

# CONTENT AND UNIFORMITY OF STEREOTYPES AND META-STEREOTYPES OF HOMELESS PEOPLE IN MADRID (SPAIN)

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*This study analyses the content and the uniformity of meta-stereotypes among homelessness people, and the stereotypes that domiciled people have of homeless people. The research took place in Madrid (Spain), based on data provided by a representative sample of homeless people (n = 188) and a sample of people at no risk of becoming homeless (n = 180). Results show that stereotypes of homeless people and homeless people's meta-stereotypes predominantly have negative or indulgent content, with very little positive content, and have a high degree of uniformity, with hardly any differences in terms of basic socio-demographic variables. The meta-stereotypes of homeless people are more uniform, and are more negative and less indulgent than the stereotypes that domiciled people have established regarding homeless people. © 2016 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.*

Although there are many definitions of the term *stereotype*, those definitions generally emphasize the idea that stereotypes tend to attribute general psychological characteristics

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to human groups. For example, Hilton and Von Hippel (1996) defined stereotypes as beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behavior of the members of certain groups. These beliefs, which may be positive or negative (Jones, 1997), arise in a specific cultural context and are largely shared both within groups and between different groups. Vorauer, Main, and O'Connell (1998) use the term *meta-stereotype* to refer to the beliefs members of an ingroup have concerning the stereotypes assigned to them by an outgroup. Whether as a result of direct or vicarious exposure to prejudicial behavior, socialization within the group itself, and/or other social learning mechanisms, the members of a stereotyped group may notice and become aware of the cognitive representations that members of other groups have of them (Saiz, Merino, & Quilaqueo, 2009).

It is important to consider two specific aspects in an analysis of stereotypes and meta-stereotypes (Saiz et al., 2009): content and uniformity. The content refers to the attributes that make up the stereotype or meta-stereotype, which imply a positive or negative evaluation of the group (Gómez, 2002). Furthermore, the uniformity of the stereotype refers to the degree of consensus on the attributes that are assigned to a group, while the uniformity of the meta-stereotype refers to the degree of consensus among the ingroup members about the attributes they are assigned by the outgroup. For an attribute to be stereotypical, a significant proportion of the group must share this belief. For meta-stereotypes, there must be some degree of agreement within the ingroup regarding the perception of the outgroup as having particular attributes (Finchilescu, 2005). As suggested with regard to stereotypes (Triandis et al., 1982), greater uniformity in meta-stereotypical beliefs may reflect an increased importance of these beliefs in the ingroup and consequently lead to more intense effects in the interaction between groups (Saiz et al., 2009).

The scientific literature highlights positive correlations between cognitive variables (e.g., stereotypes, meta-stereotypes, causal attributions), emotions (e.g., fear, suspicion, distrust), and behaviors (e.g., avoidance, rejection, discrimination) (Breckler, 1984; Zanna & Rempel, 1988). The consequences of cognitions at a behavioral level may be particularly relevant because stereotypes and meta-stereotypes may be used to justify behavior toward members of other groups, for example. Furthermore, meta-stereotypes and stereotypes may also act as cognitions that, by their nature, modulate the processes of integration of individuals belonging to groups experiencing situations of difficulty or social exclusion.

As pointed out by Greenwald and Banaji (1995), social behavior toward certain groups, and especially those that are stigmatized and suffering from social exclusion, is strongly mediated by stereotypes, which are closely linked to unintentional discriminatory behavior. Kurzban and Leary (2001) have also emphasized this factor, noting that human beings have a strong tendency to avoid people in a situation of social exclusion. Shelton and Richeson (2005) have highlighted the tendency for individuals to avoid contact with members of other groups when they believe that these groups do not wish to come into contact with them, with the attributions as to why the members of the outgroup do not want to initiate these contacts differing in the two groups. As noted by several authors (Finchilescu, 2005; Vorauer et al., 1998; Vázquez, 2016), the ingroup's negative beliefs about how it is perceived by the outgroup can influence how the members of the ingroup perceive the outgroup and can therefore significantly affect the former's contact with the latter.

