

# Driver performance, prediction and brain rhythms: What we can learn from external sensory entrainment?

Rodrigo Henriquez Chaparro<sup>1,2</sup>, Francisco J. Parada<sup>1</sup>, Franco Basso<sup>3</sup>, Leonardo J. Basso<sup>4</sup>, Raul Pezoa<sup>4</sup>, Francisca Cuevas<sup>3</sup>, Diego de la Barra<sup>5</sup>, and Daniel Rojas-Líbano<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Laboratorio de Neurociencia Cognitiva y Social, Facultad de Psicología, Universidad Diego Portales

<sup>2</sup>Department of Psychiatry, Interdisciplinary Center for Neurosciences, School of Medicine, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago, Chile

<sup>3</sup>School of Industrial Engineering, Diego Portales University, Santiago, Chile

<sup>4</sup>Civil Engineering Department, Universidad de Chile, Santiago, Chile

<sup>5</sup>Programa de Magíster en Neurociencia Social, Facultad de Psicología. Universidad Diego Portales. Santiago, Chile

September 4, 2018

## 1 Abstract

2 Drive performance in complex road scenarios research usually tends to mainly consider variables as the accuracy of motor human  
3 behavior, attentional focus levels, and technological devices for predicting risky events. However, recent evidence -particularly  
4 within visual perception research- indicates that the nervous system is continuously coupled with the dynamic, ever-changing  
5 environment. This is a highly adaptive feature allowing the online adaptation of the nervous system to the rhythm of incoming  
6 stimuli. Evidence-based current ideas about brain functioning suggest that *Bayesian* operations combined with external sensory  
7 entrainment approaches might improve human perception performance. These advancements provide a unique opportunity to  
8 refine high-performance motor-sensory coupling. Likewise, allowing evidence-based development of innovative strategies for  
9 accident prevention and road design. Thus, given the dramatic lifestyle changes and the rapid expansion of cities occurring in  
10 the modern globalized world, we provide a new perspective for the establishment of innovative vial infrastructure and accident  
11 prediction systems. Importantly, these systems and devices can be designed using behavioral and neural information obtained  
12 from human drivers with diverse cognitive, sensory, perceptual, and behavioral characteristics.

13 **Keywords:** sensory entrainment, rhythmic stimulation, perception, driving performance, brain rhythms

14 **\*Correspondence:** Rodrigo A. Henríquez Ch.

15 [rhenriquezch@gmail.com](mailto:rhenriquezch@gmail.com)

## 16 **Sensory entrainment: Neurobiological underpinnings for accident** 17 **prevention.**

18 Over the course of the last 30 years, a large body of experimental and theoretical literature has suggested that  
19 perception is a discrete phenomenon (VanRullen and Koch, 2003; Friston et al., 2010; Asplund et al., 2014;  
20 Thibault et al., 2016; Seth et al., 2008; VanRullen, 2016; Sergent and Dehaene, 2004; Friston, 2005) (Marti.,  
21 2017; Varela et al., 1981). This is, human perception is based on discrete neural processing cycles rather  
22 than a continuous stream of accumulating information. Such processing cycles have been often associated with  
23 brain rhythms; short-lived voltage variations observable at the level of microcircuits and large-scale neural  
24 networks emerging from the apparently stochastic behavior of individual neurons (Buzsaki, 2006). Such  
25 “coordinated” brain activity is frequently associated with rhythmic fluctuations in the excitation–inhibition  
26 cycle of local neuronal populations, modulating the global organization of our nervous system (Herter, 1967;  
27 Hirsh & Serrick, 1961; Varela et al., 1981; VanRullen et al., 2011; (Varela et al., 2001; Quyen, 2011;  
28 Quyen and Bragin, 2007) and generating variability in sensory and perceptual processing (Varela et al.,  
29 1981). Thus, to form a coherent representation of the world around us, the brain must dynamically organize  
30 the different sensory features composing our global perception (Bagdasaryan and Quyen, 2013; Quyen, 2011;  
31 Varela et al., 2001; Hasson et al., 2008). The nervous system’s ability to continuously couple with dynamic  
32 visual inputs depends on the synchronous neural entrainment to the rhythm of incoming stimuli (Spaak et  
33 al., 2012; Spaak et al., 2014). Improved perceptual processing and increased behavioral performance can be  
34 reached through “optimal” brain rhythm coupling mechanisms (Arnal and Kleinschmidt, 2017; Ronconi and  
35 Melcher, 2017; Henry and Obleser, 2012) and in this manner, taking advantage of the entrainment property  
36 of endogenous neural oscillations involving sensory processing reorganization. However, practical applications  
37 of these new and interesting findings are lacking. Such applications could facilitate the development of novel  
38 ecological tools supporting human sensory adaptation in everyday complex environments.

