

The strategic confirmation of meta-stereotypes: How group members attempt to tailor an out-group's representation of themselves

Olivier Klein*

Belgian National Foundation for Scientific Research and Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

Assaad E. Azzi

Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

This article is concerned with the influence of the group membership of an audience on the description of the in-group. Negative meta-stereotypes (stereotype of the in-group believed to be held by members of a relevant out-group) have aversive consequences on the self (Vorauer, Main, & O'Connell, 1998). Group members may therefore try to modify the meta-stereotype to their advantage by confirming positive traits and disconfirming negative ones. Such a strategy is not relevant when one addresses in-group members because one does not expect them to adhere to the content of the meta-stereotype. The study varied the salience of the meta-stereotype orthogonally to the group membership of the audience (out-group vs. in-group). Participants ($N = 75$) were asked to pick traits that applied to their group. As predicted, participants selected more positive traits belonging to the meta-stereotype and fewer negative ones when addressing out-group members than in-group members, but this occurred only when the meta-stereotype was salient. Both low and high identifiers displayed this tendency. These results suggest that stereotypes can be used as political weapons.

Stereotypes are seen classically as the attribution of traits to groups (Brigham, 1971). This feature remains central in the recent literature on the concept (for recent reviews, see Fiske, 1998; Hilton & von Hippel, 1996). Another common assumption is that those traits have an evaluative connotation (Brigham, 1971; Oakes & Reynolds, 1997; Tajfel, 1981): some are viewed positively while others are viewed negatively. This evaluation is conceived as being shared consensually by members of a specific group (Haslam, 1997). The social psychological literature on stereotypes is mainly concerned with the stereotype a particular group has about a specific out-group or about itself (Brigham, 1971; Fiske, 1998; Hilton & von Hippel, 1996). Other studies report the mutual perceptions two groups have of

* Requests for reprints should be addressed to Olivier Klein, Service de Psychologie Sociale, Université Libre de Bruxelles, C.P. 122, 50 av. F. Roosevelt, 1050 Bruxelles, Belgium (e-mail: oklein@ulb.ac.be).

their respective out-group (Bond, 1989; Krueger, 1996; Simon, Glässner-Bayerl, & Stratenwerth, 1991). By contrast, little attention has been paid to the stereotype in-group members' *attribute* to an out-group about their own group (but see Krueger, 1996; Vorauer, Main, & O'Connell, 1998). In this study we argue that this reflection of the in-group matters to its members and that they are likely to employ persuasive strategies in order to modify it. In line with recent work (Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994; Reicher, Hopkins, & Condor, 1997), we highlight the role of stereotypes as political weapons.

According to social identity theory (SIT), representations of social groups (or stereotypes) fulfil a variety of functions related to group protection and group enhancement (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel, 1981). One of these functions is group differentiation. It is a central assumption of SIT that favourable comparisons to out-groups contribute to social identity. In this respect, positive self-stereotypes and negative out-group stereotypes constitute positive inputs to social identity: they differentiate the in-group positively. Consistent with this prediction, a recent study (Dietrich, 1998) revealed that Belgian participants' collective self-esteem (measured with Luthanen & Crocker's (1992) scale) was higher after exposure to negative stereotypical descriptions of the French (a relevant out-group) than after positive descriptions of the same group.

Since 'no social group is an island' (Tajfel, 1981, p. 258), group members may often be aware of the representations held by members of relevant out-groups about their own group. Vorauer *et al.* (1998) used the term 'meta-stereotype' to refer to 'a person's beliefs regarding the stereotype that out-group members hold about his or her own group' (p. 917)¹ and demonstrated that this representation could be shared socially. Knowing how the out-group perceives the in-group may also provide information on the differences between the two groups, as viewed by the out-group. Meta-stereotypes are therefore a source of comparisons for in-group members. A negative meta-stereotype may contribute negatively to social identity while a positive meta-stereotype may have a favourable impact on it. Negative meta-stereotypes may be especially threatening in that they may prompt the individual group member to consider that this negative description indeed applies to the group and hence to him- or herself, at least if this social identity is important.

