Abstract

A mathematical model, named as general method, has been set up to study the cracking behaviour of a concrete tie reinforced by ordinary bars, subjected to a monotonic load. The analysis is performed considering both the crack formation stage and the stabilized cracking stage. In particular, secondary cracks occur in the stabilized cracking stage, modifying the distribution of bond stress along the transmission length. As in the stabilized cracking stage the solution of the general method requires to carry out an iterative numerical procedure, for design purposes the maximum crack width can be determined through a simplified method that allows the main aspects of the structural behaviour to be taken into account.

Introduction

Cracking in concrete structures has to be considered normal and, in general, it does not indicate a construction defect or danger when it remains within limits established by standards or contracts [1,2]. Cracks, that can already occur in fresh concrete, are due to either direct loading or restraint or imposed deformations and appear when the tensile strength of concrete is reached. Two types of cracks can be observed in structural members, that means primary cracks, that propagate inside the concrete reaching the concrete surface, and secondary cracks or Goto cracks [3], that develop around the reinforcement bars remaining mostly inside the concrete. Limiting the maximum crack width is aimed at avoiding to impair the aesthetic aspects, also in order to not generating alarmism among people, and preserving the structural durability or the sealing capacity in case of tanks or retaining structures. To this regard appropriate limits of the crack width are introduced for the various service conditions, generally not exceeding 0.4 mm. In the following, the case of cracking due to loading is examined, as it is the most frequent case, and a mathematical modelling is proposed for the calculation of the maximum crack width in service conditions [4,5].

Stages of the Cracking Behaviour and Calculation Assumptions

Primary cracks occur in the tension chord of the structural members, where the steel reinforcement is located to control their spacing and width. For the sake of modelling, the cracking analysis of the tension chord is usually performed considering an ideal RC tie with an effective area, $A_{c,ef}$. For instance, the height of the effective area of concrete can be assumed equal to $2.5 \cdot (h - d)$, being $h$ and $d$ the height and the depth of the structural member, respectively. Here, the concrete tie is assumed to be reinforced by $n_s$ bars, with diameter $\phi_s$ and total area $A_s$, and subjected to an increasing axial force $F_s$. Three stages can be considered, that means:

1. The uncracked stage, where the tensile strength of the concrete, $f_{ct}$, is not reached and both concrete and steel present a linear elastic behaviour.
2. The crack formation stage, that starts when in a certain section the concrete tensile strength is overcome, and the first crack occurs. In this stage, when the axial force $F_s$ increases, further cracks can form.
3. The stabilized cracking stage, where the crack pattern is assumed as completed and no new primary cracks can occur. In this stage, however, around the primary cracks, secondary cracks or Goto cracks [3] can form starting from the reinforcement and propagating into the concrete (Figure 1).

![Figure 1: Stabilized cracking stage of a block of an RC tie located between the cracked section and the zero-slip section under the assumption that the crack spacing is maximum.](image)

Because of cracking, around a single crack, during the crack formation stage, the state of stress obtained in the uncracked stage is modified, the assumption of perfect bond is lost, and a redistribution of stresses can be observed. In effects, in the crack formation stage, bond stresses, \( \tau_{bs} \), that are correlated to the slips between steel and concrete, are transmitted at the interface between steel and concrete. In this way the concrete stress, that is null at the cracked section, can increase until it reaches the concrete tensile strength, \( f_{ct} \). Or the steel stress decreases from the cracked section to the zero-slip section. The distance, from the cracked section, where the concrete tensile strength, \( f_{ct} \), is reached, is named transmission length, \( L_s \). As far as the distribution of slip between steel and concrete along the transmission length, \( L_s \), in the crack formation stage slip presents an analogous distribution of bond stress, that means slip is maximum at the cracked section and null at the zero-slip section. In effects, in the crack formation stage slips influence the bond stresses, through the bond law, along the whole transmission length. To this regard, fib Model Code 2010 proposes the following first ascending branch of the bond law, which is the only part of the bond law considered in service conditions:

\[
\tau_{bs} = \tau_{\text{max}} \cdot \left( \frac{s}{s_1} \right)^2, \quad 0 \leq s \leq s_1
\]

