Original article

Fatalistic beliefs, risk perception and traffic safe behaviors

Croyances fatalistes, perception du risque et comportements de sécurité routière

R. Ngueutsa a,*, D.R. Kouabenan b

a Univ. Bourgogne Franche-Comté, Laboratoire de Psychologie EA3188, 25000 Besançon, France
b Univ. Grenoble Alpes, Laboratoire Interuniversitaire de Psychologie (LIP/PC2S), BP 47, 38040 Grenoble cedex 9, France

A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:
Received 11 June 2015
Received in revised form 30 March 2017
Accepted 2 October 2017

Keywords:
Fatalistic beliefs
Risk perception
Traffic safe behaviors
Prevention

A B S T R A C T

Introduction. – Road safety is a major worldwide concern especially for developing countries where a certain feeling of helplessness predominate. Local authorities are seeking ways to change people's behaviors considered as the first causal factor of traffic accidents. Risk perception and fatalistic beliefs have been identified as important socio-cognitive functioning patterns, which can shed light on people's behaviors towards risks, for prevention purpose. But the way fatalistic beliefs are associated with risk perception and safety behaviors remains blurred in literature.

Objective. – This article examined the relationship between fatalistic beliefs, risk perception and traffic safety-related behaviors.

Method. – The study was carried out in Cameroon on a sample of 525 road users with a questionnaire made up of scales measuring fatalistic beliefs, perceived risk for dangerous traffic events and reported safe behaviors.

Results. – As expected, participants with higher levels of fatalistic beliefs perceived dangerous traffic situations as less risky and reported less safe behaviors. Perceived risk partially mediated the association between fatalistic beliefs and reported safe behaviors.

Conclusion. – Perceiving dangerous traffic situations as risky can mitigate the magnitude of one’s fatalistic beliefs on the engagement in protective behaviors. The implications for more effective prevention including both beliefs and perceptions are suggested. One can explain to people how to avoid accidents, emphasizing on their capacity to change their behavior and the gains they retrieved from that behavioral change.

RÉSUMÉ

Introduction. – La sécurité routière est une préoccupation mondiale spécialement pour les pays en développement où on note un certain sentiment d’impuissance. Les autorités locales recherchent les voies et moyens pour changer les comportements considérés comme la première cause des accidents routiers. La perception du risque et les croyances fatalistes ont été identifiées comme étant d’importants processus sociocognitifs susceptibles d’expliquer les comportements des individus face aux risques, dans un but de prévention. Mais la manière dont les croyances fatalistes sont associées à la perception du risque et aux comportements de sécurité n’est pas claire dans la littérature.

Objectif. – Cet article examine le lien entre les croyances fatalistes, la perception du risque et les comportements de sécurité routière.

Méthode. – L’étude est réalisée au Cameroun sur un échantillon de 525 usagers de la route par un questionnaire comportant des échelles de mesure des croyances fatalistes, du risque perçu pour des situations de trafic dangereuses et des comportements de sécurité.

Résultats. – Plus les participants sont fatalistes, moins ils perçoivent comme risquées les situations de trafic dangereuses et moins ils rapportent des comportements sécuritaires. Le risque perçu médiatise partiellement le lien entre les croyances fatalistes et les comportements de sécurité.

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: robert.ngueutsa@univ-fcomte.fr (R. Ngueutsa), remi.kouabenan@univ-grenoble-alpes.fr (D.R. Kouabenan).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erap.2017.10.001

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1. Introduction

According to the World Health Organization - WHO (2013), if nothing is done, road crashes will represent the fifth cause of injury and illness in the world by the year 2030. In fact, road crashes cause 1.24 million deaths per annum worldwide and strongly affects middle-income countries. Over 90% of deaths occur in developing countries although they account for only 48% of the global car number (WHO, 2013). In Cameroon for example, there is a scarcity of official statistics on traffic crashes because no central agency is in charge of collecting driving data. However, 1095 deaths were reported in Cameroon for an estimated 6136 (95%CI, 5035–7236) fatalities in 2013 (World Health Organization, 2015). The Cameroon Ministry of Transport reported about 1200 deaths per annum between 2000 to 2010, for about 443,000 vehicles (Ngoumbe, 2011); whilst in France whose car fleet is 37,438,000 vehicles, 4000 deaths were reported annually on roads (Observatoire national interministériel de la sécurité routière, 2011). Consequently, Cameroon has a ratio of 1/369 death per car, which is 25 times that of France (1/9349). The above statistics show that road crashes constitute a serious public health problem for developing countries.

No matter the country, human behaviors have always been rated as the first causal factor of road crashes (WHO, 2013). A deep knowledge of determining factors of risky behaviors is then required to change these behaviors. Among these determining factors, beliefs have been identified as one of the socio-cognitive functioning patterns, which can shed light on people’s behaviors towards risks and safety measures.

