



Cleveland State University

Work Zone Safety and Efficiency Transportation Center

Section 3

Accident Theories

THEORIES OF ACCIDENT CAUSATION



- You've carefully thought out all the angles.
- You've done it a thousand times.
- It comes naturally to you.
- You know what you're doing, it's what you've been trained to do your whole life.
- Nothing could possibly go wrong, right?



Think Again.





Theories of Accident Causation

There are several major theories concerning accident causation, each of which has some explanatory and predictive value.

1. The domino theory developed by H. W. Heinrich, a safety engineer and pioneer in the field of industrial accident safety.
2. Human Factors Theory
3. Accident/Incident Theory
4. Epidemiological Theory
5. Systems Theory
6. The energy release theory, developed by Dr. William Haddon, Jr., of the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.
7. Behavior Theory

Accident theories guide safety investigations. They describe the scope of an investigation.



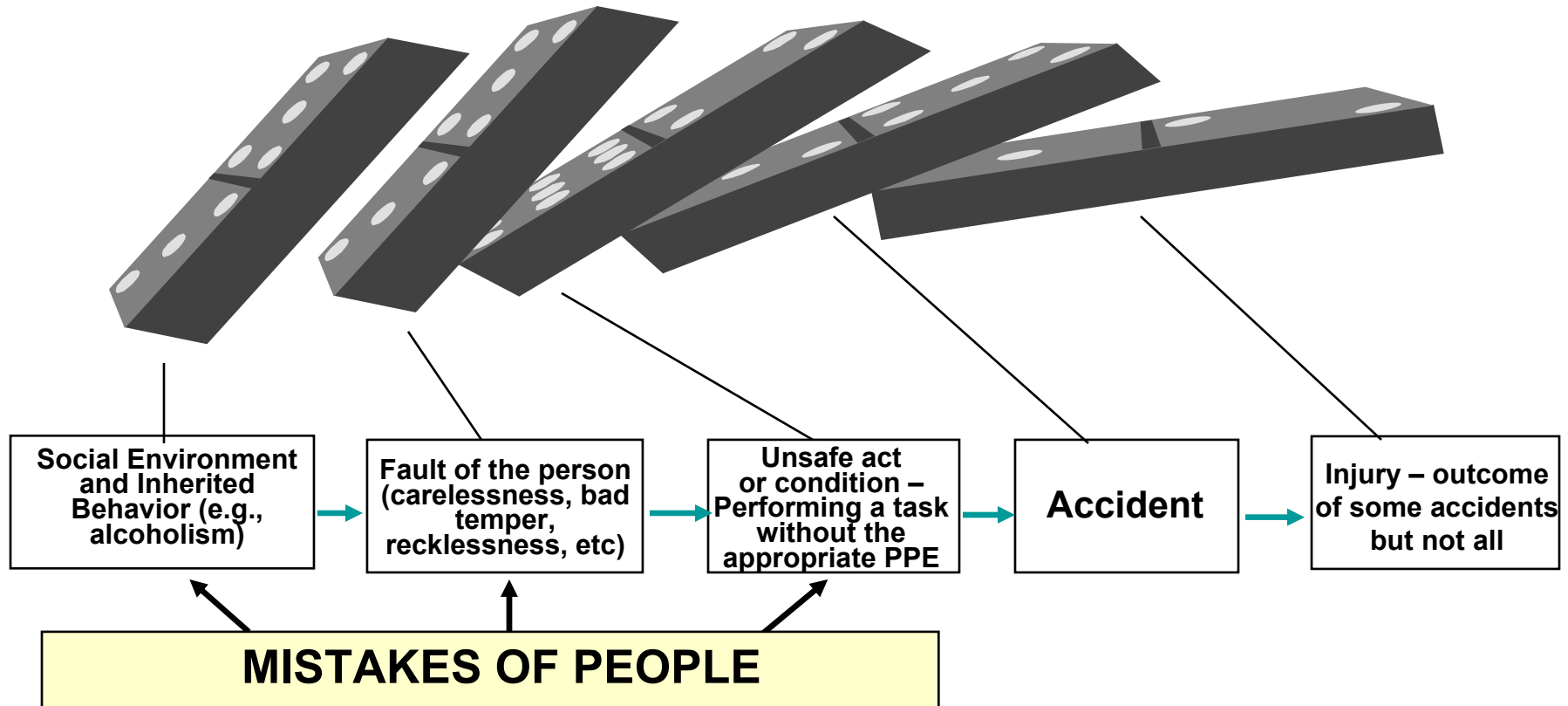
Heinrich's Domino Theory

According to Heinrich, an "accident" is one factor in a sequence that may lead to an injury.

- The factors can be visualized as a series of dominoes standing on edge; when one falls, the linkage required for a chain reaction is completed.
- Each of the factors is dependent on the preceding factor.



