much broader set of actors (companies, nongovernmental organizations, international institutions, state agencies, and so on) and can be deployed by state and nonstate actors alike without necessarily ending up in self-regulation by individuals or businesses (Barkay 2009). Also, responsibilization can be directed at, and take place through, “regulatory intermediaries” such as accounting firms or nongovernmental organizations (Abbott et al. 2017), actors engaged to act on behalf of a regulator, drawing on their own resources, authority, and legitimacy to affect the behavior of a target group to promote public values and goals (Abbott et al. 2017; van Wijk & Mascini 2019). Furthermore, public and private organizations may be internally fragmented, with various and not necessarily consistent interests and perspectives. Thus, processes of attributing responsibility can also extend to the internal lives of organizations.

A second dimension concerns the rationale behind the attribution of responsibility, that is, on what grounds responsibility is invoked. Responsibilization is “fundamentally premised on the construction of moral agency” (Shamir 2008, p. 7) as a basic rationale for assuming responsibility for one’s actions. This moral agency can in turn be attributed to (i) actors causing a problem; (ii) actors who have done something blameworthy; or (iii) actors with the power to address the problem (Nihlén Fahlquist 2006). Responsibility should weigh most heavily on the most powerful. Thus, governance-through-responsibilization is often portrayed as involving a restructuring of authority; that is, by ascribing and assuming responsibility, actors can claim and disclaim authority, legitimacy, and power (Pellizzoni 2004; Shamir 2008). The relationship between responsibility and power is, however, far from straightforward, and the literature on responsibilization highlights that delegation of responsibility also can have disempowering effects (van Wijk & Mascini 2019). It is therefore important to understand responsibilization as based on political rationales and as a process that engenders resistance, negotiations, and struggles over who bears responsibility for public problems and who has the power to address them. It is a process that can result in deresponsibilization, as responsibility is transferred away from some actors, as well as reresponsibilization, in which responsibility is reinstated among specific actors (Thörn & Svenberg 2016).

A third dimension relates to the process of responsibilization and how it is manifested in various governing techniques. Responsibilization has been theorized as governance-at-a-distance taking place through often mundane, subtle, and indistinct procedures, technologies, and practices that embody and give effect to governmental ambitions (Rose & Miller 1991). Following Shamir (2008), responsibilization is also seen as a fundamental element of government efforts—through facilitation, collaboration, and persuasion—to get various social actors to voluntarily address societal problems or support public values. Responsibilization is portrayed as increasingly important in a context of regulatory governance in which the state is seen as decentered and refashioned to engage with nonstate actors taking part in various regulative activities. Nonstate actors assume responsibility for various reasons, including a genuine concern for the welfare of society (Yasuda 2016). As highlighted by van Wijk and Mascini (2019), the motivation and capability to assume responsibility vary between actors, and while facilitative and enabling strategies may be sufficient for those willing and capable, more “repressive responsibilization” strategies, including direct state intervention, may need to be used to engage other actors. Research on voluntary governance and self-regulation also shows the importance of the “shadow of hierarchy,” including regulatory threats and economic and informative incentives (Héritier & Lehmkuhl 2008), for social actors to assume responsibility beyond mere legal compliance and participate more proactively in public and private regulatory activities (Coglianese & Mendelson 2010; Segerson 2013; Hall & Hysing 2019). In all these techniques, however, there is an important distinction between being assigned responsibilities and being held accountable (see May 2007), where processes of responsibilization can range from voluntary self-regulation schemes (Coglianese & Mendelson 2010) to schemes involving legal codification, liability, and punishment (Pellizzoni 2004).

3. Research design: Case selection, methods and materials

Since its adoption by the Swedish parliament in 1997 (Government Bill 1996/97:137), the Swedish road safety policy VZ has provided the overarching framework for road safety work and has inspired policy initiatives in other sectors (Kristianssen et al. 2018). The VZ policy stipulates a long-term objective of eliminating road deaths and serious injuries but also establishes a holistic system approach to road safety, meaning that the design and function
of the transport system are to be adapted to the conditions required to meet this goal. This has made attribution of responsibility for road safety to all those actors who influence the design and function of the transport system a key element of the policy, making this an interesting case for studies of responsibilization. While there has been widespread interest in the Swedish experiences of road safety governance, previous research has primarily focused on policy content, and in-depth, qualitative studies of its implementation are largely lacking (McAndrews 2013 being a notable exception). Such studies are necessary to enable in-depth and contextual understanding of motivations, behaviors, and dynamics within complex governance processes (Marsden & Reardon 2017).

