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## **NORMS IN SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS: TWO STUDIES WITH FRENCH YOUNG DRIVERS**

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### **Abstract**

This paper deals with a representational and conditional approach regarding norms. In the framework of social representations, conditionality is linked to individual practices or behaviors. Taking a questionnaire based on conditional scenarios that permitted to articulate individual and group behaviors to the prescriptions of Highway Code, two studies manipulating instructions with samples of young drivers were designed. The first study confirmed that conditional transgressions declared through individual practices refer to what young drivers felt acceptable to contravene. In the second study, substitution instructions i.e., to answer at the scenario "to be well-seen by yours friends" or "to be badly-seen by yours friends", and standard instructions (e.g., "response as you behave"), were administrated, using a scenario of speed limit, to study the influence of norms in subjects' responses. A multiple regression analysis showed that the responses were mediated by normative models. In conclusion, the studies illustrated an important complementary aspect of road safety concerning the social perception of rules, the influence of normative models and theirs impacts on young driver behavior.

**Keywords:** Social representations; legitimate transgressions; traffic; driving; normative models; legal rules.

### **Resumen**

Este artículo se relaciona con la aproximación representacional y condicional de las normas. En el marco de las representaciones sociales, la condicionalidad está vinculada con las prácticas o conductas individuales. Tomando un cuestionario basado en escenarios condicionales que permite articular las conductas grupales e individuales con las prescripciones del Código de Circulación, dos estudios con muestras de jóvenes conductores en el que se manipularon las instrucciones fueron diseñados. El primer estudio mostró que los conductores jóvenes legitimaban la trasgresión de las normas que, acorde a sus prácticas individuales, habían violado. En el segundo estudio se les administraron unas instrucciones de sustitución (responde para "ser bien visto por tus compañeros" o para "ser mal visto por tus compañeros") o instrucciones estándar (responde como te comportas) en un contexto de limitación de velocidad para estudiar la influencia de la normas en las respuestas. Un análisis de regresión mostró que las respuestas emitidas estaban medidas por modelos normativos. En conclusión, de estos estudios se desprende que las representaciones sociales desempeñan un papel importante en la seguridad en el tráfico, la influencia de los modelos normativos y su impacto en el comportamiento de los conductores jóvenes.

**Palabras clave:** Representaciones sociales; transgresiones legítimas, tráfico; conducción; modelos normativos; Código de Circulación.

## Introduction

In 1961, Moscovici published a book called *La psychanalyse, son image, son public*, in which he took up Durkheim's collective representation notion (1898) under the name of "social representation". For Moscovici, "social representation is a modality of particular knowledge whose function is the development of behavior and communication between individuals". The central nucleus theory of social representations (Abric, 1976, 1987, 1994a, 1994b; Flament, 1987, 1989, 1994a, 1994b) postulates a system which includes a central nucleus and a periphery. The central nucleus elements are defined as being « no-negotiable » or « absolute ». However, it is more accurate to say that these central elements are "more" absolute than others in subjects' discourse. The periphery of the representation is defined as being conditional, more closely linked to individual practices or behaviors, refers to variability and the need to adapt to circumstances. In this field, the problematic of norms gave rise to the conditionality theory (Flament, 1994a, 1994b), which associates *prescription* and *condition*. According to the Larousse dictionary definition, *prescription* is defined as a formal and detailed order, whereas *condition* is associated to a circumstance. The work initiated by Flament showed that in the area of social representations, the descriptive aspect of a cognition (there are stop signs at certain junctions) and the prescriptive aspect (you must stop when you see a stop sign) are always associated. At a discursive level, prescriptions tend to appear as being unconditional i.e., subjects refer to the general case (e.g., you must stop when you see a stop sign), instead of the particular cases linked to the conditional system. However, on a cognitive level, these prescriptions appear to be above all conditional. According to conditionality theory, conditional variations represent justifications for the subject and are not considered therefore as transgressions. For this reason, Flament referred to legitimate transgressions (1987). An individual can quite easily adopt a particular type of behavior if the conditional system justifies it. Today, the importance of periphery in the expression of the normative character of a representation is well known because "*Ultimately [...] a norm is never unconditional: only the way it is expressed appears to be*" (Flament, 2001, p. 258).

