
When We Wonder What It All Means: Interpretation Goals Facilitate Accessibility and Stereotyping Effects

Diederik A. Stapel
Willem Koomen
University of Amsterdam

In four studies, the authors show that interpretation goals facilitate accessibility and stereotyping effects. Study 1 shows that priming traits that are descriptively inapplicable to a target stimulus affect target interpretations when an interpretation goal is primed but not when no such goal is present. Studies 2 and 3 show that the range of judgment dimensions affected by applicable trait primes increases when people are interpretation motivated. Studies 3 and 4 show that behavior that is only weakly related to stereotypical beliefs is interpreted in stereotypical terms when an interpretation goal is activated, whereas no such stereotyping effect occurs when perceivers are not so motivated. Implications for models of accessibility and stereotyping effects are discussed.

As Bruner (1957) aptly captured in the famous phrase “going beyond the information given,” we constantly and effortlessly extract and construct meaning from the world around us. But how do we fill in the gaps when we are exposed to incomplete or vague information? How do we know where to go when we go beyond the information given? One answer to this question is that people understand the world by relating what they are currently experiencing to the knowledge that they have previously accumulated. Thus, when we see “a speck on the horizon surmounted by a plume of smoke” (cf. Bruner, 1957, p. 42), we are likely to identify this as a ship because we have seen other ships. When, however, a stimulus is ambiguous enough to be encodable as an instance of *multiple* categories, past experiences may not provide us with enough relevant knowledge to fill in the gaps. How do we decide that a speck on the horizon is a ship when it could be identified as easily as an off-shore drilling platform or a big, fat whale?

Social cognition research has suggested that in these cases—when several different cognitive structures may be employed to identify or interpret a given stimulus—the knowledge that is cognitively most accessible will capture the stimulus. As the accessibility of stored knowledge increases, stimulus information will be more easily and swiftly interpreted in accordance with this knowledge. Research in a wide array of domains (e.g., social comparison, attribution, attitudes, person memory and judgment, stereotyping, and decision making) provides evidence for this claim (see Stapel & Koomen, 2001). For example, when trying to make sense of behavior that is evaluatively ambiguous, the cognitive accessibility of relevant trait concepts may influence the interpretation process. The behavior description “Marcelle helps her friend complete a take-home examination” is encoded more positively when interpreters have been primed with “kind” and more negatively when “dishonest” is on the top of their heads (see Higgins, 1996). In a similar way, stereotypes may color the meaning of behavior. When a person known to belong to a particular social category performs a certain behavior, the stereotype associated with that category may guide the interpretation of this behavior. A shove is viewed as more violent when performed by a Black than by a White (Sagar & Schofield, 1980) and an emotional response is more

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likely to be interpreted as such when attributed to a woman than to a man (Banaji, Hardin, & Rothman, 1993).

In other words, contextual cues as well as features of the target stimulus may activate information (e.g., traits or stereotypes) that influences the encoding process. Such accessibility-driven encoding effects are especially likely to occur when people are relatively unmotivated to process target information in great detail. This idea is supported by research suggesting that stereotype use can be reduced by encouraging people to process information carefully (see Fiske & Neuberg, 1990) and by investigations demonstrating that assimilative accessibility effects dwindle when people are motivated to form accurate impressions (see Thompson, Roman, Moskowitz, Chaiken, & Bargh, 1994) or are low in need for closure (Ford & Kruglanski, 1995).

In the present research, we will test the hypothesis that sometimes motivation may have a rather ironic effect on interpretation processes. That is, we test the idea that when people are extramotivated to understand and make sense of a stimulus, accessibility-driven encoding effects will be more likely to occur than when such a goal is not active. Accessible information will be used more readily and extensively in the encoding or disambiguation of a target stimulus when an interpretation goal is active. When the goal to understand and make sense of the world is activated, any cue or construct that may aid in the fulfillment of this goal is likely to be used. Thus, when during the interpretation of ambiguous behavior ("Marcelle helps her friend complete a take-home examination") the goal to make sense or understand what this behavior pertains to is relatively salient ("I am Marcelle's husband and I really need to understand what her behavior means"), accessible information ("kind" or "dishonest") will be used more readily and extensively.

In other words, it is our hypothesis that interpretation goals will increase the impact of accessible trait information. This differentiates interpretation goals from accuracy motivation, which decreases the impact of trait priming (see Stapel, Koomen, & Zeelenberg, 1998). Although the difference is subtle, it is important to distinguish interpretation from accuracy goals. Being interpretation motivated means that one will try to solve ambiguities in stimulus material. Someone who is motivated to "make sense" and "interpret" a stimulus will have difficulties accepting that stimulus behavior is ambiguous. Being accuracy motivated means that one will try to perceive stimulus material "as it really is." In this case, accepting ambiguity or inconsistencies is less difficult ("Marcelle's behavior is kind as well as dishonest"), as we demonstrated in our previous work on accu-

racy motivation (Stapel et al., 1998; see also Thompson et al., 1994). It is also important to note that in our definition an interpretation goal is not a directional goal (cf. Kunda, 1990). That is, perceivers who are interpretation motivated do not have the goal of reaching a specific (e.g., positive or self-serving) outcome. They are open minded when it concerns the desirability of their judgments, as long as ambiguities have been resolved.

How do we test the hypothesis that accessible trait information is used more readily and more extensively when an interpretation goal is activated? One way to test this hypothesis is by manipulating the applicability of accessible traits. For information to be used in the encoding of a target stimulus, it has to be accessible as well as applicable to the stimulus information. The importance of applicability for the occurrence of accessibility-driven interpretation effects is well illustrated by a study reported by Higgins, Rholes, and Jones (1977). In this study, participants were assigned to conditions that surreptitiously activated traits that were obviously applicable to a target description (e.g., persistent vs. stubborn for the target description "Only rarely did he change his mind even when it might have been better if he had.") or traits that were less applicable to the target description (e.g., obedient vs. disrespectful). The results showed that only the activation of descriptively applicable traits influenced participants' later characterizations of the target stimulus. This general applicability effect has been replicated many times (e.g., Sedikides, 1990; Srull & Wyer, 1979; Stapel & Koomen, 2000). Higgins and Brendl (1995) recently showed that strong accessibility may compensate for weak applicability, and vice versa (Higgins & Brendl, 1995), but there is a certain Accessibility \times Applicability threshold that has to be met for information to exert interpretation effects. Information that is below this threshold will not be used during encoding, whereas information that is above it will (see Higgins, 1996).