In Spain, 27.3% of the population is at risk of poverty or exclusion (Eurostat, 2014), and homeless people are those suffering from one of the most difficult social situations (Panadero, Guillén, & Vázquez, 2015). Homeless people not only live in extreme poverty but also suffer from a high degree of family and social disengagement, have serious

difficulties reintegrating into society and employment, and experience significant deficiencies in health (Vázquez, Panadero, Martín, & Díaz-Pescador, 2015; Panadero et al., 2015). According to the Spanish National Statistics Institute, the homeless population cared for in centers in Spain amounts to 22,938 people (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2012), but various nongovernmental organizations estimate that there are more than 30,000 homeless people in Spain (Plujá i Calderon, 2011).

Stereotypes of homeless people mainly have very negative characteristics, which may lead to negative attitudes toward this group, (Hocking & Lawrence, 2000; Mallet, Edwards, Keys, Myers, & Rosenthal, 2003), hindering their processes of integration. However, stereotypes of the homeless may vary depending on the cultural context. There is little information available about the meta-stereotypes of homeless people, although Panadero et al. (2015) have highlighted the existence of three types of meta-stereotypes among homeless people in Spain: a positive meta-stereotype (reflecting a positive image); a negative meta-stereotype (reflecting a negative image); and an indulgent meta-stereotype (reflecting an ambivalent image; i.e., despite presenting negative characteristics, they have a condescending and tolerant perspective, which to some extent considers homeless people as victims of circumstance, affected by the situation in which they find themselves).

As noted by Shelton and Richeson (2005), a negative perspective in the meta-stereotypes used by homeless people can lead to a tendency for those people to avoid contact with the domiciled population, in the belief that the latter have no wish to come into contact with them. The experience of feeling oneself to be negatively stereotyped can affect an individual's social perception and emotional reactions toward the outgroup; this may even contribute to the avoidance of contact with its members (Finchilescu, 2005; Vorauer et al., 1998, Vázquez, Panadero, & Zúñiga, in press) or, if this avoidance is impossible, hostile reactions. Fear and anxiety about how they can expect to be treated thus lead homeless people to avoid contact, which hinders their social inclusion processes. In addition, some negative and uniform meta-stereotypes may influence the image that homeless people have of themselves (Klein & Azzi, 2001) and therefore their ability to change the situation in which they find themselves.

The aims of the study were to analyze the content and the uniformity of meta-stereotypes among homelessness people as well as the stereotypes that domiciled people have of homeless people.

## **METHOD**

The research was conducted based on data provided by individuals belonging to two different groups: a homeless group (HG) and a domiciled group (DG).

*HG* ( $n = 188$ ). The HG group comprised a representative sample of homeless people in Madrid (84.0% men, 16.0% women) who were all adults (mean age = 47.57 years, standard deviation [*SD*] = 12.172). The night before the interview the participants spent the night in a shelter or other facility for homeless people, on the street, or in other places not initially designed for sleeping (abandoned buildings, subways, Metro stations, etc.). A total of 71.8% were Spaniards and 28.2% were foreign. The HG sample size was determined based on the available data for the total number of homeless people in the city of Madrid. We designed a strategy for random sampling in the street and all housing resources for homeless people in the city of Madrid (shelters and other supervised accommodation). We selected a specific number of participants in each facility proportionately and randomly,

according to its capacity. The sample selection in the street was carried out randomly and proportionally, based on the number of homeless people sleeping in the streets of Madrid according to the figures obtained from the most recent count carried out in the city.

*DG* ( $n = 180$ ). The *DG* group comprised a sample of people who had their own home, were not using services designed for the homeless, and were not at risk of becoming homeless. The sample, which was not representative, was collected in Madrid using a strategy of “quota sampling” and matched with the *HG* sample with regard to sex (83.8% men, 16.2% women), age (mean age = 45.36 years,  $SD = 14.037$ ), and nationality (76.7% Spaniards, 23.3% foreigners).