Since several years, methods studying social representations have included the problematic of norms (Flament, 1999b, 2001; Gaymard, 2002, 2003; Guimelli &

Deschamps, 2000). In particular, researchers use the techniques of substitution inspired by Jellison and Green's paradigm of self-representation (1981). Specific instructions are given to the subject to lead him or her to answer as another person would respond. Flament (1999b) showed that answers collected in studies of social representation related back to normative models. He asked to students to fill a questionnaire to their own name (standard instruction or normal) then he asked to answer at the same questionnaire like "a student well-seen" or "badly-seen by teachers" (substitution directions). This type of instruction permitted to introduce groups of reference with explicit norm. With multiple regressions, he showed the influence of model "well-seen by teachers" and "well-seen by parents" on standard responses. So the subjects' representation is strongly influenced by normative models. Gaymard (1999) took an interest in the conditionality of the periphery concerning second generation Maghrebian females which were confronted with biculturalism within the French culture. Studying representation of higher education with two groups of Maghrebian females, the author proved the relevance of bargaining. In order to demonstrate how this negotiation takes place, two groups of Maghrebian females were compared: students living with their family and non-students having completely broken with the family. Using a test of alternative choices to elect between a behavioral norm nearing of Islamic tradition and others near of occidental tradition, results revealed that students negotiated cultural values. Following this research, Gaymard (2003) gave substitution instructions to a group of students Maghrebian females; they had to complete the test of alternative choices "like a student Maghrebian female well-seen by her parents, would do" and "like a student Maghrebian female badly-seen by her parents, would do". A multiple regression analysis supported, under standard answer instructions, a model of "well-seen by her parents". Thus, subjects' responses in standard condition were greatly influenced by normative models.

One is lead to question the problem of social desirability in answers and some studies have suggested the idea of "silent zone" in social representation. This concerns in particular sensitive objects for social groups (Abric, 2003). For example, Guimelli & Deschamps (2000), studying the representation of gypsies, founded that, in standard condition, answers appear more positives than in condition of substitution ("answer like French population in general would answer"). The authors put forward the hypothesis that the effect of social desirability would lead subjects in standard condition to avoid

negative aspects in their representation, as for example, the word “robbery”, which is only characteristic of central nucleus in condition of substitution.

Gaymard (2007), starting from the conditionality theory and individual practices, has created a questionnaire to analyse the perception of norms and the conditions under which driving rules were applied. The results illustrated the importance of conditionality in young drivers’ representation of driving. The only scenario with absolute compliance was seat belt wearing in the front of car; in this case, formal rule has been integrated within the representation. In the opposite, speed limit was responsible for the highest degree of conditionality, subjects justifying transgression through varied circumstances as road infrastructure, the others, imperatives, distraction, limit too low, etc. These findings agreed with previous studies of social representations of speed relating that young drivers are more hostile to speed limits (Barjonet & Saad, 1986).

Verkuyten, Rood-Pijpers, Elffers, & Hessing (1994) explored the concept of social representations for studying beliefs about “when certain rule-breaking behaviors are considered justified”. They examined, under what conditions, law students in the Netherlands would recognize acceptable to go through a red traffic light and to evade taxes. They observed that there are socially share beliefs about when it is acceptable to violate specific rules.

Apart from the field of social representation, Moget-Moseur & Biecheler-Fretel (1985) introduced the concept of the *driver’s fundamental behavior*, defined by the fact that each driver adopts a system of rules of conduct which are both legal and informal. Research on young drivers has focused above all on issues of aggressive behavior (Chliaoutakis et al., 2002; Lajunen & Parker, 2001; Lajunen, Parker, & Stradling, 1998; Underwood, Chapman, Wright, & Crundall, 1999), risk taking or perception of risks (Assailly, 1992, 2001; Finn & Bragg, 1986; Jessor, 1998), and links between lifestyles and the risk of accidents (Gregersen & Berg, 1994) without taking into account the perceptive dimension of transgression of rules and laws concerning driving. In the fields of risk-taking and aggressive behavior, the literature has founded differences between male and female. For example, Trankle, Gelau, & Metker (1990), in a comparative study of 208 men and 100 women in different age groups, have shown that young male drivers, unlike young women, consider road situations as being less dangerous than their older counterparts. With regard to risk-taking, researchers have founded greater male involvement (Assailly, 1992; Byrnes, Miller, & Schafer, 1999) and this “over risk

