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Autostereotyping and National Identity in The Spanish Context

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Abstract

This research deals with the concept of self-stereotyping, which is analysed in relation to the concepts of national identity and favouritism towards the ingroup. The hypothesis is that the stronger the identification with one's nationality, the more positive will be the auto-stereotypes attributed to the national group. Furthermore, it is predicted that high levels of national identification are associated with an interdependent, rather than an independent, self-concept. We use the Spanish version of the European Opinion Survey (EOS), whose psychometric properties were tested. The questionnaire was completed by 263 Spanish students. Findings support the validity and reliability of EOS, even though the self-concept scale shows some problems concerned with construct validity. The two hypotheses tested were confirmed. In relation to auto-stereotyping, it was observed that the way in which the Spanish represent themselves has changed over a period of time, and that the trait "fun-loving" was indicated as particularly representative of the Spanish national population. These findings are quite different from those obtained by Sangrador in a study conducted in Spain in 1996, due both to the relevant political changes that have characterized Spain in the last few years, and to the particular comparative context elicited by the EOS. Stereotypes are not rigid structures, but depend on the context in which they take form.

Keywords: Social identity; self concept; group behavior.

Autoesterotipos e Identidad Nacional en España

Compendio

Esta investigación maneja los conceptos de identidad nacional, auto-estereotipo y favoritismo endogrupal que son analizados en relación con la identidad nacional y el favoritismo endogrupal. Nuestra hipótesis es que cuanto más fuerte es la identificación con la propia nacionalidad, más positivos serán los auto-estereotipos atribuidos al grupo nacional: niveles altos de identificación nacional están asociados con un auto-concepto interdependiente más que dependiente. Se utilizó como instrumento la versión en castellano del European Opinion Survey (EOS) cuyas propiedades psicométricas fueron sometidas a estudio. El cuestionario se aplicó a una muestra de 263 estudiantes españoles que residían en Madrid. Los resultados apoyan la validez y fiabilidad del cuestionario EOS, aunque la escala de auto-concepto muestra algunos problemas de validez de constructo. Las dos hipótesis analizadas se confirmaron. Se observó que el modo como los españoles se representan a sí mismos ha cambiado a lo largo del tiempo, y que el rasgo "juerguistas" es el más representativo de la población española. Estos resultados se distancian de los obtenidos por Sangrador en una investigación llevada a cabo en 1996 debido a los cambios políticos y al contexto comparativo particular que pone en marcha el EOS. Los estereotipos no son estructuras rígidas, sino que se muestran en estrecha relación con el contexto en el que se insertan.

Palabras clave: Identidad social; auto-concepto; conducta colectiva.

This paper aims to explore qualities attributed to the Spanish nationality and factors predicting identification with Spanishness. National identity can be defined as a socio-psychological space of belonging, as an identification with some significant traits, and as a consciousness, more or less elaborated, of sharing a space of life (De La Torre, 1997).

Identification with one's national group implies the acquisition of beliefs, attitudes and values that are socially shared within the group and which are evaluated by both the ingroup and the outgroup. This evaluation takes place through social comparison (Tajfel, 1981a), which may occur at different levels (Brown & Heeger, 1999; Hinkle

& Brown, 1990); one's nation can be judged by comparing it to other nations (intergroup comparison), with reference to its past or future behaviour (temporal comparison) or with reference to socio-political prototypes of some ideal society (comparison based on abstract standards).

The adoption of a specific comparative orientation can have an influence on the relationship between ingroup evaluation and outgroup discrimination; in this way a distinction between nationalism and patriotism can be made. Nationalism, which derives from intergroup comparison, leads to the judging of one's nation as superior, and elevates it above the others. This implies behaviour patterns of discrimination and refusal (Mummendey, Klink, & Brown, 2001). Otherwise, patriotism originates from either temporal comparison or comparison based on abstract standards; it essentially remains an evaluative aspect. It

