
A Crystal Seen From Each of Its Vertices: European Views of European National Characters

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Europeans from 15 locations share a similar image of the national characters of each other and of nations outside of Europe, an image organized on the dimensions of modernity and self-control. Variation of the shared image is complexly patterned: Nations that are geographically close are judged similarly, especially if they are relatively far away from the judge. Similarly, judges that are close judge similarly, especially if the target nations are relatively far away. Conversely, neighboring nations are differentiated much more than those far away. Although the chauvinism of the responses is muted, antagonisms with neighbors are often pronounced, especially between those with a history of warfare. The high agreement on this complex picture suggests that these stereotypes are not merely the product of prejudice; the stereotypes are more nuanced and more widely shared than one would expect if each of the groups were merely reveling in its own superiority.

Keywords: *national character; stereotypes; values; Europe; cross-cultural variation; psychological anthropology*

In heaven, all the policeman are English, all the car mechanics are German, all the cooks are French, all the hotel keepers are Swiss, and all the lovers are Italian.

In hell, all the policeman are German, all the car mechanics are French, all the cooks are English, all the hotel keepers are Italian, and all the lovers are Swiss.

In general, jokes that depend on national stereotypes are in bad taste, but we submit that the one above is an instructive exception. It does not choose a stigmatized group and heap further abuse on it; instead, it targets a number of the most economically powerful nations on the planet and attributes both the best and worst of traits to each of them. But for our purposes, what is most interesting about the joke is that its humor depends on the audience's knowledge of a great deal about each of the nations; heaven and hell are distinguished by whether the assignment of occupations takes advantage of the nations' envisioned best traits or exposes their worst ones. In other words, the joke aligns a collection of nations in a field of attributes. The research reported here has a similar purpose: We explore and describe what it is that Europeans know (or think they know) about the placement of their own and other nations on a number of attribute dimensions. We also describe patterns in how these beliefs are distributed. Note that *nation* in our usage is not equivalent to the nation-state. The English, Scots, and Welsh are nations, but Great Britain is the nation-state, and some nations (e.g., the Roma or Gypsies) lack their own nation-state altogether.

BACKGROUND

Human beings are social organisms. Humans (and many other mammals) are sensitive to the characteristics of the other members of their social groups and to the relationships among them. An evolutionary history of living in complex social groups placed demands on the processing and memory of socially relevant information and thus contributed to the selection pressures that

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resulted in larger human brain size (D'Andrade, 2002). Cognitive specializations that accompany sociality include the ability to discern the social intentions (Frith & Frith, 1999) and the social network ties of others and the ability to rapidly infer personality traits and assign individuals to social categories (Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999). The use of simplifying heuristics to be able to make swift social judgments (Gigerenzer, Todd, & the ABC Research Group, 1999) likely leads to certain biases in social perception (Bargh, 1997, 1999; Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Bargh & Dijksterhuis, 2001). The stereotypes that result from these biases are our subject here.

Stereotyping involves attributing to each individual in a group the features that are viewed as inherent in group membership, whether it is an age, gender, or national group (Bargh, 1997), and may be applied to the self as well as social others. As Smith and Henry (1996) and Hogg and Turner (1987) have shown, when a particular social identity is made salient, individuals are likely to think of themselves as having the characteristics that are intrinsic to that social category. Stereotypes are often recruited when individuals feel they must defend their own group against other groups. A threat to an individual's self-image has been shown to trigger the goal of restoring self-esteem by denigrating other groups (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Spencer, Fein, Wolfe, Fong, & Dunn, 1998). Here, we investigate how Europeans employ stereotypes of national character and identity in understanding both themselves and other peoples.