In the present research, we will test the hypothesis that this threshold may be lowered significantly when an interpretation goal is activated, that is, when people are extramotivated to make sense of ambiguous stimuli. More specifically, encoding effects of primed information that do not occur when no interpretation goal is activated *will* occur under conditions in which such a goal *is* activated. For example, priming descriptively inapplicable constructs that will normally have no impact on the interpretation of an ambiguous target (e.g., priming "obedient" before the encoding of "persistent/stubborn" behavior) (see Higgins et al., 1977) may have an impact when perceivers are interpretation motivated.

We test this hypothesis in four studies. In the first two studies, we examine the effects of interpretation goals on the impact of priming descriptively applicable and inapplicable trait concepts on subsequent interpretations of an evaluatively ambiguous person description. In Studies 3 and 4, we investigate the effects of interpretation goals on the occurrence of stereotyping effects.

EXPERIMENT 1: USING INAPPLICABLE TRAITS DURING INTERPRETATION

The notion that for accessible knowledge to be used during the disambiguation of a target stimulus, this knowledge has to possess some level of interpretation applicability is intuitively appealing. Ruminations about Chinese food are unlikely to affect our assessment of our brother's newborn daughter. They may, however, affect our appreciation of regular Dutch meals. As we noted before, the importance of applicability for accessibility-driven interpretation effects also is firmly grounded empirically (see Stapel & Koomen, 2000). Many studies have concluded that trait priming is most effective when there is a clear descriptive match between prime and target. As Wyer and Srull (1989) wrote in their review of the relevant literature, "Concepts affect the interpretation of information only if their features are descriptively applicable to this information" (p. 372). However, a recent series of studies suggests that Wyer and Srull were too strict when defining the boundary conditions of accessibility effects.

We (Stapel & Koomen, 2000) showed that strict *descriptive* applicability is not necessary for the occurrence of accessibility-driven interpretation effects. We did this by varying the breadth and extremity of trait priming. *Breadth* (or generality or inclusiveness) of a personality construct is commonly defined as the diversity of behavioral referents of that construct (Hampson, John, & Goldberg, 1986). Broad traits (e.g., "extroverted") refer to a large number of distinct behaviors, whereas narrow traits (e.g., "talkative") refer to a more limited range of behavioral instances. *Evaluative extremity* (or social desirability) of personality constructs refers to the degree to which constructs are positively or negatively evaluated (Hampson et al., 1986). Extremely positive traits (e.g., "sweet") are traits that are generally thought to be more desirable to possess than moderate traits (e.g., "mediocre") that are again more desirable than extremely negative traits (e.g., "dishonest").

We (Stapel & Koomen, 2000) found that descriptively inapplicable trait primes are unlikely to guide the interpretation of an evaluatively ambiguous (e.g., "thrifty" vs. "stingy") target, given that such trait primes are relatively moderate and narrow (e.g., "adventurous" vs. "reckless"). However, trait primes that lack descriptive overlap

with the target stimulus but are either relatively broad (e.g., "good" vs. "bad") or evaluatively extreme ("sweet" vs. "aggressive") may direct the interpretation of an ambiguous target. The reasoning behind the Stapel and Koomen (2000) studies is that broad traits are likely to exert priming effects because the activation of general and inclusive traits is known to spread to narrow traits included in these general traits (see Hampson et al., 1986). Priming (descriptively inapplicable) broad traits may thus indirectly activate narrower but applicable traits. Extreme (and inapplicable) traits are likely to exert effects because their evaluative intensity is likely to make up for their lack of descriptive applicability. When primed with evaluatively extreme constructs, perceivers may use the strong connotative (rather than the denotative) meaning of these constructs to interpret the evaluatively ambiguous target. Constructs, on the other hand, that are descriptively inapplicable and neither broad nor extreme are unlikely to affect such target characterizations. (For a more detailed description of this argument, see Stapel & Koomen, 2000.)

In our earlier work on applicability effects (Stapel & Koomen, 2000), we demonstrated that the breadth and extremity of primed constructs might compensate for their descriptive inapplicability. To date, there have been no studies showing interpretation effects following the priming of descriptively inapplicable traits that are relatively narrow and evaluatively moderate. In the first set of experiments, however, we test the hypothesis that such interpretation effects will occur when people have the goal to make sense of, to extract meaning from, stimulus behavior—a goal that was absent in previous studies of accessibility effects in person judgment. We predict that the presence of an interpretation goal may prompt participants to use descriptively inapplicable (narrow and moderate) trait concepts that exert no effect on target judgments when such a goal is not present.

More specifically, suppose one is exposed to a behavior description that may be taken as indicating self-confidence as well as arrogance (e.g., "By the way he acted one could readily guess that he was well aware of his ability to do many things well"). Previous studies suggest that priming descriptively inapplicable (narrow and moderate) traits will not affect the interpretation of this stimulus. Thus, priming "adventurous" (a positive but inapplicable trait) will not lead to more positive (more "self-confident," less "arrogant") interpretations of the ambiguous target description than priming "reckless" (a negative but inapplicable trait). Although evaluatively charged, the lack of a clear descriptive prime-stimulus match prevents these traits from being applied in the interpretation process. The activation of an interpretation goal may change this. When the goal to "make

sense" is activated, ambiguity may be more difficult to live with than when no such goal is salient. When one has the goal to really make sense of a stimulus, one will be extra motivated to solve existent ambiguities ("Does this mean he is confident or that he is arrogant?"). Cues that may aid in the disambiguation process will then be used more readily. Hence, interpretation-motivated perceivers will use the applicability criterion less strictly, and as a result of this the evaluative implications of descriptively inapplicable traits are more likely to guide target interpretations. We tested this hypothesis by priming positive versus negative inapplicable trait concepts under a condition in which an interpretation goal was made salient and in a condition in which this goal was not made salient.

