Americans' Perceptions of Europe and the Europeans

Joachim I. Krueger

Brown University, U.S.A.

Correspondence:
Joachim I. Krueger
Department of Psychology, Box 1853
Brown University
89 Waterman Street
Providence, RI 02912, U.S.A.
Phone: 001 401 863 2503
Fax: 001 401 863 1300
E-mail: joachim@brown.edu
Web: http://research.brown.edu/research/profile.php?id=10378

To understand Americans' perceptions of Europe and the Europeans, it is useful to begin with a brief characterization of Americans as a nation. Americans traditionally see themselves as a nation of immigrants, while acknowledging the presence and the significance of Native American populations, and although being divided over the desirability of further unchecked immigration. As a nation of immigrants, the United States discourages—with varying success—the use of racial, ethnic, linguistic, and other social markers of identity. Citizenship is granted to persons born under U.S. jurisdiction or who complete a formal process of naturalization. The latter receive the rights and obligations constituent of citizenship except that they may not be elected President of the United States.

From the outset, people of many national backgrounds migrated to the area that is now the United States. African, Iberian, and Jewish communities, for example, have existed in

North America for as long as Anglo communities. Nonetheless, until the early 19th Century, immigrants from England accounted for most of the population changes, followed by waves of migrants from Ireland, Germany, Eastern Europe, and other areas.

Today, the population of the United States is a tapestry of diverse groups. Some endogamy persists, that is, members of different groups intermarry at rates considerably lower than one would expect if bonds were formed randomly. As contemporary ethnic populations are somewhat inert, they slow the drift toward ethnic, cultural, and racial homogenization. The ingredients of the pot do melt, but they do so slowly.

Against this background, it is fair to say that Americans' perceptions of Europe and the Europeans are the perceptions of people whose culture is in many ways historically derived from European parent cultures. In this essay, I am particularly concerned with how Americans see the French, the Germans, the Italians, and Europeans in general. Before proceeding, it is useful to ask what mark each of these nations has had on the contemporary composition of the population of the United States.

<div align="center">Some Historio-Demographic Background</div>

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, just over 8 million Americans claim French ancestry (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). These Americans are geographically concentrated in Northern New England and Louisiana, suggesting that immigration occurred mostly via Canada, which in turn points to descent being rooted in the migrations of the the 17th Century. During the early 20th Century, some French-Canadians were drawn to New England by industrial employment opportunities. In contrast, the French-Canadians of Louisiana, or "Cajuns," represent an older stock of immigrants. This population is descended from inhabitants of the Canadian maritime provinces. After the British defeated the French in North

America, they forcibly removed many inhabitants of these provinces, presumably in an effort to shore up control over the northeast of the continent. In contemporary American culture, the legacy of this population is represented by a distinctive cuisine and music.

According to the Census, nearly 43 million Americans claim German ancestry. Germans arrived in North America in several big waves during the second half of the 19th Century. Many were farmers who found homes throughout the Northern Midwest, an area characterized by its fertile soil and a climate somewhat similar to though with greater seasonal variation than that of Central Europe. Most of the linguistic and cultural heritage of the German immigrants has been lost, in part because of the sheer passage of time, but also because of strong Anti-German sentiments during World War I. In 1917, many German language clubs and papers closed, and many parents adopted English as the exclusive language of the home. As a token symbol of German conviviality, the Octoberfest has maintained a strong presence; it is now celebrated throughout the country, including regions with a limited history of German immigration. Bier and Bratwursts ("brats") are widely recognized as culinary staples.

Nearly 16 million Americans claim Italian ancestry. Italians immigrated in large numbers during the first half of the 20th Century. They continue to cluster in the urban centers of the Northeast and some of the great cities of the Midwest, principally Chicago. Perhaps because of their comparatively recent history of migration, Italian-Americans have a comparatively strong sense of their ethnicity. My hometown of Providence, Rhode Island, is a good example. From time to time, and with my tongue firmly buried in my cheek, I tell visitors that Providence is like Rome. "Like Rome," I say, "Providence is built on seven hills and it is full of Italians."

Together, these three ethnic groups make up about one third of Caucasian Americans and about one fourth of all Americans. To recapitulate, the diversity among these three groups is represented in the differences of group size, the time of migration, the geographic clustering of the descendents, and the differences in their sense of ethnic identity.