taking” subsists since long years (Assailly, 2001). Studies with aggressive behavior suggest that men engage in aggressive driving more often than women. Shinar & Compton (2004) observed that men and younger drivers are more aggressive than women and older drivers. In the field of social representations, there are no gender differences in conditionality. Male and female share this representation of driving and conditionality appears very homogeneous between males and females. For example in the study of Gaymard (2007), young drivers stated that they did not comply with the speed limit if they thought it was less dangerous to speed than stay behind the vehicle in front. In this case, young drivers explained their adaptation to avoid dangerous situation. Other example with the presence of passengers which justify transgression of red light, yellow light and speed limit, Shinar & Compton (2004) have shown that the presence of passengers was associated with a reduction in drivers’ tendencies to adopt aggressive behavior as honking at others drivers. The essential difference is that studies in risk-taking or aggressive behaviors put the emphasis on their contribution in traffic collisions, while the aim with study of conditionality is not to identify the groups which commit violations or types of drivers potentially dangerous; young drivers investigated are not much involved in traffic accidents (Gaymard, 2007).

In this context, two studies with the questionnaire based on conditional scenarios were performed. The aim of the first is to contrast if individual practices declared are comparables to what young drivers felt acceptable to violate. In the second study, the purpose is to verify the influence of normative model of peers on the answers in standard condition.

## **Method**

### **Study 1: Behaviors declared and believes: Comparison of instructions**

#### **Participants**

The sample was drawn from a population of first year university students, all with a car and regular drivers. A first group (A) of 40 students with an average age of 20.05 years (SD= 1.57), who had, on average, held their licence for 20.85 months (SD= 12.51). The average number of reported crashes for the entire sample was 0.25 (SD= 0.70). A second group (B) of 32 students with an average age of 19.81 years (SD=

1.15), who had, on average, held their licence for 17.97 months ( $SD= 11.83$ ). The average number of reported crashes for the entire sample was 0.16 ( $SD= 0.37$ ).

### **Measurement instrument**

A questionnaire based on conditional scenarios linked to driving (Gaymard, 2007) was used. This contains 8 conditional scenarios, seven specifics and the last general. In this study we used only specific scenarios which question subjects about their possible transgressions in the following cases: red lights, yellow lights, speed limits, seat belts, stop signs, one-way streets, white lines. For example: “you go through a red light if...” (see appendix 1). The scenario of seat belt wearing was not analysed because it was the only one for which subjects reported absolute compliance with the rule (Gaymard, 2007). Each scenario contains between 12 and 22 situations (for details see Gaymard, 2007) which must be evaluated on an ordinal scale graduated in 6 levels starting with unconditional observance (absolutely never transgress) through to unconditional transgression (transgress all the time).

### **Procedure**

Young drivers have to fill the questionnaire (6 specific scenarios) following different instructions:

- a) First group ( $N= 40$ ) with standard instruction (Gaymard, 2007): e.g. “you sometimes drive through a red light if...”.
- b) Second group with instructions on believes ( $N= 32$ ) “You feel acceptable to drive through a red light if...”.

### **Hypothesis**

Social representations are linked to behaviors. No differences between the score of conditionality with standard instructions (Gaymard, 2007) and with instructions asking to young drivers what and how they felt acceptable to violate, are expected.

### **Analysis strategies**

Each item (or situation) in the questionnaire was recodified a new code in line with the following principle:

- a) Levels 1 and 2 = unconditional observance (UO) (I never do it)= 0.
- b) Levels 3 and 4 = conditional transgression (CT) (I tend to do it)= 1.