In the vast majority of previous studies on the impact of goals on accessibility effects, the various processing goals are given to participants *explicitly* through instructions (e.g., Sedikides, 1990; Stapel et al., 1998; Thompson et al., 1994). Bargh (1997) recently proposed, however, that goals also might be activated *implicitly*. He argued that although many of the goals an individual pursues are the result of conscious deliberation and choice, conscious choice is not necessary for goal activation and operation. Goals are represented in memory in the same way as constructs, attitudes, and stereotypes. Therefore, similar rules will apply when it concerns the activation of goals or other cognitions (Bargh, 1997). Indeed, in a study by Bargh, Gollwitzer, and Barndollar (1996), participants primed via a "language" test in an ostensibly unrelated first experiment behaved in line with the primed (achievement) goal in a second experiment in which that goal could be pursued. Several studies now suggest that giving people explicit goal instructions ("Please try to be as accurate as possible in your judgments") or priming goal-related concepts ("accurate," "precise") implicitly (via a language test, see below, or subliminally) yields similar effects on subsequent cognitions, judgments, and behaviors (for a review, see Bargh, 1997). Because it is difficult (if not impossible) to effectively activate an interpretation goal through explicit instructions ("Please try to make sense of the following person description") without also activating a motivation to be careful or accurate, in the present research we applied subtle priming techniques to assess the impact of interpretation goals on the encoding of ambiguous target stimuli. That is, we subtly exposed participants to words associated with this goal (*comprehend, interpret, understand*) before giving them the target stimulus. In a recent study (Stapel & Koomen, 1999) in which we investigated the impact of "interpretation" versus "comparison" goals on the direction (assimilation or contrast) of accessibility effects, we found that this subtle activation of an interpretation goal yields similar effects

as when this goal is activated by first having people perform several "interpretation" and "categorization" tasks and puzzles (see also Bargh, 1997)

Method

PARTICIPANTS AND DESIGN

Eighty-seven students participated in exchange for partial course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to the conditions of a 2 (trait priming: descriptively inapplicable positive, descriptively inapplicable negative) \times 2 (goal priming: interpretation, control) between-subjects design.

PROCEDURE AND MATERIALS

The experiment was part of a general testing session in which participants received a total of seven questionnaires. Filler word and number puzzle tasks and problem-solving tasks alternated with the goal-priming, trait-priming, and person judgment tasks. This would make it unlikely that participants would be able to guess the true purpose of the experiment. The first task was a word puzzle task and involved unscrambling the names of seven fruits and vegetables. Then, participants were given the trait-priming task (see below). The third and fourth tasks were again short filler tasks. The fifth task was the goal-priming task (see below). The sixth task was a filler task, and the final task was the person judgment task (see below). When participants were finished, the questionnaires were collected and participants were probed carefully for awareness of the relation between the priming tasks and the person judgment task. No participant showed suspicion of a relation between the experimental tasks of the experiment, indicated that the priming task had affected target judgments, or stated that the way person judgments were constructed was congruent with the goal activated in the goal-priming task.

Trait priming. For the trait-priming task, we used the scrambled sentence test. This test consisted of one page of 12 scrambled four- or five-word groups (e.g., "is table he determined"). Participants' task was to reorganize the word groups into meaningful sentences, using only three or four words from each group (Srull & Wyer, 1979). Eight word groups were fillers and contained neutral information ("her vacation she knew"). In the positive priming conditions, the other four-word task contained a synonym of persistent (*strong-willed, determined, resolute, persevering*). In the negative priming conditions, these four-word groups contained a synonym of stubborn (*obstinate, bull-headed, headstrong, closed-minded*).

Goal priming. The goal-priming task was titled "word puzzle" and consisted of one page with a 25 \times 25 matrix of letters with seven words embedded therein. A list of these words was provided to ensure that participants

could find all the words. In the interpretation conditions, four of the eight words—*understand*, *comprehend*, *interpret*, and *construe*—were related to the interpretation construct. The other words were fillers (*table*, *painting*, *book*, *accordion*). In the control conditions, all words were fillers.

Target description. After participants had finished the priming and filler tasks, they were given the booklets titled “person judgment” and were instructed to try to form an impression of the characteristics of the person described. The target description was adopted from pretested material used by Higgins et al. (1977) and Sedikides (1990). It described the target, named Peter, as adventurous/reckless, confident/conceited, witty/sarcastic (for details, see Stapel & Koomen, 2000).

Peter spends a great amount of his time in search of what he likes to call excitement. He has already climbed the Mont Blanc, done some white-water canoeing in a kayak, driven in the exhausting Paris-Dakar race, and piloted a jet-powered boat—without knowing very much about boats. He has risked injury, and even death, a number of times. Now Peter is in search of new excitement. He is thinking perhaps he will do some parachuting (*adventurous-reckless*). By the way he acts one can readily guess that Peter is well aware of his ability to do many things well (*confident-conceited*). A lot of people enjoy Peter’s humor. He has the habit of making jokes out of the blue. Often times, in parties, his humor is quick to address the faults that people have or the mistakes they make (*witty-sarcastic*).

In a small pretest ($n = 20$), we asked participants (students) to read this description of Peter and indicate for a large number of trait dimensions whether these dimensions were either “applicable,” “inapplicable,” or “neither applicable, neither inapplicable” to the description of Peter. All participants thought the primes used in the present study were inapplicable to the target description. Although it is important to note that these are *explicit* judgments of (in)applicability, this pretest suggests that our intuition that the primes and target description used in this study do not match descriptively is shared by our participants. One should remember, however, that descriptive applicability is a matter of degree (see Stapel & Koomen, 2000). Because each trait construct may be associated semantically with other (similarly valenced and descriptively related) trait constructs, the descriptive match between one trait and another is probably best portrayed as either relatively strong (persistent-persevering) or relatively weak (persistent-confident). However, in the current literature, the term *inapplicable* is used to denote weak descriptive overlap and the term *applicable* is used to denote strong

overlap (see Higgins, 1996; Martin, Seta, & Crelia, 1990; Stapel & Koomen, 2000; Wyer & Srull, 1989).