This article builds on empirical material consisting of policy documents (government bills, inquiry reports, and evaluations) and 18 qualitative interviews conducted in 2018 (Appendix I). Respondents were strategically selected as representing organizations, companies, and authorities attributed responsibility in the VZ policy. Interviews were conducted in person or by telephone/Skype and were semistructured (i.e. based on, but not restricted to, an interview guide). The interviews took 32–224 minutes (median 54) and primarily covered issues of the attribution of responsibilities (who should do what) and relationships between actors (governance and responsibilization) (Appendix II). Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The empirical material was analyzed using responsibilization as an analytical lens; i.e. it provided a topical framework to direct the study and make sense of the findings. Three theoretical dimensions were deduced from the literature on responsibilization, providing theoretical guidance for the reading of previous research and documents, as well as for the construction and execution of interviews. Using this approach, the article empirically illustrates how responsibilization “works” in actual governance processes and provides a basis for further theoretical elaborations on the concept. Importantly, responsibilization helps to shed light on important aspects of the case, but, similar to all analytical lenses, it also obscures other aspects. Hence, to gain a comprehensive understanding of Swedish road safety governance, other types of analysis (e.g., historical and comparative) would likely yield valuable and complementary insights. When analyzing the material, a qualitative thematic analysis was conducted (Bryman 2012) in which words and reasoning identified in interview transcripts and documents were coded according to the three dimensions. Each dimension was then analyzed closely to identify common patterns as well as divergent results across the material in order to give a nuanced understanding of the case.

4. Analysis

4.1. Who is responsible for what and why in the VZ policy?

Traditionally, road users have been individually responsible for road safety (Belin et al. 2012). In Sweden, this dominant principle is expressed in the Traffic Ordinance (1998: 1276): “In order to avoid traffic accidents, a road user must observe the care and take the caution required by the circumstances.” Through education, regulation, monitoring, and threats of legal sanctions, the state seeks to influence individuals to behave responsibly (i.e. in a way that avoids accidents) when using the roads. However, accidents are always caused by one or more road users—by definition breaking the rule of adapting to current conditions—and hence legal action and moral blame can be brought against them. This means that road users can be held responsible even in situations that are extremely challenging (Tingvall & Haworth 1999; Elvebakk 2007).

Rather than emphasizing individual road user responsibility, VZ explicitly articulates a shared responsibility between road users and a broad set of “system designers,” where designers always are ultimately responsible for the design, up-keep, and use of the transport system, and thus are responsible for the level of safety within this system. Road users are obligated to adhere to rules set by the designers for using the system and “to show respect, good judgment, and responsibility in traffic.” However, the system designers are required to take additional steps to ensure that even failure to follow these rules, due to lack of knowledge, capacity, or acceptance, does not get people killed or seriously injured (Government Bill 1996/97:137; Belin & Tillgren 2012). Essentially, system designers bear the responsibility to do everything in their power to make the system as safe as possible (McAndrews 2013).

Who then are the system designers? In the Swedish VZ policy, the concept embraces all actors—public and private—who, in their professional capacity, influence the design and function of the road system (Fig. 1). Three groups of designers were singled out as particularly important: road administrators (state, municipalities, and private), the automotive industry, and actors procuring or providing transport services (taxi, bus, and freight). Other
identified system designers are actors responsible for various support systems, such as the police (monitoring and enforcement), driving schools (education), and emergency services, health care, and rehabilitation professionals (Government Bill 1996/97:137; Nihlén Fahlquist 2006).

As has been noted in much previous research (Elvebakk 2007; Andersson & Pettersson 2008; Belin & Tillgren 2012; McAndrews 2013), responsibility for implementing the policy naturally gravitates toward state authorities. While the broad view of system designers has been upheld in rhetoric, in practice, responsibility for road safety has largely been attributed to the Swedish Transport Administration (STA, until 2010 the National Road Administration, NRA). Respondents in this study generally accept the idea that they, or their organization or members, have safety responsibilities under the VZ policy, but argue that the main burden of responsibility lies with the STA. A director at the STA described its role (and expectations from others) as:

“It’s based on many [actors] taking responsibility. For example, it’s not that the STA is supposed to achieve the whole of Vision Zero; that’s not possible. But it is up to us to stimulate and lead and work strategically so that more [actors] are willing to collaborate and make things happen.”

What is the rationale for attributing responsibility under the VZ policy? The VZ policy shifts the focus from individual to shared responsibility, in terms of causal, moral, and preventive responsibility. While recognizing that human error accounts for the majority of accidents, VZ reframes the causal responsibility for accidents away from road users being solely responsible to viewing system designers as also having a role in causing accidents and, more importantly, the consequences of accidents (McAndrews 2013). The consequences largely depend on underlying conditions, for example the condition of the road, which are the responsibility of (knowledgeable and influential) system designers. As argued by one respondent:

“If I [as a system designer] place crash barriers along a road, fatalities drop by 80%. So no one can come along and say it’s the fault of the individuals if they die /…/ what we do plays a much greater role than what any particular person does out there.”

