



Me have a traffic accident? The effects of core self-evaluations on the perceived likelihood and perceived undesirability of traffic accidents



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ABSTRACT

Problem: The aim of this article was to demonstrate the influence of “Core Self-Evaluations” (CSEs) on the perception which drivers have of the occurrence of a “traffic accident”, in particular the evaluation of its likelihood, of the personal control exercised and its undesirability (attitude). More generally, this article introduces the concept of CSE in the field of driver psychology and discusses its relevance. **Method:** 201 French drivers replied to a questionnaire measuring CSEs, the perceived likelihood of having an accident, attitude and perceived personal control. **Results and discussion:** The more positively drivers evaluated themselves, the more they judged that they were in control and that accidents were unlikely. Drivers with a negative self-evaluation had an attitude more negative than drivers with positive CSEs solely when they judged the accident as unlikely. This positive correlation between attitude and perceived likelihood for drivers with negative CSEs could be viewed as the result of “wishful thinking” or “rationalisation” modes of reasoning. For these drivers a positive relationship was also observed between driving experience and perceived personal control, the latter thus cancelling out the effect of CSEs. This result suggest that with experience self-evaluation as a driver becomes positive and compensates for the effect of a negative general self-evaluation on perceived personal control and perceived likelihood. **Practical implications:** Using and adapting the Experience-Based Analysis technique for each group of drivers (positive or negative CSEs) is recommended, as well as implementing interventions that triggers drivers’ awareness of CSEs influence and that promote their self-regulating skills.

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1. Introduction

The aim of the study described in this article was to demonstrate the influence of “Core Self-Evaluations” (CSEs) on the perception which drivers have of the occurrence of a “traffic accident”, in particular the evaluation of its likelihood, of the personal control exercised and its undesirability (attitude). More generally, this article introduces the concept of CSE in the field of driver psychology and discusses its relevance.

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The concept of CSE refers to the fundamental evaluations which the individual has of themselves. Structurally, the concept of CSE is defined as a higher-order construct (Judge, Erez, & Bono, 1998) encompassing 4 personality traits: self-esteem, generalised self-efficacy, locus of control and emotional stability (absence of neuroticism). Both at theoretical and empirical level these authors report substantial similarities between these four traits and infer the existence of a second-order factor. For example, a review of 75 studies highlighted the fact that these 4 traits correlated on average to .60 which, according to them, is an indicator of an underlying evaluative factor, common to these 4 traits. Thus, this concept “captures the common variance to variables considered relatively cognitive (i.e., self-efficacy and locus of control) along with variables of a more affective or motivational nature (i.e., self-esteem and emotional stability)” (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2011, p. 118).

Through these four traits, the individual is said to make a general judgement of themselves which is more or less favourable or unfavourable. According to Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller (2011, p. 332) “People who have positive core self-evaluations see themselves positively across a variety of situations, and approach the world in a confident, self-assured manner. They believe that they are capable of solving problems (high self-efficacy), are worthy of respect and regard (high self-esteem), are in control of and responsible for what happens to them (internal locus of control), and are prone to be optimistic and free from doubts and worries (high emotional stability)”.

The first studies of CSEs were conducted within the framework of occupational psychology. They demonstrated, for example, that having positive CSEs promotes assiduity, motivation and satisfaction at work (Judge et al., 1998), career success (Judge & Hurst, 2007) and professional performance (Erez & Judge, 2001). More recently, other studies have analysed the implications of CSEs in other fields, such as, amongst others, those of well-being and health (physical and psychological) (Tsaousis, Nikolaou, Serdaris, & Judge, 2007), decision-making (Di Fabio, Palazzeschi, & Bar-On, 2012) and business creation (Ahmetoglu, Leutner, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2011), to quote only these examples. These studies illustrated the relevance of this concept beyond its initial field of study.

Having positive or negative CSEs influences the cognitive and affective functioning of individuals. They particularly influence the manner in which individuals interpret events, information and situations in their everyday life, which are then perceived in accordance with a perspective which is to a greater or lesser extent optimistic or pessimistic. In this regard, Judge et al. (1998, p. 171) have stated that “optimism is closely related to core self-evaluations”. This idea was taken up and developed by Oreg and Bayazit (2009) for whom individuals with very negative or very positive self-evaluations are more disposed to biases in the perception of events, such as over or under confidence, the illusion of control or learned helplessness or unrealistic optimism or pessimism. Indeed, an individual convinced of being capable of succeeding in the actions which they undertake and of having control over their life are likely to have a tendency to judge undesirable events as unlikely and desirable events as rather likely, as they are convinced of being able to prevent the occurrence of the former and to promote that of the latter. Likewise, the idea that a negative event could occur is inconsistent with their low propensity to negative emotions and the positive image which they have of themselves. The inverse reasoning is entirely applicable to an individual with a negative self-evaluation.

At the same time, it can be expected that individuals with an unfavourable judgement of themselves are quicker to pay attention to the potential negative consequences of events, whereas individuals judging themselves positively are more sensitive to the positive consequences. Thus, the former would be *a priori* prone to having a more unfavourable attitude with regard to forthcoming events than the latter.

The studies looking into risk perception (exposure and severity) have indirectly corroborated these points of view. For example, the studies by DeJoy (1989) and Glendon, Dorn, Davies, Matthews, and Taylor (1996) observed that drivers considered their driving skills and competence to be better than their peers. The more they felt in control the less likely they judged themselves to be involved in a traffic accident. Similarly, Klein and Helweg-Larsen (2002) reported a rather important link between LOC and comparative optimism (.34 correlation, based on 3 studies). In the same vein, Stone (1994) observed that the higher individuals considered their personal self-efficacy to be, the more that encouraged them to overestimate their chances of success in a performative task. Thus, for example, the existence of a bias referred to as optimism or overconfidence can be noted, when individuals have “highly skewed, positive views of the self” (Taylor & Brown, 1988, p. 195). Finally, Helweg-Larsen and Shepperd (2001) observed that being disposed to negative emotions reduced this propensity to optimism, as well as the perceived control of the situation.

In addition, numerous studies have more generally illustrated the importance of the four personality traits concerned, in connection with the psychology of transport and driving. This was the case notably for the LOC (e.g.; Arthur, Barrett & Alexander, 1991; Gidron, Gal & Desevilya, 2003; Holland, Geraghty & Shah, 2010; Özmen & Sümer, 2011; Rudin-Brown & Parker, 2004; Sarma, Carey, Kervick & Bimpeh, 2013), but also for self-efficacy, self-esteem and neuroticism (e.g. Huang & Ford, 2012; Machin & Sankey, 2008; Morisset, Terrade, & Somat, 2011; Taubman-Ben-Ari, Mikulincer & Gillath, 2004; Vollrath, Knoch, & Cassano, 1999).

Although none of these studies referred to the concept of CSE, nor took into account the group of four constitutive traits, they support the idea that this concept is relevant when it comes to understanding the perception of risks on the road. In particular, they make the general hypothesis plausible according to which CSEs considered together influence the perception which drivers have of their potential involvement in a traffic accident. Our study was original in that beyond the specific effect of these variables, we make the hypothesis that the second-order factor which unites them influences this perception. More specifically, the theoretical elements mentioned allowed us to formulate the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. The higher a self-evaluation a driver has of themselves, the less they foresee the possibility of having an accident (i.e. negative correlation between CSE and the perceived likelihood of an accident).

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