Dependent measures. On the next page of the booklet, participants were asked to indicate their impressions of Peter on eight 7-point rating dimensions. Although we have no explicit hypotheses as to the kind of rating dimensions on which our manipulations are likely to have the most impact, following Stapel and Koomen (2000), we categorize these rating dimensions as follows (see also Experiment 2). *Target description-related* measures are target characterizations on those dimensions about which ambiguous target information is given. These measures thus refer to the relatively narrow and moderate dimensions that show descriptive overlap with the target description (adventurous-reckless, confident-conceited, witty-sarcastic). When it concerns judgments of target characteristics that are *not* related to the specific descriptive content of the stimulus description, we distinguish the following three types of ratings: *General likability* measures target judgments on dimensions that are both relatively broad and evaluatively extreme (positive-negative). *Specific likability* measures target judgments on dimensions that are as extreme but a little narrower than general likability responses (friendly-unfriendly). Finally, *target description-unrelated* responses measure all kinds of target characterizations that show no descriptive overlap with the target description and are narrower or less extreme than the (general and specific) likability responses (independent-alooft, persistent-stubborn, skillful-clumsy). Thus, in total, participants had to judge the target on eight rating dimensions (adventurous-reckless, confident-conceited, witty-sarcastic, positive-negative, friendly-unfriendly, independent-alooft, persistent-stubborn, skillful-clumsy). The different types of rating dimensions were interspersed with each other. A rating of 1 indicated a *positive* evaluation, and a rating of 7 indicated a *negative* evaluation. To simplify data presentation, we discuss the main analyses in terms of the following (composite) rating dimensions: description related, general likability, specific likability, and description unrelated. For the present study as well as the other studies reported here, these composite indices were reliable (Cronbach’s alphas $> .74$).

Results and Discussion

We tested our prediction that priming inapplicable trait concepts will yield interpretation effects (positive judgments after positive priming, negative judgments after negative priming) when participants are interpretation motivated but not when they are not so motivated in an analysis of variance (ANOVA), treating scale ratings on the four rating dimensions (target description-related, general likability, specific likability, target

TABLE 1: Experiment 1: Using Inapplicable Traits During Interpretation

Trait Priming	Goal Priming			
	Interpretation		Control	
	Persistent	Stubborn	Persistent	Stubborn
Rating of target description				
Traits related to target description	2.86 _a (2.03)	4.25 _b (2.11)	3.55 _{a, b} (2.12)	3.24 _{a, b} (1.45)
General likability	3.59 _a (1.29)	3.54 _a (1.38)	3.75 _a (1.12)	3.71 _a (1.19)
Specific likability	2.96 _a (1.61)	3.01 _a (1.50)	2.56 _a (0.61)	2.90 _a (0.89)
Unrelated to target description	2.27 _a (0.88)	2.37 _a (1.01)	2.45 _a (0.89)	2.76 _a (0.77)

NOTE: Table shows mean ratings, with standard deviations in parentheses, of an ambiguous (adventurous-reckless, confident-conceited, witty-sarcastic) target as a function of trait (inapplicable positive: persistent, inapplicable negative: stubborn) and goal (interpretation, control) priming. Scale range is from 1 to 7. Higher scores indicate more negative judgments on description-related rating dimensions. Means with different subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$.

description-unrelated) as a within-subjects factor and trait priming (positive inapplicable, negative inapplicable) and goal priming (interpretation, control) as between-subjects factors. This revealed a main effect of scale, $F(3, 83) = 14.90, p < .01$ that was qualified by a significant Scale \times Trait Priming \times Goal Priming interaction, $F(3, 83) = 2.69, p < .05$. No other effects reached ordinary levels of significance ($ps > .17$).

As can be seen in Table 1, the trait-priming and goal-priming manipulation did not affect the general likability, specific likability, and description-unrelated dimensions. Trait Priming \times Goal Priming ANOVAs for the four types of rating dimensions only revealed the predicted interaction effect for the description-related scale, $F(1, 83) = 4.00, p < .05$ (other effects, $ps > .58$). As can be seen in Table 1, the valence of descriptively inapplicable trait primes does not influence ratings on dimensions that are descriptively related to the target description when no interpretation goal is activated ($M = 3.55$ after positive trait priming and $M = 3.24$ after negative trait priming, $F < 1$). This replicates earlier findings (e.g., Higgins et al., 1977; Sedikides, 1990; Stapel & Koomen, 2000). However, when an interpretation goal is activated, these judgments are congruent with the valence of the primed traits ($M = 2.86$ and $M = 4.25$), $F(1, 83) = 5.82, p < .05$, adjusted for multiple comparisons with the Bonferroni procedure (for details, see Bock, 1975; Neter, Wasserman, & Kutner, 1985; Norusis, 1997). Thus, the implicit activation of an interpretation goal increases the likelihood that the valence of descriptively inapplicable priming stimuli helps to disambiguate the stimulus. Subtly activating words such as *interpret* and *comprehend* is sufficient to compensate for a lack of descriptive prime-stimulus overlap. The impact of contextual cues increases when “making sense” is on the top of our mind.

Several models of knowledge accessibility effects have suggested that descriptive overlap between prime and target stimulus is one of the preconditions for priming

effects to occur (see Bargh, 1997; Higgins, 1996; Wyer & Srull, 1989). In previous work (Stapel & Koomen, 2000), we demonstrated that descriptive overlap is not necessary for priming effects to occur when primed traits are relatively broad or extreme. The present findings show convincingly that target judgments may be affected by the priming of traits that are descriptively inapplicable to ambiguous (adventurous-reckless, confident-conceited, witty-sarcastic) target stimulus—even when these traits are relatively narrow and moderate (persistent vs. stubborn). Priming inapplicable (narrow and moderate) traits affects judgment of an ambiguous target when an interpretation goal is subtly activated.

EXPERIMENT 2: USING APPLICABLE TRAITS DURING INTERPRETATION

In Experiment 1, we demonstrated that interpretation-motivated perceivers are more likely to use descriptively inapplicable trait primes in the interpretation of a target stimulus than perceivers who are not so motivated. Thus, we provided the first support for the hypothesis that interpretation goals may facilitate accessibility effects. In the present experiment, we examine the impact of the activation of interpretation goals on the use of primed trait concepts that are descriptively applicable to the target stimulus. A plethora of studies have shown that priming stimuli will be used in the disambiguation of target stimuli (for a review, see Higgins, 1996). How, then, will the activation of interpretation goals add anything to this effect? We hypothesize that such goals may affect the *scope* of knowledge-accessibility effects. That is, we predict that the effect of applicable trait concepts will be manifested in a larger range of target judgments when perceivers are interpretation motivated. The impact of applicable priming stimuli will fan out to a wider range of target judgments when words such as “comprehend” and “interpret” are extra-accessible.