VZ also explicitly attributes moral responsibility to system designers (Tingvall & Haworth 1999; Nihlén Fahlquist 2006), which also was reflected in interviews with key proponents of the policy. One basic premise of VZ is that everyone needs to use the transport system, and accidents can happen to anyone, not just bad drivers/people. Designing the system in such a way that a single mistake can lead to death is considered unethical (Elvebakk 2007; Belin et al. 2012). Safety can (morally) never be traded for mobility. One respondent likened the responsibility of system designers to that of a surgeon who is directly responsible for the life and health of other people. According to him, the responsibility of system designers is based on the ethical principle from medicine to do everything possible to save lives with the resources available; this was contrasted with traditional transport planning paradigms based on cost–benefit analysis in which appropriate actions should be assessed based on their efficiency (for a critical discussion, see Elvik 1999). VZ also largely discredits utilitarian arguments on the preventive...
purposes of punishment. Instead, the failings of road users should be accounted for when designing the system, and efforts should be shifted from punishment to helping road users to do the right thing. One example of how this philosophy was put into practice is the use of automated traffic control cameras. Instead of being used to fine all speeding road users, they are used to support those who want to drive legally and safely. Accordingly, the cameras are preceded by a “warning-sign” informing the users about the camera, digital maps of their locations are publicly available, and the cameras are not always turned on (Lindberg & Håkansson 2017).

VZ primarily ascribes responsibility to those who are able to change things for the better (Nihlén Fahlquist 2006). One-sided responsibility on the part of road users is not constructive, if the objective is to prevent future accidents (Belin et al. 2012) because such preventive responsibility needs to be accompanied by authority, resources, and power. VZ strongly emphasizes that fatal accidents are not unavoidable side effects of mobility, but rather are predictable and preventable if system designers address road safety in a systematic and science-based way. This rationale can be seen as corresponding to a technocratic approach to implementing the VZ policy, emphasizing the importance of centralized, top-down, and expert-driven road safety governance and primarily valuing technological development of vehicles and infrastructure (Elvebakk 2007; McAndrews 2013).

VZ attributes system designers with causal, moral, and preventive responsibility; however, importantly, responsibility is not a zero-sum game. As argued by Brytting (2007, p. 18): “After all it’s not the case that personal responsibility decreases when a system designer is brought in. It’s about different forms of responsibility. /.../ What Vision Zero does is to shine even more light on some actors that previously were in the shadows when it comes to responsibility for accidents.”

An important distinction can be made between being responsible and being held accountable (Brytting 2007). The responsibility of road users is codified in the Traffic Ordinance, and they can be held legally accountable for causing accidents. The question of whether to legally codify the responsibility of system designers has been the subject of debate. A government inquiry (Governmental Official Report 2000:43) recommended that the responsibility of system designers should be regulated in a frame law obliging them to conduct systematic and continuous safety management work that includes monitoring, developing, and securing the quality of their operations in relation to road safety. The recommendation was never implemented. One explanation offered by respondents was fear in the government offices that such a legal framework would enable individuals to sue road administrators or other system designers in civil court. This was, however, described as an unrealistic scenario by several respondents, primarily due to the comprehensiveness of public and private insurance systems in Sweden, and the low levels of financial compensation for damages awarded in the Swedish court system. Safety-management responsibilities for road administrators were instead introduced by the EU (Directive 2008/96/EC), and adopted in Swedish legislation through the Road Safety Act (2010:1362), but only for Trans-European Transport Network roads. The Safety Act stipulates that “the road administrator shall systematically and continuously take the measures necessary to prevent serious injuries as a consequence of use of the roads.” The Transport Agency, designated as the authority responsible for overseeing the implementation of the Act, argued for extending this legal responsibility to other parts of the Swedish road network, but this was resisted by the STA on the grounds that the costs could be too great, and was rejected by the government (Government Bill 2009/10:230). The question of the legal responsibility of system designers continues to “pop up now and then” on the government agenda, especially in connection to severe traffic accidents, according to a respondent within the government offices. This issue is also expected to receive increased policy attention, as it is critical for the development and introduction of autonomous vehicles (see, e.g., Governmental Official Report 2018:16).

The VZ policy does not primarily base the responsibility of system designers on legal frameworks and obligations (or established structures of accountability) but rather on a moral responsibility that weighs most heavily on those with the capacity to act, i.e., the actors with authority, expertise, and power (cf. Pellizzoni 2004; Shamir 2008). The lack of legal obligations for the system designers was also presented by one respondent working at the government offices as a key explanation of the government’s emphasis on shared responsibility and use of soft governance instruments.