METHOD

The first step in the study was to generate a series of propositions about national identity and character. At the University of California, Irvine, one of us (Boster) taught an undergraduate course on language and culture to an immensely multicultural and multilingual collection of students. The class included speakers of more than a dozen native languages; some (e.g., English, Spanish, Vietnamese, Mandarin, Korean, and Tagalog) represented by many speakers, others (e.g., Swedish, Farsi, Thai) by only one or two. As part of a class project on national identity, we sent the students home to interview their mothers about what it is to be whatever ethnic identity they took for themselves. Remarkably, the students from diverse backgrounds came back with descriptions of

their identities that were strikingly similar to one another. To be Latino, Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean, Filipino, or Anglo was to be proud of one's traditions, hardworking, respectful of elders, interested in education and science, and so on. In other words, all described themselves with very similar collections of positive attributes. Most of these attributes were claims to values. The mothers were telling their children that, in effect, "we are who we are because we share certain values": loyalty to the group, diligence and hard work, filial piety, education, knowledge, and so on. A few of the students from groups that had experienced ethnic prejudice reported some negative attributes, but these usually took the form of statements such as "other people say we have babies to stay on welfare" or "other people say our youths are delinquents who hang out in gangs." We think it is fair to conclude that self-report alone is a poor way to study ethnic or national identity because it does not reveal much that is unique to the groups volunteering the report.

This pilot project suggested that to get information on judgments of national identity that discriminates among the various nationalities, one has to use an instrument that elicits judgments of one's own group in contrast with others. To do this, we removed the labels of national groups from the propositions, replaced them with a blank, and changed propositions from the first-person self-report to the third person. Thus, "to be Vietnamese is to be industrious and career-oriented" became "_____ are industrious and career-oriented." Similarly, we removed "other groups say that we are . . ." from the beginning of negative propositions so that "other groups say our youth are often delinquents" became "_____ youth are often delinquents." For the European national character study, we translated this instrument from English into a number of the languages of Europe (Spanish, Italian, French, German, Dutch, Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish, Polish, Czech, Hungarian) with the aid of native speakers of each language. Each version of the survey presented 30 proposition frames to be filled with nations from a bank of 30, the first 25 of which were the same for all versions; the last five varied so that each version allowed respondents to also consider the closest neighboring nations (e.g., Danish, Finns, and Norwegians were included in the Swedish, Finnish, and Norwegian instruments but not systematically elsewhere). One of us (Boster) administered the survey by asking respondents to fill in the blank of the propositions with as many nations as they

thought fit. The respondents were invited to participate in the local language, using a short script¹ that Boster memorized for each locale. A sample instrument is shown in the appendix. With the aid of a 2-month Eurailpass in the summer of 1992, the survey was administered in 15 locations: Madrid, Barcelona, and Vigo in Spain; Genoa and Naples in Italy; Paris, Cologne, Amsterdam, Oslo, Stockholm, Helsinki, Krakow, Prague, Budapest, and London. In general, possible respondents were approached in public settings (e.g., cafes, beer gardens, bars, railway stations, and trains) and were asked if they would be willing to participate in the survey. These locations were chosen so that we would sample a reasonably diverse cross-section of the population and so that we had a good chance of finding individuals who were relaxed and willing to take a few minutes to hospitably respond to a request from a foreign visitor. The sample was predominantly urban and favored those that had the resources to dine or travel away from home. However, this research project sampled a much wider age and occupational range than those interviewed by Peabody (1985), whose sample was limited to European university undergraduates. Europeans were surprisingly amenable to doing the survey; approximately two thirds of those approached agreed to fill out the survey. About 72 respondents were surveyed in each location, for a total of 1,082 respondents, as shown in Table 1.

RESULTS

The first step in the analysis was to aggregate the responses of each locality into fifteen 25-by-30 local nation-by-attribute matrices, stripping out the responses to the five nations that varied across instruments. The matrices were then stacked on top of each other to form a stacked nation-by-attribute matrix with 375 rows (corresponding to how the respondents in the 15 localities viewed the 25 nationalities) and 30 columns (corresponding to the 30 attributes captured by the proposition frames). The cells of this matrix hold the counts of the number of informants from that locality who assigned the attribute corresponding to the column to the nation corresponding to the row. An overall nation-by-attribute matrix was formed by summing across the 15 local matrices to form a 25-by-30 overall matrix. Correspondence analysis (Greenacre, 1984) was used to produce a low dimensional representation