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expresses the need, well described by Tajfel (1981b), for belonging to a group, which can be evaluated in a positive way. Schatz and Staub (1997) propose a further distinction between blind and constructive patriotism; the former lies in supporting one's own nation every time, without considering things in a critical way; the latter represents, on the other hand, a form of loyalty, critically elaborated, towards the national group. Identification with one's nation is due to the support of two basic elements, one objective and the other subjective (Javaloy, Cornejo, & Bechini, 1990). The former is related to the possibility of sharing a place, a common historical past and a complex cultural system; the latter refers to a personal feeling of belonging to the national group. Although in psychology the subjective dimension of identification is privileged, objective factors must be considered as well; as a matter of fact, they deeply influence the concept of social identity associated with a group. In his analysis of Latin American identity, Salazar (1998) points out four key elements of national identity: territoriality, culture, ethnic background and state. Even other authors have underlined the fundamental role of these objective factors. Mlicki and Ellemers (1996) carried out a study in two European nations with very different histories, different political aspirations and a different vision of European integration: the Netherlands and Poland. They asked students in each country to identify traits supposedly typical of their nationality and to rate how positive or negative each trait was. Macroscopic differences existing between the two countries were observed in the different way in which the Dutch and the Poles identify with their own nation.

At the same time everyone is a member of many social categories, including not only the groups to which they belong in the present, but also the ones to which they have belonged or could belong in the future (Cinnirella, 1998). These categories can be either independent or mutually inclusive. The latter case is exemplified by regional, national and European identity. These three levels of abstraction can be represented as concentric circles, which include each other from the most specific to the most general (Brewer, 1991).

Nowadays we should also take into account the concept of comparative identity, which expresses the relationship between different levels of categorization. Comparative identity is the difference between identification with the region and with the nation (Huici & Ros, 1993; Huici et al., 1997; Ros, Cano, & Huici, 1987; Ros, Huici, & Gomez, 2000). More precisely, the hypothesis is that regional identity will be more salient in those subjects for whom at the same time identification is high with the region, and low with the nation. The greater salience of this category makes an attitude of favouritism towards the ingroup more probable in the context of comparison between regions.

On the other hand, national identity will be more salient in those subjects who have a high level of identification with the nation and a low one with the region. In this case ingroup bias will be in favour of the national group when compared to other nations (Ros, Huici, & Gomez, 2000).

In analysing the particular European context, it can be realized that national and European identities have been changing gradually over the past few years, in the light of those political modifications, which are accompanying the birth of the European Union. More and more, Europe is becoming a stable and concrete entity; relationships between different groups, both regional and national, are changing in order to find a new equilibrium. In some cases, the attachment to one's nation may diminish, while the identification with the supra-national entity may grow. In other cases, a closing within well-delimited boundaries can be observed; this may be due to the fear of losing distinctiveness and specificity, which may increase the attachment to one's own national or regional identity. The involved different populations perceive the progressive European integration differently. Cinnirella (1997) carried out some interesting research with Italian and British subjects. The author found that the British perceived entrance into Europe as a threat to their national identity; this was reflected in their quite low identification with the supra-national entity. On the contrary, Italians identified themselves highly with Europe. It is clear that perception of the reality with which people are called to identify is really relevant; the greater enthusiasm of Italians was probably due to their perception of the many advantages which European integration could give them, both from an economic and political point of view.

The way in which a group is generally perceived represents the basis of the regional, national or supra-national identity associated with that group. This perception is often the result of a series of attitudes, social representations and stereotypic beliefs that refer both to the ingroup and to the outgroup (Sangrador, 1996).

The sharing of stereotypes is an essential part of a normal cultural process; the categorization process depends deeply on cultural parameters (Banchs, 1982). A readiness to categorize people in particular ways is conferred by societies, cultures and ideologies that shape one's perception during the process of socialization (Haslam, Oakes, Reynolds, & Turner, 1999). People who belong to the same group are likely to share the stereotypes that are attributed both to the ingroup and to the outgroup. It is therefore possible to analyse the concept of national identity by itemising the stereotypic traits which members of the national group attribute to themselves. Stereotypes must be considered, in this case, as shared beliefs (Sangrador, 1996).

National stereotypes come both from quite stable factors and from more variable ones: the former are related

to the objective and subjective features of national identification; the latter are, instead, related to the features of the particular comparative context activated (Rutland & Cinnirella, 2000). As a matter of fact, comparison can make some traits more salient than others, influencing both the content and the value of the emerging stereotypes.

Much research has been carried out with the aim of identifying the content of national stereotypes (Campbell, 1967; Eagly & Kite, 1987; LeVine & Campbell, 1972; Peabody 1985; Von Ehrenfels, 1957). There are three classes of hypothesis about the way in which stereotype content takes form; these are hypotheses centred on structural factors, those based on cultural variables, and those centred on non-social determinants, such as climatic and geographical factors. Linssen and Hagendoorn (1994) studied the content of stereotypes typical of some Western European countries. They found that national stereotypes rely on four content dimensions, which they called efficiency, emotionality, empathy and dominance. These findings were confirmed by a more recent study, which showed how real differences between nations are reflected in the content of national stereotypes (Poppe & Linssen, 1999).