Studying Stereotypes the Google Way

It is commonplace to say that the media, including the internet, drive social perceptions in general and group stereotypes in particular. The inverse is also true, however. In no small way do the media tailor the contents of their programming to what they believe people want to see and hear (i.e., they do market research). Therefore, an exploration of media contents can yield first impressions and hypotheses as to how one culture sees another.

Using *google web* and *google images*, I found a lode of material having to do with the French. Having observed informally that American comedians are more likely to target the French than the Germans or the Italians, I also expected to see more links to comedic material concerning the French. One particularly revealing find was a clip posted on *youtube*, where Robin Williams packs half a dozen of stereotyped images into a two-minute *shtick*. Williams opens by noting that the French still perform nuclear tests. They do not do this in the Sahara, "a total wasteland," but "in Tahiti. In paradise." "Why?" he asks, and answers his own question while drawing on an imaginary cigarette, "Because we're French." After an expletive-filled rant, expressing presumed French attitudes about American political correctness and uptightness, Williams stops in midsentence and turns around, yelling "Oh, the Germans are! Come back Americans! We love you! Come back! You can build a Disneyland near Paris. We won't go, but build it!" The theme of French military weakness, German strength, and America's role as the savior of an ungrateful nation is hard to miss. The media will not let

Americans forget that they were drawn into two world wars to save the French from the Germans, and that since then the French, unlike the Germans, have failed to support the United States in foreign wars. The most recent of these chafing memories is the French refusal to support the invasion of Iraq. Comedy performances such as Williams's both exploit these perceptions and perpetuate them.

Other, more benign, images focus on food and lifestyle. I found one picture showing a beret-wearing smoking frog squatting between a wedge of cheese and a bottle of wine. Another picture showed a rear view of an old man riding a bicycle down a tree-lined country road with a little boy and a very long baguette on the backseat. These images are idyllic, expressing the presumed expertise of the French to savor the goodness of in life. From the American point of view, which is still anchored in its puritan origins, one wonders if such images reflect a deeper ambivalence. The savoring of life in a foreign culture may not only evoke admiration, but also moralistic rejection. I suspect that of the Europeans, the French are the most likely to be perceived as degenerate and hedonistic by Americans.

The stereotype of the Germans also comprises food, drink, and garb. Images of Bavarians in lederhosen and alpine felt hats are easy to find. In the food department, Bratwursts come to mind, and these images may not be entirely inaccurate as beer and wurst consumption is indeed rather high in Germany. Other stereotypic images recall German militarism. Though historically correct, this stereotype is now dated. Even today, the History Channel and the Military Channel on cable television dedicate a good portion of their programming to footage of the Blitzkrieg, D-Day, and the Battle of the Bulge. In these programs, the Germans are typically portrayed as worthy enemies, whereas the French are ignored or portrayed as weak.

The stereotype of the Italians does not appear to be as crystallized in the popular media. Although there is sufficient geographical imagery, there is no clear sense of what the Italians are like. Conversely, there is a strong set of images of Italian-Americans, and this might contaminate the view Americans have of Italians as a European nation. The imagery of Italian-Americans is dominated by the theme of organized crime. The series of Godfather movies was so successful that it has led the creation of a virtual genre of mob movies. Over the past decade, the 'Sopranos' was a hit series on HBO, tracking the life and times of Tony Soprano's "family" (in both senses of the word). Tony Soprano himself was domineering, violent, and chauvinistic (though "family-oriented"). This portrayal, and its stunning popularity, should have chagrined the Italian-American community. The show's masterstroke was that it also showed Tony in his weekly session with his psycho-therapist, a woman who treated him for a panic disorder. Hence, by creating and perpetuating negative stereotypes, the show also acknowledged the complexity and the contradictions in the human character.

In my hometown of Providence, Rhode Island, ex-mayor Vincent "Buddy" Cianci has attained dubious fame. The longest-serving mayor of a major American city, he is also a twice-convicted felon, once for assault and once for racketeering. Arguably, his efforts have contributed to urban renewal, and the emergence of Providence as what he calls "The Renaissance City." Waterways have been improved and a Venetian gondola takes visitors for a ride downtown. This too is a real-life case of complexity and contradiction.