39 Within this context, automobile driving can be understood as a complex task requiring sensory information  
40 processing, visual perception integration, and decision making under conditions of high perceptual uncer-  
41 tainty. In natural driving conditions, a busy road with incoming traffic is a common scenario. Eye fixations  
42 will concentrate on the road ahead, while periodically fixating towards the rear-view mirror sets (Nunes  
43 and Recarte, 2002). Moreover, covert attention will be deployed towards the incoming traffic and potential  
44 pedestrians; shifting between unattended visual fields. Thus, driver performance studies are a well-suited  
45 model for studying neural mechanisms allowing the identification and processing of diverse dynamic stimuli.

46 The fields of Cognitive Psychology and -more recently- Cognitive Neuroscience has produced a variety of  
47 research tools composed by experimental and computational techniques. These methodological tools allow  
48 the identification and modulation of oscillatory brain activity; having direct impact on sensory, perceptual,  
49 and behavioral processes (Wutz et al., 2014; Thut et al., 2011). Likewise, a growing number of studies provide  
50 key insights about psychophysiological factors and their impact on driving performance (Mehler et al., 2009;  
51 Thiffault and Bergeron, 2003; Lal and Craig, 2001; Klinestiver, 1980). These studies focus on quantifying the  
52 impact on driving performance of cellphone calls (Nunes and Recarte, 2002), texting while driving (Caird  
53 et al., 2014), conversations with passengers (Drews et al., 2008), spontaneous episodes of breakdown of  
54 attentional stream (i.e. mind wandering) (Henríquez et al., 2016; Thomson et al., 2014; Yanko and Spalek,  
55 2014; He et al., 2011), among others factors. Additionally, other human demographical and historical factors  
56 such as age and driver accident records are variables that also impact overall driving performance (Horberry  
57 et al., 2006; Ball and Owsley, 1993). Thus, growing evidence indicate these distractions are associated with  
58 reduction of reaction times, attentional impairments such as “tunnel vision”, limiting peripheral vision, and  
59 -of course- increasing the overall risk of accidents (Alexander et al., 2004; Robb et al., 2008; (Petridou  
60 and Moustaki, 2000). Although relevant evidence has been gathered about built environment, human, and  
61 cognitive factors predicting automobile accidents, a unifying neurobiological model providing clear empirical  
62 hypothesis is still lacking.

63 In the present perspective article we will highlight the role of perceptual cycles and sensory entrainment  
64 processes as an integrative and ecological neurobiological model of driver’s cognitive and behavioral perfor-  
65 mance. Our main hypothesis is that external modulation of visual sensory processing of incoming stimuli,  
66 would improve the perception and behavior (i.e: sensory-motor coupling) during automobile driving. If true,  
67 our hypothesis suggests the possibility to set a driver’s sensory system within a range of “optimal percep-  
68 tual state”, allowing processing external sensory demands successfully. Furthermore, we suggest cognitive  
69 neuroscience should work towards establishing a relationship between driving performance and external  
70 sensory entrainment of neural oscillations. Establishing such a link would allow the implementation of real-  
71 time information delivery systems working alongside innovative probabilistic collision prediction applications  
72 indicating collisions and road hazards (Basso et al., 2018). Providing thus a starting point for the develop-  
73 ment of perceptually-driven interactive vial infrastructure and other empirically-designed applications for  
74 car accident prevention.