Supporting this view, Vorauer *et al.* (1998) showed that meta-stereotypes had implications for group members. Feeling stereotyped by out-group members was associated with negative emotions and lowered self-esteem. While Vorauer *et al.* do not make a distinction between positive and negative aspects of the meta-stereotype, it seems reasonable to suggest that these consequences derive from the negative components of the meta-stereotype, which are predominant (Krueger, 1996; Vorauer *et al.*, 1998).

If a negative meta-stereotype has such undesirable consequences, individuals may try to make it more favourable to the group. One way to do so would be to communicate a favourable description of their group when in the presence of an

¹This term may not be the most felicitous one. Indeed, according to the *Webster Comprehensive Dictionary*, the prefix 'meta' expresses an idea conveyed by words like 'beyond, over; transcending' as in 'metacognition' or 'metalanguage'. The relevance of such a prefix for describing an attributed stereotype is far from obvious. However, we prefer not to inflate the jargon of our discipline now that this term already exists.

out-group audience. More precisely, they should confirm that the positive traits belonging to the meta-stereotype indeed apply to the in-group but they should discard the negative traits as inadequate.

In proposing that such a selective confirmation of the meta-stereotype may occur when addressing out-group members, we suggest that the expression of stereotypes can be seen as a persuasive behaviour. This communicational dimension seems particularly relevant in the case of stereotype expression: expressing a stereotype does not *only* involve the translation of a fixed representation into words. It is used strategically for convincing an audience of the validity of a specific representation of the target group (Condor, 1990; Graumann & Wintermantel, 1989; Reicher *et al.*, 1997). Along similar lines, other aspects of social identity have also been found to be used strategically in order to affect audiences differentially (Noel, Wann, & Branscombe, 1995; Postmes, Branscombe, Spears, & Young, 1999; Reicher & Levine, 1994a, 1994b; Reicher, Levine, & Gordijn, 1998; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995).

If the selective confirmation of meta-stereotypes is truly a persuasive act, it should be present exclusively when one addresses out-group members rather than in-group members. In other words, the selective confirmation of the meta-stereotype should be stronger *when one addresses those who endorse it*. Nevertheless, a more favourable description of the in-group to out-group than in-group members does not in and of itself demonstrate that the communicator wishes to *persuade* out-group members of the validity of a more desirable representation of the in-group. It could also be a reflection of the internal states resulting from the specific intergroup context. For example, it may be a consequence of the greater salience of group membership induced by the presence of an out-group audience (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) or a psychological response to a threat posed by the meta-stereotype (Doosje & Ellemers, 1997) that would be devoid of any communicational component. One way to disentangle those two types of interpretations would be to manipulate the *salience* of the meta-stereotype. Although little work has been done on the cognitive representation of meta-stereotypes, it seems reasonable to suggest that, like out-group stereotypes, their level of accessibility is not constant: they can be more or less accessible depending on the social context.

In addition, as Vorauer *et al.* (1998) suggest, because meta-stereotypes are complex representations, they may not be as easily activated as out-group stereotypes. If the meta-stereotype is salient (e.g. explicitly labelled as such) and therefore highly accessible, group members may have a clear understanding of which aspects of the stereotype an out-group audience adheres to. This renders the selective confirmation easier. If one could demonstrate that when the audience belongs to an out-group, selective confirmation is more pronounced when the meta-stereotype is salient than when it is not, but that this effect is weaker or absent when the audience belongs to the in-group, then this would suggest that this favourable description of the in-group is not merely a reflection of an internal representation but a persuasive act directed at a specific audience. In contrast, independent effects of the two factors would be compatible with both a communicational and an intra-personal view of the descriptions.

In addition, if the purpose of this persuasive act is to modify the meta-stereotype, it should manifest itself by more favourable descriptions of the in-group on the traits belonging to the meta-stereotype rather than on other traits. Indeed, communicational theories (Clark & Brennan, 1991; Sperber & Wilson, 1986) suggest that communicators try to build on their audience's existing knowledge (e.g. the meta-stereotype) rather than introduce new bodies of knowledge (e.g. traits not belonging to the meta-stereotype).

Finally, if our hypothesis in terms of social identity is correct, the impact of the meta-stereotype on the self should increase with identification: if a specific group membership is part of one's self-definition, one should be more affected by the image of this group than if it is not.

