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# Police officers' stereotype content and its evolution over two decades: From "neither nice nor able" to "still not nice but able"

*Évolution du contenu de stéréotype des policiers sur vingt ans : tout aussi mal appréciés mais un peu plus compétents et responsables*

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## Abstract

This research examined French female students' stereotype concerning the socio-professional group of police officers, and its evolution between 1986 and 2010 using both the adjective checklist and the percentage estimates procedures. Results revealed that over the last 24 years (1) different traits were used to describe police officers, reflecting the fact that the stereotype changed in content; (2) stereotype consensus has globally decreased; and (3) the relatively low favorableness of the stereotype remained unchanged. Taken together, these findings suggest that French female students' negative perception of the police officers did not undergo substantially

## Résumé

Cette recherche avait pour objectif principal d'analyser l'évolution du stéréotype de jeunes étudiantes à l'égard des policiers entre 1986 et 2010. Les résultats recueillis à l'aide des tâches classiques d'attribution de traits et d'attribution de pourcentages montrent qu'en l'espace de 24 ans (1) des traits différents ont été choisis pour décrire les policiers, suggérant que le contenu du stéréotype a changé; (2) le caractère consensuel du stéréotype a globalement diminué et (3) la favorabilité du stéréotype, assez faible, est restée relativement stable. Plus précisément, ils suggèrent que les policiers restent toujours mal appréciés par les jeunes étudiantes, même s'ils sont perçus comme un

## Key-words

Adjective checklist method, percentage estimates method, police officer, stereotype change, youth

## Mots-clés

Attribution de traits, attribution de pourcentages, policiers, évolution du stéréotype, jeunes

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changes over time, although police officers are nowadays acknowledged to be relatively more competent. The implications of this research for the social perception of police officers and its methodological limitations are discussed.

peu plus compétents. L'intérêt et les limites notamment méthodologiques de cette recherche sont discutés.

According to social psychologists social stereotypes affect intergroup relations by influencing people's attitudes and behavior towards the members of stereotyped groups. However, only a few studies have explored the evolution of the stereotype content over time. And among them rare are those interested in socio-professional categories that assign specific roles, functions or missions to its members (Carlson & Sutton, 1975; Eagly, 1987; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Gatto, Dambrun, Kerbrat, & De Oliveira, 2010). We argue that the evolution of these roles or missions will affect people's stereotypical beliefs making them particularly open to change. Among the various socio-professional categories, the category of police officers appears particularly interesting. In charge of maintaining or restoring law and order, the police has a controversial image in various social groups. Police officers, because of their uniform, the nature and the frequency of their interventions are, like other salient categories (e.g., gender or race) a privileged target of stereotypes (Fiske, Lin, & Neuberg, 1999; Czopp & Monteith, 2006). Moreover, stereotypes towards the police are difficult to challenge because of the specificity of the interactions with its members which most of the time take place in exceptional circumstances (Tuohy & Wrennall, 1995). While several studies examined the prejudice of police officers towards various social groups (Gatto et al., 2010; Gatto & Dambrun, 2010; Plant & Peruche, 2005; Wortley & Homel, 1995), none, to our knowledge, explored the stereotype content of this category with the classical procedures, such as the adjective checklist or the percentage estimates. In the present study, we replicated a study that was carried out for the first time in 1986 and which assessed French female students' stereotypes towards police officers. This allowed us to examine whether its content, consensus and favorableness has changed over the past 24 years.

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POLICE OFFICERS' STEREOTYPE CONTENT

Many opinion polls carried out in France at the end of the eighties (CREDOC, 1990; Gorgeon, 1994; Martin, 1990; Renouard, 1993) unanimously showed that police officers were perceived very negatively by young people aged between 15 and 25 years, independently of their socio-economic status, their sex and their level of education. Although they viewed the police as an institution necessary for the control of crime and for the protection of peoples' lives and properties, they perceived them as a category discredited by its members. Police officers were considered as inefficient, incompetent, and persecutory, aggressive in their interventions, poorly educated, and full of prejudices. The same negative image of police officers also appeared in the rare social psychological studies carried out in the same period in other countries (Hewstone, Hopkins & Routh, 1992; Hopkins, Hewstone & Hantzi, 1992; Moser & Pascual, 1991). Some events that occurred during the last 24 years could have contributed to improve the image of police officers (e.g., a more demanding recruitment policy; the modernization of the police; the creation of an Institute of Advanced Studies of Interior Security "IHESI"; see also the Observatory of Communautarism, 2009). Other events, on the contrary, could have contributed to the persistence of the negative image of the police, and even to its deterioration (e.g., a strong media coverage of fatal police errors; see Jobard, 2002; the riots in the French suburbs; see Mucchielli & Goaziou, 2007). Consequently, one may ask whether the negative image of the police can still be found in young people's stereotypical beliefs and whether these beliefs have changed over the last two decades. From this point of view, young female students, who are normally less exposed to police interventions (e.g., identity checks) than their male counterparts, constitute an ideal sub-group for the study of stereotype changes because their stereotypical beliefs are less biased by negative personal experiences.

