

# Irish descendants in America: An exploration of schematic representations and societal implications

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There has been very little research investigating the schema that Americans possess of the Irish. The purpose of this paper is twofold: Firstly, we wanted to establish a set of attributes that Americans relate to the Irish, and secondly, we wanted to explore how the Irish stereotype impacts judgments about those of Irish descent. In Studies 1a and 1b we empirically examined attributes most commonly associated with the Irish. These studies indicate that the “alcohol consumer” attribute is a strong component of the Irish stereotype. In Study 2 we provided further evidence for this stereotype attribute by manipulating availability of cognitive resources. In Study 3 we empirically demonstrated how this stereotype attribute can put people of Irish descent at a relative disadvantage.

## Introduction

Early immigration in America truly represented a cross section of different nationalities. Many groups of peoples sought refuge and advantage in the new land of America. However, one group that became disproportionately represented in the tide of immigration was the Irish. Driven mostly by environmental and political pressures, the Irish became a dominant aspect within the core of American society. Carrying with them many of their customs and beliefs, Irish immigrants blended well into American society and played a major role in the development of contemporary American culture.

While Irish influence in the development of American culture seems incontrovertible, there is a speculative nature to what particular beliefs and associations may have developed about those of Irish descent. The memorable clichés such as “luck of the Irish,” shamrocks, and St. Patrick’s Day permeate contemporary American society. However, alongside these associations the more deleterious belief about Irish immigrants’ abuse of alcohol appears to have developed (Miller, 1985). For example, Stivers (1976) identified how many Americans think of the Irish in America as being “happy drinkers”.

While the association of Irish immigrants with alcohol use has been reported in many other countries (Greenslade, Pearson, & Madden, 1995), in the present investigation we focus on how this belief is existent and relevant within the US.

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### **From traits to stereotypes**

A core aspect of how people function involves categorisation of the social world around them. As such, when we encounter people we assign them to particular groups or categories. This approach allows us to represent and understand a complex world in a relatively easy and simple way (e.g. Allport, 1954; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Hewstone, 1989; Seta & Seta, 1993).

Schemas refer to cognitive frameworks that represent a particular stimulus. More specialised schemas are known as stereotypes; they detail specific beliefs and characteristics of a particular group. Stereotypes taint new information that we encounter about members of a stereotyped group. The result is that stereotyped groups are seen as being homogenous (Linville, Fischer, & Salovey, 1989) and when individuals do not fit or “disconfirm” the stereotype, they are still seen as being consistent with the stereotype (Kunda & Oleson, 1995; O’Sullivan & Durso, 1984). Research also suggests that this process seems to take place at very early stages of information processing (Dovidio, Evans & Tyler, 1986; Kawakami & Dovidio, 2001) and even without awareness (Fazio & Hilden, 2001). In short, stereotypes have a powerful influence on how we process social information (Yzerbyt, Rocher, & Schradron, 1997) in the world around us.

Indeed, research identifies a particularly profound role that stereotypes play in processing information about people of other groups. Another aspect of this research is how stereotypes influence attitudes towards and treatment of the stereotyped group members. Not surprisingly, it seems that merely thinking about members of a stereotyped group is sufficient to elicit a stereotype-based response (Spencer, Fein, Wolfe, Fong, & Dunn, 1998).

There is also a fair amount of evidence that stereotypes may be activated and used automatically. Research by Gaertner and McLaughlin (1983) demonstrated that people could identify paired letter strings more quickly if they were consistent with the stereotype (e.g. Blacks - welfare). Devine (1989) found evidence that stereotype activation was unconscious by subliminally presenting stereotype stimuli below the level of conscious awareness. Later research has found that stereotypes are more evident when cognitive resources are diminished. For example, Bodenhausen (1990) found that when circadian time-of-day was mismatched (e.g. morningness type in the evening) participants were more likely to display stereotype-consistent responses. Further evidence can be found with tasks involving time constraint, such as the weapon identification task (e.g. Correll, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2002; Greenwald, Oakes, & Hoffman, 2003).