1932 First Scientific Approach to Accident/Prevention - H.W. Heinrich





Heinrich's Dominos – The Process

1. A personal injury (the final domino) occurs only as a result of an accident.
 2. An accident occurs only as a result of a personal or mechanical hazard.
 3. Personal and mechanical hazards exist only through the fault of careless persons or poorly designed or improperly maintained equipment.
 4. Faults of persons are inherited or acquired as a result of their social environment or acquired by ancestry.
 5. The environment is where and how a person was raised and educated.
- .



Heinrich's Domino Theory – Critical Issues

- The factor preceding the accident (the unsafe act or the mechanical or physical hazard) and it should receive the most attention.
- Heinrich felt that the person responsible at a company for loss control should be interested in all five factors, but be concerned primarily with accidents and the proximate causes of those accidents.
- Heinrich also emphasized that accidents, not injuries or property damage, should be the point of attack.
 - An accident is any unplanned, uncontrolled event that could result in personal injury or property damage. For example, if a person slips and falls, an injury may or may not result, but an accident has taken place.



***Heinrich's Domino Theory – Corrective Action Sequence
(The three “E”s)***

- **Engineering**
 - Control hazards through product design or process change
- **Education**
 - Train workers regarding all facets of safety
 - Impose on management that attention to safety pays off
- **Enforcement**
 - Insure that internal and external rules, regulations, and standard operating procedures are followed by workers as well as management.



HUMAN FACTORS THEORY

Heinrich posed his model in terms of a single domino leading to an accident.

The premise here is that human errors cause accidents. These errors are categorized broadly as:

- ***OVERLOAD***
 - The work task is beyond the capability of the worker
 1. Includes physical and psychological factors
 2. Influenced by environmental factors, internal factors, and situational factors
- ***INAPPROPRIATE WORKER RESPONSE***
 - To hazards and safety measures (worker's fault)
 - To incompatible work station (management, environment faults)
- ***INAPPROPRIATE ACTIVITIES***
 - Lack of training and misjudgment of risk

But the structure of this theory is still a cause/effect format.



ACCIDENT/INCIDENT THEORY

Extension of human factors theory. Here the following new elements are introduced:

- ***Ergonomic traps***
 - These are incompatible work stations, tools or expectations (management failure)
- ***Decision to err***
 - Unconscious or conscious (personal failure)
- ***Systems failure***
 - Management failure (policy, training, etc.)



EPIDEMIOLOGICAL THEORY

Epidemiology

- This field studies relationship between environmental factors and disease
- Can be used to study causal factors in a relationship

Two key components:

1 Predisposition characteristics

- tendencies may predispose worker to certain actions

2 Situational characteristics

- peer pressure, poor attitude, risk taking

Together these characteristics can cause or prevent accidents that a person predisposed to a given situation or condition may succumb to.



Summary - Traditional Chain-of-Events

Accident Causality Models

- Explain accidents in terms of multiple events, **sequenced** as a forward chain over time.
- Events linked together by direct relationships (ignore indirect relationships).
- Events almost always involve component failure, human error, or energy-related events.
- Causality models form the basis for most safety-engineering and reliability engineering analyses and/or designs.



Limitations of Event-Chain Causality Models

- Neglects social and organizational factors
- Does not adequately account for human error
 - One cannot simply and effectively model human behavior by decomposing it into individual decisions and actions. One cannot study human error in isolation from:
 - ✦ physical and social context;
 - ✦ value system in which behaviors takes place; and
 - ✦ dynamic work process
- Neglects adaptation
 - Major accidents involve systematic migration of organizational behavior to higher levels of risk.



Reliability Engineering vs. System Safety

- Both arose after World War II
- Reliability engineering is often confused with system safety engineering, but they are different and sometimes even conflict
- Reliability engineering focuses on quantifying probabilities of failure.
- System safety analysis (e.g., fault tree analysis) focuses on eliminating and controlling hazards
 - Considers interactions among components and not just component failures
 - Includes non-technical aspects of systems
- Highly reliable systems may be unsafe and safe systems may not be reliable.



Civil Engineers are accustomed to these types of charts – CPM diagram (aka a PERT chart).

Operational Decision Making:

Decision makers from separate departments in operational context very likely will not see the forest for the trees.

Accident Analysis:

Combinatorial structure of possible accidents can easily be identified.



A Systems Theory Model of Accidents

- Accidents arise from interactions among humans, machines, and the environment.
 - Not simply chains of events or linear causality, but more complex types of causal connections.

