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Social Representations and Public Policy: Influence of the Distance from the Object on Representational Valence

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Abstract

Theory: Our research is based on the social representations theory (Moscovici, 1961) [1] as an interpretation grid to understand reality. These representations constitute a way to defend social positions towards a social object. We are interested in the concept of distance from the object (Abric, 2001) [2] to study individuals' feelings towards a social object. People can feel concerned and close to it, or not concerned and distant from it. We assume this link impacts the representational elements' valence. By applying it to the urban mobility public policy of 30 kph, we inscribe it into an applied approach with the aim of helping urban planners, politicians and associations to understand social acceptability of this measure. Method: 129 young French drivers (mean age: 22.4; SD: 3.8; 78% are women and 22% are men) replied to a questionnaire to determine the individuals' distance from the object and the social representation of 30 kph. Results: A T test highlights the significant influence of the distance from the object on the representational elements' valence. Depending on individuals' feelings, social representation is focused upon pro-social or negative aspects. Gender seems to have a minor impact, whereas the regular mode of transport seems to influence the representation. Applications: Our results clearly give information to build efficient awareness campaigns (Bordarie & Gaymard, 2015) [3]. They can also provide indications for urban planners to implement 30 kph zones, highlighting the flexibility of practices (Bordarie & Gaymard, 2015) [4].

Keywords

Social Representations, Distance from the Object, Valence, 30 kph, Acceptability

1. Framework

Social Representations, Valence and Distance from the Object

Social representations (Moscovici, 1961) [1] are defined as knowledge of common sense (Jodelet, 1991) [5] and constitute a reading grid for people (Moliner, 1988) [6] in order to analyse the world. They appear through two processes: objectification and anchorage (Moscovici, 1961) [1]. The first one refers to the creation of a figurative core, an image, which allows people to understand and appropriate a concept making it more concrete. If the

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objectification process seems to be a process of knowledge creation about the social object, the anchoring resembles an integration of this knowledge in individuals' reality. Indeed, the anchoring consists in the appropriation of the new knowledge and object, giving it some sense, and generating stances (Doise, 1986, 1992) [7] [8]. This integration rests on classification, categorization and denomination mechanisms in order to make the object familiar. The selection of information participates in the objectification process giving a positive or negative image of the object. We could speak about the positive or negative balance, or more generally we will use the valence of the representation. The representational valence appears equal to the cause and the consequence of the link that individuals have with the object. This link constitutes an important element for the understanding of individuals' representation. However, there are very few studies interested in this link. Rouquette (1994, 1997) [9] [10] evokes the importance of individuals' implication towards the object and distinguishes three factors: valorisation, identification and action capacity. These three factors appear to be important variables in order to understand the representation and individuals' practices toward an object. By questioning the nature of the object/subject relationship (Abric & Tafani, 1995) [11], Abric (2001) [2] theorises the concept of "distance from the object". Dany and Abric (2007) [12] published one of the rare studies testing this concept. These authors studied the relationship between individuals and cannabis by questioning their beliefs and practices. They highlighted the role of those factors in the distance from the object and showed with a Principal Component Analysis how they influenced the structure of cannabis' social representation. Other aspects such as normative aspects are important in the dynamics of social representation (Flament, 1999; Gaymard, 2003) [13]-[16]. Indeed, the role of parent or peer models has been demonstrated in several studies, especially in the mobility and road safety framework (Bordarie & Gaymard, 2014; Gaymard, 2009; Gaymard & Bessin, 2014) [17]-[19]. These aspects could participate in the understanding of social regulation phenomena (Doise, 1986, 1992) [7] [8]. The insertion in reality directly refers to the anchoring process (Moscovici, 1961) [1] and constitutes essential data in social representations' studies. The distance from the object proposes an interesting perspective to understand social representations and practices, their insertion in individuals' daily life and their potential transformations. The distance from the object constitutes an index of representation and dynamics of practices. It is a way to understand the differences in a population, both for highlighting the link individuals/objects and emphasizing the representational valence.

2. Methodology

2.1. Procedure

Students motorists from Angers filled out a questionnaire anonymously displayed on an online platform.

2.2. Population

129 individuals replied to the questionnaire. 78% of women and 22% of men constitute the population. They are 22.4 years old (standard deviation: 3.8).

2.3. Tool

We created a questionnaire split into two parts. The first one refers to the measure of distance from the object, by using the factors found in the literature (for example, Gaymard, 2007) [20]. We added questions on normative aspects and used questions on habits to study practices. The second part deals with the social representation of 30 kph. For each question, individuals had to choose a modality from 1 (not agree at all) to 6 (totally agree). We chose pairs of scales to insure a clear answer, positive or negative from subjects, in order to measure the valence of the different items. We also chose positive modalities to avoid the negative value impact (Schwarz, Knäuper, Hippler, Noelle-Neumann, & Clark, 1991) [21].