Recently, we (Stapel & Koomen, 2000) showed that interpretations of an evaluatively ambiguous target are more likely to be accompanied by evaluative inferences after priming extreme and broad constructs than after priming applicable, moderate, and narrow constructs. Specifically, priming “self-assured” versus “arrogant” affected judgments of a “confident/conceited” target description on description-related dimensions (e.g., confident-conceited) and general likability dimensions (positive-negative) but had no effects on specific likability (e.g., friendly-unfriendly) and description-unrelated (e.g., adventurous-reckless) dimensions. Priming relatively broad and extreme traits, such as “good” versus “bad,” affected description-related dimensions and general likability dimensions but also specific likability dimensions. The accessibility of broad and extreme constructs thus encourages people to go beyond the information given and accompany their target interpretations with more evaluative judgments.

This suggests that when perceivers are exposed to an evaluatively ambiguous target stimulus, the interplay between target and primes also may affect the extent to which this impression is only disambiguation of the information (“She is self-confident”) given or interpretation + inference (“She is self-confident, I like her, she is nice”). In our previous studies (Stapel & Koomen, 2000), we thus demonstrated that priming broad and extreme trait constructs increases the likelihood that target information will be understood in more inclusive and more evaluative terms. Priming broad and extreme traits increases the likelihood that target interpretations will be “supercharged” (Wyer & Srull, 1989). Therefore, individuals will more easily extract general, evaluative inferences from these interpretations, and thus the “scope” of the priming effect will increase (for more details, see Stapel & Koomen, 2000).

In the present experiment, we test the hypothesis that interpretation goals may affect the impact of (narrow and moderate) descriptively applicable constructs in a way that is similar to the impact of broad and extreme constructs. When interpretation is on the top of one’s mind, it is likely that one will extract more meaning, that one will “perceive more deeply” than is the case when no such goal is activated. Interpretation goals will increase the scope of the effect of descriptively applicable trait primes. This will manifest itself in the finding that interpretation-motivated perceivers are more willing to accompany their target encodings with evaluative inferences than perceivers who are not so motivated. Specifically, when no interpretation goal is activated, priming applicable (narrow and moderate) traits is likely to affect description-related and general likability ratings (see Stapel & Koomen, 2000). When an interpretation

goal is activated, such traits are also likely to affect specific likability ratings.

Method

PARTICIPANTS AND DESIGN

Sixty-five Dutch undergraduate students participated in exchange for partial course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to the conditions of a 2 (prime: descriptively applicable positive traits, descriptively applicable negative traits) \times 2 (goal: interpretation, control) between-subjects design.

PROCEDURE AND MATERIALS

The procedure was similar to the one used in Experiment 1. Differences with that experiment are described below.

Trait and goal priming. For the trait-priming task, we used the same version of the scrambled sentence test as in Experiment 1, except that in the present experiment the relevant trait words were descriptively applicable to the target description. In the positive priming conditions, four synonyms of witty (*clever, sharp, acute, keen*) were activated. In the negative priming conditions, four synonyms of sarcastic (*cynical, offensive, bitter, mocking*) were activated. Pretest (see Experiment 1) participants had rated each of these traits as applicable to the target description. The goal-priming task was identical to the one used in the previous experiment.

Target description and measures. After participants had finished the priming and filler tasks, they were given the booklets titled “person judgment” and were instructed to try to form an impression of the characteristics of the person described. The target description was identical to the one used in Experiment 1 and described the target as adventurous/reckless, confident/conceited, and witty/sarcastic. Participants were asked to indicate their impressions of Peter on a number of bipolar 7-point rating dimensions. Following Stapel and Koomen (2000) and similar to Experiment 1, we used the following types of rating dimensions to systematically tap the scope of trait-priming effects under interpretation versus no interpretation conditions. Each of these response categories was pretested in terms of its descriptive overlap with the target, its breadth, and its evaluative extremity, such that the inferential scope of the accessibility effects could be tapped systematically (see Stapel & Koomen, 2000).

The *target description-related* measures were adventurous-reckless, confident-conceited, and witty-sarcastic. The *general likability* measures were positive-negative, likable-dislikable, and warm-cold. The *specific likability* measures were nice-not nice, friendly-unfriendly, and kind-unkind. The *target description-unrelated* measures were

TABLE 2: Experiment 2: Using Applicable Traits During Interpretation

Trait Priming	Goal Priming			
	Interpretation		Control	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
Rating of target description				
Traits related to target description	2.43 _a (1.12)	4.04 _b (0.53)	2.41 _a (1.07)	3.81 _b (1.10)
General likability	3.41 _a (0.80)	4.60 _b (0.77)	3.29 _a (1.04)	4.31 _b (1.13)
Specific likability	3.27 _a (0.69)	4.20 _b (0.80)	3.53 _{a,b} (0.84)	3.24 _{a,b} (1.17)
Traits unrelated to target description	2.77 _a (1.02)	2.24 _a (0.75)	2.66 _a (0.93)	2.43 _a (0.96)

NOTE: Table shows mean ratings, with standard deviations in parentheses, of an ambiguous (adventurous-reckless, confident-conceited, witty-sarcastic) target as a function of trait (applicable positive: witty, applicable negative: sarcastic) and goal (interpretation, control) priming. Scale range is from 1 to 7. Higher scores indicate more negative judgments. For each of the four measures, means with different subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$.

independent-aloof, persistent-stubborn, skillful-clumsy, normal-plain, and sweet-aggressive. Thus, in total, participants had to judge the target on 14 rating dimensions (see also Stapel & Koomen, 2000). These rating dimensions were interspersed with each other in such a way that order effects of “type of scale” were unlikely to occur. Furthermore, the order in which the rating dimensions were presented was counterbalanced. ANOVAs showed no significant (main or interaction) effects of this “order” variable ($F_s < 1$), and therefore this variable is not discussed in the analyses below.

Results and Discussion

We tested our prediction that priming applicable trait concepts will yield interpretation effects (positive judgments after positive priming, negative judgments after negative priming) on more response categories when participants are interpretation motivated than when they are not so motivated in an ANOVA, treating scale ratings on the four rating dimensions (description-related, general likability, specific likability, description-unrelated) as a within-subjects factor and trait priming (positive, negative) and goal priming (interpretation, control) as between-subjects factors. This revealed main effects of scale, $F(3, 61) = 43.09$, $p < .01$, and trait priming, $F(1, 61) = 18.50$, $p < .01$. These main effects were qualified, however, by a Scale \times Trait Priming interaction, $F(3, 61) = 25.02$, $p < .01$, and the predicted Scale \times Trait Priming \times Goal Priming interaction, $F(3, 61) = 3.02$, $p < .05$. No other effects reached ordinary levels of significance ($p_s > .17$).