TABLE 1
Demographic Information on Local Samples

<i>Locale</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>	<i>No Sex Stated</i>	<i>Mean Age</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
Amsterdam	25	9	12	4	25	6
Barcelona	116	65	51		28	12
Budapest	75	41	34		30	9
Cologne	66	38	28		24	10
Genoa	71	38	25	8	35	16
Helsinki	95	24	70	1	30	9
Krakow	43	10	33		23	3
London	87	37	48	2	34	14
Madrid	88	51	37		33	14
Naples	61	37	22	2	32	13
Oslo	69	31	38		29	11
Paris	39	27	11	1	33	15
Prague	71	36	35		31	12
Stockholm	79	21	57	1	31	10
Vigo	97	52	45		28	8

of the association of the attributes and nations. The results of a correspondence analysis of the overall matrix are shown in Figure 1.

The horizontal dimension of the correspondence analysis (the first factor) seems to reflect variation in the judged modernity of the nations, with characteristics of traditional societies on the left (e.g., "bound by tradition," "devoutly religious," "old-fashioned") and characteristics of more modern societies (e.g., "excel in science," "industrious and career oriented," "think they are superior") on the right. Iranians, Egyptians, Indians, and Turks are judged as the most traditional; Germans, Swedes, Americans, Dutch, British, French, and Japanese are judged as the most modern. The vertical dimension of the correspondence analysis (the second factor) seems to reflect variation in the judged degree of self-control of the nations, with characteristics of low-self-control societies on the bottom (e.g., "easily lose their tempers," "know how to have fun," "lazy," "sexually active," "generous")² and characteristics of high-self-control societies on the top (e.g., "modest and self-effacing," "modest about showing their bodies," "hardworking," "conceal their emotions"). Italians, Mexicans, and Spaniards are generally regarded as having the least self-control, whereas Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Indians, and Vietnamese are judged as having the greatest self-control.

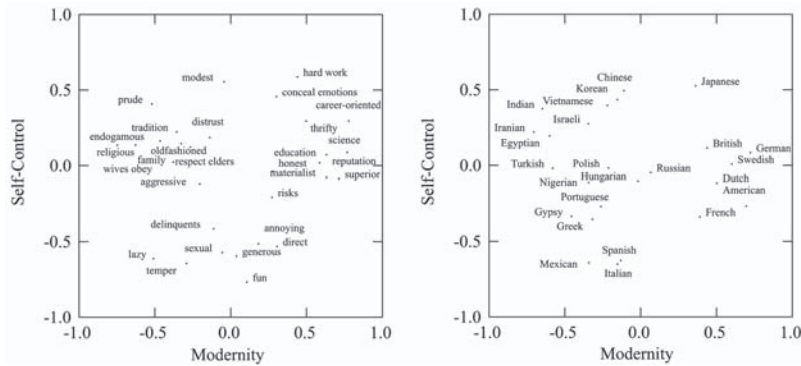


Figure 1: Correspondence Analysis of European Judgments of National Character Showing the Distribution of Attributes (Left) and Nations (Right) Through the Space

There was high agreement among localities on national characteristics: The mean Pearson's r among the local nation-by-attribute matrices was .69, with a standard deviation of .07 and a Cronbach's alpha of .96. Thus, about equal amounts of the variance is shared and not shared, suggesting both substantial agreement on a common picture of European national characters and nearly equally substantial variation among the localities. The variation among the localities shows a number of modest but statistically significant patterns. One pattern is that the more distant nations are from one another, the less likely they will be judged similarly. We calculated the great-circle distances between the capitals of the 25 nations judged by all 15 localities and found a significant negative correlation between the distances and the similarity of the attribute profiles of the judged nations in the overall nation-by-attribute matrix (Pearson's $r = -.19, p < .001$).³ A related pattern is that as the average distance between a judge and a pair of targets relative to the distance between the targets increases, the judged similarity of the targets increases. (In other words, Norwegians, Swedes, and Finns all look very different from one another if viewed from Oslo, Stockholm, or Helsinki but very similar to each other when viewed from Naples.) We calculated the great-circle distances between the capitals of every possible pair of target nations ($distance_{bc}$) as well as the great-circle distances between each judging locale and each of these pairs of target nations ($distance_{ab}$ and $distance_{ac}$) to compute a measure of the distance to the targets relative to the distance between the targets,

$$\frac{distance_{ab} + distance_{ac}}{2 * distance_{bc}} \quad (1)$$

A cartoon illustrating this measure is shown on the left side of Figure 2. This relative distance measure was significantly correlated with the similarity of the attribute profiles of the judged nations in the judging locales' nation-by-attribute matrix (Pearson's $r = .35$, $p < .001$).