The information was gathered using an instrument designed as a heteroapplied structured interview, which resolved the problems arising from the participants’ difficulties in reading and/or understanding. The instrument designed to gather information on meta-stereotypes (*HG*) comprised the initial instruction: “I would like to know what you think people in general think about homeless people. I am going to read you some alternatives and I would like to tell me whether you agree or disagree with each one.” This was followed by a list of 57 statements with “agree” and “disagree” response options. The members of the *DG* were asked the question: “Now we would like to know what characteristics homeless people generally have. We are going to read you some alternatives and we would like to say whether you agree or disagree with each one.” This was followed by the same list of 57 statements presented to the *HG*, with “agree” and “disagree” response alternatives.

## RESULTS

The percentages of agreement with the various statements concerning homeless people (meta-stereotypes and stereotypes) among the members of the *HG* and *DG* are shown in Table 1:

Table 1 shows that of the 57 statements mentioned, the members of the *HG* said they agreed with 47 meta-stereotypes, while the members of the *DG* they agreed with 27 stereotypes. Over 75% of the members of both groups said they agreed with a series of stereotypes or meta-stereotypes: indulgent (lacking motivation, lonely, low self-esteem, physically and psychologically worn out, with a difficult past, socially rejected, lacking financial resources, living hand to mouth, and not thinking about the future); and negative (drinkers, don’t wash properly, they’re dirty). Furthermore, over 75% of the *HG* members concurred with other meta-stereotypes—negative (drug users, lazy, unstable, problematic, lazy, irresponsible, difficult to live with) and indulgent (ill, distrustful)—and more than 75% of the *DG* members agreed with other indulgent stereotypes (malnourished, unfortunate, unlucky, pessimistic, helpless, vulnerable, misunderstood). Conversely, a low percentage of the interviewees agreed with positive stereotypes or meta-stereotypes.

Table 1 also shows that there are statistically significant differences in the percentage of agreement with meta-stereotypes (*HG*) and stereotypes (*DG*) in 48 of the 57 statements, so that the members of the *DG* presented higher percentages of agreement with nine statements (indulgent stereotypes), while the interviewees in the *HG* showed higher percentages of agreement with 37 statements (positive and negative meta-stereotypes).

The differences between the interviewees, according to three basic demographic variables for which the two groups were matched (sex, age and nationality), were analyzed to study the uniformity of stereotypes (*DG*) and meta-stereotypes (*HG*) in greater depth. No statistically significant differences were found according to the interviewees’ gender,

**Table 1.** Agreement With Various Statements About Homeless People Among the Components of the Homeless Group (Meta-Stereotypes) and the Domiciled Group (Stereotypes)