Beyond Impressionism: Studying Stereotypes Empirically

The empirical study of social stereotypes presents three sampling challenges. First, who is to make the judgments? Ideally, a study of national stereotypes comprises judgments made by a representative sample of members of the perceiver nation. This goal is hardly attainable.

Most social psychological studies are conducted with convenience samples drawn from local populations of college students. The reliability of the findings then becomes an empirical question of how well the findings are replicated in other samples. The claim that the findings of the present study reflect Americans' perceptions of Europeans is an inferential one. For now, it is more accurate to say that the findings reflect the perceptions of students at Brown University. Nonetheless, one may be optimistic that the findings are informative of the perceptions held in the general population because it has been shown elsewhere that perceptions of large social categories, such as national groups, are widely shared within a culture (Schneider, 2004).

The second sampling issue concerned the selection of the target groups. In some contexts, such as gender, there is no problem. If there are only two groups, exhaustive sampling is straightforward. In the case of Europe and her nations, however, the task is more complicated. Respondents cannot be expected to make judgments about all nations. Any selection of a subset of groups requires a justification. Here is mine: I selected the French, Germans, and Italians as target groups because these three nations are among the largest in Europe, they are geographically central, they are historically among the first to embark on the path toward integration. Yet, these nations are clearly distinct from one another in terms language, culture, and history. As one of the central questions of this study was to ascertain if and how Americans construct perceptions of Europeans from their perceptions of individual European nations, it was important to select groups that are likely to serve this informational function. Small nations, such as Luxembourg, or large but recently formed nations, such as the Ukraine, did not appear likely candidates.

The third sampling issue concerned the types of characteristics on which the target groups were to be judged. Until recently, studies of stereotype content proceeded by using long but haphazardly compiled lists of personality traits. One additional strategy was to consult existing research to replicate the use of specific haphazard lists. Another strategy was to conduct pilot tests, asking respondents to generate traits that they thought were relevant to the judgment task. Recently, the *stereotype content model* (SCM; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007) has emerged as an organizing framework for stereotype assessment with a variety of target groups. According to this framework, "warmth" and "competence" are two foundational dimensions of social perception. Warmth refers to a general tendency to be nice, pleasant, and agreeable to others versus mean, hostile, or indifferent. Competence refers to a general tendency to be skillful, resourceful, and talented versus ineffectual, lethargic, or dumb. In other words, the dimension of warmth addresses the perceived social motivation of the target group or person to benefit the perceiver. The dimension of competence addresses the group's or person's ability to translate this motivation into action. As the instrumental question need only be asked after the motivational question has been answered, the warmth dimension ought to loom larger in social perception than the competence dimension. This is indeed what SCM researchers have found.

As the two dimensions are theoretically and empirically orthogonal, the perception of any particular target group can be located on a map where the X-coordinate represents the perceived level of competence and the Y-coordinate reflects the perceived level of warmth. The four quadrants of such a map represent four types of social group. A group perceived as high in both warmth and competence may be termed a "virtuous winner" (Phalet & Poppe, 1997). For example, Americans see themselves as such a group. A group perceived as high in

warmth but low in competence may be termed "virtuous loser" (e.g., the elderly). A group

perceived as low in warmth but high in competence may be termed "sinful winner" (e.g., the

rich). Finally, a group perceived as low on both dimensions may be termed "sinful loser" (e.g.,

the homeless).

Glick, Fiske, and Abrams (2006) conducted a study of how Americans are perceived by

other nations. In that study, the two-dimensional SCM framework was amended by the

dimension of arrogance, a decision possibly motivated by the recent controversial political

choices made by the U.S. government. I considered the inclusion of the arrogance dimension a

good idea, as it provided further opportunities for fine-grained distinctions among the

stereotypes of European groups. Following Glick et al., I selected the following trait adjectives

for the present study.

