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Original article

## Characterization of controlled gamblers and pathological gamblers using the social representation theory



### *Caractérisation du discours de joueurs pathologiques et non pathologiques à l'aide de la théorie des représentations sociales*

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#### ABSTRACT

**Introduction.** – In industrialized countries, gambling disorder tends to become a major issue. The use of the social representation theory provides clues for a better understanding of pathological gamblers.

**Objective.** – This paper investigates the representation of risk in a gambling context among lay people (Study 1) and among controlled gamblers and probable pathological gamblers (Study 2).

**Method.** – In the first study, 1106 people answered a free association task based on the target expression 'risk in a gambling context'. In the second study, a small sample of gamblers, half of them being probable pathological gamblers (based on their score at the SOGS), participated in a semi-structured interview about risk in a gambling context. Interview guidelines were constructed based on the results obtained from Study 1.

**Results.** – In Study 1, results indicate that the overall representation of risk in a gambling context differs from the one in a general context. The results are interpreted through the prospect theory and the decision-making dual-process model. Results from Study 2 show that, contrarily to those being probable pathological gamblers, controlled gamblers orient their discourse around the notion of pleasure and do not perceive gambling as a threat for their ego.

**Conclusion.** – Controlled gamblers fear to lose money, while probable pathological gamblers fear to lose the game.

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#### R É S U M É

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**Introduction.** – Dans les pays industrialisés, les jeux de hasard commencent à devenir un problème majeur. L'utilisation de la théorie des représentations sociales permet d'appréhender de façon originale le jeu pathologique.

**Objectif.** – Cet article examine les représentations du risque dans un contexte de jeu de hasard auprès d'individus tout venants (Étude 1), de joueurs sains ainsi que de joueurs pathologiques probables (Étude 2).

**Méthode.** – Dans la première étude, 1106 personnes ont répondu à une tâche d'associations libres avec comme terme inducteur « le risque dans un contexte de jeu de hasard ». Dans la seconde étude, un petit échantillon de joueurs, la moitié étant des joueurs pathologiques probables (selon les scores obtenus au SOGS), a participé à des entretiens semi-structurés sur la thématique du risque dans un contexte de jeu de hasard. Le guide d'entretien a été construit à partir des résultats obtenus lors de l'Étude 1.

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**Résultats.** – Globalement, les résultats de l'Étude 1 indiquent que la représentation sociale du risque dans un contexte de jeux de hasard est différente de la représentation sociale du risque dans un contexte général. Les résultats sont interprétés à l'aide de la théorie des perspectives et des modèles de prise de décision à processus duaux. Les résultats de l'Étude 2 montrent que, contrairement aux joueurs pathologiques probables, les joueurs sains ont un discours orienté autour des notions de plaisir et ne perçoivent pas les jeux de hasard comme une menace pour leur ego.

**Conclusion.** – Les joueurs sains ont peur de perdre leur argent alors que les joueurs pathologiques probables ont peur de perdre le jeu.

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## Introduction

About 60% to 90% of the adult population in industrialized countries gambles at least occasionally (Giroux, Jacques, Ladouceur, Leclerc, & Brochu, 2012). Based on a review of the literature, Williams, Volberg, and Stevens (2012) identified that the rate of gambling disorders is about 2.3% of the overall population. In France, the prevalence of gambling disorders is estimated at 1.1% of the French population aged between 18 and 75 years (Williams et al., 2012). According to the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM 5), multiple risks are associated with gambling, such as the impulse of gambling, the difficulty of cutting back with gambling, or the financial and relational consequences linked to gambling disorders.

Risk in general is a multidimensional construct with no consensual definition (Renn, 1998). A distinction can be made for example between rational definitions of risk, such as in relation with engineering, and the subjective definitions of risk used in psychology. Experts use probabilities and consequences amplitude to estimate risk, whereas lay people's estimation of risk is influenced by hazard characteristics, such as the threat for future generations (Slovic, 1987). From a psychology perspective, it is assumed that people suffer more a loss than they enjoy a win of the same magnitude (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Tversky & Kahneman, 1992).