where \( \tau_{\text{max}} \) is the bond resistance that depends on the concrete strength, and which is equal to \( k \cdot \sqrt{f_{ck}} \); \( s \) is the slip that corresponds to the attainment of the bond resistance; \( \alpha \) is a coefficient. The parameters \( k, s_1 \) and \( \alpha \) have tabulated values, which are valid for ribbed bars embedded in well confined concrete (in fib Model Code 2010: \( \alpha = 0.40; k_1 = 2.5 \) and \( s_1 = 1.0 \) mm in good bond condition or \( k_1 = 1.25 \) and \( s_1 = 1.8 \) mm in all other cases). Other values are given for smooth bars. From a comparison of the maximum crack width obtained with Eurocode 2, a good value of the exponent \( \alpha \) is equal to 0.25 [4,5]. During the crack formation stage, other cracks form that correspond, locally, to the attainment of the tensile strength of concrete. But, for design purposes, the calculation of the crack width in the crack formation stage as well as in the stabilized cracking stage is made on the basis of the mean values of the material properties. Therefore, in the following it is considered as tensile strength of concrete, \( f_{ct} \), its mean value and the transmission length, \( L_s \), is determined accordingly. Assuming a constant value of the tensile strength, in the stabilized cracking stage the distance between two adjacent cracks, that means the crack spacing, can vary between once the transmission length, \( L_s \), and twice the transmission length, \( 2 \cdot L_s \). In practice, for design purposes, it is assumed that the crack spacing is maximum and equal to twice the transmission length, as this situation, even it is an incipient condition for the formation of a new intermediate crack, represents the most unfavorable cracking condition, to which corresponds the attainment of the maximum crack width, \( w_{\text{max}} \). Under this assumption, it results that, at the zero-slip section, the concrete stress is known and equal to...
its tensile strength, $f_{ct}$. It is worth to note that the value obtained for the maximum crack width is a reference value determined at the concrete surface, to be used for verifications. That means, it is neither the mean value nor the characteristic value and cannot be compared with the crack width measured in situ.

**General Refined Method**

An RC tie is considered in the crack formation stage or in the stabilized cracking stage [4,5]. A reference system is introduced along the member axis with origin located at the zero-slip section (Figure 2).

Along the transmission length, $L_s$, at a certain distance $x$ from the zero-slip section, a slip between steel and concrete, $s_s(x)$, which represents the difference of the deformations of the steel, $u_s(x)$, and the concrete, $u_c(x)$, occurs:

$$s_s(x) = u_s(x) - u_c(x) \quad (2)$$

The first derivative of Eq. (2) gives the difference of the strains of the steel, $\varepsilon_s$, and the concrete, $\varepsilon_c$:

$$\dot{s_s}(x) = \frac{du_s(x)}{dx} - \frac{du_c(x)}{dx} = \varepsilon_s(x) - \varepsilon_c(x) \quad (3)$$

while, from the second derivative of Eq. (2), it results:

$$\ddot{s_s}(x) = \frac{d\dot{\varepsilon}_s(x)}{dx} - \frac{d\varepsilon_c(x)}{dx} \quad (4)$$

If one assumes a linear elastic behaviour for steel and concrete and considers the equilibrium of forces that act on infinitesimal blocks made of only steel or only concrete extrapolated from the RC tie, the two terms of Eq. (4) can be written in the following forms:

$$d\varepsilon_s(x) = \frac{n_s \cdot \pi \cdot \phi_s \cdot \tau_{bs}(x) \cdot dx}{E_s \cdot A_s} \quad (5)$$

$$d\varepsilon_c(x) = -\frac{n_c \cdot \pi \cdot \phi_c \cdot \tau_{bs}(x) \cdot dx}{E_c \cdot A_{c,ef}} \quad (6)$$

Therefore, the second order differential equation of the slipping contact between steel and concrete can be obtained, which is valid both in the crack formation stage and in the stabilized cracking stage:

$$\ddot{s_s}(x) = \frac{4 \cdot \tau_{bs}(x)}{E_s \cdot \phi_s} \cdot \left(1 + \alpha' \cdot \rho_{s,ef}\right) \quad (7)$$