In order to investigate changes in stereotype content, consensus and favorableness with regard to police officers, we adapted the adjective checklist procedure developed by Katz and Braly (1933). Several follow-ups of this pioneering study carried out at intervals of 10 to 20 years (Devine & Elliot, 1995; Gilbert, 1951; Karlins, Coffman, & Walters, 1969; Madon et al., 2001) revealed

three main tendencies. First, some traits persisted, but new traits appeared too. Second, the consensus for the “traditional” traits weakened over time, but the consensus for the new traits was strong (Devine & Elliot, 1995; Madon et al., 2001). Third, while the stereotypes for the majority of the ethnic and national groups became overall more positive, this was not the case for groups involved in conflicting sociopolitical relationships, such as the Japanese shortly after World War II (Gilbert, 1951; Sinha & Upadhyaya, 1960). These studies were exclusively devoted to changes in ethnic and national stereotypes; and it remains an open question as to whether stereotype content of other social groups such as police officers could also change over time. However, the above-mentioned studies were criticized for suffering from several methodological shortcomings which we tried to improve in our study. The first criticism concerns the limits of the classical adjective checklist procedure (Katz & Braly, 1933). According to Brigham (1971), the frequency with which participants choose a trait informs us about the consensual character of their choice, rather than the prevalence of this trait in a given group. The percentage estimates task which consists of estimating the probability that the members of a given group possess a given trait allows for the measure of its prevalence (i.e., its typicality; Brigham, 1971). The joint use of these two tasks offers thus the possibility to measure the stereotype content (typicality), in addition to the appreciation of its consensual nature. The second criticism concerns the standard measure of the traits’ favorableness. Contrary to previous studies (Karlins et al., 1969; Madon et al., 2001) which estimated the favorableness of the stereotypical traits of the “older” samples from the scores obtained from the “recent” sample, we measured the favorableness of the stereotypical traits for each sample at the moment we assessed its content and its consensual character. Thus, for the first time, we can directly compare the evolution of the favorableness of police officers’ stereotype over the past 24 years.

## Method

### **Participants**

The present study was carried out in 1986 and in 2010 and mobilized French female students in all (247 participants in 1986, and 201 participants in 2010). All participants whose age ranged from 19 to 24 years were enrolled in social sciences classes (except psychology and sociology).

### **Material and procedure**

Participants completed individually a questionnaire containing one of three tasks: the adjective checklist task, the percentage estimates task, or the trait favorableness task. The adjective checklist was completed by 177 respondents in 1986 and 111 in 2010, the percentage estimates task was carried out by 40 respondents in 1986 and 60 in 2010, and the trait favorableness ratings were done by 30 respondents in 1986 and 30 in 2010. All participants included in the study indicated that they did not have a police officer among their close relationships or friends.

#### *Adjective checklist*

The stereotype content about police officers and its evolution was measured with the adjective checklist procedure (Katz & Braly, 1933). The adjectives were taken from a pilot study carried out in 1986, in which 30 participants were asked to eliminate among a list of 96 adjectives (taken from various studies on social perception), those which were hardly ever used in everyday life or which were redundant. The final list of adjectives comprised 52 traits, including 26 positive traits and 26 negative traits. Participants were instructed to mark with an "X" the traits and attributes which, according to them, characterized police officers best.

#### *Percentage estimates*

In order to measure the prevalence of traits attributed to police officers and its evolution, participants of the two samples were presented a list of 12 traits. Six of these traits were stereotypical (chosen by at least 45% of the participants in 1986) and the

remaining six traits were non-stereotypical (chosen by less than 10% of the participants in 1986). The questionnaire instructed participants to estimate the probability with which each of these 12 traits characterize police officers on a scale ranging from 0% to 100%.

### ***Trait favorableness***

In order to measure the positive or negative connotation of the 12 traits used in the percentage estimates task, the 12 traits were presented randomly with the instruction to indicate their valence (1: very negative; 7: very positive).