Of equal importance in defining stereotype content is the comparative context within which judgement takes place. The study carried out in Scotland by Hopkins, Regan and Abell (1997) had the aim of studying auto-stereotyping processes in different judgment contexts. The findings highlighted variation in the stereotypic traits attributed to one's national group in three different comparative contexts. Auto-stereotypes, according to the auto-categorization theory, depend on the frame of reference in which they take form.

Spain, being a differentiated and pluri-national reality, is a particularly interesting place for analyzing the concept of national identity through the measurement of national stereotypes. A new line of research on regional and national stereotypes in Spain was carried out by Pinillos (1960), and Rodríguez Sanabra (1963). There followed a long period of silence due to political reasons under the Franco regime until the research conducted by Sangrador (1981). However, in the last decade the study of Spanish regional and national stereotypes has come to life again. In this field it is possible to identify several trends in the conceptualisation of national and regional stereotypes, as well as national identity. Javaloy, Cornejo and Bechini (1990) studied how Catalans perceived the inhabitants of six regions of Spain: Andalusia, Aragon, Catalonia, Galicia, Valencia and the Basque Country. Rodríguez, Sabucedo and Arce (1991) studied the stereotypes attributed by Galicians to seven different regions or nationalities (Andalusia, Castile, Catalonia, Spain, Europe, Galicia, and the Basque Country). They found similarity between the stereotypes attributed to Catalans and Europeans, between the ones attributed to Spaniards and Andalusians, and between those attributed

to Galicians and Basques. It is interesting to note the definition that these authors give for stereotypes: they are considered as social, and not individual, beliefs.

In this context the centrality of the concept of comparative identity (Huici & Ros, 1993) is well understood. Respondents who have a low comparative identity, such as Castilians, tend to differentiate themselves from other regional groups. On the contrary, Basques and Catalans show a high level of comparative identity. Huici & Ros made an interesting comparison between samples from different countries: Andalusian and Scottish. The findings showed the presence of a positive relationship between European identification and positive evaluation of the European Union for those subjects who had a low comparative identity (Andalusians). This was not found in Scotland, where subjects had a high comparative identity. The most recent Spanish research on regional, national and European stereotypes is by Sangrador (1996), who had started the study of stereotypes in the 1980s, placing them in relation to other relevant concepts, such as identity and attitude.

Putting together all the findings obtained through these studies, a series of conclusions can be drawn: regional stereotypes are quite stable; high agreement can be observed in the stereotypes which a community attributes to itself and those which other communities share about it; there is not a great difference between the content of autostereotypes and heterostereotypes, even though the former tend to be more positive than the latter (Sangrador, 1996).

The research presented here had the aim of studying the relationship between regional, national, and supra-national identities, autostereotypes and ingroup bias across a sample of Spanish students. This study is part of a larger European project using the European Opinion Survey (EOS), which has also involved UK, the Netherlands, Finland, France, Italy, Germany, Greece and Poland (Smith et al., in press; Stefanile, Gianinni, & Smith, 2003).

Spain is an interesting location for this kind of research. Spanish national identity may have modified in the light of the recent important changes observed in Europe. In Spain, many episodes of strong regionalism take place every year. This is clearly in contrast with the progressive European integration in which Spain is involved. The birth of Europe represents a great social, economic and political upheaval; it is therefore really important to understand how people perceive their belonging to this new entity. Furthermore, Spain is a Latin and southern country. This analysis could give interesting information about this kind of culture, shared by many other countries, not only in Europe but also in America. In particular, Spanish culture is a collectivistic one; people who share collectivistic values are more likely to construe themselves as interdependent with others. Interdependence could influence the degree in which people feel identified with the groups to which

they belong (Hinkle & Brown, 1990). This is therefore an important aspect to be taken into consideration in the investigation of the concept of national identity. The questionnaire used here puts together all these aspects in order to give some useful information about the concept of one's nationality shared within a national group.