According to Kouabenan (2007), beliefs usually emerge when individuals are confronted with complex situations such as risks or accidents. To analyze and cope with such situations, people mostly rely on their beliefs to compensate their lack of knowledge about the causal factors of such complex situations. Therefore, ‘an understanding of the beliefs people hold about risks and the causes of accidents as well as their perceptions of risk targets and the need for safety, are important prerequisites for effectively managing risk and designing preventive measures’ (Kouabenan, 2009, p. 767).

Beliefs are scientifically unjustifiable statements, considered to be truths to which an individual adheres consciously and which shape his/her actions and thoughts (Ngueutsa, 2012). We can distinguish several types of beliefs, which could be classified according to whether or not one has control over the situation. Globally, one can distinguish beliefs that are based on a total absence of control (examples: beliefs in fate, destiny, bad luck, misfortune, etc.) from beliefs based on the control a person may have over situations (control beliefs). Control beliefs constitute one of the determining factors of protective behaviors, which are labelled as: perceived behavioral control (Theory of planned behavior, Ajzen, 1985), self-efficacy (Social cognitive theory, Bandura, 1977, 1997) or perceived capacity to carry out recommended actions (Health belief model, Becker & Rosenstock, 1987; Protection motivation theory, Rogers, 1983). Studies validating these theories have identified control beliefs as a robust determining factor of behaviors, among other variables. High feelings of control over risks were found to be important drivers of engagement in health or safe behaviors (Schwarzer, 1992; McCaul, Sandgren, O’Neill, & Hinzs, 1993; Armitage & Conner, 1999; Albarracin, Johnson, Fishbein, M., & Muellerleile, 2001; Luszczynska, 2004; Riley & Baah-Odoo, 2012; Bergvik, Sorlie, & Wynn, 2012; Milton & Mullan, 2012; Mbaye & Kouabenan, 2013; Kouabenan & Ngueutsa, 2015).

On the contrary, some studies suggested that feelings of lack of control over events can lead people to underestimate risks, neglect safety measures and execute unsafe behaviors (Kouabenan, 1998; Peltzer & Renner, 2003; Claassen et al., 2010; Kayani, King, & Fleiter, 2012; Kouabenan & Ngueutsa, 2015). Our attention will be focused on that form of belief in a total absence of control over situations, i.e. fatalistic beliefs. For a long time, fate has been considered as the sole cause of accidents, not only in traditional African societies, but also in Western modern ones (Hewstone, 1993, 1994; Morris & Peng, 1994). Quinot (1976) and Hewstone (1993, 1994) reported how accident prevention in Europe has been influenced by fatalistic beliefs that have long reinforced the idea that accident or uncertainty were not manageable or could only be controllable through mystical or religious practices (consultations of lights or marabouts, prayers, protective medals like that of St. Christopher’s in the West, etc.). A deep knowledge of how fatalistic beliefs can be associated to risk perception and safe behaviors is then required to strengthen preventive actions.

In the following paragraphs, we will present studies on the relationship between fatalistic beliefs, risk perception and safe behaviors.

1.1. Fatalistic beliefs, risk perception and safe behaviors

Fatalistic beliefs (Claassen et al., 2010; Kayani, King, & Fleiter, 2012; Kouabenan, 1998; Ngueutsa, 2012; Norenzayan & Lee, 2010; Peltzer, 2003; Peltzer & Renner, 2003; Türküm, 2006), control beliefs (Schwarzer, 1992; McCaul et al., 1993; Armitage & Conner, 1999; Albarracin et al., 2001; Luszczynska, 2004; Riley & Baah-Odoo, 2012; Bergvik et al., 2012; Milton & Mullan, 2012; Mbaye & Kouabenan, 2013; Kouabenan & Ngueutsa, 2015; White, Lehman, Hemphill, Mandel, & Lehman, 2006; Ngueutsa, 2012) and divine control beliefs (Howsepiian & Merluzzis, 2009; Ngueutsa, 2012) are among the types of beliefs that have been studied. Fatalistic beliefs, which are of interest here, are a typical example of beliefs in a non-controllable force (fate). They are rooted in a kind of inevitability or assumed determinism of events, especially unfortunate ones. Such beliefs, even if they seem greatly reduced today by scientific progress, continue to influence people’s perception of risks, accidents or any other life events that are difficult to explain (Espinosa & Gallo, 2011; Kayani et al., 2012; Kouabenan, 1998; Norenzayan & Lee, 2010; Peltzer, 2003; Peltzer & Renner, 2003; Pepitone & Saffiotti, 1997). This section deals with:

• how fatalistic beliefs can be associated with risk perception;
• how risk perception is associated to safe behaviors;
• the link between fatalistic beliefs and safe behaviors.

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