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... misiunea oricărei Universități nu este numai de a răspândi știința dar și de a ajunge să creeze ea însăși valori, insuflând vocații și întreținând focul sacru la generațiile care i se prezintă!

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Drivers' Social Representation of Death as an Outcome of Road Traffic Accidents

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Overview of today's talk

- Arguments for choosing this topic
- What has social psychology of road user behavior done so far ?
- Brief theoretical background for the present PhD research project
- General aims and hypotheses
- Design and methodology
- Questions, suggestions, remarks…

Why such a topic?

- **Road traffic accidents** constitute a very serious social problem across the world;

- In 2007, **Romania** was on the second place in Europe in number of car crashes and deaths as outcome of such accidents;

- **Traffic psychology** has become a new promising area of research, adopting concepts from social and cognitive psychology.

What has social psychology of road user behavior done so far ?

- **Social psychology** within the realm of traffic psychology has largely focussed on attitudes towards road user behaviour (e.g. SARTRE reports on drivers' attitudes in Europe).

- There is currently a very small body of research in this field using **the Social Representations** (SR) as a theoretical background. We believe that the theory of SR should be able to incorporate all the attitude-related concepts within a global perspective of driver behavior.

- Most studies neglect the drivers' representations on certain aspects of life, their need for meaning, **motivation** to change aberrant behavior etc.

General aim of the project

- using new theoretical perspectives and studying one of the most threatening issues – **death**. Death is a controversial concept because it may be understood in different ways and may have different subjective connotations: consequence, threat, instinct etc.

- clarifying some controversies regarding driver's **meaning** of life and death, specifically referring to road accidents.

- understanding what leads people to take risks and face death while driving in order to be able to elaborate **future sustainable strategies** of modifying human behaviour in traffic.

Brief theoretical background

- **Death**
    - *Social Representations* (Moscovici, 1961)
    - Human motives – *mortality salience*
    - *Illusion of relative invulnerability* (McKenna, 1993)
- **Terror management theory** (Becker, 1973; Solomon, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, 1991)
    - self-reflection, awareness of one's mortality
    - worldview defense
- **The meaning maintenance model** (Heine, Proulx & Vohs, 2006)
    - need for meaning
    - fluid compensation → alternative representations

Objectives

- **I. A preliminary descriptive stage**
  - To identify and compare the content and internal structure of the SR of death among different road users (i.e. the social actors' demographical characteristics).
  - To identify and compare the meaning of life and death for road users (main themes and dimensions).
  - To identify the motivational factors that may be hidden behind this SR as conceptualized by the TMT and MMM.
  - To point out the common elements of the SR and the concept of mortality salience.

- **II. A second inferential stage**
  - To analyze the relationship between the drivers' SR of death and their meaning of life and death.
  - To analyze the relationship between the drivers' SR of death and the way accidents are presented in mass-media.
  - To outline possible intervention strategies (e.g. Wilde's short scenarios) based on the inferences following data analysis.

Brief sketch of specific hypotheses

- There are significant differences between the SR structures of inexperienced young men and other categories.
- The SR structure reflects the information concerning accidents frequently shown in mass media.
- Different actors (young – old, males – females, experienced – inexperienced, novice – experts) should have a different meaning of the same objects (life and death).
- Drivers who show lower fear of death compensate though a higher illusion of invulnerability.
- Drivers with a high illusion of invulnerability have a more simplistic, even unrealistic SR of death.

Design and methodology

- **Subjects**
  - Romanian samples of drivers:
    - male and female drivers;
    - drivers of different age: young vs old;
    - drivers with a different experience (mileage): experienced vs inexperienced; novice vs experts;
  - If possible, drivers from different countries within the "Latin culture" of Europe (e.g. Romanian, Italian, French / Spanish etc.).

Design and methodology

- **Measures**
  - Dependent measures:
    - the content and the internal structure (core and peripheral elements) of the SR of death;
    - the dimensions of the meaning regarding life and death;
    - need for certainty regarding death;
    - strategies of compensation (domains of fluid compensation);
    - level of perceived invulnerability.
  - Independent measures:
    - Gender: female vs. male;
    - Age: young vs. old;
    - Experience: experienced vs. inexperienced; novice vs. experts;
    - General need for meaning;
    - Level of motivation regarding particular domains.

Design and methodology

- **Procedure & techniques for data collection**
    - The free association task (Abric, 1973);
    - The specific association and connection tasks (Rouquette & Guimelli, 1992);
    - argumentative units task (DiGiacomo, 1986) or open questionnaires;
    - a questionnaire built on the SR dimensions previously identified in order to compare the different groups;
    - Self-report instruments to assess the MMM constructs;
    - Eventually, an experimental procedure to test the advanced hypothesis.

Questions, suggestions, remarks…