Respondents differ in their assessment of the importance of legally codified responsibilities. Some argued that the unregulated nature of road safety hampers implementation, while others claimed that the VZ policy provides sufficient guidance for system designers to act responsibly. One respondent said:
Another respondent reflected critically about how the STA had used VZ to legitimize getting involved (“meddling”) in various processes outside their jurisdiction: “It gives them some legitimacy as well, to go around telling other people what they think.” When the STA stepped in, the respondent argued: other agencies and organizations stepped back and effectively reduced their engagement with road safety. As illustrated by the comments made by these respondents, being assigned responsibility can be used to legitimate actions and potentially increase one’s authority and influence (cf. Pellizzoni 2004; Elvebakk 2007).

As will be addressed in the next section, how responsibility is attributed under the VZ, i.e. responsibilization, is a question of both how it is institutionalized within the state and how state authorities use its power to define roles and responsibilities within the wider transport community (Andersson & Pettersson 2008; McAndrews 2013).

4.2. Responsibilization inside the state

How has the responsibility ascribed to system designers in the VZ been institutionalized in the Swedish state apparatus? When the VZ policy was introduced, the National Road Administration (NRA) was given a key role in policy implementation. The NRA had been assigned the main responsibility for road safety when it merged with the Traffic Safety Agency (Trafiksäkerhetsverket, est. 1968) in 1993, which meant that it had in-house competence and personnel to handle road safety issues (Andersson & Pettersson 2008). The agency also played a crucial role in implementing the VZ policy in its capacity as a road administrator charged with the planning, construction, and maintenance of the state road network as well as because of its so-called sectoral responsibility to coordinate, support, and stimulate the work of external stakeholders to fulfill national policy objectives. A former director at the NRA described the sectoral responsibility as extremely important for the implementation of the VZ, but several respondents also reported that these activities were highly marginalized within the NRA, which remained mainly focused on road administration and the exercise of public authority.

Within the NRA, the idea of VZ initially met with deep skepticism, and one respondent described the situation as a “civil war” between a small number of officials promoting VZ and transport planners supporting measures based on cost–benefit analysis. The idea of ascribing responsibility to system designers also made many NRA officials concerned. After the success in 1998 of the first road using median barriers (Lindberg & Håkansson 2017), an infrastructural design introduced as part of the VZ policy, internal support for the VZ policy grew. Even so, respondents argued that the lack of support from inside “the state apparatus” has remained a fundamental problem for implementation. Officials are described as deliberately downplaying the VZ policy, because they “don’t really believe in it or have other priorities” (Former NRA Director).

While many respondents testify to continually ongoing internal struggles within the NRA, with strong forces promoting mobility over road safety and environmental protection, respondents also credits the NRA for implementing safety improvements on the state road network. The most important success of the VZ, according to a former director, also followed upon the reaching of an agreement between different NRA departments on the principles for setting speed limits, namely that the safety standard of a road determines its speed, but a higher speed can be accepted after safety improvements are made. Speed is the most critical parameter (and a key component of the VZ policy, as well as other road safety policies) for ensuring that when accidents happen (which is unavoidable), the impact energy generated is within the limits of tolerance of the human body (Belin et al. 2012; Tingvall & Haworth 1999; see also Siren & Sørensen 2015).

Already in the initial Bill, the government recognized the need to clarify the responsibility of system designers. While liability never materialized (Belin & Tillgren 2012), a Road Traffic Inspection was set up in 2003 to analyze and oversee the systematic safety work of the NRA and other actors. The inspection was organized inside the NRA, but with substantial autonomy (Ordinance 2002:804). As noted by Belin and Tillgren (2012), the inspectorate had a critical attitude toward many of the system designers (including the NRA) for their lack of commitment to safety. According to one respondent, those working with road safety inside the NRA did not see this as constructive criticism, but rather as undermining their credibility and in effect hampering their work.

The importance of independent oversight remained an issue in Swedish transport governance and was a key motive for the formation of the Transport Agency (TA) in 2009 (Governmental Official Report 2008:44). The TA
became the central supervisory authority in the transport system and the agency usually issuing regulations, while the NRA retained operational responsibility for the state road infrastructure and for transport planning. The new agency incorporated the Road Traffic Inspection (Government Bill 2008/09:31), but according to several respondents, their activities ceased. One respondent explained this as due to TA being geared to oversee legal compliance and as there was no legally codified responsibility for road safety, there was nothing to oversee. Critical voices from outside the TA also argue that even in areas with legally codified responsibility for safety, for example the Road Safety Act, oversight is not prioritized. According to several respondents, the government mandated the TA to head the road safety work, but the competence, commitment, and resources remained in the NRA. Consequently, this institutional division resulted in a diffusion of responsibility, as it became unclear which agency would take the lead in road safety governance.