While stereotypes hold obvious influence in everyday life, research has shown that not all information pertaining to a target (e.g. an out-group) may be equal. Specifically, research has shown that some attributes, such as warm or frigid, are better classified as traits whereas others, such as redneck or hard worker, are better thought of as social stereotypes (Andersen & Klatzky, 1987; Andersen, Klatzky, & Murray, 1990; Klatzky & Andersen, 1988). According to this view, stereotypes are relatively more in depth in their associations, visual, distinct in detail, and more efficient than trait labels.

### **Summary and predictions**

Very limited research has investigated the schematic properties associated with the Irish in America; far less has been devoted to understanding potential implications for those of

Irish descent. This paper is devoted to addressing this void. While we recognise that there may be many attributes associated with the Irish that are socially desirable and productive (e.g. hard-working, friendly), we wanted to focus our investigation on attributes that may put Americans of Irish descent at a particular disadvantage. Thus, awareness of stereotype information has important implications, especially given that stereotypes are often automatically activated and lead to discriminatory behavior without a person's conscious awareness (e.g. Devine, 1989; Lepore & Brown, 1997).

To examine our question, we first set out to explore what attributes individuals in American culture associate with Americans of Irish descent. Our analysis revealed that alcohol consumption, what we term the "alcohol consumer<sup>1</sup>," was the foremost attribute associated with the Irish and fits the criteria for stereotype-based information (Andersen & Klatzky, 1987). Based upon these findings, we utilised a distraction task to further establish that "alcohol consumer" is a stereotype attribute associated with the American Irish. Next, we focused our attention on how this particular attribute of the Irish-American stereotype can put those of Irish descent at a particular disadvantage. We hypothesised that, because of the alcohol consumer attribute, an individual of Irish descent will be judged as having a higher likelihood of guilt in a situation involving alcohol consumption, relative to a person who does not appear to be of Irish descent.

### **Study 1a**

#### **Participants and procedure**

Thirty-six undergraduate students were asked to take part in the study. Twenty of the participants were female, fifteen were male and one did not report gender. After consenting to take part, participants were asked to indicate five things that they associate with the Irish and write them down. After completing the questionnaire, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

#### **Results**

To determine what stereotypic traits people associate with the Irish, we collected all of the participants' responses and tallied the results. For ease of description, a few of the terms with very similar descriptions were combined. The findings from this study are reported in Table 1. As can be seen, participants had some variability in what they reported, with a few traits emerging more often than others. It should be noted that most of the attributes would be classified as what Andersen & Klatzky (1987) term traits. It would appear that "friendly," "rowdy" and alcohol consuming are the three attributes that fit the stereotype classification. Almost ubiquitous across participants (all but three) was the association of Irish with alcohol consuming behavior (see Table 1). Almost all of the descriptor terms used for this attribute could be captured under the term "alcohol consumer".

### **Study 1b**

#### **Participants and procedure**

A separate set of 30 students took part in this study. All of the participants were

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<sup>1</sup> We chose the term "alcohol consumer" rather than the "happy drinkers" description used by Stivers (1976) because it was more encompassing of overall responses.

Table 1. Mean total frequency of attributes associated with the Irish.

Attribute	Frequency
Alcohol consumer (e.g. beer, drunk, alcoholic, boozier)	48
St. Patrick's Day	40
Green	21
Potatoes	15
Shamrock	15
Hair color (red, blonde)	14
Leprechaun	10
Clovers	7
Notre Dame	5
Blarney	5
Rowdy (fighting)	4
U2	4
Celtic music	3
Friendly	3
Rainbows	3

undergraduate students at Appalachian State University. The sample consisted of 21 females and nine males. Participants were provided with the top three attributes gathered from Study 1a (see Table 1). Participants were asked to rate the respective attribute as an aspect associated with the Irish on an 11-point scale where 0 represented “not at all associated” and 10 represented “very associated”.