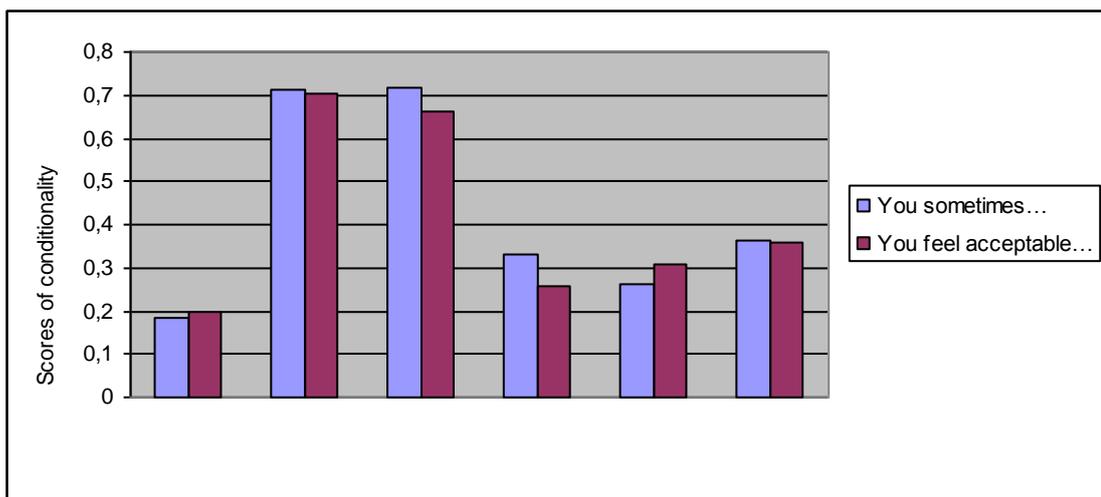
c) Levels 5 and 6 = unconditional transgression (UT) (I do it all the time)=2.

This permits us to calculate a “score of conditionality”.

## Results

No differences, Hotelling's  $T^2 \chi^2(6) = 2.92$ ; ns, were observed in the average score (see Table 1) between the two instructions, resulting a symmetrical graph from these data (see Figure 1). Then Practices declared in standard condition are comparables with what they find acceptable to violate. As already noted (Gaymard, 2007), scores of conditionality are significantly different,  $F(5,355) = 55.98$ ;  $p < .001$ , for example, in comparison with speed limit or yellow light, a red light violation is less conditional.

**Figure 1.** Comparison with instructions: "You sometimes...if..." "You feel acceptable...if...".



**Table 1.** Mean scores of conditionality.

	<b>You sometimes...</b>	<b>You feel acceptable...</b>
Red lights	0.1837	0.1978
Yellow lights	0.7142	0.7056
Speed limits	0.7172	0.6609
Stop signs	0.3315	0.2569
One-way streets	0.2615	0.3094
Whites lines	0.3625	0.3594

## **Study 2: Substitution instructions: the influence of normative models.**

### **Participants**

The answers given by the first group (A) in study 1 ( $N= 40$ ) in the most conditional scenario (speed limits), were compared with another group (C) of 21 students with an average age of 20.14 years ( $SD= 1.68$ ), who had, on average, held their licence for 26.52 months ( $SD= 17.44$ ). The average number of reported crashes for the entire sample was 0.28 ( $SD= 0.90$ ).

### **Measurement Instrument**

*The Questionnaire based on conditional scenarios* was used but only with the scenario of speed limits (22 situations) which is the most conditional.

### **Procedure**

a) First group (A) ( $N= 40$ ) with standard instruction (Gaymard, 2007), e.g. “you sometimes drive through a red light if...”.

b) Second group (C) ( $N= 21$ ) with substitution instructions. For estimating the influence of reference group (peers), subjects answered to the scenario “speed limit” two times with different instructions. To remove the order effect, the instructions “well-seen” and “badly-seen”, were alternated among the subjects.

Substitution instructions were as follows:

a) “You have to fill this questionnaire to be well-seen by your friends”;

- b) “You have to fill this questionnaire to be badly-seen by your friends”.

### **Analysis strategies**

To show this effect, we start from a table of means instead of a table with individual values (Flament, 1999b; Gaymard, 2003). This table presents means of each group (standard, well-seen, badly-seen) for each situation ( $N= 22$ ). This approach is descriptive and the items of the questionnaire (situations) are placed at the start of the rows and the “conditions of populations” (standard, well-seen, badly-seen) at the head of the columns (Q Methodology). It is therefore a transposition with respect to the kind of table which is usually presented (Reuchlin, 1976, 1991). This transposition permits to have at the head of the columns, average profiles (Lebart, Morineau, & Piron, 1997; Rouanet & Le Roux, 1993).

### **Data analysis**

A multiple regression analysis was performed for the average profiles (Flament, 1999b; Gaymard, 2003) with the models well-seen and badly-seen (condition of substitution) as predictor variables, and the standard answers as dependent variable.