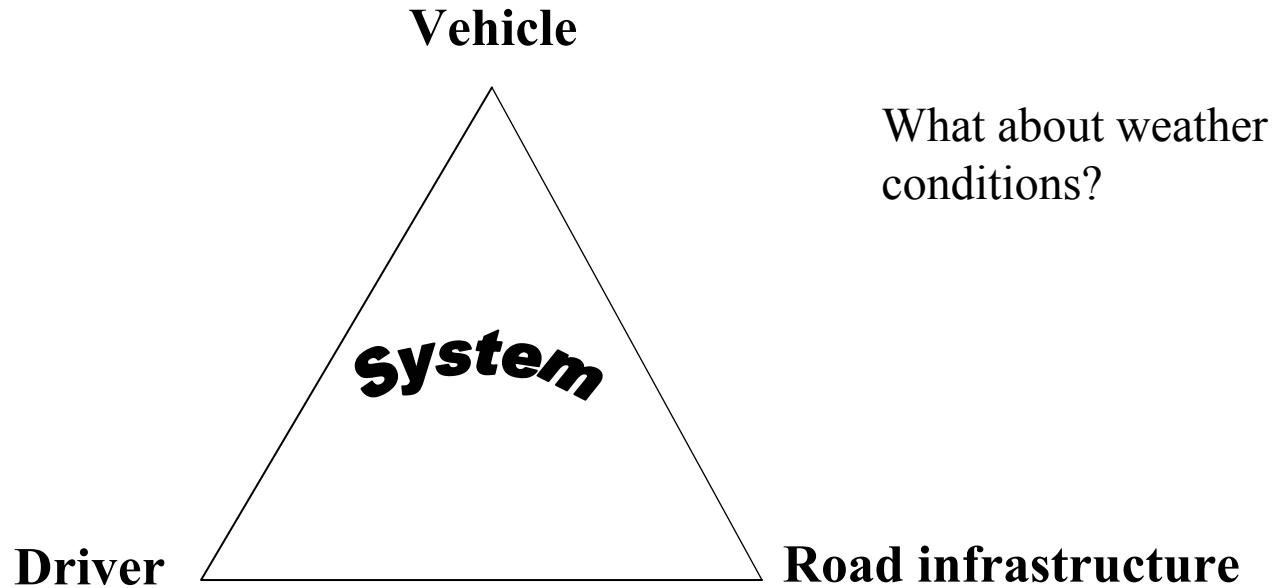
Under normal circumstances chances of an accident is low. Rather than looking at the environment as being full of hazards and people prone to errors, system safety assumes harmony (steady state) exists between individuals and the work environment.



- Safety is an emergent property that arises when components of system interact with each other within a larger environment.
 - A set of constraints related to behavior of components in system enforces that property.
 - Accidents when interactions violate those constraints (a lack of appropriate constraints on the interactions).
 - Software as a controller embodies or enforces those constraints.



Systems Theory Applied to Transportation Engineering



Road accidents are seen as failures of the whole traffic system (interaction between the three elements) rather than a failure of the driver.



- The driver is a victim – this assumes the demands that the traffic system puts on the driver is too complex for the driver’s limited capacity to process information.
- As a result of this assumption the system must be designed to be less complex, which *prevents* errors from occurring.
- “The energy and barriers perspective”: The system must also *reduce* the negative consequences of errors, i.e., introduce safety margins that allows the driver to incur an error without being hurt too seriously.



HADDON'S ENERGY RELEASE THEORY

Willam Haddon a medical doctor and the administrator of NHTSA at one point in time, in 1966 helped to impose the following regulations for new cars:

1. Seat belts for all occupants
2. Energy-absorbing steering column
3. Penetration-resistant windshield
4. Dual braking systems
5. Padded instrument panel
6. All measures correspond with the energy and barrier concept



- The systems theory approach, in contrast to the energy release theory, treats the driver as a **passive** responder in his environment.
- The evidence is that he is in fact an **active** participant, regulating his/her level of preferred risk
- Risk compensation/ behavioural adaptation: operators within a system may take advantage of safety measures in other ways than to increase safety
- Two basic forms of compensation to road safety measures:
 - Increased speed
 - Reduced attention



” ... more efficient brakes on an automobile will not in themselves make driving the automobile any safer. Better brakes will reduce the absolute size of the minimum stopping zone, it is true, but the driver soon learns this new zone and .. he allows only the same relative margin between field and zone as before.”

Reference: Gibson J. J. & Crooks L. E. (1938): A theoretical field analysis of automobile driving. The American Journal of Psychology, 51, 453-471



SYSTEMS MODEL - SUMMARY

- Views accidents as a control problem
 - e.g., O–ring did not control propellant gas release by sealing gap in field joint
 - Software did not adequately control descent speed of Mars Polar Lander.
- Events are the result of the inadequate control
 - Result from lack of enforcement of safety constraints
- To understand accidents, need to examine control structure itself to determine why inadequate to maintain safety constraints and why events occurred.

Not a "blame" model – trying to understand "why"



BEHAVIORAL THEORY

- Often referred to as behavior-based safety (BBS)
- 7 basic principles of BBS
 - Intervention
 - Identification of internal factors
 - Motivation to behave in the desired manner
 - Focus on the positive consequences of appropriate behavior
 - Application of the scientific method
 - Integration of information
 - Planned interventions



COMBINATION THEORY

- Accidents may/may not fall under any one model
- Result from factors in several models.
- One model cannot be applied to all accidents