Smith et al. (in press) proposed two hypotheses. The first is that respondents will attribute positive stereotypes to their national group when their identification with their nation is high. The second is that high levels of identification with the nation will be associated with interdependent self-construal. Smith et al. tested these hypotheses using samples from nine European nations, including a Spanish sample drawn from Madrid and Barcelona. This paper provides a more detailed analysis of the results from the Madrid sample.

Method

Participants

Data were collected in 2002, sampling students in Madrid, Spain. The 263 respondents were university students of psychology (84% female, average age 20.9). Almost all the respondents were living in Madrid (96.2%). Many of them were even born in the capital (84.4%). Only a few respondents (5.7%) had lived in a different country within Europe for a period of time longer than four months.

Material

The European Opinion Survey has eight sections, which are intended to measure national stereotypes and different aspects of social identity, using items most of which are drawn from previous studies. The English version of the questionnaire was translated into Spanish. Subjects are asked to express their opinion on seven-point Likert scales, with anchors from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The first two scales comprise a list of eight traits, four of which are shown by pilot test to be positively evaluated and four of which are negatively evaluated. Subjects are asked to what extent these traits characterise persons firstly in Spain and then within Europe. Respondents are next asked to evaluate these traits as positive or negative. The fourth scale measures identification with Spain, while the fifth measures identification with Europe, using five items taken from Mlicki and Ellemers (1996). The questionnaire next contains a section related to regional identity. The respondent is first asked which region he belongs to and is then presented with a regional identity scale, again using Mlicki and Ellemers' five items. The last section comprises fifteen items measuring interdependent self-construal (Gudykunst et al., 1996; see Appendix A).

In order to create versions of the European Opinion Survey suitable for use in each country, it was necessary not only to translate the questionnaire, but also to find eight stereotypic traits which could be representative of each country

in which EOS was used. The selection of traits was made in different ways in each country. For the Spanish version, we used the results of the study of Sangrador (1996) as a solid point of reference. The choice of eight (four positive and four negative) adjectives was made by comparing the percentage attributed to the Spanish with the percentage attributed to Europeans; those traits, which were particularly representative of the Spanish were selected. Happy (*alegres*), open (*abiertos*), hospitable (*hospitalarios*), noble (*nobles*), fun-loving (*juerguistas*), proud (*orgullosos*), impulsive (*impulsivos*), envious (*envidiosos*) are the traits used in the Spanish version of the EOS. The first four adjectives were chosen as positive stereotypes and the others as negative ones.

Data Analysis

After testing the psychometric properties of the EOS, the following measures were created: a) positive and negative ingroup biases; b) differential ingroup bias; c) positive auto-stereotyping; d) regional, national and European identity; e) interdependent self-construal.

Comparison takes place without the presence of an outgroup; *positive* and *negative ingroup bias* are computed by comparing the mean score for each trait, once with regard to the nation and once with regard to Europe. More precisely, the typicality of each trait in describing both the Spanish and Europeans was computed; the difference between the two scores was calculated for each adjective; a D value was therefore associated to each stereotype. *Positive ingroup bias* is the mean of the 4 D values associated to positive traits. *Negative ingroup bias* is the mean of the 4 D values associated to negative traits. Positive and negative ingroup biases can be summarized as a single value: *Differential ingroup bias* is the difference between the two. The sign of this value indicates the presence of an attitude of favouritism towards the national group; if it is a positive value, it is supposed that subjects attribute to their nation more positive than negative features. The opposite can be said if the same value has a negative sign.

The value of the *positive auto-stereotype* was next computed as the mean typicality of positive traits in describing one's nation. The same was done for negative traits. The value of positive auto-stereotype was obtained by subtracting the mean typicality of negative traits from the mean typicality of positive traits. Identification with *regional, national and European identities* was computed as the mean of the five identification items. A score for *interdependence* was the mean of the fifteen self-construal items.

Finally, the correlation between positive auto-stereotyping and national identification was computed to test the first hypothesis. The correlations between interdependence and positive auto-stereotyping and between interdependence and national identification were computed to test the second hypothesis.

Table 1
Factor Loadings for National and European Identity Scales

	National Identity	European Identity
I am glad I am Spanish/European	.828	.708
I identify with other Spanish/European	.885	.760
I see myself as Spanish/Europeans	.592	.896
I am like other Spanish/Europeans	.819	.728
I feel strong ties with other Spanish/European	.695	.830
Variance explained%	59.4	62.1

Note. Factor loadings $>.35$ are presented.

