34th International Lab Meeting of the
**European/International Joint Ph.D. in Social Representations and Communication**
Summer Session, 18th - 24th June 2017

**Social Representations in the social arena faced with social demand: a wide range of societal issues investigated in various thematic areas in multiple applied contexts**

# Driving behaviors, moral reasoning and Social Representations

Andrei HOLMAN

# Context

- Road traffic accidents are one of the main causes of human casualties (WHO, 2013)

- norm violation - the most important cause for their appearance (Rothengatter & Huguein, 2004)

# Context

- traffic rules have the purpose to foster traffic safety

- deliberate infringements of these rules increase the risk of road accidents

- yet, traffic norm violations are omnipresent - massive disobedience towards the traffic code

- E.g.: 90% of drivers systematically exceed speed limits

# Factors of drivers' law disobedience

- personality traits - impulsiveness (Ryb et al., 2006), hostility (Stephens & Groeger, 2009), locus of control (Holland et al., 2010)

- other personal characteristics: gender (Harre et al.,1996), age (Parker et al.,1995), attitudes (Elliott et al., 2003), perceived control (Parker et al., 1992), optimism biases (González-Iglesias et al., 2015)

# Empirical aim

- to identify the moral underpinnings of driving violations

  - anchored in relevant SR

# Theoretical framework

- ***Social cognitive theory*** (Bandura, 1986): rule transgressions or compliance stem from **two control mechanisms** involving one's **anticipation of the outcomes** of the transgressive behavior

# Social cognitive theory

- First, people refrain from such behavior when the anticipated social sanctions or personal losses are significant

    – in driving: accident involvement or legal sanctions - instrumental motives

# Social cognitive theory

- Second: anticipation of self-censure, consisting of negative reactions (emotions) towards the self when contemplating the possible deviant behavior

# Internal control in driving

- BUT this emotional internal control of transgressive driving behaviors is frequently absent
  - high prevalence of these behaviors
  - drivers who commit violations are usually not ashamed of it (Corbett & Simon, 1992)

# Internal control in driving

- one possible reason: driving violations are easily or at least often self-legitimized

- internal control and self-sanctions can be *disengaged* from the deviant behavior

- by appraising the situation in a manner that would justify this disengagement

# Social cognitive theory

- several cognitive mechanisms, each focusing on a specific aspect of the situation and aiming either at

(a) reconstructing the conduct so it is not viewed as immoral

(b) minimizing one's role in causing harm by cognitively altering the causal agency of action

(c) minimizing the negative consequences of the deviant behavior

(d) devaluating or allocating blame on its victim

# The *special moral status* of driving

- *moral ambiguity* of the official traffic rules
- the majority of law deviances imply a clear and immediate transgression of certain moral principles

- driving violations frequently involve only a *potential* physical harm

# The *special moral status* of driving

- drivers' decisions are frequently based on a personal analysis of the possible courses of action in the current situation, by computing their risks and benefits (Goldenbeld & van Schlagen, 2007; Sagberg et al., 2015)

- when the estimated risk of performing the forbidden behavior is lower than the one expressed in the respective traffic rule, drivers tend to ignore the law

# The *special moral status* of driving

- Drivers often act according to their own judgments regarding the appropriate behavior in the respective situation

- E.g. the 30 km/h speed limit on urban residential streets - exceeded by the majority of drivers (Dinh & Kubota, 2013)

# SR of traffic accidents

- central core of this SR: "death" (Holman, Havârneanu, & Tepordei, 2010)

- the central core elements are decisive criteria in defining the object

- Mostly the road events that provoke death are those represented as accidents

# SR of traffic accidents

- Focus on the serious / blatant rule violations, which lead to casualties

- Maybe motivating high prudence in driving, but also minimizing the *less blatant* rule violations

# SR of traffic accidents

- certain driving behaviors are represented as objectively safe, but sanctioned by the police in order to create opportunities for fines or bribe

# SR of road police

- high prevalence of negative attitudes toward traffic authorities among Romanian drivers (Havârneanu & Golita, 2010)

- road police – not interested in traffic safety, but in creating opportunities for sanctioning drivers

# SR of road police

- they frequently enforce *perverse rules*
  - their main function appears to be not that of motivating their *respect* but, their *infringement* (Fernández-Dols & Oceja, 1994; Lucas & Pérez, 2003)
  - thus, drivers are provoked to break the law

# SR of road police & accidents

- many traffic rules are perceived as lacking credibility in the immediate situation – no real danger

- this dichotomy between the two types of dangers is essential for the SRs relevant for driving behaviors

- might foster specific moral disengagement mechanisms

# The *special moral status* of driving

- another factor of drivers' moral reasoning: the "autonomous" traffic norms developed among road users (Pérez et al., 2002)

- paralleling the "heteronomous" traffic rules stemming from the official traffic authorities

# Autonomous traffic norms

- encourage basing one's driving behaviors on a personal analysis of the immediate situation and of the needs of the drivers involved in it, irrespective of the legal prescriptions