For the crack formation stage, the solution of the differential equation (7) was obtained by Balázs in closed form [6], adopting the $f_{ib}$ bond law (see Eq. (1)). On the basis of the Balázs’ solution the average bond stress, $\tau_{bs,av}$, along the transmission length can be calculated from the equilibrium condition:
As an alternative to Eq. (9), for concretes of characteristic compressive strength, $f_{ck}$ between 30 MPa and 50 MPa, it can be referred to the tabular values of Table 1, that gives the values of the average bond stress-to-mean tensile strength ratio, $\tau_{bs,m}/f_{ck}$, obtained from Eq. (9), as a function of the concrete strength, the reinforcement ratio and the bar diameter. In this way, from Eq. (8), the transmission length can be determined as:

$$L_s = \frac{f_{ct} \cdot \phi_s}{4 \cdot \tau_{bs,m} \cdot \rho_s,ef}$$  \hspace{2cm} (10)$$

$$\tau_{bs,m} = 0.414 \left( \frac{\tau_{\text{max}}}{E_s} \right)^{0.2} \left( \frac{f_{ct}}{2 \cdot \rho_s} \right)^{0.8}$$  \hspace{2cm} (9)$$

**Table 1: Values of the average bond stress-to-mean tensile strength ratio, $\tau_{bs,m}/f_{ck}$**

| $f_{ck}$ (MPa) | $\phi_s$ (mm) | $1.00\%$ | $1.50\%$ | $2.00\%$ | $3.00\%$ | $5.00\%$ |
|---------------|--------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| 30-50         | 10           | 1.56   | 1.34   | 1.2    | 1.03   | 0.86   |
|               | 25           | 1.88   | 1.61   | 1.44   | 1.24   | 1.03   |
|               | 40           | 2.06   | 1.77   | 1.58   | 1.36   | 1.13   |

**Simplified Calculation Method**

The general method is quite complex and is certainly not suitable for design purposes. Therefore, some simplifications are introduced here. Eq. (11) can be written with reference to the average values of the steel and concrete strains, $\varepsilon_{st}$ and $\varepsilon_{cm}$, respectively, along the transmission length, $L_s$:

$$w_{\text{max}} = 2 \cdot L_s \left( \varepsilon_{cm} - \varepsilon_{st} \right)$$  \hspace{2cm} (11)$$

In Eq. (12) the average strains of steel and concrete can be determined from the local strains. In effects, the steel strain varies from the value $\varepsilon_{st} = \frac{F_s}{E_s \cdot A_s}$ at the cracked section to the value $\varepsilon_{st} = \frac{F_s - A_{eff} \cdot F_{ct}}{E_s \cdot A_s}$ at the zero-slip section, while the concrete strain is null at the cracked section and equal to $\varepsilon_{cm} = \frac{F_{ct}}{E_c}$ at the zero-slip section. Therefore, approximating the distributions of the steel and concrete strains (Figure 2C) with linear laws it results:

$$\varepsilon_{sm} = \varepsilon_{s2} - \frac{f_{ct}}{2 \cdot E_c \cdot \rho_{s,ef}}$$  \hspace{2cm} (13)$$

$$\varepsilon_{cm} = \frac{f_{ct}}{2 \cdot E_c}$$  \hspace{2cm} (14)$$

Finally, the value of the maximum crack width is determined at the concrete surface of the structural member, not at...
the reinforcement level. For this reason, it is necessary to take into account the effect of the concrete cover, c. To this regard, as shown in Figures 2A, 2B & 2C, passing from the reinforcement level to the concrete surface, the crack width tends to widen. And this tendency increases with the increase of the steel stress. It results an increase of the maximum crack width dependent on concrete cover:

$$\Delta w = \left( \frac{\sigma_{st,2}}{\sigma_{st,1}} - 1 \right) \beta \cdot c$$

where $\beta$ can be determined experimentally and assumed equal from 0.002 to 0.004, while $\sigma_{st,2}$ is the steel stress at cracked section under the cracking force. In conclusion, on the basis of Eqs (15),(9),(13),(14),(16) the maximum crack width can be determined with the following formula:

$$w_{\text{max}} = \frac{\sigma_{st,1}}{2 \cdot \rho_s \cdot \tau_{\text{mix}}} \left( \varepsilon_{cm} - \varepsilon_{cm,sh} \right) + \left( \frac{\sigma_{st,2}}{\sigma_{st,1}} - 1 \right) \beta \cdot c$$

### Conclusion

The calculation of the maximum crack width is usually referred to the tension chord and the effective area of concrete. Taking into account the constitutive laws of materials and the main physical aspects, in particular those relating to cracking, a mathematical general method has been set up which allows the cracking behaviour to be analysed. However, the general method presents some calculation difficulties that are not suitable for design purposes. A simplified calculation method is, therefore, proposed which allows the main aspects of structural behaviour to be taken into account. In service conditions, the maximum crack width represents the reference value to be compared with the limits required by standards or contracts.

### Acknowledgement

To God.

### Conflicts of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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