## 75 **Brief overview of driving activity and risk management respect to** 76 **neuroscience**

77 One of the most commonly used models to describe driving activity is the Michon model (Michon, 1985). This  
78 approach divides driving behavior into two main classes: *taxonomies* and *functional models*. Taxonomies have  
79 the advantage of disturbing and classifying the different components of driving activity, but do not express  
80 the dynamics between these components. In turn, functional models, give an idea of the relationship between  
81 the elements, but are sometimes too restrictive and do not always go beyond their own field of study. Thus,  
82 the cognitive model of automotive activity by Michon is presented in a simple and flexible structure, which  
83 can group different hierarchical and theoretical levels (Michon, 1985). The model is further divided into  
84 three main parts corresponding to levels of competence in driving activity. The level of *rational operation*,  
85 which contains all the necessary actions to control the car. The *tactical level*, which refers to placement and  
86 positioning maneuvers in traffic and infrastructure. Finally, the *strategic level* allows planning of driving  
87 objectives, route and choice of transportation mode. These different levels influence each other in such a  
88 way that driving conditions or the driver’s willingness to drive can change in any time. For instance, when  
89 a driver interacts with traffic and unexpectedly changes the route. Another example would be taking an  
90 exit off a highway, for which our strategic driving can change due to the availability of different options.  
91 The driver can make the tactical choice of overtaking, which involves significant speed reduction and lateral  
92 positioning of the vehicle at the rational operating level. On the contrary, the driver can also tactically choose  
93 not to make a road overtaking, which will facilitate the rational positioning of the vehicle to the next point  
94 on the route. The decision between these two options will depend in part on the driver’s *risk management*  
95 and *perception*. According to the risk homeostasis model (Wilde, 1998), decisions corresponding to the  
96 strategic level of the Michon model (Michon, 1985) depend on an optimization of the driver’s risk decision  
97 making. In fact, the driver would choose the most appropriate manoeuvre based on four dimensions related  
98 to the risk homeostasis model: (i) expected benefits and (ii) expected costs of the risk behavior, and (iii)  
99 expected benefits and (iv) costs of the safe behavior. According to the risk model, driving always involves  
100 some risk. Likewise, there is always a goal to achieve. A driver will have a specific level of risk, deriving  
101 maximum benefit associated to the accomplishment of such a goal. The risk threshold would determine is  
102 the risk is worth taking in order to achieve a particular goal. Thus, risk taking may be voluntary if the  
103 individual decides to perform a maneuver by accepting the risks. In contrast, it can also be involuntary,  
104 because the individual could make a decision without knowledge of all the critical elements of the situation  
105 (Wilde, 1998). Behaviors related to driving are directly linked with this real world experience. Unfortunately,  
106 given the internal/ecological validity trade-off, the majority of experimental laboratory approaches related to  
107 the driving activity and its risk management tend to lack ecological validity. These studies, focus on exploring  
108 the impact of optimization of sensory processing on decision-making as well as on executive functions [**need**  
109 **citation**]. In this sense, considering more reliable variables that are closer to real world driving behavior,  
110 should be a main goal in the design of experimental protocols. Thus developing a more ecological approach

111 to studying the psychobiological correlates of the driving activity. We argue that experimental designs should  
112 aim at reproducing the complex and dynamic tasks that people face in their daily lives. It is for this reason  
113 that driving should be considered in relation to cognition, behavior, and technological devices in the actual  
114 environment where it occurs (Menary, 2013; Gallagher and Crisafi, 2008). Furthermore, the relationship  
115 between drivers and cars must be established as a joint cognitive system that functions in real-world settings.  
116 Consequently, any interventions aiming at improving and supporting the driving activity should focus on the  
117 neural bases of sensory, perceptual and cognitive functions and actions in relation to driving technologies and  
118 urban road settings. Providing thus opportunities for translational research between neuroscience, human  
119 behaviors variability, engineering, computer science, and public policy and socio-political sciences.