### **Results**

#### *Stereotype content and consensus with the adjective checklist*

We calculated for each sample, and for each of the 52 traits, the percentage of participants who endorsed each trait as descriptive of police officers (traits marked with an “X”). We defined the stereotype content as the traits chosen by at least 45 % of participants. The results showed that in 1986, participants perceived police officers as being suspicious (64.97%), obedient (56.49%), nationalist (56.49%), aggressive (55.93%), rigid (50.28%) and submissive (46.32%). However, none of the six stereotypical traits was chosen by the participants of the 2010 sample as characterizing police officers (see Table1). Indeed, 24 years later, participants perceive police officers as being authoritarian (63.96%), proud (49.54%), cold (46.54%) and vigilant (45.97%). This means that they spontaneously assigned different stereotypical traits to them.

As for the non-stereotypical traits, in 1986 police officers were not at all perceived as intelligent (0%), and rarely as careful (2.25%), responsible (5.64%), calculating (6.21%), dynamic (6.77%), or competent (7.90%). In 2010 they were still rarely perceived as intelligent (5.40%), careful (5.40%), dynamic (6.30%), skilful (7.20%) or trustworthy (9.90%). Furthermore, we examined the changes in stereotype consensus over time by calculating the mean frequencies for the 12 most selected traits in 1986 and in 2010 (see Table 1). The mean frequency for these 12 traits was

	1986		2010	
	(n=177)		(n=111)	
	Number of occurrences	Frequency	Number of occurrences	Frequency
Suspicious	115	64.97	42	37.83
Obedient	100	56.49	30	27.02
Nationalist	100	56.49	32	28.82
Aggressive	99	55.93	32	28.82
Rigid	89	50.28	39	35.15
Submissive	82	46.32	18	16.21
Authoritarian	70	39.54	71	63.96
Cold	65	36.72	52	46.84
Vigilant	62	35.02	51	45.94
Unlikeable	50	28.24	28	25.22
Impulsive	46	25.98	30	27.02
Proud	32	18.07	55	49.54
Voluntary	32	18.07	26	23.42
Confident	22	12.42	11	9.90
Calm	17	9.60	14	12.60
Competent	14	7.90	16	14.41
Dynamic	12	6.77	7	6.30
Calculating	11	6.21	13	11.71
Responsible	10	5.64	30	27.02
Skilful	10	5.64	8	7.20
Careful	4	2.25	6	5.40
Intelligent	0	0	6	5.40

TABLE 1:  
Number of occurrences and frequency of the traits obtained with the adjective checklist in 1986 and 2010 (chosen by at least 5% of one of the two samples)

46.5% in 1986 and dropped to 36.03% in 2010 indicating that the stereotype became less consensual over time.

### *Stereotypicality of traits with the percentage estimates*

In order to measure the evolution of the stereotype content in a more direct way, we compared participants' percentage estimates concerning the probability that police officers possess the 12 critical traits (the six most selected and the six least selected traits by the 1986 sample). Results revealed that in 2010, police officers were perceived equally suspicious, nationalist, aggressive and rigid as in 1986 (all  $t_s < 1.42$ ). However, they were perceived as less

obedient and submissive in 2010 compared to 1986 ( $t[98] = 2.49$  and  $4.05$ ,  $ps = .014$  and  $.001$ , two-tailed). At the same time, they were perceived as more competent, intelligent and responsible in 2010 compared to 1986 (all  $ts[98] > 2.04$ , all  $ps < .05$ ).

### *Trait favorableness ratings*

A comparison of the perceived favorableness of the traits in 1986 and 2010 revealed that it did not change over time (see Table 2). However, two negative traits (submissive and obedient) became less characteristic of police officers, while three positive traits (intelligent, competent and responsible) became more descriptive of them. To determine the extent to which stereotypes have changed over time we also calculated a favorableness score (see Karlins et al., 1969) by multiplying the valence of each stereotypical trait with the frequency with which it was selected. The sum of the resulting values was then divided by the total frequency. The results presented in Tables 1 and 2 show that the mean favorableness of the stereotypical traits which was rather weak, did not change significantly between 1986 and 2010 (respectively  $M = 2.95$  and  $M = 3.73$ ;  $t(22) = 0.51$ , *ns.*).