A third pattern is that the more distant a pair of judging locales, the less likely they will judge other nations similarly. We calculated the great-circle distances between the 15 judging locales and found a significant negative correlation with the similarity of the attribute profiles they ascribed to other nations (Pearson's $r = -.33$, $p < .001$). A related fourth pattern is that as the distance between a pair of judges and a target increases relative to the distance between the judges, the similarity of the judgments of the target increases. (In other words, the Germans and the English may disagree about what to make of the French or Dutch but agree about their stereotypes of the Chinese and Japanese.) We calculated the great-circle distances between every possible pair of judging locales ($distance_{bc}$) as well as the great-circle distances between the target and each of these pair of judging locales ($distance_{ab}$ and $distance_{ac}$) to compute a measure of the distance from the judges to the target relative to the distance between the judges,

$$\frac{distance_{ab} + distance_{ac}}{2 * distance_{bc}} \quad (2)$$

A cartoon illustrating this measure is shown on the right side of Figure 2. This relative distance measure was significantly correlated with the similarity of the two judgments of the target nation (Pearson's $r = .20$, $p < .001$). This pattern is partly a consequence of the fact that neighbors differentiate each other more than they do peoples far away. Neighboring nations in Europe have complex and often hostile histories with each other, and their residents have had ample opportunity to interact with each other. In contrast, Europeans' knowledge of those from distant lands is relatively unsullied by much actual experience. If the stereotypes arise from the use of simplifying heuristics to make swift social judgments, we would expect the heuristics to be less discriminating if used rarely

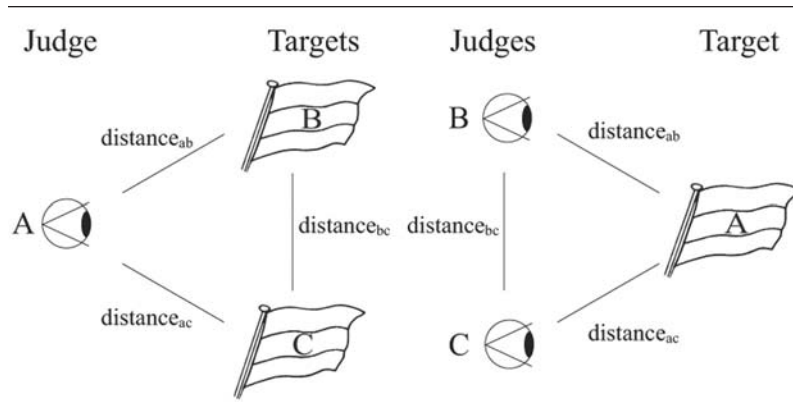


Figure 2: A Measure of Relative Distance Either Between a Judge and Two Targets (Left) or Between a Target and Two Judges (Right)

and more discriminating if frequently used. The heterogeneity seen in the social foreground versus the homogeneity seen in the background is concordant with this expectation. Thus, as the distance from a judge to a target increases, the convergence of the judge with the general stereotype (as captured by the overall nation-by-attribute matrix) increases (Pearson's $r = .23, p < .001$). This pattern can be illustrated by plotting the 95% confidence intervals around the positions of the 25 target nations using the scores from the stacked correspondence analysis, as shown in Figure 3. There are small ellipses around the positions of target nations for which there is high cross-cultural agreement and much larger ellipses around those nations for which there is lower agreement. Because of the greater agreement on nations far away from the judge and greater differentiation in the foreground, most of the nations on which there is the greatest agreement are outside of Europe (e.g., Chinese, Iranians, Indians, Japanese, Israelis, Americans, Turks, Mexicans, and Koreans). The few target nations within Europe on which there is comparable agreement are the British, Italians, and Germans. (There is great agreement that the Spanish are passionate and have low self-control but only modest agreement on their degree of modernity.) Again, it appears that it is easiest to reduce to a shared stereotype those peoples one has had little direct experience of. Table 2 illustrates this point, sorting the target nations by the amount of variation in their self-control scores across the local samples. The respondents in our sample