	HG (Meta-stereotype) % (n)	DG (Stereotype) % (n)	$\chi^2$
They are consumers of alcohol	95.3% (163)	85.7% (144)	9.150**
They lack economic resources	91.6% (153)	97.7% (172)	6.435**
They live hand to mouth and don't think about the future	89.1% (147)	81.9% (140)	3.514*
They lack motivation	89.0% (145)	91.9% (159)	0.848
They are solitary	88.3% (144)	81.8% (135)	2.748
They are drug users	86.5% (147)	71.5% (118)	11.330***
They are physically and psychologically worn out	85.9% (146)	93.3% (166)	5.101*
They are rejected by society	85.3% (139)	89.3% (158)	1.222
They are lazy	82.7% (139)	44.0% (70)	53.081***
They don't wash properly, they're dirty	82.1% (138)	77.6% (128)	1.080
They have had a difficult past	81.9% (131)	90.5% (153)	5.217*
They are sick	79.3% (130)	69.9% (123)	3.924*
They are distrustful	78.9% (127)	64.5% (111)	8.395**
They are difficult to live with and to deal with	78.0% (124)	60.8% (104)	11.372***
They are unstable, problematic	77.8% (126)	48.5% (81)	30.205***
They are idle	77.6% (128)	37.1% (63)	56.086***
They have low self-esteem	77.6% (121)	88.1% (148)	6.365**
They are lazy (easy-going), irresponsible	76.5% (124)	43.8% (70)	36.145***
They are malnourished	71.4% (120)	93.2% (165)	28.490***
They are bohemians, hustlers	70.1% (110)	28.7% (49)	56.191***
They are mentally ill	70.7% (116)	54.2% (90)	9.592**
They have poor social relationships	69.8% (111)	57.9% (95)	4.936*
They are criminals	69.6% (119)	17.2% (29)	95.055***
They are rebels	67.5% (112)	39.5% (66)	26.136***
They are dangerous	66.3% (112)	14.1% (23)	93.566***
They are unfortunate, they have been unlucky	66.3% (110)	75.7% (131)	3.687*
They are pessimists	65.8% (100)	80.0% (132)	8.141**
They blame others for their situation	64.6% (104)	62.2% (102)	0.202
They are aggressive	64.3% (101)	26.5% (43)	45.974***
Homeless people can't be trusted	64.2% (106)	23.9% (38)	53.374***
They are defenceless	64.0% (105)	82.3% (144)	14.478***
They are vulnerable, defenceless	63.7% (100)	85.1% (143)	19.747***
They don't have any social skills	63.5% (94)	38.2% (66)	20.525***
They are wasteful	63.3% (105)	20.3% (35)	64.085***
They are useless, they can't contribute anything to society	60.2% (97)	10.1% (17)	91.852***
They are free	58.3% (88)	30.1% (52)	26.167***
They are tough, resistant	58.1% (93)	42.0% (68)	8.398**
They are misunderstood	57.7% (90)	79.3% (134)	17.666***
They have a weak character	56.9% (91)	54.5% (91)	0.188
They live exclusively on the streets	56.8% (92)	45.8% (77)	3.963*
They deserve pity	56.6% (90)	69.9% (114)	6.165**
They lack moral values	56.4% (88)	20.9% (34)	42.657***
They have no family	53.8% (91)	40.3% (71)	6.313*
They appreciate things more	53.1% (85)	38.6% (66)	7.033**
They take advantage of the system	52.8% (86)	9.9% (17)	71.740***
They are caring	48.8% (81)	50.0% (78)	0.047
They don't attach any importance to material things	48.4% (76)	31.8% (54)	9.439**
They are victims of the system	48.4% (74)	60.4% (102)	4.657*
They are sociable	43.2% (67)	43.8% (70)	0.009
They are normal, like everyone else	41.0% (68)	70.8% (119)	30.232***
They are courteous, respectful, polite	40.9% (65)	43.6% (68)	0.237
They are trusting	36.4% (56)	20.5% (33)	9.775***
They are optimists	34.5% (51)	10.6% (18)	26.536***
They are enterprising, fighters	32.7% (54)	12.7% (21)	18.791***
They are hard-working	24.1% (39)	33.8% (53)	3.642*
They are clean	23.5% (38)	13.5% (23)	5.451*
They are happy	18.1% (29)	6.0% (10)	11.591***

Note. HG = homeless group; DG = domiciled group.

**Table 2. Differences According to Age in the Level of Agreement With Various Statements About Homeless People Among the Homeless Group (Meta-Stereotypes) and the Domiciled Group (Stereotypes)**

	Yes M age years (SD)	No M age years (SD)	t
<b>People in general think that homeless people . . . (HG–meta-stereotypes)</b>			
Are rejected by society	43.00 (13.597)	48.46 (11.663)	-2.066*
Are physically and psychologically worn out	52.63 (7.851)	46.63 (12.298)	2.999**
Are consumers of alcohol	50.75 (3.615)	47.31 (12.151)	2.157*
<b>In general, homeless people... (DG–stereotypes)</b>			
Are rejected by society	44.25 (13.947)	51.79 (11.370)	-2.265*
Don't attach any importance to material things	48.59 (11.668)	43.24 (14.641)	2.560*
Are argumentative, problematic	47.75 (13.433)	43.13 (14.404)	2.143*
Have a weak character	47.36 (13.199)	41.66 (14.644)	2.646**
Are unfortunate, they have been unlucky	46.70 (13.378)	40.62 (15.408)	2.470*
Are mentally ill	47.11 (14.680)	42.61 (13.623)	2.049*
Are happy	53.00 (7.226)	44.61 (14.124)	3.293**
Lack moral values	50.65 (14.908)	43.01 (13.458)	2.878*
Are rebels	48.74 (12.944)	42.43 (14.292)	2.897**
Are tough, resistant	39.87 (12.874)	48.18 (13.811)	-3.889***
Are normal, like everyone else	43.13 (13.811)	49.20 (13.679)	-2.596**
Are vulnerable, defenceless	45.83 (13.531)	38.08 (15.586)	2.580*
Homeless people can't be trusted	48.68 (10.997)	42.83 (14.935)	2.609*
Live exclusively on the streets	49.31 (13.038)	40.97 (13.617)	4.050***