As can be seen in Table 2, the goal-priming manipulation did not interact with the trait-priming manipulation when it concerned target description-related and general likability ratings. For both these types of ratings, ANOVAs only revealed a main effect of trait priming; for target description-related ratings, $F(1, 61) = 20.46$, $p < .05$, adjusted with Bonferroni; for general likability ratings, $F(1, 61) = 11.93$, $p < .05$, adjusted with Bonferroni; other effects, $p_s > .2$. For these two types of scales, prim-

ing positive traits led to more positive ratings (description-related $M = 2.42$, general likability $M = 3.35$) than when negative traits were primed ($M = 3.93$ and $M = 4.45$, respectively), independent of whether an interpretation goal was activated.

For specific likability ratings, the interpretation goal manipulation did have an important impact on judgments, as is evidenced by a Prime \times Goal interaction, $F(1, 61) = 9.57$, $p < .01$ (other effects, $p_s > .08$). Under no interpretation conditions, specific likability ratings were not affected by the valence of descriptively applicable trait primes ($p > .58$). However, under interpretation goal conditions, positive trait priming led to more positive judgments ($M = 3.27$) than did negative trait priming ($M = 4.20$), $F(1, 61) = 9.38$, $p < .05$, adjusted with Bonferroni. The interpretation and trait-priming manipulations had no effect on judgments on the description-unrelated rating scales ($F_s < 1$) (see Table 2).

These results provide further support for the hypothesis that the activation of an interpretation goal may facilitate accessibility effects. The range of target characterizations affected by the accessibility of descriptively relevant traits is relatively broader when words such as “interpret” and “comprehend” are on the top of people’s minds. Under “standard” (no interpretation goal) conditions, priming descriptively relevant traits affected judgments only on dimensions related to the target description and general likability dimensions. This effect replicates previous studies in which the effect of priming descriptively applicable traits on judgments of an ambiguous target person was investigated. When interpreting an ambiguous person description (e.g., thrifty/stingy Barbara), applicable trait primes typically affect judgments on dimensions related to the target description (thrifty-stingy) and very general, broad likability judgments (likable-dislikable) (see Stapel & Koomen, 2000).

The present study shows that when interpretation goals are activated, priming applicable traits affect a wider range of people’s judgments. Under interpreta-

tion conditions, participants' judgments on likability ratings that are somewhat narrower (e.g., friendly-unfriendly, kind-unkind) also show assimilation to the primed traits. The scope of knowledge accessibility effects thus increases when an interpretation goal is activated. The meaning people extract from an ambiguous target description is somewhat broader and wider when they are extramotivated to do so. It is important to note that in interpretation conditions, trait priming did not affect judgments on dimensions that are unrelated to the target description. This suggests that the activation of an interpretation goal did not merely prompt participants to simply respond to the evaluative aspects of the primes and subsequently form evaluatively consistent judgments. The power of interpretation goals to facilitate accessibility effects has its limits. Interpretation goals may prompt people to think about a target person in somewhat broader, more evaluative terms ("John is persistent. John is friendly."). Yet, this does not necessarily mean that they will be willing to subsequently translate these inferences to descriptively more narrow rating dimensions that are completely unrelated to the target information given: "Is John independent or aloof, sweet or aggressive?" "I don't know. I can't tell from this little snippet of behavioral information."

EXPERIMENT 3: INTERPRETATION GOALS FACILITATE STEREOTYPING

The findings of our first two experiments demonstrate how interpretation goals facilitate the interpretative impact of accessible knowledge such that descriptively inapplicable trait primes may be used more readily (Experiment 1) and descriptively applicable trait primes may be used more extensively (Experiment 2) in a stereotype-neutral judgment context. In the present experiment, we extend our investigation of the impact of interpretation goals on person judgment to the domain of stereotyping.

Stereotyping is the use of beliefs about a social group (stereotypes) in judgments of this group or members of this group. Stereotyping gives meaning to social reality. Stereotypes color the meaning of behavior such that their denotation and connotation is used in the interpretation of behavior (for reviews, see Hamilton & Sherman, 1994; Kunda & Thagard, 1996). In the present experiment, we test the hypothesis that when an interpretation goal is activated, stereotyping is more likely to occur than when no such goal is accessible. Based on the findings of Experiments 1 and 2, we predict interpretation goals to facilitate stereotyping in at least two ways.

First, stereotypical beliefs will be used more readily when an interpretation goal is relatively accessible. That is, behavior that is ambiguously related to beliefs about the actor's social category will be characterized more

readily in terms of these beliefs when an interpretation goal is active than when no such goal is active. For example, you are more likely to apply the stereotype that "car salesmen are untrustworthy" and not to trust a car salesman who tries to sell you a Toyota Corolla 1993 for only \$1,000 when you are trying hard to make sense of this amazing offer than when you are not so motivated. We suggest that when people are interpretation motivated, exposure to behavior that is only ambiguously related to stereotypical beliefs about the actor is sufficient to result in stereotypical judgments. Under "standard" (no interpretation goal) conditions, social category markers such as race, gender, and social class may not always activate stereotypical interpretations of ambiguous behavior spontaneously (see Banaji et al., 1993; Stapel & Koomen, 1998). Under interpretation conditions, however, such markers may function like magnetic fields that stimulate the application of stereotypical beliefs.

Second, accessible, stereotype-relevant knowledge will be used more extensively when an interpretation goal is accessible. That is, in situations in which exposure to an ambiguously stereotypical behavior is accompanied by contextually activated (primed) stereotype-relevant knowledge, the range of target judgments affected by this knowledge is likely to increase with the activation of interpretation goals. The scope of accessibility-driven stereotype effects increases when people are interpretation motivated.

In the present experiment, we test the above hypotheses in a research paradigm that was inspired by Banaji et al. (1993). In all conditions, participants read a story about a target person. The story referred to either a male target (Paul) or a female target (Paula) who performed a series of behaviors ambiguously related to the trait "dependent." Subsequently, participants were asked to give several trait judgments. Dependence is stereotypical of women and not of men (Bem, 1974); therefore, one might expect that a story about "ambiguously dependent Paula" is more likely to be interpreted as such than a story about "ambiguously dependent Paul." However, previous research has shown that simply giving people such a behavior description does not instigate spontaneous stereotyping effects. For such effects to occur, behavior has to have a relatively strong descriptive relation to the stereotype-relevant construct (cf. Banaji et al., 1993; Sagar & Schofield, 1980; Stapel & Koomen, 1998). We predict that the activation of an interpretation goal may change this. Interpretation-motivated perceivers will more readily apply stereotypes than perceivers who are not so motivated. Thus, in conditions in which participants are simply exposed to ambiguously dependent Paul or Paula, interpretation-motivated participants will give Paula higher "dependent" ratings than participants who are under control goal conditions. Judgments of

Paul will not be affected by interpretation goals because “dependence” is stereotypically associated with women, not with men.