Method

Sample, choice of in-group and out-group

The participants were Belgian undergraduate students who were all French speaking. We chose the national group, Belgium, as the in-group and the French as an out-group. This choice is motivated in part by the easy access French-speaking Belgians have to the meta-stereotype held about their national group in France. The French media are easily accessible because the Belgian market is very restricted. A large portion of the books, films, newspapers and television and radio channels are French. This and the community of language offer French-speaking Belgians multiple opportunities to observe the stereotypes commonly held in France about neighbouring countries and more specifically Belgium. More generally, for French-speaking Belgians, France is the main cultural reference (Destatte, 1998). For example, French-speaking Belgian artists or writers need to be accepted in France to gain celebrity status in Belgium (Klinkenberg, 1981). In Belgium, national identification and national pride are among the lowest in Europe (De Winter, Frogner, & Billiet, 1998). This may be because the juxtaposition of two groups possessing different cultures and languages makes it difficult to define a single identity. Because of the vague character of Belgian identity, the content of Belgian French speaker's identity is strongly shaped by their cultural identity, which they share with France (Fontaine, 1998): for example, at school, children learn French rather than Belgian literature. There is a tension between those who want to be French speakers at the expense of their Belgian identity and those who claim a specific French-speaking Belgian (or Walloon) membership (Fontaine, 1998). In terms of social identity, the French can therefore be seen as an important comparison group, if not the most important one (see e.g. Dietrich, 1998). Nonetheless, the political relations between the two countries are cordial. Both are founding members of the European Union and no major conflict has divided the two nations since the independence of Belgium in 1830.

Preliminary analysis and trait selection

We carried out a preliminary analysis which involved asking undergraduate students ($N = 10$) to generate 10 traits that they associated with the in-group (the Belgians). Another sample of participants belonging to the same population ($N = 40$) had to indicate on 9-point rating scales the extent to which those traits were typical of the Belgians. Traits for which the mean rating was significantly higher than the scale mid-point were presented to a third sample ($N = 37$). Participants had to rate the extent to which these traits belonged to the stereotype the French have of the Belgians (this was the meta-stereotype measure). A final set of participants ($N = 35$) was asked to rate the valence of those traits on 9-point scales. Six sets of three traits that differed both in their valence and the degree to which they belonged to the meta-stereotype were selected. A trait was considered as belonging (or not belonging) to the meta-stereotype if its mean score was significantly higher (lower) than the scale mid-point at the .05 level. This procedure allowed us to isolate a specific meta-stereotype that was

distinct from the in-group stereotype. A similar procedure was used for the valence measure. This method resulted in the choice of one set of nine traits belonging to the meta-stereotype and one set of nine traits that did not.² Each of these sets was made of three subsets of three traits varying in valence (positive, neutral, negative). In order to validate this choice, we computed the mean score of each set of traits respectively on the valence measure. We compared the scores on traits differing in valence using *t* tests with a Bonferroni correction for 10 comparisons.³ As expected, each of those comparisons yielded a significant *t* value. A similar procedure was used for comparing the scores of the traits on the meta-stereotype measure: the mean scores on the three sets of traits belonging to the meta-stereotype were compared separately to the mean scores on the three sets of traits not belonging to the meta-stereotype. Unsurprisingly, the *t* scores all exceeded the critical *t'* value for nine comparisons at the .01 level.

Participants

The main experiment was conducted with 91 undergraduate students taking a psychology course at the *Université Libre de Bruxelles* (Free University of Brussels); 16 participants were excluded from the analyses because they were not Belgian citizens.

Design

We used a factorial design including three between-participant factors: *identification* with Belgium (low, high), group membership of the *audience* (belongs to the in-group, belongs to a relevant out-group) and *salience* of the meta-stereotype (salient, not salient). There was one within-participant factor: the *source* of the traits (belongs to the meta-stereotype, does not belong to the meta-stereotype).

Procedure

Testing took place in one session during a psychology class. Participants were told that they would participate in a study the purpose of which was to investigate the representation Belgians have of their national group. They received a questionnaire that differed across conditions. This questionnaire was distributed so that participants would be assigned randomly to the different conditions. Answers were anonymous.⁴

We chose to manipulate the group membership of the audience by varying the alleged nationality of the researchers conducting the experiment. When answering, participants to an experiment usually know that researchers will be aware of their responses. Researchers therefore constitute audiences for their participants and are treated as such, especially when responses are verbal (Schwartz, 1995). In addition, researchers are identified as belonging to a specific group (Billig, 1976; Reicher & Levine, 1994a, 1994b; Reicher *et al.*, 1998). It therefore seemed natural to use this feature of the experimental situation to manipulate the audience's group membership.