Table 2
Principal Components Analysis for Interdependence Scale

Factor	Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
Adapting to the majority	4.644	30.957	30.957	2.578	17.189	17.189
Collaboration in deciding	1.883	12.555	43.512	2.421	16.143	33.332
Willingness to sacrifice for the group	1.429	9.527	53.039	2.401	16.004	49.335
Importance of relationships	1.113	7.423	60.462	1.669	11.126	60.462

Results

Smith et al. (in press) reported satisfactory reliabilities for the identification and self-concept measures that were used in each of the nations that were included in their study. In the present sample, Cronbach's alpha was satisfactory both for national identification, ($\alpha = .82$) and for European identification, ($\alpha = .84$); similar results were found in the British sample for national identification ($\alpha = .86$) (Smith et al., in press). Mean inter-item correlations computed on the five items are satisfactory as well (they range between .29 and .71 when the scale measures European identification, and between .35 and .69 when it measures national identification). The scale, which is coherent and not repetitive, presents good reliability. It is not necessary to eliminate any items.

Principal Components Analysis for the five items yielded one factor (see Table 1), which accounted for a consistent percentage of variance both for national and European identification (59.4% in the first case and 62.1% in the second).

The self-concept scale also had good reliability ($\alpha = .83$), but inter-item correlations were quite low for this scale ($r = .25$). Principal Components Analysis resulted in four significant factors (see Table 2), on which a varimax rotation was made. Some improvements should be done on this scale, in order to refer the items to a single dimension.

All the adjectives that had been selected as typical of the Spanish were seen as actually representative of the national population. No trait was attributed to the Spanish with a mean score lower than 4 (the neutral point). Figure 1 shows the profile for each of the traits.

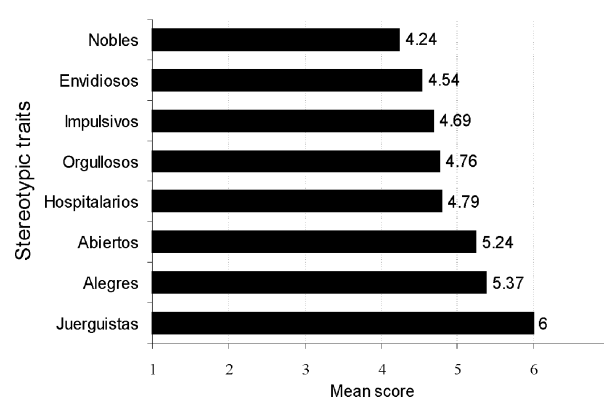


Figure 1. Mean typicality of traits for the Spanish

All the traits, except one (*noble*) were judged as more typical of the Spanish than of Europeans. These results are not surprising, as the adjectives had been chosen to be representative of the national population of Spain. Of greater relevance is the different way in which respondents judged positive and negative traits to be typical of the

Spanish and of Europeans. According to the first hypothesis, subjects should evaluate desirable traits (the positive ones) rather than negative traits as more representative of their nation. In order to test this hypothesis, the difference in typicality for each adjective (typicality for Spain minus typicality for Europeans) was computed. Through these comparisons the measure of *differential ingroup bias* was found. The trait *fun-loving* emerged as most representative of the Spanish, not only when it was evaluated in terms of Spanish typicality, but even when it is compared with European typicality, as is shown by Figure 2.

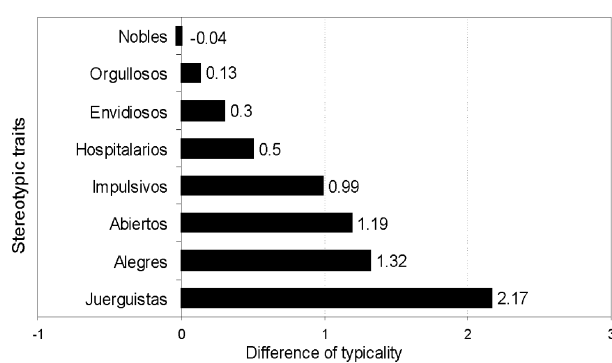


Figure 2. Differences between means for National and European stereotypes

In Sangrador's (1996) study the trait *fun-loving* had been attributed to the Spanish less strongly than other traits such as *happy* and *open*. Another important change, relative to the 1996 data, concerns the positivity of the trait *fun-loving*. *Fun-loving* was chosen as a negative stereotypic trait, on the basis of Sangrador's study; but this adjective was not judged as negative by our sample: on a 7-point Likert scale it obtained a mean score of 4.8. This finding is particularly significant. We focus on this in the discussion section.