TABLE 2:  
Mean and standard  
deviation for the  
relative frequency and  
favorableness of the  
traits in 1986 and 2010

	1986 (n=40)			2010 (n=60)		
	M	SD	Favorableness	M	SD	Favorableness
Suspicious	75	18.43	2.74	69.33	24.32	3.10
Obedient	75.5	20.15	3.48	63.91	24.3	3.71
Nationalist	70.25	21.12	3.22	63.16	26.19	3.10
Submissive	69.25	18.44	1.80	49.83	26.26	1.63
Aggressive	65	17.98	2.51	59.16	21.49	2.96
Rigid	65	17.32	2.66	66.25	16.86	2.66
Dynamic	50.75	21.89	6.10	55.33	22.45	6.20
Calculating	49.75	17.98	2.64	53.33	25.55	3.03
Responsible	45.75	16.22	5.90	55.29	20.89	6.23
Competent	44.25	18.18	5.77	50.91	14.3	6.30
Careful	44.25	16.36	4.83	38	21.53	5.46
Intelligent	36.5	22.81	5.96	47.16	22.19	6.56

POLICE OFFICERS' STEREOTYPE CONTENT

## **Discussion**

This research examined whether French female students' stereotypes towards police officers have changed in content, consensus and favorableness between 1986 and 2010. The results of the adjective checklist task revealed that respondents did not choose the same traits in 1986 and 2010 suggesting that stereotype content underwent some changes over the last 24 years. However, they also showed that the negative valence of the stereotype did not change radically. In 1986, all six stereotypical traits were negatively connoted; and in 2010, 75% of the traits were still negative. Finally, the measurement of the evolution of the stereotype with the percentage estimates task revealed both the stability of some traits and the change of others: police officers were considered as equally suspicious, nationalist, aggressive and rigid, and to a lesser extent as equally calculating, careful and dynamic in 2010 as in 1986. However, in 2010 they appeared less obedient and submissive, and more intelligent, competent and responsible than in 1986.

This tendency, which suggests an evolution of the police stereotype, can be discussed within the framework of the Stereotype Content Model (SCM; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). According to the SCM, the evolution of the stereotype content does not exclude that its organization remains stable. In a nutshell, stereotype content is organized in two dimensions, warmth and competence. The first dimension refers to the benevolent or malicious intentions attributed to the members of an outgroup while the second dimension refers to the evaluation of the outgroup's capacity to pursue them. Furthermore, the SCM postulates that stereotype content can be positive or negative on both dimensions, but can also be mixed, i.e.; positive on one dimension and negative on the other. Our results suggest a possible evolution of a negative stereotype of police officers towards a mixed stereotype. Indeed, the positive traits (i.e., intelligent, competent, responsible) and negative traits (i.e., submissive and obedient) related to the dimension of competence become respectively more and less characteristic of the police officers in 2010. However, the negative traits related to dimension of warmth (suspicious, aggressive, nationalist, and

rigid) persisted. Although still disliked by female students, police officers seem to have gained some competence in their eyes. We are aware that the scope of these results is limited. Their impact could have been increased by taking into account other groups of young people, as well as by a detailed analysis of the sociopolitical or economic events capable of modifying the social status of police officers (i.e., their competence) and/or the nature of the relation with them (i.e., their warmth).

Our research raises also some important methodological considerations related to the joint use of the adjective checklist procedure and the percentage estimates task. First, even though different traits were spontaneously selected by the respondents of the two samples as descriptive of police officers suggesting a stereotype change, the same traits were viewed as typical for police officers when using the percentage estimates task, suggesting the stability of the stereotype content over time. However, forcing participants to estimate the probability that police officers possess a given "old" trait (perceived as typical in 1986) can lead to an underestimation of stereotype change (Madon et al., 2001). Moreover, the communicability of a trait, that is, the degree with which it is used in the social discourse, has been shown to affect stereotype persistence and change over time (Schaller, Conway, & Tanchuk, 2002). In other words, the more a trait is used in daily communication, the more it tends to persist over time. Thus, the elimination of rarely used traits in our pilot study may have increased the probability to over-estimate their stability.

The weaker mean frequencies of trait attributions in 2010 compared to 1986 indicated that the 2010 sample held a less consensual stereotype about police officers. This decrease in stereotype consensus can be explained by an increased sensitivity to the items, by a greater control of stereotype expression in participants of 2010 (resulting in a weaker standard deviation in 2010 compared to 1986; 16.22 versus 21.14, respectively), or by the presence of stronger social norms protecting police officers against prejudice in 2010 than in 1986. The results of a study by Crandall, Eshleman and O' Brian (2002) concerning the acceptability of prejudice towards 105 social groups showed a relatively

low acceptability of prejudice with regard to police officers. Therefore, the use of implicit methods to measure individuals' stereotypes seems more appropriate, even if it is not always easy to ensure their validity (De Houwer, 2006). In spite of these limitations, our results suggest that it is possible to examine the evolution of stereotypical beliefs shared by a group with regard to another group by situating them in a social temporality. Conducting this kind of studies in a more systematic way, by varying the type of social categories, the periods of data collection and the respondents' characteristics could contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of intergroup relations.

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Épreuve de contrôle