- this normative dichotomy also stems from the SR of *drivers vs. authorities* as *in-group vs. out-group*

# Autonomous traffic norms

- Consequently, such descriptive and autonomous norms can run counter to the traffic code
- the behaviors that infringe upon the official traffic rules become easier to legitimize, by invoking social rules or the arguments on which the latter are founded
- the traffic environment - conducive to moral disengagement

# The moral value of traffic regulations

- In spite of the moral ambiguity of traffic norms, they correspond to personal moral obligations in many drivers (Gauld et al., 2014)

- driving-related personal norms foster compliance with the traffic code (De Pelsmacker & Janssens, 2007)

- people vary in their degree of internalization of traffic rules

# General hypothesis

- Maladaptive driving styles and accident–prone behaviors are supported by certain moral disengagement mechanisms

  – they reduce anticipatory self-censure over drivers' decisions to violate traffic rules

# Research purpose

- To develop a *Driving Moral Disengagement* scale (DMDs)

# Empirical studies

- First: **pilot study** using structured interviews

- participants (n = 70) were asked to describe at least one traffic behavior that violated a traffic rule and the justification they had in mind when performing this rule-transgressing behavior

# Empirical studies

- Subsequently, across two studies, we tested the psychometric proprieties of the DMDs, its factorial structure, and its construct, external and incremental validity.

# Study 1

- 382 Romanian drivers

- exploratory factor analysis

- dimensionality and psychometric properties

# Study 2

- 325 Romanian drivers
- confirmatory factor analysis approach
- construct validity through its associations with participants' driving styles
- external validity through its associations with participants' traffic offences and provoked accidents

# DMDs – final version

- 4 factors, 12 items

# *Minimizing risks*

- *When there's no traffic it's acceptable not to the use the seatbelt*
- *It's not so serious to drunk drive for a short distance*

- many traffic violations do not bring immediate or predictable negative consequences

# *Outcome – based justification*

- invoking a more severe outcome that the respective violation would supposedly avoid

- *It's reasonable not to allow pedestrians to cross the street if it could lead to blocking the intersection.*
- *If braking could lead to a sideslip it's reasonable to cross the red lights.*

# *Outcome – based justification*

- deviant acts – perceived as better adjusted to the traffic environment

- ignoring regulations - a trait of the adapted and safe driver

# *Minimizing risks & Outcome – based justification*

- Both DMD mechanisms rely on drivers making their own computation of risks
- fostered by
  - the SR of traffic accidents – *dangerous vs. safe* rule violations
  - the SR of road police – motivated not to increase safety, but to punish drivers
    - many rules forbid maneuvers that are perceived as actually safe

# *Displacement of responsibility*

- identifying other factors than oneself in the cognitive appraisal of traffic violations

- *The poor quality of many roads in this country often obliges you to over speed in order to recover the time lost.*

- *Since the parking places are insufficient, it's ok to park illegally.*

# *Displacement of responsibility*

- blaming the suboptimal contextual features - the state of the infrastructure or the inadequacy of the traffic rule

- generally, the lack of involvement of the authorities in providing proper traffic conditions and regulations

- fostered by the SR of authorities as out-group, and as having conflicting interests with those of the drivers

# *Personal needs – based justification*

- *When you're in a hurry to get to the hospital for a family member it's ok to cross the continuous lines.*

- *Speeding above the limit when you're in a hurry to get to a hospitalized family member is justified.*

# *Personal needs – based justification*

- general strategy: *moral justification* (Bandura, 1986) - attempting to portray the behavior as serving a higher purpose
  - e.g. *Heinz* (Kohlberg)

- socially acceptable purposes that overcome in importance the gravity of the misconduct

# *Personal needs – based justification*

- in driving - many people are inclined to use their own personal needs as a reference term

  - allocating them moral value

- exclusively *instrumental* psychological approach on driving, only concerned with the attainment of one's needs

# *Personal needs – based justification*

- supported by the *autonomous system* of traffic moral rules, favoring drivers' needs at the expense of traffic laws

- further fostered by the relevant SRs
  - us vs. them, each with their own definitions of road hazard
  - aside from the maneuvers creating real dangers, all others are actually safe, although forbidden sanctioned by authorities

# Practical outcomes of DMD

- the degree to which drivers use these moral disengagement strategies - strongly associated to
  - the three most maladaptive driving styles
  - traffic offences
  - accidents

# Practical outcomes of DMD

- these self-exonerating strategies render specific manners of legitimization cognitively available in driving decision-making

- they foster the abolishment of internal control of deviant driving behaviors by reconstructing this control as either *unnecessary, impossible* or *undesirable*

# Practical outcomes of DMD

- 4/8 moral disengament mechanisms (Bandura, 1986, 1999)
- this narrowing in scope – due to the specificities of the driving context
  - among them - relevant SRs

# Thank you

**Acknowledgment**