120 Recent knowledge about neural bases of sensory and cognitive functions underlying driving sheds light on the  
121 understanding of human behavior and to improve the performance in a wide range of driving settings [**need**  
122 **citation**]. A key area where neuroscientific interventions can be applied is in the creation of tailored strategies  
123 for optimizing perceptual sensory processing as a safety measure in automobile driving designed from and for  
124 the human brain. Reaching this goal would require examining sensory and perceptual processes in driving,  
125 which tend to be overly demanding on normal driving settings (Lee et al., 2008; Walter et al., 2001; Deery,  
126 1999; Ranney, 1994). According to studies about accident records, the proportion of fatal crashes for drivers  
127 on highways is expected to increase due to demographic shifts in the modern cities (McGwin Jr et al., 1998;  
128 McGwin Jr and Brown, 1999). Recent findings suggest a 155% increase by 2030, for instance, for drivers aged  
129 65 and above (Lyman et al., 2002). These projections of increased crash risk for different type drivers can  
130 arise from age related factors and psychophysical performance associated with sensory, perceptual processing  
131 and attentional impairments, among others. These variables can in turn be caused by external factors such  
132 as distractions, as well as internal ones, such as a deteriorations in some perceptual modality (e.g. visual or  
133 hearing impairments) (Preusser et al., 1998; Owsley et al., 1991; Ball and Owsley, 1993). For this reason, the  
134 study of the driving activity demands a multidisciplinary translational approach which must merge elements  
135 of cognitive psychology and human factors to study brain structure and function in everyday environments,  
136 which are often studied in isolation and so present a challenge in generalizing neurophysiological findings to  
137 predict driving safety behavioral actions. In this direction, cognitive neurophysiology can be used to explain  
138 and understand the mechanisms for instance of attentional breakdown that might be associated with driving  
139 behavior problems. Thus, a more complete picture of the the basic sensory processes that drivers need in  
140 the real-world might come from examining their performance in controlled laboratory studies to determine  
141 the the basic neurophysiological requirements for perceptual sensory processing to operate effectively and  
142 successfully in all driving scenarios. Future research on the driver's performance might further explore the  
143 ability of sensory entrainment to modulate the sensory processing systems in order to determine how well  
144 the driver can compensate and improve their sensory, perceptual and behavioral ability. Results from these  
145 type of efforts might play a role in the reduction of accidents. A physiological perspective and neuroscientific  
146 approach to drivers' perceptive skills can be useful to investigate a variety of cognitive states that affect  
147 various driving settings.

## 148 **Linking the Bayesian brain, perceptual uncertainly, and cognitive** 149 **prediction at the wheel**

150 The nervous system's ability to dynamically coordinate cognitive functions in a world of sensory uncertainty  
151 is one of the greatest evolutionarily-given tools (Jensen et al., 2012). Although from experience, our per-  
152 ceptual world looks stable and determined, many factors indicate that coordination with incoming sensory  
153 information is less reliable than it appears (Geisler and Kersten, 2002). For example, the variability in the  
154 density of the receptors of the retina -as well as the structural limitations in neural organization and the  
155 variety and variability of information introduced in the early stages of sensory coding- mean that the ner-  
156 vous system must dynamically and effectively deal with the resulting uncertainty. Appropriate uncertainty

157 management generates accurate perceptual representations of the world. Thus guiding decisions and acti-  
158 ons in a more adaptive manner. Therefore, perception is a process of active unconscious and probabilistic  
159 inference (Friston et al., 2012; Moutoussis et al., 2014; Moutoussis et al., 2014) (**Barlow 1990 -> no lo**  
160 **encuentro**).

161 On the one hand, Bayesian methods have proven successful in describing computational theoretical models for  
162 perception and sensory-motor control (Buckley et al., 2017). On the other hand, psychophysics has provided  
163 a growing body of evidence on how perceptual calculations in human beings follow an optimal Bayesian  
164 pattern (Buckley et al., 2017). This means that Bayesian coding approach reverse the notions classically  
165 established of perception as a largely bottom-up process of information accumulation or stimulus detection  
166 driven by the impact of sensory signals. Suggesting instead that both perceptual content and behavioral  
167 response is determined by top-down predictive signals. These signals would arise from multi-level generative  
168 internal models of environmental sources, which are continually modified by bottom-up prediction error  
169 signals. The latter ones, communicating reciprocal exchanges of information between predicted and actual  
170 signals across the different sensory and perceptive hierarchical levels, ultimately impacting on behavioral  
171 execution. Thus, evidence indicates the processes by which the human brain represents incoming sensory  
172 information, could be understood in a probabilistic way [**CITE EVIDENCE**]. Thus, the *Bayesian coding*  
173 *hypothesis*, suggests the human brain could be a natural probability distribution generator (**Friston., 2009,**  
174 **2010**). This theoretical and experimental approach has fundamental implications for studying the brain  
175 in everyday environments, particularly in the way we understand and describe the neural calculations and  
176 natural dynamics of neural representations. However, direct applications in daily life on this hypothesis are  
177 almost non-existent. Determining how and which are the requirements of the driver's brain to coordinate,  
178 the dynamics and natural neuronal interactions that are useful for the effectiveness of information coding  
179 in environments of high sensory uncertainty, is an important objective not only for the development of  
180 neuroergonomics as a field, but also a major advance in the field of applications in complex social contexts.