## Results

In this study we set out to determine how strongly participants would rate each of the attributes as being associated with those of Irish descent. As prior research has shown, an increased rating on this type of scaling indicates greater stereotypic association. Our analysis showed that alcohol consumption ( $M = 8.1$ ), St. Patrick's Day ( $M = 8.3$ ) and the color green ( $M = 7.4$ ) were all rated as being highly associated with the Irish, results that are consistent with the previous study. This finding also supports our contention that the “alcohol consumer” is an attribute of the Irish stereotype.

## Study 2

In Studies 1a and 1b we showed that, among our participants, the “alcohol consumer” is a pervasive aspect of the Irish stereotype. In Study 2 we wanted to further test for evidence supporting this contention. As prior research has shown, people respond more in accordance with their stereotypes for judgments when they have reduced cognitive resources (e.g. Bodenhausen, 1990; Macrae, Bodenhausen, Schloerscheidt, & Milne, 1999; Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994). In Study 2 we relied on this research to develop a means for further validating and testing predictions for the Irish stereotype. To do so, we constructed a hypothetical scenario involving a person with an Irish name

(O’Kelly) and possible illegal drinking. We provided participants with this task while they were under normal conditions (no distractions) or under conditions of reduced cognitive resources (distraction task). If alcohol consumption is an aspect of the Irish stereotype, then we would expect that reducing cognitive resources should lead participants to respond in a more stereotypic manner (i.e. greater likelihood of guilt).

## **Method**

### *Participants and design*

Fifty participants from Appalachian State University took part in our study. The design of our study was a one-way factorial design with distraction/no distraction acting as our independent variable and participants’ perceived likelihood of guilt as our dependent variable.

### *Procedure*

Participants took part in the study individually. After arriving for the study, they were randomly assigned to a condition of distraction or no distraction. Participants in the distraction condition were seated at a computer and given headphones, whereas those assigned to the no distraction condition were seated at the same computer but not given headphones. After participants made themselves comfortable they were provided with written instructions wherein they were informed that they would be answering a series of questions. Participants in the distraction condition were additionally told that they would be listening to a five minute audio file that contained a short story and that they should count the number of times they heard the word “green” within the short story. After acknowledging that they understood the directions and were ready to begin, participants were provided with several unrelated tasks<sup>2</sup> and our hypothetical situation. Specifically, the hypothetical task read as follows:

Recently, Sean O’Kelly and three passengers were stopped at a checkpoint on US 321 between Boone and Blowing Rock at 2:30am. Due to a smell of alcohol, police suspected O’Kelly of driving while impaired; however, they were unable to administer a breathalyser at the scene. After determining the nightclub where O’Kelly had been that evening, police contacted employees and patrons who gave statements that O’Kelly could have been intoxicated at the time of leaving the nightclub at 2:15am. O’Kelly denies drinking, and states that he was a designated driver.

Directly after this scenario, participants were asked to rate how likely they thought it was that the person was driving while impaired. They were asked to respond on a 10-point scale ranging from “not very likely” to “extremely likely”. After completing the task,

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<sup>2</sup> The unrelated tasks were included to ensure that participants in the distraction condition were well into the story before they evaluated our alcohol consumption task. We purposely put together very benign tasks to avoid any type of interference. First, participants were asked to place a mark directly in the middle of 3 lines that were presented approximately 2-inches apart and 4-inches in length. Next, they were asked to imagine that they were preparing lasagna for dinner and had purchased beef. We then asked them to rate the expected quality of the beef on a 5-point scale. Directly following these two tasks, the alcohol consumption scenario was presented.

participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

## Results

As prior research has shown, when people have limited cognitive resources, such as through distraction, they rely more on stereotypes for making judgments. Therefore we hypothesised that under conditions of distraction, participants evaluating the Irish individual involved in a potential alcohol incident would display higher levels of perceived guilt relative to participants who were not distracted. To test this prediction, we performed a one-way ANOVA with level of distraction acting as the independent variable and participants' reported likelihood of guilt as the dependent variable. The results of this analysis revealed that participants in the distraction condition did report significantly higher ( $F(1, 48) = 8.7, p < .006$ ) likelihood estimates of guilt ( $M = 7.24$ ) relative to those who were not distracted ( $M = 5.84$ )<sup>3</sup>.