Warmth	Competence	Arrogance
Competent	Good-natured	Selfish
Intelligent	Trustworthy	Power-hungry
Confident	Sincere	Aggressive
Skillful	Friendly	Arrogant
Efficient	Warm	Deceitful

Data were collected from 70 students at Brown University (35 women and 35 men)

during the Spring semester of 2008. Each student rated each target group (Europeans, French,

Germans, Italians) on each trait on a 7-point scale (1 = not characteristic at all; 7 = very

characteristic). Half the respondents rated Europeans first, and the other half rated Europeans

last. The three national groups were presented in all possible orders, which were varied over

respondents. Then, respondents rated how difficult (vs. easy) it was to make judgments for

each of the groups and how confident they were about the judgments they made. Finally, respondents rated the social desirability of each trait (7 = highly desirable).

Findings

Stereotype Desirability

Before examining stereotype content, I asked how positive Americans' perceptions are of the European groups overall. For each respondent and each of the four target groups I computed the correlation between typicality ratings and desirability ratings over traits. A correlation coefficient of +1 means that the stereotype is perfectly positive, a coefficient of -1 means that the stereotype is perfectly negative, and a correlation of 0 means that the stereotype is neither positive nor negative. Recall that 10 of the traits were selected to be positive, namely all traits related to the dimensions of warmth or competence. The remaining 5 traits related to the dimension of arrogance were negative. In general, people show a positivity bias in social judgment, such that, *ceteris paribus*, they are more likely to ascribe positive than negative traits to themselves and others. Given past research, it is a useful rule of thumb to expect that desirable traits will be ascribed with a probability of 2/3 and undesirable traits will be ascribed with a probability of 1/3. If so, the baseline, that is, the least uninformative value of the correlation is about .32. Against this background, I found the following mean correlations:

Europeans	.22
French	-.10
Germans	.03
Italians	.38

In terms of statistical significance, it is safe to say that Europeans and Italians were judged more favorably than the French or the Germans. The differences between the groups comprising these two sets were statistically small. Although the Italians elicited the most favorable judgments, they were not judged noticeably above the heuristic baseline of .32. Finally, it is noteworthy that judgments of the Europeans fell within the range set by the specific groups, that is, perceptions of Europeans might be a composite of perceptions of the individual groups. I will return to this point shortly.

Stereotype Content

Next, I computed scale scores of warmth, competence, and arrogance by averaging judgments of the 5 constituent traits within each dimension and separately for each target group.

|	Warmth	Competence	Arrogance
Europeans	4.16	4.80	4.04
French	3.59	4.44	4.26
Germans	3.59	<u>5.23</u>	4.60
Italians	<u>5.02</u>	4.35	3.75

The results suggest that Americans associate Germans with competence and Italians with warmth (see underlined means). Germans were rated higher on competence than any other group and they were rated higher on this dimension than on any other. Likewise, Italians were rated higher on warmth than any other group, and Italians were rated higher on this dimension than on any other. Conversely, Germans were rated lower than other groups (though they were tied with the French) on warmth, and they were rated lower on this dimension than on any

other. Italians were rated lower on competence than any other group, but they were rated even lower on arrogance. Hence, Americans' perceptions of Germans and Italians emerged as mirror-image ambivalent stereotypes. Germans were perceived as "sinful winners," and Italians were perceived as "virtuous losers."

The French stereotype was less extreme, though overall rather unfavorable (as noted before). This group was seen as low in warmth, somewhat low in competence, and high in arrogance. The stereotype of Europeans again appeared to be a reasonably weighted average of the judgments made about the three national groups considered here.

Setting aside the dimension of arrogance for a moment, the average judgments of the four groups can be displayed graphically as a location in a two-dimensional space, where the Y-coordinate represents the level of ascribed warmth and the X-coordinate represents the level of ascribed competence. Data were standardized so that the sum of the data points on each axis is zero.

In addition to the location of the four target groups, this figure reproduces the locations of five other groups studied within the framework of the SCM in order to provide a context for how Americans perceive Europeans. Note that Americans tend to view themselves as high in both warmth and competence (i.e., the American auto-stereotype), and hence as better than any of the European groups. As Glick et al. (2006) showed, however, other nations view Americans rather like the Germans, or like rich people or men. Italians are viewed like the elderly or like women, and the French are viewed like the homeless, albeit less extremely so. As perceptions of Europeans appear, at least in part, constructed from the perceptions of her constituent groups, these perceptions turn out to be somewhat non-descript, lying near the point where the axes cross.