Note. HG = homeless group; DG = domiciled group; SD = standard deviation.

\* $p \leq 0.05$ . \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq 0.001$ .

and the differences according to age (Table 2) and nationality (Table 3) are relatively small, especially with regard to the meta-stereotypes of the HG. These results show that there is a great deal of uniformity in both the stereotypes among the members of the DG about homeless people and the meta-stereotypes used by the members of the HG:

Table 2 shows that among the members of the HG, there are statistically significant differences only in terms of age for 3 of the 57 suggested statements, with the oldest individuals showing higher percentages of agreement with two negative or indulgent meta-stereotypes, and a lower percentage agreeing that homeless people suffer from social rejection. Meanwhile, there are statistically significant differences in 14 of the 57 statements offered among the members of the DG. The oldest interviewees presented higher percentages of agreement with ten negative or indulgent stereotypes and one positive stereotype (they are happy), while the younger interviewees showed a higher level of agreement with two positive stereotypes (they are tough, resistant, and they are normal, like everyone else) and that they suffer from social rejection.

As shown in Table 3, depending on the nationality of the respondents, of the 57 statements suggested, statistically significant differences in the percentage of agreement were observed only in three meta-stereotypes (HG) and four stereotypes (DG). Thus, among the members of the HG, the Spaniards agreed to a greater extent with the three positive or indulgent meta-stereotypes, while among the members of the DG, the Spaniards agreed to a greater extent with four negative or indulgent stereotypes.



**Table 3. Differences According to Nationality in the Level of Agreement With Various Statements About Homeless People Among the Homeless Group (Meta-Stereotypes) and the Domiciled Group (Stereotypes)**

	Spanish % (n)	Foreigners % (n)	$\chi^2$
<b>People in general think that homeless people . . . (HG–meta-stereotypes)</b>			
Are free	63.1% (70)	46.2% (18)	3.403*
Are misunderstood	63.4% (71)	42.9% (18)	5.281**
Are normal, like everyone else	47.5% (57)	25.0% (11)	6.715**
<b>In general, homeless people . . . (DG–stereotypes)</b>			
Have a weak character	57.4% (66)	37.8 (14)	4.293*
Are unfortunate, they have been unlucky	81.8% (99)	56.8% (21)	9.743**
Are rebels	44.0% (51)	24.3% (9)	4.540*
Have low self-esteem	91.5% (107)	75.0% (27)	6.852*

Note. HG = homeless group; DG = domiciled group.

\* $p \leq 0.05$ . \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq 0.001$ .

## DISCUSSION

The results obtained show that in Madrid (Spain), the stereotypes among the domiciled population of homeless people and the meta-stereotypes used by homeless people mainly have negative content (reflecting a negative image) or indulgent content (reflecting an ambivalent image; i.e., despite presenting negative characteristics, they have a condescending and tolerant perspective, which to some extent considers homeless people as victims of circumstance, affected by the situation in which they find themselves), with very few positive contents (reflecting a positive image). The meta-stereotypes have a very high degree of uniformity, with hardly any differences in their content according to basic sociodemographic variables such as sex, age, or nationality. Meanwhile, the stereotypes are also remarkably uniform, although variables such as age and, to a lesser extent, nationality appear to have some influence on their content: domiciled people of Spanish origin; older people especially have negative and indulgent stereotypes of homeless people to a greater extent, and fewer stereotypes with positive content.