The first page of the questionnaire served as a short introduction in which the researchers conducting the study presented themselves and explained their motivation for conducting the study. For half of the participants, they presented themselves as a group of French researchers working in several French universities (out-group audience). For the other half, they were described as a team of

²Positive traits were warm-hearted, open-minded, hospitable (belonging to the meta-stereotype) and gastronome, gourmet, wine lover (not belonging to the meta-stereotype); negative traits were stupid, unrefined, naïve (MS) and discontent, disabused and conformist (non-MS). In addition, six filler neutral traits were used. Those traits were French fries eater, mussels eater, beer drinker (MS) and modest, humble, capable of laughing at oneself (non-MS). Since the scores on those traits were not relevant to our hypotheses, they are not discussed.

³The familywise error rate being fixed at .05.

⁴Note that anonymity does not imply that the choice of traits is not a communicational act. An act of communication does not need to be public (think of an anonymous letter, for example). We chose precisely to keep responses anonymous to avoid any potential influences of individual self-presentational concerns, which were irrelevant to our present purposes and could potentially interact with the processes studied here.

Belgian researchers working in several Belgian universities (in-group audience). Below is an example of an introductory text (the information that varied as a function of audience is bracketed):

Before you complete this questionnaire, let us introduce ourselves. We are French [Belgian] researchers working in several French [Belgian] Universities in the whole country. As a part of a large-scale study on Belgium, we would like to know [how our Belgian neighbours perceive themselves]/[how we, Belgians, perceive ourselves].

There is only one reliable study on the image of Belgians (Dumont & Glinne, 1990). This study shows in a convincing manner how [us, French, see Belgians]/[how the French see us, Belgians]. But there is no recent study on the way Belgians see themselves. This is why we decided to conduct the present study.

By introducing this fictional information in all conditions, we attempted to make the French out-group salient in all conditions. The 18 traits were printed in random order on the second page of the questionnaire. The second independent variable (salience of the meta-stereotype) was manipulated in the following manner. For half of the participants, traits belonging to the meta-stereotype were printed in bold characters. Participants were told that the traits were those that had been selected by participants in the study on the representation held by the French about the Belgians. The wording of the manipulation changed slightly to accommodate the group membership of the audience. In the out-group audience condition, participants read:

The traits printed in bold letters represent the way we, French, see the Belgians according to the above study.

In the in-group audience, the text was:

The traits printed in bold letters represent the way the French perceive us, Belgians, according to the above study.

For the other half, no trait was printed in bold characters. Participants were asked to tick the traits that they believed applied to the Belgians. The instructions were:

Below, you will find a number of traits. Read this list very carefully. Each time you have the impression that a trait applies to the Belgians, mark it with a cross in the box that is left to it.

Participants were free to choose as many traits as they wished. This method departs from the standard practice of imposing a fixed number of traits (as proposed initially by Katz & Braly, 1933). The usual procedure has the advantage of constraining the variability of the number of chosen traits and of making the computation of some indices (e.g. consensus estimates) easier. However, it also has a major drawback as participants are forced to choose traits even if they believe that these traits do not apply to the group and to ignore traits even if they find those traits suitable. By not constraining the number of traits that could be chosen, we offered participants an opportunity to present their actual representation of the group (within the range of traits that was offered). Note too that this strategy did not compromise our ability to test the hypotheses appropriately.

Dependent measures

We computed a 'meta-stereotype positivity score' which was equal to the score on positive traits belonging to the meta-stereotype minus the score on negative traits belonging to the meta-stereotype divided by the total number of positive and negative traits selected. This score measured the tendency to modify the meta-stereotype in favour of the in-group by disconfirming negative traits and confirming positive ones. This score could theoretically vary between -1 if participants chose only negative traits belonging to the meta-stereotype, and $+1$ if they chose only positive traits belonging to the meta-stereotype. A similar score was computed for traits not belonging to the meta-stereotype.