Swedish transport administration has historically been divided along the lines of different transport modes, but in 2010, these were integrated within a single agency—the STA. At the same time, the government decided to terminate the sectoral responsibility (see Governmental Official Report 2008:128). According to one respondent who at the time worked in the government offices, this was motivated by saving money and getting clearer lines of accountability. While the instructions stated that the STA “shall collaborate with other actors and in so doing implement measures aiming to achieve the transport policy objectives,” respondents made it clear that most existing cooperation with external stakeholders was closed down (see also STA 2013), and that officials within the STA became reluctant to take new initiatives. The end of sectoral responsibility is reported to have had a major negative effect on the STA’s work with road safety. Respondents described the years following this as a period of “definitive dismantling” and reduction of personnel actively working with road safety. Another indicator of this was the elimination of the position of Traffic Safety Director in 2015, and road safety instead being incorporated into the broader portfolio of sustainability.

More recently, two institutional changes have been introduced to clarify and strengthen the STA’s responsibility. First, a Safety Director position was established at the office of the Director-General of the STA, charged with security and safety issues but also with overall responsibility for coordinating and controlling STA’s internal processes on road safety. The importance of such a controller function is highlighted by one respondent:

“*My personal take on it is that there’s a huge need for STA also to have a good control apparatus so that they work with road safety, because in that area, in my opinion … well, the entire planning process at STA could stand to be a bit more goal directed with regard to road safety.*”

The second institutional change was that the government designated the STA to be “lead agency” for road safety as part of a “Renewed Commitment to VZ” (Government Offices of Sweden 2016). A prime motive for this policy initiative was that, while Sweden had experienced a dramatic reduction in road fatalities, and continued to have one of the lowest rates of road deaths per capita in the EU (European Commission 2018), the reduction in fatalities had leveled off. As part of this initiative, the STA was (once again) instructed to organize and lead cooperation with external actors and support their work. Next, we will focus on state governance efforts directed at key nonstate actors identified in the VZ policy.

### 4.3. State responsibilization of nonstate actors

A first group of actors important for road safety consists of the road users. Traditionally, measures to influence road user behavior, such as information campaigns and education, have been at the heart of road safety governance. Under VZ, such measures have been successively marginalized in favor of supporting technological development of vehicles and infrastructure. Sweden stands out in international comparisons for not using informative policy instruments (Fleisher et al. 2016). Many respondents promoting VZ argues that information campaigns are ineffective in changing driving behavior and making road users act responsibly (see also STA 2013) and that previously used measures such as educating children about traffic regulations are outright dangerous. One respondent argued that traffic accidents do not happen because drivers do not know what to do, but rather because they are human (and fallible). While skepticism of informative policy instruments is strong among VZ proponents, there is also self-criticism in the sense that with the end of informational campaigns, public
awareness of road safety, and political attention directed to it, has dwindled. As one respondent put it, people think the problem is “solved” or is on the way to being solved.

Respondents representing road user organizations are critical of this reorientation; it is a mistake to “take the human being out of the equation, and not to work with human behavior” and “STA /…/ has no faith in human beings as a force for good in the system; instead it’s like they’re just slaves to a mass of circumstances.” Motorist organization representatives also felt that they were kept at a distance by the STA, were not granted access to important collaborative fora, and did not get a fair hearing for their science-based arguments. One respondent argued that the STA is its own worst enemy, as it views itself as the only actor able to manage the challenges of road safety, and does not use, and even ignores, the knowledge and experiences of different road user groups. From interviews with both STA officials and external stakeholders, there is an evident lack of trust between motorist organizations and the STA.

Under the VZ policy, rather than being educated into taking road safety responsibility, road users are primarily attributed responsibility as consumers (for a discussion on the civic responsibility of road users, see McAndrews 2013). Government support for the European New Car Assessment Programme (Euro NCAP), founded in 1997 to provide independent consumer information on cars’ safety characteristics, is described as “successful beyond belief” (Former NRA Director). Respondents from both government and the automotive industry agree that this has been a highly effective soft governance tool to influence the automotive industry to voluntarily improve vehicle safety, while respondents express diverging opinions about its effect on the safety awareness and prioritizations of consumers.

As administrators of regional and local roads, local governments are identified as key system designers in the VZ policy and thus are a second important group of actors. The STA has primarily assisted local governments with their road safety responsibilities by providing state funding and expert support. As long as the NRA had the sectoral responsibility (until 2010), cofinancing of local road safety measures was an important instrument (STA 2013). While state cofinancing has not disappeared, one interviewed local government representative argued that the sums have been reduced to a level where they no longer amount to a real incentive for additional local road safety measures. Hope is placed in a new form of state cofinancing (so-called urban environmental agreements, Ordinance 2015:579) where the state annually contributes one billion SEK to create better conditions for public transport and cycling, but also to finance local safety measures. The STA is responsible for managing and deciding on the distribution of the funds. The STA has also applied to the government to restore the possibility to use state infrastructure funds to invest in road safety measures on the regional and local road networks (STA 2017).