Warmth
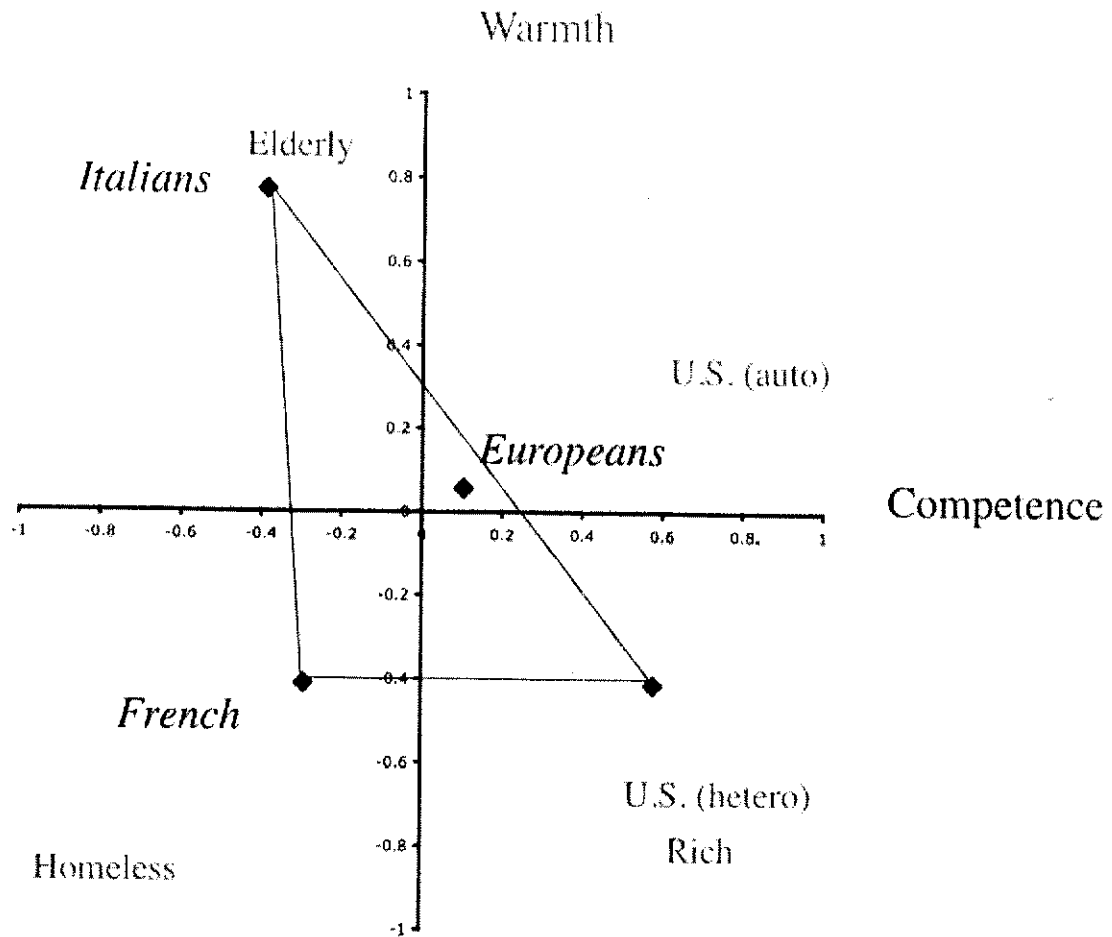
Stereotyping by Inductive Reasoning

Having found that perceptions of the Europeans depend on perceptions of specific

European nations, I asked how well judgments of these nations would performs comparatively

as predictors of judgments of Europeans in general. The next table contains mean correlations

between judgments of Europeans and judgments of each nation, computed over respondents.