As previous studies have shown (Banaji et al., 1993; Stapel & Koomen, 1998), a similar effect will occur when stereotype-relevant traits (“dependent,” “passive”) have been primed right before target exposure. When primed with the trait “dependent,” people will interpret an ambiguously dependent female target in accordance with the activated trait. Thus, we predict that interpretation goal priming and stereotype trait priming manipulations will yield stereotype-congruent ratings of persons who perform behavior that is only ambiguously related to this stereotype. We further predict that the scope of this stereotype effect will be larger when both relevant traits and interpretation goals are primed. That is, as in Experiment 2, we predict that the range of target judgments affected by priming “dependent” will be larger when an interpretation goal is present than when such a goal is absent. Specifically, similar to Experiment 2, when no interpretation goal is activated, we expect stereotyping effects to occur on rating dimensions that have a strong descriptive relation to the target behavior. When an interpretation goal is activated, dimensions that are only weakly related to that behavior might show stereotyping effects. When interpretation is on the top of one’s mind, the scope of stereotype-relevant trait priming effects will increase.

Method

PARTICIPANTS AND DESIGN

The study consisted of 139 Dutch undergraduate students who participated in exchange for partial course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to the conditions of a 2 (trait priming: dependent, neutral) \times 2 (goal priming: interpretation, control) \times 2 (target gender: female, male) between-subjects design.

PROCEDURE AND MATERIALS

The procedure was similar to the first two experiments. Below, we will describe how the trait priming and person judgment tasks differed from the previous two experiments.

Trait priming. In the dependent priming conditions, five traits that can be associated with the female stereotype “dependent” (agreeable, inhibited, patient, submissive, quiet) were primed. In the neutral priming conditions, only neutral information (see Experiment 1) was primed.

Person description and measures. The target paragraph described a series of activities involving the target to be judged and included behaviors only weakly related to the relevant trait (“dependent”) embedded in neutral

behaviors (for details, see Banaji et al., 1993; Stapel & Koomen, 1998). In the female target conditions, the target was named Paula. In the male target conditions, the target was named Paul. Participants indicated their impressions of Paula or Paul on eight 10-point rating scales, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 10 (*extremely*). Similar to Experiments 1 and 2, these rating scales can be categorized according to their descriptive relation to the target paragraph. Strong description-related traits were “dependent” and “passive.” Weak description-related traits were “weak” and “insecure.” Description-unrelated traits were “aggressive,” “polite,” intelligent,” and “cautious.” The applicability of these traits to the target paragraph was tested in a small study ($n = 25$). In this study, participants were given the target paragraph and were asked for each of these traits to rate the applicability to the behavior described in the target paragraph (1 = *not at all applicable*, 9 = *very applicable*). The applicability ratings were as follows: $M = 7.44$ for strong description-related traits, $M = 6.30$ for weak description-related traits, and $M = 4.09$ for description-unrelated traits; t tests between these means revealed that those means differed significantly from each other ($ps < .01$). To simplify data presentation, we discuss the main analyses in terms of the composite rating dimensions.

Results and Discussion

We first performed an ANOVA to see whether participants’ gender had an effect on target judgments. There were no significant main or interaction effects of this variable on any of the dependent measures. Next, we performed an ANOVA, treating scale ratings on the three types of rating dimensions (strong description-related, weak description-related, description unrelated) as a within-subjects factor and trait priming (dependent, neutral), goal priming (interpretation, control), and target gender (female, male) as between-subjects factors. This revealed main effects of scale, $F(2, 131) = 239, p < .01$; goal priming, $F(1, 131) = 5.20, p < .05$; trait priming, $F(1, 131) = 4.19, p < .05$; and target, $F(1, 131) = 26.52, p < .01$. These main effects were qualified by a Trait Priming \times Target interaction, $F(1, 131) = 4.27, p < .05$; a Scale \times Goal Priming interaction, $F(2, 131) = 4.12, p < .05$; a Scale \times Target interaction, $F(2, 131) = 19.42, p < .01$; a Scale \times Trait Priming \times Goal Priming interaction, $F(2, 131) = 5.45, p < .01$; a Scale \times Target \times Goal Priming interaction, $F(2, 131) = 5.52, p < .01$; a Scale \times Target Priming \times Trait Priming interaction, $F(2, 131) = 6.01, p < .01$; and a weak Scale \times Goal Priming \times Trait Priming \times Target interaction, $F(3, 131) = 2.58, p < .08$. No other effects reached ordinary levels of significance ($ps > .10$).

As was predicted, trait and goal priming manipulations exerted no effect on any of the measures of the

male target ($F_s < 1$) (see Table 3). Dependent behavior is not stereotypical of men. Therefore, vaguely dependent behavior is unlikely to be interpreted as such when performed by a man. The activation of an interpretation goal and/or stereotype-relevant traits does not change this.

As predicted, trait and goal manipulations did influence ratings of the female target. For the female target conditions, a Scale \times Trait Priming \times Goal Priming ANOVA revealed main effects of scale, $F(2, 63) = 220.06$, $p < .01$; goal priming, $F(1, 63) = 11.57$, $p < .01$; trait priming, $F(1, 63) = 9.35$, $p < .01$; Scale \times Goal Priming, $F(2, 63) = 11.16$, $p < .01$; Scale \times Trait Priming, $F(2, 63) = 8.44$; and the predicted Scale \times Goal Priming \times Trait Priming interaction, $F(2, 63) = 9.30$, $p < .01$. (The Trait Priming \times Goal Priming interaction was nonsignificant, $F < 1$.)