Moreover, the questionnaire ended with three items measuring identification with the in-group. These items were used to examine whether the effect of our manipulations could be attributed to greater salience of group membership and/or greater identification with the in-group produced by one or more of the conditions. If identification is not affected by the manipulations, these items could also be used to introduce this variable as an additional factor in the design. The items were: 'Being Belgian does not play a role in the way I define myself', 'If I had to leave Belgium, I would not miss this country', and 'I do not feel any particular attachment to Belgium'. Participants had to rate the extent to which these statements applied to themselves on 11-point scales (1 = not at all, 11 = very much).⁵

Results

Identification

Scores on the three identification items were subjected to an Audience \times Salience MANOVA. This analysis did not reveal any multivariate effect of the independent variables ($F < 1$). None of the univariate tests on the individual scores was reliable, which suggests that our manipulations did not differentially affect identification with the in-group or the salience of group membership. We constructed an identification score which was equal to the mean of the three items ($M = 6.58$, $SD = 2.45$, $\alpha = .63$). Because this score was unaffected by the manipulations, we used a median split within each experimental condition in order to divide the sample into two roughly equal groups. Low identifiers ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 1.67$) showed less identification than high identifiers ($M = 8.40$, $SD = 1.43$; $t(73) = 10.58$, $p < .001$).

Positivity scores

We computed a Salience of the meta-stereotype \times Identification \times Audience \times Source ANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor (see means in Table 1). The repeated measures were the positivity scores on the traits belonging and not belonging to the meta-stereotype respectively.

As expected, we obtained a main effect for the repeated factor ($F(1,67) = 65.61$, $p < .01$), suggesting that participants were more likely to use traits belonging to the meta-stereotype than traits not belonging to it to differentiate their group positively. There was also a main effect of identification: high identifiers described their group more positively than low identifiers ($F(1,67) = 5.01$, $p < .03$).

In addition we obtained an interaction between source, salience and audience ($F(1,67) = 6.01$, $p < .02$). To examine this interaction further, we computed two separate Salience \times Audience ANOVAs on traits belonging to the meta-stereotype

⁵The items were reverse scored. The use of negative statements was motivated by the fact that French-speaking Belgians generally view nationalism very negatively (Destatte, 1998) and like to assert their difference from groups perceived as nationalistic or chauvinistic, like the French (Dietrich, 1998) and the Flemings (Provost, 1998). They may therefore be reluctant to report answers which might reflect such an ideology even if they subjectively identify with Belgium. By using negative statements, we hoped to counter this tendency: identification would be shown here by refusing to be labelled as 'not Belgian'. Regardless of the validity of this assumption, a study on Belgian identification with a similar sample shows that sets of reverse scored negative statements (Licata & Klein, 1999) have as good a reliability as similar sets of positive statements and as scales combining both positive and negative ones. This finding suggests that they do not constitute a less acceptable measure of identification than the usual positive ones.

Table 1. Mean positivity scores as a function of source, identification, group membership of the audience and salience of the meta-stereotype

Audience	Identification					
	Low		High		Total	
	Not salient	Salient	Not salient	Salient	Not salient	Salient
In-group						
MS Positivity score	-.04	.06	.47	.28	.20	.18
Non-MS Positivity score	-.27	-.36	-.26	-.09	-.26	-.22
Out-group						
MS Positivity score	.05	.34	.04	.56	.04	.45
Non-MS Positivity score	-.16	-.12	-.08	-.11	-.11	-.12
Total						
Score MS	.01	.19	.23	.41	.12	.31
Score non-MS	-.22	-.25	-.16	-.10	-.19	-.17

Note: MS = meta-stereotype.

and traits not belonging to it separately. If our hypotheses are correct, we should have observed a two-way interaction on the traits belonging to the meta-stereotype so that scores are higher when the audience belongs to the out-group and the meta-stereotype is salient than in any other condition. The results confirmed this prediction ($F(1,74) = 5.39, p < .02$). An effect for salience was also observed ($F(1,74) = 4.26, p < .05$), indicating that mean scores were higher when the meta-stereotype was salient than when it was not. However, this effect occurred only when the audience belonged to the out-group ($t(35) = 3.01, p < .01$) (see Table 1). The simple effect of audience when the meta-stereotype was salient was also significant ($t(38) = 2.45, p < .02$): when the meta-stereotype was salient, participants were more likely to use it to differentiate their group positively if the audience belonged to the out-group than to the in-group. On traits not belonging to the meta-stereotype, the ANOVA did not yield any significant effect.