One interviewed local government official argued that local governments often lack necessary competence on road safety. Until 2011–2012, STA provided expert support to inform and update municipal officials as part of the Transport Quality (TQ) project, which aimed to influence how municipalities set environmental and safety requirements when procuring transport services and improving their business trips, work-related journeys, and vehicle fleets (discussed in more detail in the following). Respondents also argue that road safety has low priority in local policymaking. Infrastructure investments make up only a small part of local budgets, and are mostly spent on new roads rather than being used to improve the safety of existing ones as part of local governments’ responsibilities as road administrators under the VZ policy. Respondents also testify that reducing speed and accessibility in order to improve safety is a very sensitive political issue, especially in complex urban environments. According to them, there is also growing local resistance to STA decisions to match speed limits to the safety level of roads; such a resistance is expressed through local governments appealing such decisions to the government.

A third group of actors identified as key system designers in the VZ policy is the automotive industry. Collaboration and partnerships with industry to make vehicles as safe as possible are portrayed as a crucial VZ element (Tingvall & Haworth 1999) and improvements in vehicle safety are seen as a major reason behind road death reductions. However, respondents agree that the introduction of new vehicle safety regulations is no longer in the hands of the Swedish government, but instead is handled within the EU and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, as well as within regulatory processes for other large markets (e.g., the USA). States can, however, influence the market for safe vehicles and promote the development of vehicle safety technology. According to respondents in both industry and government, the most important policy instrument for attributing safety responsibility to the automotive industry is the Euro NCAP (Belin & Tillgren 2012). While regulations and legal technical standards provide a bottom line, it is the Euro NCAP and similar programs around the world that
influence the actual safety standard of vehicles. Furthermore, interviewed vehicle manufacturers testify to the importance of coming out on top.

Public procurement policy is another way for the state to induce vehicle manufacturers to assume safety responsibilities by using market mechanisms to create a demand for safety technology. Respondents argue the importance of state actors taking the lead, as for example reflected in the state ordinance (2009:1) on environmental and safety demands on cars bought or leased for car travel by state agencies (Belin & Tillgren 2012). Several critical voices, however, are arguing that the government could do more to ensure that state agencies support VZ when procuring and delivering transport services. One example is that although the STA initiated and directed the development of the international road traffic safety management standard ISO 39001 (published in 2012), the STA has not implemented it in its own operations (STA 2017). A similar line of criticism is that the government has been reluctant to instruct state-owned companies on their safety responsibilities. As expressed by one respondent: state-owned companies “are more hopeless than the private business sector.”

Sweden is the home of the car manufacturer Volvo Cars. The company’s relationship with the Swedish government and state agencies is described by a company representative as characterized by close and long-term cooperation (which also was corroborated by interviewed STA officials). One example, highlighted by both industry and government representatives, is the development of new norms for setting speed limits. In 2008, the Director-General of the NRA and the CEO of Volvo Cars agreed to cooperate on a division of responsibility for road safety. This resulted in an agreement to assign responsibility to the vehicle (manufacturers) for protecting the occupants in a frontal collision up to 80 km h$^{-1}$, while the infrastructure (owner) was responsible for preventing higher impact speeds, for example by building median barriers to prevent head-on collisions. This was then used as a standard for road and street designs in Sweden (Eugensson et al. 2011). There is also significant cooperation in research and innovation. In 2009, the Swedish government and the automotive industry entered into a strategic partnership (Strategic Vehicle Research and Innovation program, FFI; a predecessor to the program, however, was established already in 1994) in the areas of climate, environment and safety, which is allocated one billion SEK per year, half of which comes from public funds. The funds are used for various collaborative programs, the most visible being the development of autonomous vehicles—Drive Me. Automation of vehicles is a priority for many vehicle manufacturers and is recognized as having important road safety implications (Kim et al. 2017). While one industry representative describes the cooperation as highly successful—“It [FFI] has helped Swedish industry very much.” Another respondent describes a situation in which industry “is only interested in money for product development” and states that the relationship between the STA and Volvo Cars “has at times been profoundly chilly and complicated.”