181 In consequence, considering the Bayesian brain framework (**Friston, 2009, 2010 & 2011**), if we provide  
182 relevant information to optimize a probability calculation (e.g. the prediction of motor behavior on a highway)  
183 our brain would use this information and modify itself from its interaction with incoming stimuli. Thus  
184 drawing a probabilistic prediction, with higher success rate of what *could* happen within the given context.  
185 In real high-uncertainty road driving conditions, the drivers' brain would consider the inputs from the  
186 environment and compare them with their previous experiences, in order to regulate and modify their  
187 behavior according to perceived risk (Wilde, 1998). In turn, optimization of brain functioning -by integrating  
188 the most relevant variables and trying to zero out any errors in its predictive model- can occur in a moment-  
189 by-moment basis. Furthermore, optimization involves updating the current model to reevaluate sensory  
190 inputs. Selective sampling of new incoming sensory inputs will thus generate adaptive responses reducing  
191 uncertainty and facilitating behavioral performance (Friston and Frith, 2015). Hence the nervous system is  
192 prepared to make active and probabilistic inferences of what might happen in our nearby sensory world.  
193 Furthermore, it can update such models with new predictive information, increasing the degree of accuracy.  
194 Environmental Psychology can therefore use this framework in order to develop systems that can facilitate  
195 such an optimization process. For example, using information derived from state-of-the-art predictive model  
196 of accidents in order to provide online non intrusive data about driving conditions (Basso et al., 2018).  
197 Given the fact that in real driving scenarios signals and stimuli are in constant competition, transmitting  
198 information to drivers is not an easily achievable goal.

## 199 **Brain oscillations, rhythmic stimulation and non-Invasive sensory** 200 **entrainment**

201 The functional architecture of perception is supported by distinct neurophysiological rhythms organized  
202 across different spatial scales (Buzsáki, 2004). This essential function -potentially supporting all cognitive

203 activity- has its basis that start from a single neuron (Hutcheon and Yarom, 2000) passing through different  
204 neural circuits (Whittington et al., 1997) to thalamo-cortical and cortico-cortical networks (Lőrincz et al.,  
205 2009). Thus, different brain rhythms occur at distinct frequency bands as a function of micro- and macro-  
206 network architecture (Buzsáki, 2004). Different aspects of cognitive activity can thus be described in terms of  
207 neuronal oscillators, hierarchically organized interacting at different frequencies (Buzsáki, 2004). A biological  
208 mechanism named *synchronization of neuronal elements* enables the dynamic perceptual framing of sensory  
209 information (Varela 1981); a neurophysiological process derived from oscillatory coordination (Jensen and  
210 Mazaheri, 2010; Salinas and Sejnowski, 2001; Fries, 2005). Within this neural mechanism, temporal segmen-  
211 tation serves to reduce the problem of information overload because sensory stimuli can be processed serially.  
212 In this context synchronous voltage variations that occurring within 8-13 Hz in adults and within 6-9 Hz  
213 in children, known as alpha oscillations are thought to be a crucial element or these processes (Palva and  
214 Palva, 2007). Furthermore, these lower frequency rhythms (theta 4-8 Hz, alpha 8-13 Hz) have been related to  
215 long-distance brain communication dynamics, while higher frequency bands like gamma (>30 Hz) have been  
216 associated with local neuronal interaction (von Stein et al., 2000). It has been proposed that low- and high-  
217 frequency oscillatory systems belong to a larger multi-band coordination system, enacting an informational  
218 multiplexing mechanism (Akam and Kullmann, 2014) through cross-frequency interactions (Palva and Palva,  
219 2007; Jensen and Colgin, 2007; Canolty and Knight, 2010). Activity in different frequencies across brain  
220 structures may also provide important clues to these functions, for instance posterior alpha-band oscillations  
221 (8–12 Hz) are related to the sensory input regulation (Lőrincz et al., 2009), and attentional selection (Thut  
222 and Miniussi, 2009; Worden et al., 2000; Sauseng et al., 2005; Kelly et al., 2006). Hence, when perception  
223 unfolds during driving activities, also relies on processes that enable effective selection and integration of  
224 relevant information from the vast amount of sensory inputs on the road, that is constantly bombarding the  
225 driver’s brain. Sensory function improvements could be therefore made by a natural property of oscillations.  
226 This is, oscillatory activity is self-sustained and dynamic (e.g. (Pikovsky et al., 2003; Glass, 2001)), implying  
227 that brain rhythms could be modulated by an external sources. For instance, if the modulation is carried out  
228 periodically by an external stimulus, the ongoing waves may then become synchronized to the external pat-  
229 terns. In other words, brain rhythms will synchronously cycle with the same period as the external sensory  
230 input, becoming “*entrained* ” and coordinated to the rhythm of external incoming events (Lakatos et al.,  
231 2008). Within this context, *synchronization* and *entrainment* are synonymous (Pikovsky et al., 2003). Thus,  
232 in this perspective we will use the term *entrainment* to refers synchronization to a natural brain rhythmic  
233 with rhythm of external (sensory) incoming events.