We also obtained a four-way interaction ($F(1,67) = 4.80, p < .04$). We again chose to decompose this interaction into separate ANOVAs. First, we computed two separate three-way ANOVAs in each audience condition. Because we hypothesized that high and low identifiers would react differently to the salience of the meta-stereotype as a function of the group membership of the audience, this choice seemed sensible.

When the audience belonged to the in-group, the main effect for the source of the meta-stereotype was present ($F(1,34) = 40.82, p < .001$) as well as the main effect for identification ($F(1,34) = 6.14, p < .02$). There was a marginally significant interaction between the three factors ($F(1,34) = 4.12, p = .05$). In order to assess the nature of this interaction more precisely, separate two-way ANOVAs on the traits belonging to the meta-stereotype and on the traits not belonging to it were performed: in the latter case, no main or interaction effect was significant (omnibus

$F(3,34) < 1$). If anything, though, there seemed to be a tendency for high identifiers to describe their group more positively when the meta-stereotype was salient than when it was not ($t(67) = 1.65, p < .1$). In the former case, we only observed a main effect of identification with high identifiers describing their group more favourably than low identifiers ($F(1,34) = 9.12, p < .01$). Although the interaction was not reliable ($F(1,34) = 1.47, p = .23$), this tendency was surprisingly stronger when the stereotype was not salient than when it was salient. Multiple comparisons (using Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference) revealed that when the meta-stereotype was not salient, high identifiers obtained higher scores on traits belonging to the meta-stereotype than low identifiers and that this was the only significant comparison. The reason for the presence of a three-way interaction seemed therefore to be that the effect of identification was stronger on traits belonging to the meta-stereotype when it was not salient and on traits not belonging to it when it was salient (although the latter tendency was weak).

A three-way ANOVA was also performed in the out-group audience conditions, which were our main focus of interest. The main effect for source remained significant ($F(1,33) = 25.90, p < .01$), but not the main effect for identification ($F(1,33) < 1$). Contrary to predictions, there was no interaction between the three factors ($F(1,33) = 1.18, p > .3$). However, there was an interaction between source and salience ($F(1,33) = 7.89, p < .001$). We computed two two-way ANOVAs on each type of trait in order to assess the nature of this interaction. On traits belonging to the meta-stereotype, the expected effect of salience was present ($F(1,33) = 9.02, p < .001$), with higher scores in the salient condition. Interestingly, the interaction between salience and identification was not significant ($F(1,33) < 1$): high identifiers were not more sensitive to the manipulation of salience than low identifiers. On traits not belonging to the meta-stereotype, no main or interaction effect reached significance (omnibus $F(3,33) < 1$).

In sum, the analyses suggest that when addressing members of the out-group, participants were more likely to use traits belonging to the meta-stereotype to differentiate their group positively if the meta-stereotype was salient than not salient and that this was true regardless of identification with the in-group. When the audience was from the in-group, this pattern of results was absent: high identifiers described their group more positively on traits belonging to the meta-stereotype than low identifiers, and they were most likely to do so when it was not salient.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine whether group members would try to modify the stereotype held by members of a relevant out-group in a favourable direction. We reasoned that they should be likely to do so when they were addressing out-group members and the stereotype held by this audience was salient.

As predicted, when addressing a French audience, Belgian participants confirmed more positive traits and disconfirmed more negative traits belonging to the meta-stereotype if it was made salient than if it was not. This was the case for both

low and high identifiers. When the audience belonged to the in-group, this pattern was altogether absent, which suggests that the selective confirmation was directed specifically at an out-group audience. High identifiers described their group more positively than low identifiers (which is not surprising). In addition, a marginally significant interaction indicated that the difference between low and high identifiers was stronger on traits belonging to the meta-stereotype when it was not salient than when it was. On traits not belonging to the meta-stereotype, the difference was higher when the stereotype was salient (although it did not reach significance). However, given the large number of tests involved in our analyses, the low statistical significance of this result, and the limited relevance of it to our theoretical framework, it might not be wise to accord too much importance to this interaction.⁶