The value of differential ingroup bias is negative ($M = -.15$; $SD = .92$), as is the value of positive auto-stereotype ($M = -.08$; $SD = .83$). It seems that for Spanish students the distinctiveness of their nation depends slightly more on negative than on positive features, since they have a negative perception of their own nation, with *negative ingroup bias* ($M = .89$; $SD = .73$) higher than *positive ingroup bias* ($M = .74$; $SD = .73$).

The degree of identification with the region, with Spain and with Europe differs significantly. It rises with the narrowing of the territorial area considered. Regional identification is the highest ($M = 5.26$; $SD = 1.01$). This is significantly higher than identification with Spain ($M = 5.02$; $SD = 1.36$; $t(251) = 3.97$; $p < .001$), different from the others. The Spanish describe themselves as more identified with their nation ($M = 5.02$; $SD = 1.36$), than with Europe ($M = 4.61$; $SD = 1.29$; $t(250) = 6.41$; $p < .001$).

The correlation between national identification and the degree of autostereotyping was next computed in order to test the first hypothesis. Although the value of the positive auto-stereotype is slightly negative, the correlation between national identification and autostereotype is positive and significant ($r = .32$, $N = 263$, $p > .001$). Even the correlation between national identification and differential ingroup bias is significant and positive ($r = .24$, $N = 263$; $p > .001$). These findings confirm hypothesis 1: Spanish students attribute positive stereotypes to their national group the more strongly they identify with their nation. The negative value of *differential ingroup bias* is discussed later.

Interdependent self-construal ($M = 4.95$; $SD = .63$) also correlated positively with the strength of both national identification ($r = .40$; $N = 263$; $p > .001$) and positive auto-stereotyping ($r = .15$; $N = 263$; $p > .01$). Hypothesis 2 is therefore also supported, but less strongly than Hypothesis 1. The final discussion will be centered on the findings related to the first hypothesis, as the scale used to test this hypothesis is valid and reliable; the same cannot be said for the self-construal scale, used to test the second hypothesis, as the Principal Components Analysis indicated.

Discussion

Stereotypes and national identity were defined with particular regard to the most relevant recent studies (Brewer, 1991; Haslam, Oakes, Reynolds, & Turner, 1999; Mlicki & Ellemers, 1996; Ros, Huici, & Gomez, 2000; Salazar 1998; Sangrador, 1996; Tajfel, 1981a), and analysed with the help of the EOS, a questionnaire already used in other European research studies.

The administration of EOS to a Spanish sample has allowed us to test the validity and reliability of the questionnaire and to analyse the way in which Spanish students perceive their national group. The formal structure of EOS can be considered adequate, as no particular resistance was shown by respondents to filling in the questionnaire.

The identification measures show good content validity. Although inter-item correlations are quite low, Cronbach alpha is satisfactory for both national and European identification. The items are homogeneous but different; they seem, therefore, to produce responses that are representative of the universe of contents, which the scale intends to measure.

Spanish students identify quite highly with the ingroup, at the three levels of categorization measured by the EOS. People who live in the capital feel that they belong at the same time to Madrid, to Spain and to Europe. Despite this, the three mean scores are significantly different. These subjects identify especially with their regional identity. Identification with Spain is quite high; according to the hypothesis, subjects should therefore show an attitude of favouritism towards the national group. That is confirmed, as national identity correlated with

positive auto-stereotyping. In spite of this, the value of *differential ingroup bias* is negative, which indicates that Madrilenos students have a slightly negative perception of their nation as a whole; similar findings were obtained from students in several other countries (Smith et al., in press).

The trait evaluated as most typical of the Spanish is the adjective *fun-loving*, which is the feature of a person who loves doing nothing, who prefers to enjoy himself rather than to work. The evaluation of this trait as most representative of the Spanish national population is very significant. It is interesting to compare the findings obtained in Madrid to the ones obtained by Mlicki and Ellemers (1996) in Poland. For both samples the value of *differential ingroup bias* suggests that students have a negative perception of their nation as a whole, but these two values have a very different meaning. The most typical trait of Poles was seen as *alcohol abusing*, which is an obviously negative feature. On the contrary, the trait *fun-loving* can express a feature that might be evaluated in a positive way. That is just what this sample did, evaluating the adjective as positive. Furthermore, the correlation between auto-stereotyping and national identification is positive and significant. This indicates that the subjects who identify most with their nation are the ones who attribute positive traits to their national group. This is one of the most interesting findings obtained. The way in which people represent "being Spanish" is quite complex; an interpretation of these data is therefore articulated.