A final group of system designers identified as important in the VZ policy comprises actors procuring and providing transport services (taxi, bus, and freight). The VZ policy highlights that assuring the quality of transport services provided by public and private companies and organizations could “lead to significant effects for road safety” (Government Bill 1996/97:137). The NRA/STA have tried in various ways to encourage the procurers and providers of transport services to voluntarily adopt safety responsibility. This work has included supporting the development of the management standard ISO39001 and Q3, a procurement support tool for setting environmental, road, and work safety requirements, as well as working to directly influence and support the providers and procurers of transport. One example is the TQ project, which was established in the late 1990s with the aim to further the goals of energy efficiency, environmental protection, and road safety. The project targeted trucking, taxi and bus companies, and public and private organizations and companies that procured transport services or had substantial work-related journeys.

Transport companies were invited by the NRA/STA to establish voluntary agreements according to which the companies committed themselves to employ a systematic approach to ensure the quality of their services, for example by making informed choices when buying vehicles and promoting safe driving practices (NRA 2009). Respondents involved in the project thought that the decisive argument was that the companies could make money on road safety measures, first by promoting eco-driving, which conserves fuel, reduces emissions, and increases safety, and later by promoting branding, arguing that safety responsibility improved the image of the company which in the long-run would improve profit. The NRA/STA officials served to support and inspire, cooperate, and exchange knowledge. One respondent described her role as to “sell,” “raise awareness,” and “sow seeds,” because, as she put it, “there were very many organizations where they had never thought to set requirements about anything else than price and reliability.”
The officials could also offer economic incentives to “sweeten the deal,” for example free testing of new technical systems or assistance with the development of road safety policies. However, as described by one respondent, as long as no one demanded and was ready to pay for safe and environmentally friendly transport, the transport companies could not change. As stated by one industry representative:

“I’m the first to admit that we drive a bit too fast /…/ But at the same time, whose fault is that? Is it the purchaser, who sets bad requirements or is it the trucking company that pressures the drivers? Or is it the drivers who feel pressure to make deliveries on time /…/ Sure, we drive too fast, but whose responsibility is it?”

To create market pressure, the STA increasingly targeted major transport purchasers as intermediaries (Abbott et al. 2017) to engage them with setting requirements for transport quality in their procurement processes (cf. van Wijk & Mascini 2019). This corresponds to central ideas in the VZ about not attributing responsibility to individuals, but rather targeting the system: “If you want to get something done, you have to go higher up in the hierarchy /…/ go up-stream; go to where the conditions are set, go to the leadership, go to the money flows” (Former STA Director). While many companies have Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policies, one respondent representing the transport industry argued that these commitments rarely cover transport. Thus, the STA convened and organized “business networks” where STA officials offered their expertise to support the companies in bettering their procurement of transport services. In addition, the networks provided fora for sharing experiences between companies. Some of these networks developed common declarations of intent, for example to follow up on stated demands. In retrospect, respondents considered the project a success and highlighted the importance of close interaction between authorities and companies, but also raised critical flaws, such as that the project failed to engage upper management, and that once the STA ceased actively supporting the companies, some of them went right back to doing things the old way.

As the sectoral responsibility was terminated, the TQ project was phased out, and all activities ended in 2012. Since 2016, there has been renewed government interest in engaging with the transport industry, but as one representative of the industry states: “Sure, we have a good dialogue with the politicians, but I feel like no demands are being placed on us in the sense that we should be better than anyone else, or take the baton, or lead the way; instead we just do what’s asked of us.”

5. Concluding discussion

The introduction of the VZ policy signaled a shift in governance from attributing road safety responsibilities primarily to individual road users to a system with shared responsibility, where a broad set of system designers are attributed responsibility. The rationales behind this were causal, moral, and preventive, but designating system designers as co-responsible for road safety did not make them accountable or liable. In this final section, we draw on the lessons learned from the case study to discuss responsibilization as an analytical lens for understanding complex governance processes and change.

The concept of responsibilization has proved to be a useful analytic tool to help shed new light on changes in Swedish transport governance. Responsibilization can here be understood as a process whereby safety responsibilities were extended (at least rhetorically) to all actors that influence the design and function of the road system. Government demands to assume responsibility thus increase for all actors. However, even though it is important not to treat responsibility as a zero-sum game, this responsibilization affected different actors in different ways. Responsibility was shifted from a one-sided focus on individuals to state authorities in particular. While road users retain legal responsibilities, this transfer of responsibility together with deprioritization of policy measures directed at road users (e.g., information campaigns) can be critically viewed as a deresponsibilization process that risks portraying individual road users as (mindless) victims of circumstances. This has arguably negatively affected the opportunities for road users to participate in policymaking and reduced awareness and acceptance of road safety measures. For system designers, especially the STA, being assigned responsibility by the government arguably increased their legitimacy, power, and authority (but not liability) to engage in road safety governance. This responsibilization can also be seen as part of a general technocratic and top-down approach to implementing VZ, in which the STA and other system designers were assigned leading roles based on a science-based expertise, and which has primarily valued technological development of vehicles and infrastructure. A first important lesson from this study is that
Responsibilization provides an important theoretical lens for governance research, but the directionality of responsibilization (who attributes responsibility to whom), as well as its effect on the distribution of authority and legitimacy between actors, need to be treated as open empirical questions, rather than responsibilization automatically being seen as a manifestation of neoliberalism (cf. van Wijk & Mascini 2019).