More importantly, the finding that low identifiers tried to protect the image of the group as forcefully as high identifiers is interesting in its own right, although it is not in line with our hypotheses. We had hypothesized that high identifiers would be more sensitive to the meta-stereotype because it directly questioned their self-image. This result suggests that the selective confirmation of meta-stereotypes is not necessarily driven by identification with the target group. Meta-stereotypes may be detrimental to members of the target group regardless of identification with this group. For example, negative meta-stereotypes have undesirable consequences on the quality of interactions with out-group members (Devine, Evett, & Vasquez-Suson, 1996; Vorauer *et al.*, 1998). When the meta-stereotype is negative, members of the target group may be perceived unfavourably by the out-group even if this ascribed membership is not part of their self-definition: this is especially true when it is difficult to escape membership in the group, as is the case with national categories. For low identifiers, who are most likely to identify with other groups (Ellemers, 1993), a negative meta-stereotype may therefore be undesirable: being defined by a potential host group in accordance with this representation may hinder their acceptance and their successful integration in this group and therefore threaten their social identity. In the present case, these threats may be particularly relevant since French-speaking Belgians who are dissatisfied with their national identity often define themselves as French speakers rather than Belgians. In doing

⁶The three-way interaction may, however, be interpreted along the same theoretical lines as the main results. When the meta-stereotype is salient, participants may be more interested in selectively confirming the traits *not* belonging to the meta-stereotype: they might assume that those traits are specifically part of the stereotype held by in-group members, while the other traits are part of the stereotype held by out-group members. This is most likely to be true among high identifiers, who should be most interested in developing a positive self-stereotype among group members (Klein, Azzi, & Brito, 1999). Low identifiers, however, have fewer reasons to feel concerned by the stereotype held in the in-group. When the meta-stereotype is salient, the positivity score should therefore be higher on traits not belonging to the meta-stereotype and lower on traits belonging to the meta-stereotype than when it is not salient and this should mainly be true among high identifiers. This is what we obtain, at least descriptively (a contrast testing specifically this pattern of results is marginally significant; $t(67) = 1.83$, $p = .071$). A complementary explanation may also be found in the fact that participants were much less likely to select traits not belonging to the meta-stereotypes than traits belonging to it. In making the distinction between the two types of traits, we did not control for their centrality in the stereotype, largely because two other dimensions had to be taken into account already (source and valence) and the number of potential traits is not infinite. Some dimensions may be more important than others in defining the group (Doosje & Ellemers, 1997): in this respect, one cannot exclude the possibility that traits belonging to the meta-stereotype were more central in the self-stereotype than traits not belonging to it. The probability of their selection may therefore depend more on identification and manipulations affecting the relevance of identity management strategies.

so, they want to emphasize their proximity to France and to French culture (Fontaine, 1998; see also Sojcher & Pickels, 1998, for illustrations). In sum, because the out-group is an important source of comparisons for both high and low identifiers, it is necessary to secure the image of the in-group in France even if the actual impact of this image on social identity differs as a function of identification.

The influence of the meta-stereotype on the self may also depend on the relation between the target group and the group that is the source of the stereotype. For example, subordinate groups' meta-stereotypes about dominant groups may elicit feelings of guilt in the latter and the sense that their position is illegitimate (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). However, if the meta-stereotype comes from a dominant group, the threat may concern acceptance by this group and access to resources controlled by it. Paradoxically, if there is a conflict between the in-group and the out-group, one may aspire to being viewed negatively by the out-group as, under certain circumstances, negative evaluations of the in-group by a devalued out-group will constitute a positive input to social identity (Haslam *et al.*, 1996; Turner, 1991).⁷ Sometimes, the meta-stereotype may not affect the self at all. For example, if the out-group is perceived as extremely different from the in-group, one can attribute a negative meta-stereotype to this difference and hence limit its influence on the self. In our opinion, one of the most promising avenues for further research centres on the role played by these factors in people's sensitivity to meta-stereotypes.