## Study 3

Study 1 provided evidence that alcohol consumption is an attribute associated with the Irish stereotype in America. Study 2 provided further evidence by showing that it is more pervasive when participants are under cognitive load. In Study 3 we wanted to focus on one way that this stereotypic belief could influence Americans' attitudes and opinions toward those of Irish descent. Specifically, in Study 3 we again utilised a hypothetical scenario involving possible illegal drinking. However, embedded within this scenario we manipulated whether the suspect in question was of apparent Irish descent or appeared non-Irish. Thus, we wanted to test whether the Irish stereotype could put people of Irish descent at a particular disadvantage relative to other individuals.

## Method

### *Participants and design*

Thirty male and 48 female undergraduate students agreed to take part in the study and received course credit for their participation. The design of our study was a one-way factorial design and our independent variable of ethnic descent (Irish vs. non-Irish) consisted of two levels.

### *Procedure and materials*

Participants were first presented with the hypothetical scenario consisting of a situation involving possible illegal alcohol use. This task is similar to Study 2 with the exception that the suspect in question had a name indicative of Irish descent or a non-Irish name. Specifically the task read as follows (traditional Irish condition in italics):

Recently, Roger Williams (*Sean O'Kelley*) was suspected of being intoxicated; however, police were unable to administer a breathalyser at the scene. After determining the nightclub where Williams (*O'Kelley*) had been

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<sup>3</sup> We performed subsequent analysis to test whether gender may have interacted with our distraction manipulation. To test for this, we conducted a 2 x 2 ANOVA with gender and level of distraction acting as independent variables. This analysis did not reveal a significant effect ( $F(1, 46) = 1.09, p > .3$ ).

that evening, police contacted employees and patrons and it is unclear whether Williams (*O'Kelley*) had been drinking.

Directly afterwards, participants were asked to rate how likely they thought it was that Roger Williams (*Sean O'Kelley*) had been drinking. They were then provided with a 10-point scale where 1 represented "not very likely" and 10 represented "extremely likely". After completing the task the participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

## Results

Because alcohol consumption is an attribute of the Irish stereotype, we hypothesised that when the individual in question had a traditional Irish name, participants would report a greater likelihood of guilt in the alcohol-related incident relative to someone with a non-Irish name. To test this hypothesis we performed a one-way ANOVA with ethnic descent of suspect (Irish name of Sean O'Kelley or non-Irish name of Roger Williams) as our independent variable and likelihood of guilt as our dependent variable. The results of this analysis revealed a significant effect ( $F(1, 76) = 4.37, p < .05$ ) such that when the suspect was named Sean O'Kelley, participants' average response for likelihood of guilt was greater ( $M = 6.2$ ) than when the suspect was named Roger Williams ( $M = 5.4$ )<sup>4</sup>.

## Discussion

In this paper we set out to examine the traits and attributes associated with the Irish stereotype. We also wanted to examine how this stereotype may influence attitudes and behaviours toward people of Irish descent in the multicultural background of America. Our findings reveal that, firstly, a significant part of the Irish-American stereotype involves alcohol consumption, and secondly, this stereotypic belief can have real influences when Americans are making judgments about the likelihood of guilt in a situation involving alcohol.

The implications of this research are straightforward: the Irish stereotype can have real effects on Americans' opinions and judgments about the Irish. As the research we have reviewed suggests, stereotype responding is not only common but a likely occurrence that happens automatically. However, the research also shows that, even though individuals may possess negative traits and stereotypes, it is not inevitable that they use them. In fact, when people are motivated to avoid a prejudice response, they can avoid using the stereotype (e.g. Devine, 1989; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). We believe that, given the lack of awareness about the Irish stereotype, this would preclude any type of conscious effort to avoid a stereotypic response towards the Irish. That is, people are simply unaware that they may possess stereotypes about the Irish. Awareness is a key component in overcoming stereotype responses, the focal point of this paper.