3. Results

3.1. Distance from the Object

We measured the distance from the object using several variables. Mixing the different conclusions presented in the literature, we used various components such as attitude, perceived social norm from parent model and peer model, perceived capacity, personal implication and perceived importance (Rouquette, 1995) [22]. We also used

people' practices and habits (Abric, 2001; Dany & Abric, 2007) [2] [12] with some variables of the self-report habits index (Verplanken & Orbell, 2003) [23]. We tested the behaviour frequency, automaticity, the perceived difficulty, the identification with the behaviour and since when they began to have the expected behaviour. We finally add a question on the intention people have to realize the behaviour and comply with the 30kph. Our tool to evaluate the distance from the object is composed of 12 variables divided into two components such as social cognitive aspects and habit aspects. The Cronbach alpha indicates a good reliability ($\alpha = 0.929$), higher than the minimum level of 0.70 (Nunnaly, 1978) [24]. Every item appears to be significant and necessary to optimize the Cronbach alpha. From the individuals' average, we can create two groups (cf. **Table 1**) by dividing individuals who "feel concerned" (object distance higher than the mean) and individuals who "don't feel concerned" (object distance lower than the mean).

3.2. Representational Valence

We did a mean comparison test from the results for each item.

Our two groups manifest two different social representations with significant differences for many items. Individuals close to the object, who feel concerned, consider the items calm, facility, promote bike use, useful, ecology, cohabitation, respect of others, quality of life, saving money and space sharing ($p < 0.001$) are directly related to the 30 kph. The others think the opposite (cf. **Table 2**). All those elements refer to pro-social aspects and constitute positive aspects of 30 kph.

The results highlight differences between the two groups. Nevertheless, others differences exist even if they don't oppose the two groups. Both of them do agree with the fact that some items are related or not to the 30 kph but the value of their harmony is significantly different. For instance, concerned and not concerned people do agree to say that caution, safety, respect of rules, schools, slowness, increase of travel time ($p < 0.000$), presence of children in the car ($p < 0.02$), pedestrians ($p < 0.03$) and cyclists ($p < 0.05$) are related to 30 kph. And yet, their level of agreement is statistically different. Thus, we note that the negative aspects like slowness and travel time increase imply a level of agreement higher for the group distant from the object. On the other hand, all the others elements suggest a higher agreement of concerned people (cf. **Table 3**). It means that negative aspects are more important and have more impact on the distant group's representation. The close group's representation is more impacted by conditional aspects and the consideration of others.

4. Discussion

Results suggest that the distance from the object (Abric, 2001) [2] is particularly interesting in order to analyse the valence of social representations. The index we measured appears to be a relevant way to measure people's "degree of concern" towards a social object (Rouquette, 1995) [22]. We include normative aspects of parent model and peer model in our tool. These aspects impact the social representation construction (Bordarie & Gaymard, 2014; Flament, 1999, 2001; Gaymard, 2003, 2009; Gaymard & Andrés, 2009) [13] [15] [17] [18] [25] [26] but they are often not taken into account. By using intention and habits as variables, we also optimized the distance from the object index. Thus, we could better evaluate the link between individuals and the social object of 30 kph. We saw this index was useful to analyse and predict the representational valence.

The words with the most influence for concerned people are *safety*, *children*, *pedestrians* and *danger* while *slowness*, *police*, *children* and *danger* have the most influence for not concerned people. We can see some similarities in both representations with the presence of *children* and *danger*. Nevertheless, the representation differs according to the importance our two groups give to *safety* and *slowness* to define 30 kph zones. Moreover, some pro-social aspects (*calm*, *facility*, *promote bike use*, *useful*, *ecology*, *cohabitation*, *respect for others*, *quality of life*, *saving money* and *space sharing*) are specific to people who feel concerned by the 30kph.

Our study emphasizes the role of constraining aspects (*police*, *fines*, *urban design*, *danger*, *obligation*) in the representation of 30 kph. Both of our two groups related them to the 30 kph. The interest of our study lies within the fact that in spite of these negative aspects, a part of our population prefers to focus on more positive aspects.

Table 1. Distribution of individuals according to the object distance index.

Low index of object distance (lower than 3.5) (don't feel concerned)	82
High index of object distance (higher than 3.5) (feel concerned)	47

Table 2. Mean test for the items with significant disagreement between our two populations.