We can conclude this contribution by discussing a few broader issues related to the present study. First, one may argue that in the present case, negative meta-stereotypes constitute an out-group threat to the value of the in-group (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999). According to Branscombe *et al.*, in this situation, group members use a variety of strategies in order to cope with such a threat. The strategies Branscombe and her colleagues refer to are psychological in the sense that they affect the perception of the context (e.g. homogeneity of the group, choice of dimensions of comparison) and of one's position in that context (e.g. identification, self-stereotyping) without modifying the actual context at all. In the present study we provide evidence that group members may not need to use psychological strategies if they have an opportunity to affect the features of the context that threaten their social identity. In this regard participants' reactions can be seen as *political* rather than purely psychological.

By emphasizing the persuasive function of stereotypes, the present work is also relevant to an issue of major theoretical importance, the status of social stereotypes as cognitive vs. public representations. Discourse analysts (e.g. Potter, 1996; Wetherell & Potter, 1992) propose that representations of reality, and stereotypes more specifically, are discursive constructions and do not have an independent existence as cognitive representations. Their variability in discourse is taken as evidence for this claim. In social cognition (e.g. Hamilton & Trolier, 1988;

⁷Birnbaum (1992) showed how this reaction is used by the leader of the French far-right party 'Le Front National', Jean-Marie Le Pen. This party is ostracized by most journalists, who claim their attachment to 'anti-racist' values. This strategy has actually favoured the Front National's ascension: those who feel close to the party having negative feelings towards the journalists (which they perceive as 'Jewish' and 'intellectual') do in fact gain a sense of pride from the attitudes of these journalists. Therefore, Le Pen often tries to elicit negative reactions from them.

Hamilton, Stroessner, & Driscoll, 1994) however, stereotypes are viewed as stable cognitive representations: therefore, their expression is often considered to be the mere translation of these representations into words. Neither of these perspectives adequately captures our position. First, we find the idea that stereotypes do not exist outside discourse difficult to accept in view of the increasing evidence showing that they exert effects on behaviour outside awareness (see e.g. Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Devine, 1989). However, the idea that stereotypes are stable and fixed representations is clearly at odds with numerous studies inspired by self-categorization theory (Haslam & Turner, 1992; Haslam, Turner, Oakes, McGarty, & Hayes, 1992; Hopkins, Regan, & Abell, 1997): these studies show that some elements of a stereotype are more likely to be chosen than others as a function of the social context. Although features of the social context can trigger a specific representation of the in-group, group members will not necessarily express this representation. The probability of its expression depends on the perceived likelihood that this behaviour will fulfil the motivations of the communicator in this particular context. While category salience may constrain the range of potentially accessible traits, an individual may still choose between a variety of elements of the stereotype depending on his or her intentions towards the audience. A set of traits is potentially accessible as a function of the history of each group member, and both category salience and strategic motivations filter the range of traits that will actually be expressed. In this view, variability at the phenotypic level (discourse) does not imply the absence of a genotypic level (the representation).

Note too that the absence of effects of the manipulations on the identification score invalidates an interpretation of the results in terms of category salience and is compatible with our suggestion that strategic behaviour operates over and above the effects of this factor (see Reicher *et al.*, 1995 for a similar perspective).

The idea that the expression of stereotypes may be affected by strategic motivations is also relevant to meta-cognitive perspectives on stereotyping, and more specifically to the social judgeability approach (Yzerbyt, Schadron, Leyens, & Rocher, 1994). According to this view, the social context provides meta-information about whether stereotyping is appropriate as a function of existing social norms. Consistent with our communicational approach, the activation of the stereotype does not necessarily lead to its expression. In the present study, the meta-informational cues provided by the context do not concern social rules but the anticipated consequences of expressive behaviour on the communicator. These cues do not determine whether a hypothetical unitary stereotype will be expressed, as in the social judgeability approach, but *which* aspects of the stereotype will be emphasized. In this regard, meta-cognition plays a much richer role than the inhibition of activated representations.

To conclude, recent work had already shown that group members strategically manipulate aspects of their social identities when presenting them to an audience. This is true of group attitudes (Reicher & Levine, 1994a, 1994b; Reicher *et al.*, 1995, 1998), identification (Ellemers, Barreto, & Spears, 1999), in-group bias (Marques, Yzerbyt, & Rijsman, 1988; Noel *et al.*, 1995) and reported level of discrimination towards the out-group (Postmes *et al.*, 1999). Our study suggests that stereotypes should henceforth be added to this list.

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