There is also a mismatch between the contents of stereotypes and meta-stereotypes, so that the meta-stereotypes of homeless people have more negative and less indulgent content than the stereotypes about this community. Homeless people therefore believe that the domiciled population has a worse image of their group than the image that this population says it has. This is because the stereotypes that it has of homeless people are characterized to a greater extent by describing an image expressed in a tone that is emotionally negative and rather condescending, which places homeless people in a situation of disability and dependence. Homeless people appear to believe that domiciled people value them less than they really value them, which may unfortunately have negative consequences in their processes of social inclusion.

Unfavorable and very uniform meta-stereotypes of homeless people may adversely affect the contacts they have with the rest of the population, in terms of both the amount of those contacts and their quality. According to Shelton and Richeson (2005), there may

be a tendency among homeless people to avoid contact with people they believe do not wish to come into contact with them, and if these contacts take place, then they may lead to situations of hostility. Fear and anxiety about how they expect to be treated may make homeless people avoid contact, which would hinder their processes of inclusion.

Furthermore, people have a strong tendency to avoid people who are socially excluded (Kurzban & Leary, 2001), and uniform and unfavorable stereotypes (indulgent and negative) of homeless people among domiciled people may have a negative effect on the type of relationship they have with them. According to Greenwald and Banaji (1995), social behavior toward certain groups, and especially those that are stigmatized and suffering from social exclusion, is strongly mediated by stereotypes, which are closely linked to discriminatory behavior. The stereotype of homeless people may be used as a justification for negative behavior toward them. In both groups, the avoidance of contact may lead to different attributions regarding the reasons why the members of the outgroup do not wish to initiate these contacts, reinforcing the previously existing negative stereotypes and meta-stereotypes.

According to Triandis et al. (1982) and Saiz et al. (2009), the high level of uniformity in meta-stereotypes reflects a high level of relevance of these beliefs for the ingroup, which could lead to severe effects during interaction with members of the outgroup. Likewise, very uniform unfavourable meta-stereotypes may have a negative influence on the image that homeless people have of themselves (Klein & Azzi, 2001), which could limit their opportunities to change their situation. Nevertheless, if domiciled peoples' indulgent stereotypes influence the content of homeless peoples' meta-stereotypes, then there could be an improvement in homeless peoples' self-image, which could lead to more frequent and positive contacts between the two groups. Information and awareness raising of homeless peoples' circumstances and characteristics as well as an improvement in the amount and type of contacts between them and domiciled people could lead to a change in the content of stereotypes and meta-stereotypes, with potentially positive benefits for the homeless.

### ***Limitations***

This study is limited to Madrid (Spain). This limitation makes it difficult to generalize the results to other contexts, especially bearing in mind the cultural variations in stereotypes and meta-stereotypes, which are particularly acute among individuals experiencing social difficulties or exclusion (Vázquez, 2016). It therefore seems important to give in-depth consideration to the characteristics of these cognitive processes in different cultural contexts, because the data obtained may be useful in designing intervention strategies aimed at working on stereotypes and meta-stereotypes of vulnerable groups and those experiencing social exclusion.

### ***Conclusion***

Stereotypes and meta-stereotypes of people in homeless situation in Madrid, which are very uniform and for the most part desfavorable, can be slowing the social inclusion processes of those living homeless. This study provides information of the most negative and widespread stereotypes and meta-stereotypes of the homeless people, as well as some characteristics of the people who use the most damaging stereotypes and meta-stereotypes for their inclusion process. Also, the work shows the meta-stereotypes present more negative characteristics than the stereotypes, issue presenting the need to work with



the homeless people, whom have a more negative image of themselves than expressed by the general population.

In order to promote the social inclusion processes of homeless people, achieving an improvement of their self-image, and facilitate more frequent and of better quality contact with the general population, would be of great relevance in developing intervention programs oriented to modify of the most harmful stereotypes and meta-stereotypes of those living homeless.

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