### **Hypothesis**

The model “well-seen by the friends” will be a good predictor of the standard answers.

## **Results**

Stepwise regression shows the quality of fit (Tables 2 and 3). Table 4 provides detailed information about the regression coefficients for each statistical model generated during the model-building process. The model “well-seen by friends” has important weight (0.941) in the equation and appears as a good predictor of standard answers. Correlations established with average profiles (Table 5) show the influence of normative models: the standard profile correlate positively with the profile “well-seen” and negatively with the profile “badly-seen”.

**Table 2.** Stepwise regression: Model summary.

<b>Model</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>AR<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>E</b>
<b>1</b>	.879(a)	.773	.749	.177433
<b>2</b>	.875(b)	.766	.755	.175322

Note: a= Predictive values: (constant) BS (badly-seen), WS (well-seen); b= Predictive values: (constant) WS.

**Table 3.** ANOVA(c).

<b>Model</b>		<b>SS</b>	<b>d.f.</b>	<b>MS</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>p</b>
<b>1</b>	Regression	2.032	2	1.016	32.278	.000(a)
	Residual	.598	19	.031		
	Total	2.631	21			
<b>2</b>	Regression	2.016	1	2.016	65.579	.000(b)
	Residual	.615	20	.031		
	Total	2.631	21			

Note: a Predictive values: BS, WS. b Predictive values: WS. c Dependent variable: Standard.

**Table 4.** Regression Coefficients(a).

<b>Model</b>		<b>B</b>	<b>E</b>	<b><math>\beta</math></b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>
Regression 1	(const)	-.335	.556		-.602	.554
	WS	1.221	.184	.941	6.635	.000
	BS	.237	.326	.103	.726	.477
Regression 2	(const)	.061	.106		.578	.570
	WS	1.136	.140	.875	8.098	.000

Note: a Dependent variable: Standard.

**Table 5.** Pearson correlations with average profiles.

	<b>Standard</b>	<b>Well-seen</b>	<b>Badly-seen</b>
Standard	1	.875(*)	-.496(*)
Well-seen	.875(*)	1	-.636(*)
Badly-seen	-.496(*)	-.636(**)	1

Note: \* $p < .001$  (unilateral). N=22.

## Discussion

This research was conducted within the theoretical framework of social representations and the conditionality of norms (Flament, 1999a, 2001; Gaymard, 1999). Social representations are concerned with common sense and practical knowledge. According to the theory of social representations, the central nucleus of a representation has non-negotiable elements and the essential characteristic of the periphery is its conditionality. In daily adaptation, the periphery plays a crucial role because its elements represent the most accessible and concrete part of the representation. The theory of conditionality combines the concept of *prescription* and the concept of *condition*. It is based on the observation that behaviors are to a large extent governed by a conditional logic which attempts to justify them. For some years now, Flament has defended this idea of conditional variations around social prescriptions (Flament, 1989, 1994a, 1994b). According to Flament (1999a), within the representation there is a fuzzy zone where small violations are acceptable. These violations are legitimate within the representation as they are justified by the conditional system. In a study with drivers aged between 22 and 45 years, Flament (1994b) observed that the refusal to commit violations was rare and a large number of violations was associated with *pre-identified* conditions (*I drive faster than 50 km/h if it is during the night*). Thus, when social conduct is observed, it can be seen that even if the norms are formulated in a way that appears absolute, it is apparent that there are important conditional variations. Furthermore, this approach allows answering to criticisms. In the field of social representations, Potter and Litton (1985) have criticized the one-sided emphasis on consensus because it's important to include variations and differences. According to Bruner (1991, p. 61): "Thus, whereas a culture must contain a set of norms, it must also be able to anticipate interpretative procedures which render it possible to measure differences with respect to norms, by referring to well-defined belief models". Conditionality theory gives us a base for both measuring and explaining such differences.

Gaymard (2007) has created a questionnaire based on conditional scenarios to encourage the expression of conditionality and analyse the perception of norms and the conditions under which driving rules were applied. The findings show the importance of conditionality in young drivers' representation of driving. In opposition to the system of legal norms (the Highway Code) there is therefore a system of social norms which are

linked to the subject's real driving practices. Results show the most significant declared conditional rule transgression concerning failure to stick to the speed limit and failure to stop at yellow light. The observed conditionality reveals that in these cases rules are not internalized as such. Consequently, transgressive behavior is recognized as being socially legitimate in specific cases.