The evaluation that the students make of the Spanish nation might seem slightly negative at first sight; but if data are considered as a whole, the conclusions are not the same. It is the high score attributed to the trait *fun-loving* on the first scale, which determines the high value of *negative ingroup bias* and therefore the sign of *differential ingroup bias*.

If we compare Sangrador's (1996) findings to the ones obtained through EOS, we realise that the meaning of the trait *fun-loving* has changed over the years. This change can be explained in the light of Tajfel's (1981a) Social Identity Theory. Tajfel states that people can improve their social image in many ways, if social comparison is not favourable. In the case of national identity, social mobility, that is the possibility of changing the ingroup, is a plausible but extreme solution. The boundaries of the national group can be considered practically impermeable. Social mobility corresponds to emigration: many persons do not want to emigrate, for both economical and affective reasons; this option is a drastic solution, which can be contemplated only under dramatic conditions. Moreover, even though emigration is chosen, it is not so easy to obtain a new nationality. It is much easier to choose alternative strategies to improve one's social image. These kinds of strategies are described as forms of social creativity. One of them consists in categorizing oneself as a member of a subculture or a supra-culture; that is, to strengthen regional or European identification. This could have happened in our sample, as identification with the region is significantly higher.

Another possibility is to change the direction of the social comparison process, trying not to be evaluated with regard to those features on which the group could be considered inferior. Members of the group can propose new features, which become an object of comparison or they can modify the value associated to already existing ones. The meaning of a specific feature, which the group possesses can be changed by attributing a positive value to it. This is just what the Spanish seem to do: *fun-loving* becomes a positive feature; if before it was a fault, as emerged from Sangrador's study, now it is considered a positive quality. This change is possible because stereotypes are not rigid structures; their content and their connotation depend on contextual aspects. If the context changes, stereotypes change as well.

Cultural aspects of a specific context influence the auto-stereotyping process; it is interesting to observe that countries which share some cultural features can share even some autostereotypes; this can happen in Spain and Central and Southern America, which share a Latin heritage. In particular we can compare our findings to the ones obtained in a study carried out among Mexican children (Valdez, González, Reyes & Gil, 1996). In this study, some traits emerged as more representative of the Mexicans; some of them, such as *friendly (amigable)* and *enthusiast (entusiasta)* are very similar to the ones attributed by our sample to the Spanish, such as *open (abiertos)* and *happy (alegres)*; even the trait *fun-loving*, which is the one evaluated as more typical in our study, is indicated in Valdez et al. study as representative of the Mexicans.

In our case, two types of context must be considered. The first is the national one. In the last 20 years Spain has undergone deep political modifications, which are generally followed by relevant cultural changes. This has been caused by the concomitance of two independent and parallel processes: the progressive integration of nations into Europe and the birth of the Spanish Autonomous Communities. The autonomization of regional realities has been a natural consequence of the recognition of the sociocultural plurality characterizing Spain. Many ethnic groups are in fact present in this nation; these groups not only live in a specific zone of Spain, but even have distinctive traits, both from a historical and a cultural point of view (Sangrador, 1996). When the Spanish Constitution gave political support to the Autonomous Communities, concrete boundaries were established, and the existence of distinct human groups became even more evident. This may have led people to change their attitude towards their own regional and national realities.

On the one hand, the need for distinctiveness can lead to a strengthening of regional stereotypes; on the other, the need for assimilation leads to the definition of a shared identity. This can be found in a re-definition of national identity, which is the feature that the inhabitants of every community have in common.

The processes that we have described have surely influenced the image that the Spanish have of themselves; the national auto-stereotype may have changed as well. Identity originates from social comparison, and is the result of a relational process: if inter-group relationships change, social identity will change too. Cultural changes are not concomitant to external changes; before they show up, it is necessary for time to pass, during which the change can be elaborated. These are very deep changes, which can influence the structure of one's social identity.

Nevertheless, we need to take into consideration the structure of the sample used: young people, whose average age was 21. A cultural change can be observed more easily in the new generation: adults find more difficulty in assuming a new vision of things. On the contrary, young people naturally absorb, through assimilation processes, cultural aspects, which surround them, different from how they appeared to the previous generation.