In the risk literature, the influence of the social context on cognitions has been disregarded until the 1990s. This gap has been filled in by the researches on the influence of worldviews (Dake, 1991, 1992; Peters & Slovic, 1996; Slovic, 1999). Worldviews are generalized attitudes towards the world with a social organization role (Dake, 1991, 1992). They influence people's judgments and behaviors. According to Dake (1991, 1992), worldviews are orienting dispositions, used as pathfinders, to position people's responses when they are confronted with complex situations. Worldviews could be considered as a manner of conceptualizing risk and life in general. In this line of research, Joffe (2003) proposed another prism in order to study risk's perception for lay people in a qualitative way; she proposed to study risk perception with the help of the social representation theory.

According to Moscovici, a social representation belongs to "a culture, social class or group's specific world of opinions towards objects of the social environment" (Moscovici, 1961, p. 66). For Leiser and Aroch (2009), it is the public discourse or knowledge that shapes social representations. Social representations may serve as a basis for understanding new objects in order to facilitate dealing with them (Moscovici, 1984). In a given social group, the emergence of a new social object may lead to the construction of a new social representation, as for example with the arrival of the Euro as a new currency (Meier & Kirchler, 1998; Roland-Lévy, 2002). New social representations are created by the combination of two main processes: objectification and anchoring (Moscovici, 1961).

The objectification process defines the way in which social representations are created, and shows how the identification of content and structure of a representation are formed. Anchoring defines how new representations are integrated into pre-existing

frames of references. Two theoretical approaches derive from these two processes: the structural approach, which focuses on the objectification process, and the socio-dynamic approach, which focuses on the anchoring process. This paper studies the two approaches through two interdependent studies. While the first study falls within the structural approach, the second study falls within the socio-dynamic approach. However the methodology of the second study is based on the results of the first study.

The study of the structure of a representation, through the central core theory, enables to identify the relation between various parts of a representation (Abric, 1993). It allows organizing the different elements of a social representation, distinguishing the most important and shared elements (i.e., the central core or central system) from the others (i.e., the peripheral system). The central system is composed of few elements, which are characterized by their stability and non-negotiability due to their historical social anchoring. The central system provides the meaning, the organization and the coherence of a social representation, as well as its permanence. Moreover, elements of the central system influence the ones located in the peripheral system. The peripheral system, which includes individual differences and specificities, may explain why some people can have the same representation of a social object, but different behaviors towards it.

While the structural approach focuses on the objectification process of the social representation, the socio-dynamic approach focuses on the anchoring process of the social representation (Doise, 1985, 1992). In the socio-dynamic approach, representations are studied at an intergroup level: analyses are carried out by comparing different social groups' representations. According to this approach, the study of the anchoring process involves the identification of the content, followed by a between group comparison, which is done on the content of the representation itself (Gangl, Kastlunger, Kirchler, & Voracek, 2012; Leiser & Drori, 2005). During the anchoring process, social representations are integrated in a set of former representations and are modulated by them. In line with the socio-dynamic approach, individual's position towards the object changes according to their groups' affiliation, as well as according to the importance granted to the given object (Clémence, Doise, & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1994).

Kmiec and Roland-Lévy (2014) studied the social representation of risk in general (i.e., without a particular identified context). They identified one key element in the central system of the representation of risk: the idea that risk is basically connected to 'danger'. In their study, 'danger' is shared and essential for the studied population. Moreover, according to the participants themselves, it clearly provides a negative connotation to risk. Three terms compose the near periphery: risk is connected to 'fear', but also to the need of being 'courageous' in order to confront the fear related to risk and to the fact that risk produces 'adrenaline'. The studied population shares these three ideas, but they are not essential, as they were not quickly associated to risk. Based on the participants' own evaluation, 'fear' has a negative connotation, while 'courage' and 'adrenaline' both hold a positive valence. As always, the distant periphery is composed of numerous terms. Some of them have a

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