State authorities have been shown to be at the heart of VZ policy implementation, but the results also show that the state is a multitude of actors that do not necessarily work in unison and that important processes of responsibilization have also taken place within the state, for example struggles over legal codification, sectoral responsibility, and new forms of oversight. Some processes have had responsibilization of road safety as their stated aim, while other processes have been swept along with the winds of change (that is, changes in responsibility can be seen as unintended consequences). How responsibilities are assigned within the state is important for the implementation of the VZ policy, as shown, for example, by the institutional changes that led to reduced oversight and diffusion of safety responsibility. Also shown to be important are the intrastate dynamics and compartmentalized struggles for resources and policy prioritization within and between state authorities.

This clearly illustrates a second important lesson derived from this study: the importance of not only looking at what “the state” is doing to others but also at what is happening inside the state. It is necessary to open the “black box” and illuminate internal struggles between departments, sectors, and factions within the state apparatus if we are to understand complex governance processes. Internal competition may be the natural order of things, but it is often overlooked in governance research, even though it is critically important for how priorities, roles, and responsibilities are allocated both within and outside the state.

Partially as a consequence of failures to legally codify the responsibilities of system designers with regard to road safety, state authorities have used a host of soft governance techniques to encourage safety responsibility within the transport community while actively turning away from others (e.g., information). Through the lens of responsibilization, it becomes clear that these soft governance measures very explicitly adhered to a combination of technocratic and normative/ethical rationales for societal responsibilities; that is, influential system designers were argued to have a (moral) responsibility to make the roads safe (to the best of their ability) based on science-based expertise. In this case, the VZ policy was framed by key proponents as implying a moral responsibility on the part of system designers that effectively questioned and challenged influential policy instruments such as cost–benefit analysis in the governance of road safety. Explicating the role of normative rationales in governance processes is important, and a third important lesson from this case is that the responsibilization perspective can provide valuable help in doing so.

In addition to its theoretical contributions, the study also generated important lessons for policy practice. First, in designing soft governance measures (even as a second-best alternative), powerful incentives need to be crafted in order to successfully institute long-term and structural changes in corporate behavior. Substantial public resources have been devoted to encouraging businesses to mantle the safety and environmental responsibilities assigned to them in the VZ policy, but if the state cannot provide credible threats of regulation, and consumers prioritize getting transport “for free” over mitigating its environmental and safety consequences, this will likely be insufficient to make companies voluntarily commit to road safety or mantle a role of regulatory intermediary (Abbott et al. 2017). This conclusion supports much previous research on the challenges of ensuring compliance in new forms of regulation and governance (e.g., Barkay 2009; Parker & Nielsen 2009; Coglianese & Mendelson 2010) as well as raises critical questions about existing power relations (cf. van Wijk & Mascini 2019), not only between state and market actors but also between individuals and public authorities; between central government and (independent) state agencies; and between various departments (and interests) within the state apparatus.

Second, public actors need to take the lead, both by setting a good example and by providing leadership during policy implementation, thereby taking responsibility for their own actions. As seen here, diffusion of responsibilities between state authorities has hampered effective governance. However, this is a call not only for government authority and leadership, but also for a strengthening of the political responsibility and accountability of government (cf. Kallis et al. 2009). As argued in previous research, processes of responsibilization risk transforming essentially political issues into moral responsibilities, which can lead to a depoliticization where social conflicts are not articulated and acted on in public space (Thörn & Svenberg 2016; cf. Wood & Flinders 2014). Transferring responsibilities to state authorities, and expecting them to be addressed in a largely technocratic way, poses a risk of reducing the saliency of important public problems (such as road safety) on the political agenda, as well as the level and quality of political and public engagement and deliberation.
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References


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APPENDIX I: LIST OF RESPONDENTS

Insurance company Folksam
Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation
National Society for Road Safety
Project Q3
Swedish Association of Road Transport Companies
Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions
Swedish Automobile Association
Swedish Motorcyclists Association (two respondents)
Swedish Transport Administration (five respondents)
Swedish Transport Agency
Toyota Sweden
Transport department of one municipality
Volvo Cars

APPENDIX II: INTERVIEW GUIDE

What is your opinion on the VZ? Problems and opportunities?
Who has the main responsibility for road safety in Sweden?
What is your area of responsibility and how have you mantled it?
How do you collaborate with other actors regarding road safety?
What is the role of the Swedish Transport Administration?
How can Swedish road safety work become more successful?