		Levene Test		T-Test		
		F	Sig.	t	ddl	Sig. (bilateral)
Calm	If equal variance	1.199	0.276	−5.235	127	0.000
	In unequal variance			−5.385	104.315	0.000
Facility	If equal variance	4.875	0.029	−6.706	127	0.000
	In unequal variance			−6.183	74.952	0.000
Promote bike use	If equal variance	0.464	0.497	−4.243	127	0.000
	In unequal variance			−4.229	95.026	0.000
Useful	If equal variance	0.008	0.928	−5.332	127	0.000
	In unequal variance			−5.255	91.788	0.000
Ecology	If equal variance	1.060	0.305	−5.702	127	0.000
	In unequal variance			−5.841	103.076	0.000
Cohabitation	If equal variance	3.626	0.059	−5.672	127	0.000
	In unequal variance			−5.985	111.772	0.000
Respect of others	If equal variance	0.044	0.835	−5.521	127	0.000
	In unequal variance			−5.421	90.766	0.000
Quality of life	If equal variance	1.707	0.194	−5.434	127	0.000
	In unequal variance			−5.184	83.051	0.000
Saving money	If equal variance	0.934	0.336	−3.546	127	0.001
	In unequal variance			−3.439	87.318	0.001
Space sharing	If equal variance	1.478	0.226	−5.928	127	0.000
	In unequal variance			−6.204	109.402	0.000

Table 3. Mean test for the consensual items with significant difference in the level of harmony.

		Levene Test		T-Test		
		F	Sig.	t	ddl	Sig. (bilateral)
Caution	If equal variance	6.485	0.012	−4.495	127	0.000
	In unequal variance			−5.138	126.896	0.000
Safety	If equal variance	3.924	0.050	−4.065	127	0.000
	In unequal variance			−4.410	119.102	0.000
Cyclists	If equal variance	1.395	0.240	−2.186	127	0.031
	In unequal variance			−2.303	111.399	0.023
Respect of rules	If equal variance	4.507	0.036	−3.643	127	0.000
	In unequal variance			−4.024	122.989	0.000
Schools	If equal variance	4.422	0.037	−3.761	127	0.000
	In unequal variance			−4.035	116.312	0.000
Slowness	If equal variance	12.571	0.001	5.624	127	0.000
	In unequal variance			5.025	68.479	0.000
Pedestrians	If equal variance	1.053	0.307	−2.261	127	0.025
	In unequal variance			−2.331	104.999	0.022
Travel time increase	If equal variance	4.140	0.044	4.468	127	0.000
	In unequal variance			4.184	78.554	0.000
Presence of children in the car	If equal variance	0.010	0.922	−2.455	127	0.015
	In unequal variance			−2.466	97.255	0.015

The 30 kph zones constitute a new social object in the drivers' daily life. Many European cities have decided to implement it on their territory. They sometimes decided to generalize it. The representational valence allows individuals to defend social positions (Doise, 1986, 1992) [7] [8] towards the 30 kph. Thus, by analysing the representational valence, we can understand representations' anchoring. Most of all, we suggest taking into account the distance from the object which is specifically interesting in order to study the relationship between individuals, social objects and their representation. Spinoza (1660: p. 68) [27] said that "*love born from the representation and the knowledge we have of an object*; *the higher and more important the object is, the stronger and more important love is*" (our translation). It seems to mean the consideration of the object depends on individuals' representation. To insure a social acceptance of the 30 kph by drivers, it appears necessary to be sure that people have a positive representation. For people with a negative representational valence, we could try to inform people in order to generate a transformation of the social representation. In this framework, there are two conceptions. The first one considers social practices are the best way to transform social representations from a structural point of view (Abric, 1994; Flament, 1987, 1994; Guimelli, 1998) [28]-[31]. We already confirmed it in the field of 30 kph (Bordarie, 2015; Bordarie & Gaymard, 2015a) [3] [32]. The second one is interested in communication impact and persuasion in representational dynamics (Aïssani, 1991; Gaffié & Aïssani, 1992; Mugny, Moliner, & Flament, 1997; Mugny, Quiamzade, & Tafani, 2001; Roussiau & Bonardi, 2001) [33]-[38]. Moscovici (1961) [1] described the impact of communication in the representation process. Depending on the object, the kind of information and source's credibility, the impact of communication can be different (Renard & Roussiau, 2007; Roussiau & Soubiale, 1996b) [39]-[41]. Furthermore, we demonstrated its relevance in the field of the 30 kph generalization in a city (Bordarie, 2015; Bordarie & Gaymard, 2015) [6] [31]. These two conceptions clearly appear as important and relevant for government and local authorities in order to support individuals' practices change, and to insure a social acceptance of public policies.

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