	Warmth	Competence	Arrogance
French	.41	.53	.46
Germans	.08	.44	.39
Italians	.10	.02	.33

The most significant trend in these data was the judgments of the French consistently emerged as the best predictors of judgments of Europeans. Judgments of Germans mattered only for the dimensions of competence and arrogance, and judgments of Italians mattered only for the dimension of arrogance. For an aggregate, visual display of these findings, I averaged these correlations for each nation and coded the strength of these average correlations as the thickness of the arrow representing the predictive effect.
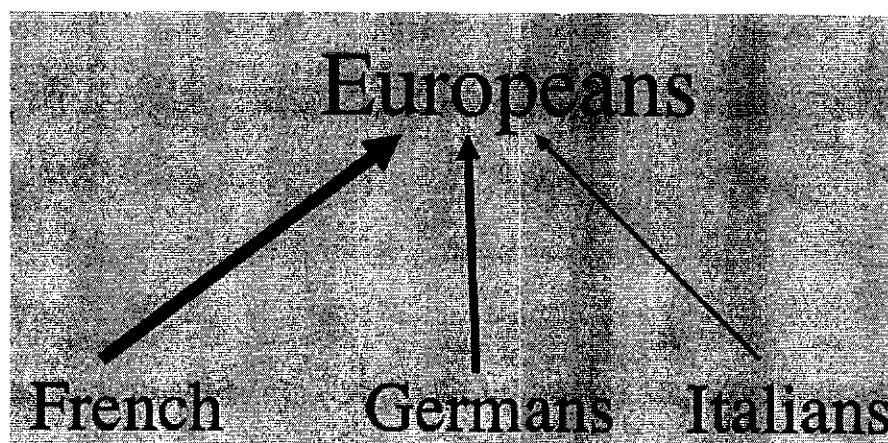
These data suggest that Americans construct judgments of the Europeans primarily by consulting their stereotypes of the French, and then by amending these judgments with their perceptions of the Germans, the Italians, and perhaps other groups not studied here. If this idea is correct, then respondents should report that it was easiest for them to rate the French and hardest to judge Europeans. Recall that respondents judged the ease with which they made judgments of each group and how confident they were about their judgments. As these two kinds of rating were positively correlated, I averaged them to form a composite score of stereotype accessibility. As this table shows, stereotypes of the French and the Europeans were respectively the most and the least accessible.

Europeans	3.51
French	4.37
Germans	3.69
Italians	4.08

A final empirical question concerned the degree of agreement of interpersonal consensus with which the various target groups were judged. By one definition, stereotypes are social inasmuch as they are shared among members of a group. This is, of course, a purely definitional issue because just like other attitudes, stereotypes may exist in the heads of individual people who disagree with the other perceivers in their group. Likewise, the social consensus of stereotypes is conceptually independent of stereotype desirability and stereotype accessibility. As an index of stereotype consensus, I computed for each target group the mean pair-wise correlation from all possible pairs of respondents. The mean correlations are shown in this table.

Europeans	.20
French	.28
Germans	.33
Italians	.29

The most striking finding was that consensus was lowest with regard to what Europeans are like. This finding is consistent with the idea that Americans do not possess well-formed perceptions of Europeans and that they have to construct judgments inductively from stereotypes of constituent groups. Somewhat surprisingly, the stereotype of the French did not

emerge as the most consensual. Instead, Germans and Italians were rated with greater consensus (and the Germans significantly so).

Conclusions

The history of American-European relations is long, and current economo-political developments proceed at a rapid pace. In contrast, social stereotypes are notorious for their inertia. Often, significant stereotype change occurs only over generations instead of within individuals. Hence, it may not be surprising that the findings of this preliminary study reflect intercultural perceptions that carry the shadow of the past. In today's Europe, the most dramatic change is twofold. At the highest level, formerly sovereign countries have begun to integrate with one another into a new whole, a unit that is not like a United States of America and not like any of the former states that are now mere members. [1] At the regional level, movements of separatism, independence, and the revival of local languages and cultures are emboldened. Together, these two forces present powerful challenges to the traditional concept of the nation state.

Americans have been slow to recognize these changes (Reid, 2004). In time, one hopes they will appreciate, understand, and interact with the new Europe. If so, stereotypic perceptions may become more layered, such that there may be an emergence of certain trait characteristics on which Europeans are—and are seen—as more distinctive than members of any of its constituent groups.

Note. [1] This brief characterization only refers to the prevailing trend; it is not meant to deny set-backs such as Europe's failure to find acceptance for a common constitution or Ireland's refusal to ratify the Lisbon treaty.

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