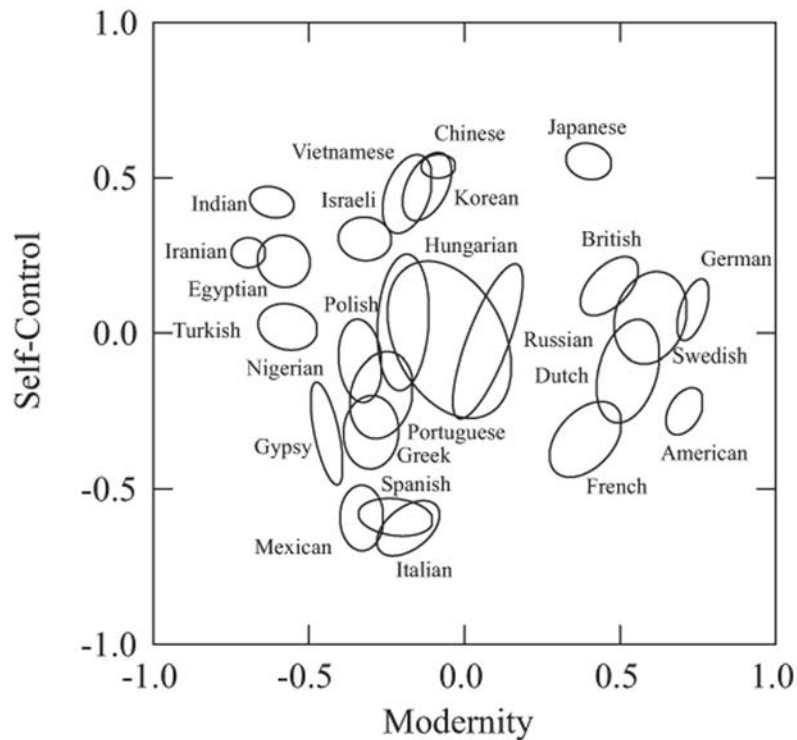


Figure 3: Confidence Intervals (95%) Around Centroids of Scores in Stacked Correspondence Analysis

agreed least on the amount of self-control exhibited by Hungarians, Russians, and Poles and the most on that exhibited by the Chinese, Iranians, Indians, and Japanese.

The disagreement on the Russians may have a simple explanation: Invading your neighbors does not win their esteem. Figure 4 shows the disparate views of the Russians by various local samples. In much of southern and western Europe, respondents rated the Russians favorably as both reasonably modern and self-controlled. However, neighbors who have been invaded by the Russians, especially the Poles (Krakow), Finns (Helsinki), Hungarians (Budapest), and Czechs (Prague), see them as both less modern ($t = 3.2, p < .001$) and less self-controlled ($t = 4.6, p < .001$) than they are seen elsewhere.

TABLE 2
Mean and Standard Deviation of Modernity and
Self-Control Scores From the Stacked Correspondence
Analysis, Sorted by Standard Deviation of Self-Control