Verkuyten et al (1994) explored the assumption that there are socially shared beliefs about when it is considered acceptable to break specific legal rules. They observed a high level of consensus regarding the rules that must be obeyed and the rules which it was considered acceptable to violate. For example, obeying a red traffic light is not as important at night when there is nobody around on the road and it is *completely acceptable* to drive through a red light in an emergency. Then they observed a high degree of agreement in beliefs about when certain rules should be observed or may be violated. They show that "there are not only rules for breaking formal prescripts but also second-order rules that restrict these rules" (p. 694). When socially accepted rules are transgressed, people feel obliged to analyse and this reconstructs the shared nature of common sense.

Starting from this notion of "acceptable", the aim of the first study is to demonstrate that individual practices declared in standard condition are comparables to what young drivers felt acceptable to obey or to violate. No differences were observed between the two conditions that confirms the legitimate character of transgression in representation. If we take examples of justifications (Gaymard, 2007), for the red light scenario, the highest degree of conditionality was associated to being in a hurry and being with friend because they find acceptable to drive through a red light in these circumstances. In the opposite, they declare no conditionality if they have young children in the car because it is not acceptable to violate the rule of red light in this case. So there is correspondence between conditionality declared and believes about when it is considered acceptable to break specific legal rules. According to Gaymard (2007), this research brings to light legitimizing social situations according to a specific conditional system, rather than pointing out the dangerousness of individuals. In other terms, subjects expressed a rationalisation of their behavior which enables them to legitimize transgression. In the subjects' representational universe, social control takes the form of recommendations with the margins of tolerance rather than prescriptions or prohibitive measures. The importance of the conditional system, in particular in

transgressions of speed limit and yellow light, attests to this shift between a perception of absolute prohibition and a perception of tolerance.

In the second study the aim was to show the influence of normative model of peers on the answers in standard condition. With multiple regression analysis, it was observed that the model “well-seen by the friends” is a good predictor of answers in standard condition. When young drivers fill the questionnaire (standard condition), they answered as students well-seen by their friends. It is well known the importance of peers’ model in adolescents and young adults. Our results confirm that the peers constitute in representation a group of reference which is going to direct practices. For example, the legitimacy of the transgression of the speed limit is shared by peers’ group. Starting from examples of justifications (Gaymard, 2007), we can think that it is well-seen by peers’ group no respect speed limit if a vehicle following too closely, if someone driving quickly in front, if we are in town but it is badly-seen by peers’ group no respect speed limit if we have young children in car (this situation was near to absolute compliance).

The techniques of substitution put in emphasis the place of normative models in social representations. This approach also allows to evaluate the capacity of subjects to take the place of the others while they are able to reproduce the representations of others groups (Campbell, Muncer, Guy, & Banim, 1996).

This study is limited by the population and the number of young students who filled in the questionnaire. This population is not representative of drivers in general. In spite of this limitation, this study illustrates an important complementary aspect of road safety, that of the social perception of rules and the influence of normative models in representation. Social representations are linked to practices and orient people giving them meaning to act. The study of social representations allows us to go beyond the individualistic perspective and clarify the links between legal rules and human conduct.

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**CONTENTS**

**Articles**

- A social desirability scale for the MMPI-2. Which of the two: Wiggins (WSD) or Edwards (ESD)?  
*Fernando Jiménez, Guadalupe Sánchez and Cristina Tobón* 147
- Norms in social representations: Two studies with French young drivers  
*Sandrine Gaymard* 165
- Implication degree and delay on recall of events: An experimental and HDV study  
*Antonio L. Manzanero, Sofián El-Astal and Javier Aróztegui* 183
- Homicide and domestic violence. Are there different psychological profiles mediated by previous violence exerted on the victim?  
*Miguel Ángel Soria, Inmaculada Armadans, María Rosa Viñas and Montserrat Yepes* 205
- Discriminating real victims from feigners of psychological injury in gender violence: Validating a protocol for forensic settings.  
*Manuel Vilariño, Francisca Fariña and Ramón Arce* 221