234 **RE-ESCRIBIR, NO SE ENTIENDE -> [Therefore, generating non-invasive stimulation of a**  
235 **coordinated nature pulsed sensory stimulation appear as key tool for simultaneously entrain**  
236 **many primary sensory structures and input pathways including sub-cortically and cortical**  
237 **structures. In this context pulsed form of rhythmic stimulation is steady-state sensory stimuli**  
238 **presentation.]** For instance, transient visual events that are repeated at fixed frequency (Herrmann, 2001),  
239 in order to entrain the natural brain frequencies to the rhythm of the presentation. With this non-invasive  
240 approach to sensory stimulation, stimuli can be presented in a wide range of repetition frequencies, covering  
241 the physiological range of brain oscillations from slow-waves to high-frequencies bands (Herrmann, 2001;  
242 Thut and Miniussi, 2009), allowing non-invasive brain stimulation at appropriate frequencies and temporal  
243 scales. Likewise, inducing sensory entrainment on drivers’ brains appear as a perfect candidate to generate  
244 non-invasive safety tools for prevention of automobile accident. In addition, note the possibility of generating  
245 a tool in road infrastructure to modify and improve the perceptual and behavioral performance of drivers  
246 appears as a neuroergonomic challenge in urban design, as well also opening a new path in the way the  
247 concept of road safety is constructed, designed from and for the human brain.

## 248 Concluding remarks

249 Current descriptions of the role of brain oscillations in the execution of complex behavior is a fundamental  
250 aspect to understand the role of external sensory modulation to improve the coupling with the world (Varela,

251 1981; (VanRullen et al., 2005), suggesting a biological-tech support for driving performance. This neurophys-  
252 iological reinforce can be interpreted in terms of a “optimal temporal window” for establishing the best time  
253 to deliver the stimulus (Ronconi and Melcher, 2017; Wutz et al., 2018; VanRullen et al., 2005; VanRullen et  
254 al., 2005) Varela 1981, connecting the on coming stimuli with the optimal sensory rhythms. Here, we have  
255 proposed that effective sensory entrainment constitutes a novel approach to help perceptual processing dur-  
256 ing driving performance and explain why we can improve, a least temporality the performance on complex  
257 task such driving. Specifically, effective neurophysiological, cognitive, and computing neuroscience studies  
258 allow us to hypothesize that the temporal synchrony within a window of visual integration would provide a  
259 high temporal resolution, necessary for the stability of perceptual representation, despite the rapid changes  
260 in sensory inputs present on complex vial scenarios (Wutz et al., 2014). Thus, improve the anticipatory be-  
261 haviors before the execution of the desired action (Khaliliardali et al., 2012). Therefore, these are the aspects  
262 that must be considered in order to improve the chances of attending for instance to preventive signs within  
263 the road environment. Moreover, given the existence of multi sourcing of sensory stimulus processing deficits  
264 that affecting the cognitive domains, this approach may be used to test the Bayesian brain hypothesis in  
265 order to understand the perception and sensory-motor coupling, on based of human brain deal with incoming  
266 sensory information in a probabilistic manner. Dynamic causal models of perceptual-motor coupling based  
267 on external modulation of sensory processing may provide an opportunity to achieve “effective” cross-talk  
268 between industrial engineering and basic neuroscientists (Kahan and Foltynie, 2013). By means of effective  
269 neurophysiological studies, we may be able to understand why drivers with similar sensory systems perform  
270 differently (i.e., very well or very badly) during automobile activity.

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