<i>Target Nation</i>	<i>Modernity</i>		<i>Self-Control</i>	
	M	SD	M	SD
Chinese	-0.08	0.08	0.54	0.05
Iranian	-0.69	0.08	0.26	0.07
Indian	-0.62	0.10	0.42	0.07
Japanese	0.40	0.10	0.55	0.08
Spanish	-0.22	0.16	-0.59	0.08
Israeli	-0.32	0.12	0.30	0.10
Turkish	-0.57	0.13	0.02	0.10
American	0.71	0.08	-0.25	0.10
Egyptian	-0.58	0.12	0.23	0.11
Italian	-0.18	0.14	-0.63	0.12
British	0.47	0.13	0.15	0.13
German	0.73	0.07	0.08	0.13
Mexican	-0.33	0.10	-0.59	0.14
Korean	-0.12	0.11	0.47	0.15
Greek	-0.30	0.12	-0.32	0.16
French	0.39	0.16	-0.34	0.17
Vietnamese	-0.18	0.11	0.45	0.17
Nigerian	-0.34	0.10	-0.09	0.18
Portuguese	-0.27	0.14	-0.20	0.19
Swedish	0.60	0.16	0.05	0.20
Gypsy	-0.44	0.07	-0.32	0.22
Dutch	0.53	0.14	-0.12	0.22
Polish	-0.20	0.11	0.04	0.30
Russian	0.08	0.15	-0.03	0.34
Hungarian	-0.05	0.27	-0.02	0.34

We had expected that most respondents would evaluate their own nations as better than others do. Although it is true that respondents tended to judge their fellow nationals as more modern than others saw them ($t = 3.0, p < .02$), they did not seem to regard themselves as necessarily more self-controlled ($t = -.6, p > .5$). As shown in Figure 5, there seems to be a certain amount of regression to the mean in self-conceptions of degree of self-control. The Poles, Hungarians, British, and Dutch all think of themselves as more relaxed and passionate than they are considered by others, whereas the Spanish and Italians think of themselves as markedly more self-controlled than the general stereotype of them. It should

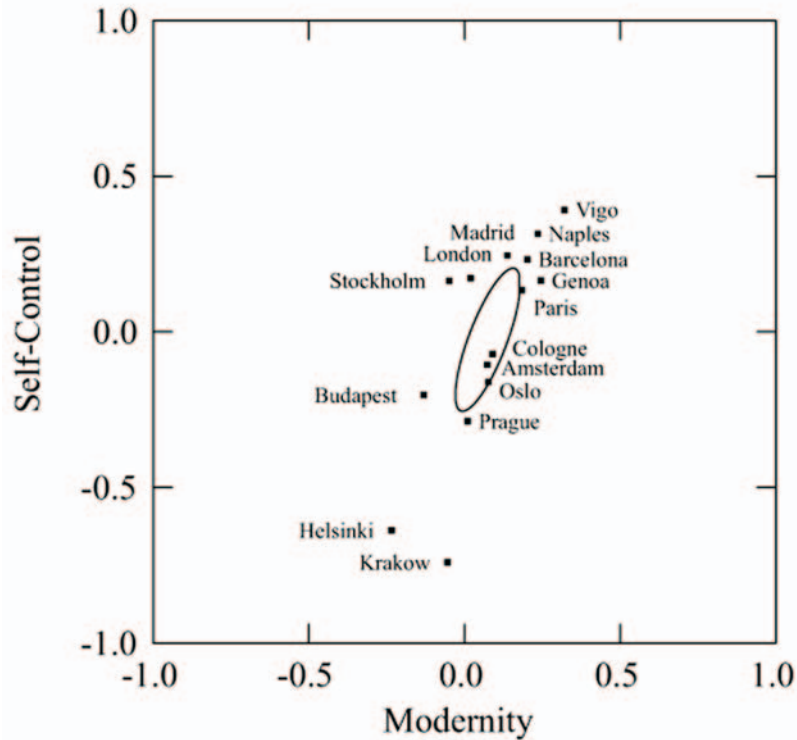


Figure 4: European Perceptions of Russians

be pointed out that the two samples of Italians from Genoa and Naples display almost exactly the same displacement of their self-concept from the general stereotype, and their vectors completely overlap in Figure 5, so much so that it is hard to see there are two lines.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In sum, Europeans from 15 locations all across Europe share substantially similar images of the national characters of each other and of nations outside of Europe. The overall structure of the national character space is similar to that found in other studies of the structure of connotative meanings, except that (a) the dimension that corresponds most closely to “potency” (modernity) is the most