The tendencies towards regional independence and towards European integration have opposite directions, but they have the same power of threatening the image of Spain as a distinct and integrated nation. This may have led the Spanish to look for a new common dimension of belonging, in order to assure a clear specificity of their own nation. The need for distinctiveness can be observed in the choice of *fun-loving* as the most typical trait of the Spanish national population; the other traits present in the list, such as *happy* or *open* can more equally be attributed to other European populations; they are those features which are usually defined as typical of Southern European countries (Von Erhenfels, 1957). To be *fun-loving* is a clearly distinctive feature, which more sharply separates Spanish identity from others.

There are many ways in which members of Western countries try to strengthen their national identity; Billig (1995) introduced the concept of banal nationalism in order to express the continual reminders of nationhood that are typical of established nations. Nationhood provides a continual background for the political and cultural life of Western countries; there are many elements that stress one's national identity in everyday life, producing a familiarity with and strengthening of one's national identity. These embodied habits of social life play an important role in the formation of one's national identity. They can be seen as familiar forms of a nationalism which Billig calls "banal", as it is present in our life without being consciously evident.

The second type of context to be taken into consideration is the comparative one. The nature of social comparison may moderate the need for positive identity. If the respondent is asked to compare the ingroup to an outgroup (intergroup comparison), the need to show a positive social image is higher; when an outgroup is present

auto-categorization at one level becomes salient. This can produce a higher identification at that level (Haslam et al., 1999). With EOS, there is no direct comparison; subjects are asked to express their identification with three kinds of ingroup; as no outgroup is named in the questionnaire, there would be a less strong need for favouring the ingroup. In this sense, the sample is not particularly stimulated to describe the national group in a positive way. On the contrary, subjects are motivated to distinguish the national group from a larger European context, towards which people do not need to express their superiority, Europe being an ingroup as well.

Furthermore, we can take into consideration the concept of comparative identity. Our sample seems to have a high and positive comparative identity, as regional identification is significantly higher than national identification. As a consequence, a clear attitude of favouritism towards the ingroup would be observed in a context of comparison between regions, which we did not study. EOS elicits comparison of one's own nation to the larger European context. It is normal, according to this theory, that they do not show a high need for differentiating the national group in a positive way. We can conclude that in our sample the need for showing a positive national image is present but not so evident.

Some methodological proposals can be made; it would be interesting to add to EOS another scale, in which the same stereotypic traits could be evaluated with reference to the regional population; this could be a very relevant element, although respondents judge the traits as typical of their nation, they might not think they are representative of their region. This is related to selective auto-stereotyping (Biernat, Vescio, & Green, 1996). Some changes could also be made to the self-construal scale, in order to improve its construct validity. It would be interesting to administer EOS to other Spanish regions; if data from different regions of Spain could be compared, a more detailed and complete analysis of the Spanish reality in this period of change could be undertaken.

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Appendix A**Items from the European Opinion Survey (Spanish Version)**

Traits: Alegres, Orgullosos, Abiertos, Juerguistas, Hospitalarios, Impulsivos, Nobles, Envidiosos.

Identification Items:

Me gusta ser español/a

Me siento muy unido a los españoles/as

Me identifico con otros españoles/as

Me veo a mí mismo/a como un español/a

Soy un español/a más

Self-construal items:

Antes de tomar decisiones importantes, consulto a otras personas

Consulto a colegas sobre asuntos relacionados con el trabajo

Sacrificaría mis propios intereses en beneficio de los del grupo

No abandono el grupo cuando éste pasa por dificultades

Respeto las decisiones que se toman en el grupo

Si me necesitan, sigo en el grupo, aunque no me sienta feliz

Colaboro para mantener la armonía en el grupo

En el grupo respeto el deseo de la mayoría

Si me necesitan, no abandono el grupo, aunque no esté a gusto en él

Intento acatar las costumbres y los acuerdos en el trabajo

Tengo muy en cuenta las dificultades de los demás, de manera que se puedan cumplir los objetivos del trabajo

Es mejor confiar en otros y conocer su opinión antes de hacer algo

Es importante consultar a los amigos más cercanos y saber su opinión antes de tomar una decisión

Mis relaciones con otros son más importantes que lo que pueda conseguir

Ayudo a la gente que conozco, aunque me resulte incómodo