## Legal implications

Adherence to stereotype bias against a member of a group, such as the Irish, is in stark

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<sup>4</sup> We also examined whether gender differences may exist in our data. To do so, we performed a 2 x 2 ANOVA with gender and ethnic descent of suspect acting as independent variables. This analysis did not reveal a significant effect ( $F[1, 74] = 1.30, p > .3$ ).

contrast to well settled American precedence. Title 42 of the United States Code Section 1981 affords equal protection under the law for all United States citizens<sup>5</sup>. Our findings provide evidence of bias against the Irish, simply because of their heritage. This demonstrates a clear violation of individual bias, based solely upon a person's ethnic group affiliation. The presumption of alcohol consumption on the part of the Irish defendant deprives them of their equal benefit guaranteed by American law. Such a preconception denies some individuals the fairness that is promised to all<sup>6</sup>.

Cases continue to be litigated in the American courts with regards to "profiling" of defendants from various ethnic and sociological backgrounds. Based upon our findings it would appear that the Irish are not immune from such stereotyping. The indifference granted to some groups or individuals (e.g. non-Irish as defined above) suggests a violation of the civil rights guaranteed to all citizens, including Irish Americans. Thus far, no substantial law has surfaced in the United States which identifies unequivocally this source of bias against the Irish. Based upon the results of our studies, further research and consideration appears necessary to preserve the rights of Irish Americans and to prevent future standardisation of bias in this changing political and sociological environment.

### **Future research**

It is interesting to ponder the flip side of this stereotype, such that there may be situations where Americans of Irish descent are perceived more positively. For example, we found that "friendly" was an attribute associated with the Irish. This particular attribute may give those of Irish descent an advantage if the situational constraints encourage this particular aspect of the stereotype.

Given that our findings reveal a very strong belief that Americans have about the Irish and aberrant alcohol consumption, it would seem worthy that future research should investigate whether such assumptions may be accurate. That is, do Americans of Irish descent consume alcohol at a significantly higher rate than the average American; or is this belief a myth that has been created or introduced as a type of cultural artifact? While no such conclusions can be reached at present, previous findings paint an unclear picture. First, there is some evidence to suggest that this may not be the case as it appears that alcohol consumption in the Irish Republic is low relative to other European countries (Conniffe & McCoy, 1993). However, there is also some evidence to suggest that when the Irish consume alcohol, they do so at relatively higher levels (Greenslade, Pearson, & Madden, 1995). In sum, further investigation and empirical studies are needed to examine this question.

Lastly, the present studies provide some insight into how schemas and stereotypes about Irish Americans influence the treatment of and attitudes toward those of Irish descent. However, it is important to consider that our research relied on hypothetical situations that were artificially contrived to test our premise. While this research is

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<sup>5</sup> Statement of equal rights: All persons within the jurisdiction of the United States shall have the same right in every State and Territory to make and enforce contracts, to sue, be parties, give evidence, and to the full and equal benefit of all laws and proceedings for the security of persons and property as is enjoyed by white citizens, and shall be subject to like punishment, pains, penalties, taxes, licenses, and exactions of every kind, and to no other.

<sup>6</sup> Protection against impairment: The rights protected by this section refer to impairment by nongovernmental discrimination and adherence to State law.

certainly valid, a more convincing case could be obtained if similar evidence could be drawn from controlled studies in a real world setting, and future research should attend to this concern.

### Conclusion

In the current set of studies we first depict attributes that are aligned with the Irish schema. Our findings reveal a number of traits and stereotype attributes associated with the Irish. However, the most consistent stereotype attribute that emerged from our investigation was that of the “alcohol consumer”. We then constructed a hypothetical situation involving illegal alcohol consumption wherein the suspect was either of Irish or non-Irish descent. Our findings reveal that the “alcohol consumer” attribute can put those of Irish descent at a relative disadvantage.

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