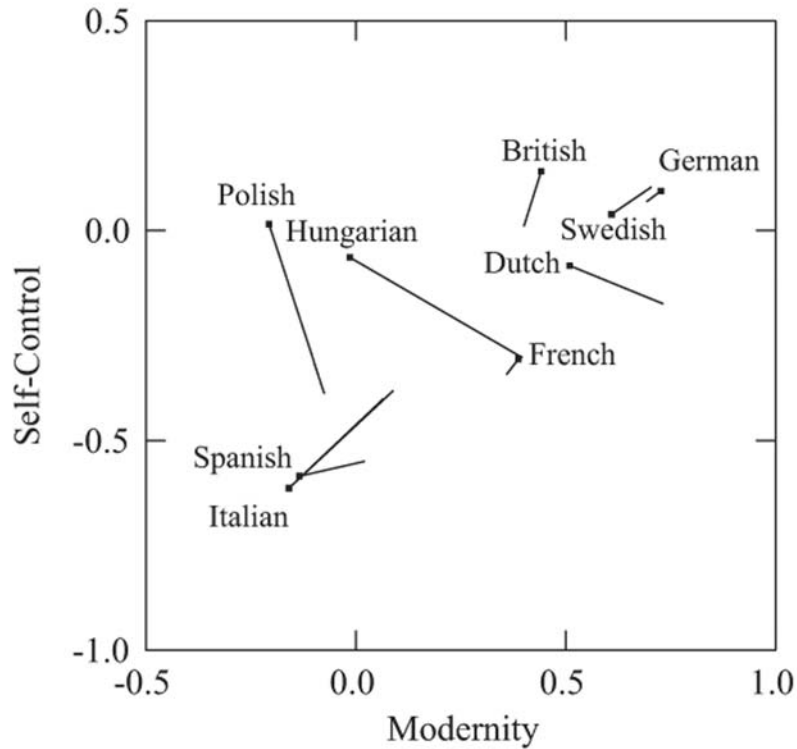


Figure 5: European Self-Conceptions Versus General Stereotypes

NOTE: The head of each vector shows the placement of nation in the general stereotype; the point shows placement of nation in self-concept.

important dimension of variation, and the one that corresponds most closely to "evaluation" (self-control) is the second factor (cf. Osgood, May, & Miron, 1975), and (b) both of the dimensions are ambivalently evaluative; it is deemed better in Europe to be both modern and self-controlled, except each of these virtues has its cost. In moving to modernity, one loses the social closeness and values of traditional society, and in attaining high self-control, one misses out on a lot of fun.

Variation in the shared stereotypes is complexly patterned. Nations that are geographically close are judged similarly, especially if they are relatively far away from the judge. Similarly, judges that are close judge similarly, especially target nations that are relatively far away. The distant background is homogenized,

reduced to a sparse schema; it is the social foreground, one's neighboring nations and one's fellow nationals, where the images are complicated, contested, and conflicted. The chauvinism of these judgments is muted; our respondents were not nearly as self-aggrandizing as we expected them to be. But grudges with neighbors are long remembered. If you invade your neighbor, you should expect that they will carry the resentment for generations.

European national character stereotypes are principally anchored by conceptions of non-Europeans; there was highest agreement on the stereotypes of the Chinese, Iranians, Indians, and Japanese, and to a lesser extent the Israelis, Americans, Turks, Mexicans, and Koreans. Only the stereotypes of the British, Italians, and Germans are as widely held as those of these non-European nations. Apparently, it is easiest to essentialize when one has little contact with the other group; one's neighbors and the members of one's own group usually look very different and sharply differentiated from the generally held national stereotypes. Maltseva and Boster (2004) examine this phenomenon in Scandinavia. Evaluations of the Scandinavians by other Europeans are generally favorable and become ever more so with greater distance. Scandinavians view their neighbors much more critically, Swedes and Norwegians view the Finns as aggressive, Swedes and Finns view the Norwegians as honest but childlike, and the Finns and Norwegians view the Swedes as self-contained but arrogant. However, when members of each of these nations appraise themselves, they see virtually the same image; all three have self-conceptions that are nearly identical with one another.

The high agreement on this variegated picture suggests that these stereotypes are not merely the product of prejudice; the stereotypes are more complex and more widely shared than one would expect if each of the groups were merely reveling in its own superiority to the rest of humanity. Many of the evaluations are strikingly mirror symmetric: Both Italians and Norwegians agree that Norwegians are harder working and that Italians have more fun and express their feelings more openly. Italians and Norwegians alike expressed a sort of wistful envy of the best traits of the other, even if in the end, they would prefer to remain the way they are. It is as though the Europeans in our sample are all reciting a longer winded version of the joke stated at the outset; they agree about the placement of themselves and their neighbors on a number of feature dimensions, and they are willing to see both the good and the bad in their own and others' national characters. Each of

the European localities tended to see itself as more modern than others saw it, but not necessarily more moral or self-controlled. Although the agreement on the stereotypes and the capacity for self-deprecation shown by our respondents does not demonstrate the truth of their shared stereotypes, nevertheless, it suggests that the stereotypes represent a genuine effort by our respondents to understand themselves and other humans. The more actual experience they have of those other humans, the more complicated their understanding is.

Appendix: The British English Instrument

Age ____ Sex ____ Ethnicity _____ Occupation _____ Years education ____

All of the statements below came out of interviews with members of various ethnic groups in describing themselves. We would like to find out how many of these statements might apply to other groups as well. Which nationalities or ethnicities best fit in the blanks in the sentences below? Write your responses in the blank with the numbers of *all* the nationalities that fit. (That is, more than one nationality may fit in each frame and each nationality may fit in more than one frame.) Please answer according to your understanding of the reputations that these nationalities have among the English people generally, not necessarily according to your own sense of how they really are. Please print neatly.

1 Dutch	2 Chinese	3 Greek	4 Russian	5 German
6 French	7 English	8 Gypsy	9 Vietnamese	10 Japanese
11 Egyptian	12 Spanish	13 Polish	14 Korean	15 Iranian
16 Italian	17 American	18 Hungarian	19 Turkish	20 Mexican
21 Portuguese	22 Indian	23 Swedish	24 Israeli	25 Nigerian
26 Irish	27 Scottish	28 Czech	29 Welsh	30 Norwegian

- 1 _____ are generous.
- 2 _____ usually marry other members of their group.
- 3 _____ distrust other ethnic groups.
- 4 _____ are thrifty.
- 5 _____ say what they think.
- 6 _____ parents are strict and old-fashioned.
- 7 _____ are modest and self-effacing.
- 8 _____ easily lose their tempers.
- 9 _____ know how to have fun.
- 10 _____ try hard to maintain a good reputation.

- 11 _____ are sexually active.
 - 12 _____ are aggressive.
 - 13 _____ are very concerned with material possessions.
 - 14 _____ are lazy.
 - 15 _____ are bound by tradition.
 - 16 _____ like to take risks.
 - 17 _____ tend to be loud and annoying in large groups.
 - 18 _____ are hardworking.
 - 19 _____ conceal their emotions.
 - 20 _____ think they are superior to other groups.
 - 21 _____ youth are often delinquents.
 - 22 _____ are industrious and career oriented.
 - 23 _____ have respect for their elders.
 - 24 _____ place family obligations over their own needs.
 - 25 _____ believe that wives should obey husbands.
 - 26 _____ value education.
 - 27 _____ tend to be modest about showing their bodies.
 - 28 _____ excel in science.
 - 29 _____ are devoutly religious.
 - 30 _____ are honest.
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Notes

1. The introduction script was translated into each local language and could be glossed in English as follows: "Are you [the nation predominant in the region]? I am an American anthropologist visiting [nation] to find out what [nation] thinks about themselves and other Europeans. Do you have a few minutes to fill out this survey? Thank you."

2. Peabody (1985) called this dimension "Tight-Loose" for the tight or loose control of impulses. As one can see, both poles are a mix of positive and negative traits. Those at the tight end are hardworking but emotionally closed; those at the loose end are both lazy and fun and readily express both their affection and their aggression.

3. All probability values are for two-tailed tests.

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