As can be seen in Table 3, the data pattern was as follows: For description-unrelated ratings, no effects were found ($F_s < 1$). For strong description-related ratings, participants' scores were less stereotypical ($M = 6.47$) in the no interpretation goal/no trait priming condition than in trait-only ($M = 7.81$), goal-only ($M = 8.09$), or trait-and-goal ($M = 8.38$) priming conditions. Simple comparisons showed that the differences between the no interpretation goal/no trait priming condition and each of the experimental conditions were significant ($p_s < .05$ with Bonferroni adjustments), whereas the other comparisons were not ($F_s > 1$). For weak description-related ratings, participants' scores were more stereotypical ($M = 7.88$) in the trait-and-goal priming condition than in the no interpretation/no trait ($M = 6.25$), goal-only ($M = 6.35$), and trait-only ($M = 6.44$) priming conditions. Simple comparisons between trait-and-goal priming condition and each of the other conditions showed significant effects ($p_s < .05$ with Bonferroni adjustments), whereas other comparisons did not ($F_s > 1$).

The finding that priming trait concepts yields stereotypical judgments on strong description-related dimensions when those primed traits match the content of the target description (ambiguously dependent behavior) as well as the social category of the target (dependence is stereotypical of women, not of men) is a replication of Banaji et al. (1993; see also Stapel & Koomen, 1998). The finding that the activation of an interpretation goal is sufficient to instigate stereotype-congruent judgments of a target that is otherwise perceived more neutrally is new. It suggests that interpretation goals may lead to the stereotypical portrayal of targets that are otherwise viewed in a nonstereotypical manner. The finding that trait-and-goal priming conditions also led to stereotypical judgments on weak description-related dimensions (weak, insecure) supports the hypothesis that the range of judgments affected by trait priming will be larger

when people are extramotivated to make sense of the presented information. That is, in conditions in which no interpretation goal was activated, trait priming had no effect on rating dimensions that were only weakly related to the target behavior, whereas those ratings were affected when both stereotype-relevant traits and an interpretation goal were accessible. This replicates the effects of Experiment 2. Furthermore, the finding that description-unrelated dimensions remained unaffected by the manipulations again shows that although under interpretation priming conditions accessibility effects on target interpretations may fan out from description-related to more general judgments, interpretation goals do not prompt a general response mode (see also Experiment 2).

EXPERIMENT 4: MORE SPONTANEOUS STEREOTYPING

In Experiment 3, we found that trait priming is not necessary to instigate stereotyping effects. In the "neutral trait priming" conditions of that experiment, the activation of an interpretation goal was sufficient to initiate stereotypical judgments of a target person. An ambiguous description of a female target was rated more dependent and passive when participants were interpretation motivated than when they were not. Judgments of a similar male target were not affected by interpretation goals. This suggests that the spontaneous stereotyping of ambiguous social stimuli is more likely to occur when the perceiver's goal is to "make sense" of what meets his or her eyes. In the present experiment, we set out to replicate this intriguing effect of the activation of interpretation goals using another gender stereotype, namely, the belief that aggression is stereotypical of men but not of women. In this study, we investigated the impact of primed interpretation goals per se. That is, in the current study, there were no trait priming conditions.

Similar to the previous experiment, in the present experiment, participants read a story about a target person. The story referred to either a male target (Paul) or a female target (Paula) who performed a series of behaviors weakly related to the gender-stereotyped trait "aggressive." Subsequently, participants were asked to judge the target on several traits. We predict that interpretation-motivated perceivers will stereotype targets more readily than perceivers who are not so motivated. Thus, under interpretation conditions, we predict higher ratings on relevant traits for judgments of Paul than when no interpretation goal is activated. Judgments of Paula will not be affected by whether an interpretation goal is activated.

TABLE 3: Experiment 3: Interpretation Goals Facilitate Stereotyping

Trait Priming	Goal Priming			
	Interpretation		Control	
	Dependent	Neutral	Dependent	Neutral
Strong description-related traits				
Female	8.38 _b (0.42)	8.09 _b (0.57)	7.81 _b (1.03)	6.47 _a (1.28)
Male	6.16 _a (0.94)	6.36 _a (1.77)	6.00 _a (0.98)	6.22 _a (1.84)
Weak description-related traits				
Female	7.88 _b (0.78)	6.35 _a (1.38)	6.44 _a (1.17)	6.25 _a (1.42)
Male	6.42 _a (1.45)	6.00 _a (1.66)	6.25 _a (1.49)	6.28 _a (1.10)
Description-unrelated traits				
Female	4.24 _a (0.77)	4.84 _a (0.66)	4.86 _a (0.56)	4.92 _a (0.76)
Male	4.75 _a (0.72)	4.99 _a (0.55)	4.61 _a (0.83)	5.01 _a (0.82)

NOTE: Table shows mean ratings, with standard deviations in parentheses, of an ambiguously dependent target as a function of Trait Priming (dependent, neutral) \times Goal Priming (interpretation, control) \times Target Gender (female, male). Scale range is from 1 to 10. Higher scores indicate higher ratings on the relevant type of rating dimensions. For each of the three measures, means with different subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$.

Method

PARTICIPANTS AND DESIGN

Seventy-two Dutch undergraduate students participated in exchange for partial course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to the conditions of a 2 (goal: interpretation, control) \times 2 (target gender: female, male) between-subjects design.

PROCEDURE AND MATERIALS

The procedure was similar to the one used in Experiment 3. Below we will describe how the person judgment task differed from Experiment 3.

Person description and measures. The target paragraph described a series of activities involving the target to be judged and included behaviors weakly related to the relevant trait (“aggressive”) embedded in neutral behaviors (for details, see Banaji et al., 1993). In the male target conditions, the target was named Paul. In the female target conditions, the target was named Paula. Participants indicated their impressions of Paula or Paul on eight 10-point rating scales, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 10 (*extremely*). Similar to Experiment 3, strong description-related (“aggressive,” “dominant”), weak description-related (“hostile,” “likable”; reversed-scored), and description-unrelated traits (“insecure,” “polite,” “intelligent,” and “cautious”) were used as measures. The applicability of these traits to the target paragraph was tested in a small study ($n = 27$) that was identical to the one described in Experiment 3. Participants rated the applicability of the relevant traits as follows: $M = 7.15$ for strong description-related traits, $M = 5.87$ for weak description-related traits, and $M = 4.05$ for description-unrelated traits; t tests between these means revealed that those means differed significantly from each other ($ps < .01$). To simplify data presentation, we discuss the

main analyses in terms of the composite rating dimensions.

Results and Discussion

We first investigated whether participants’ gender affected target judgments. Similar to Experiment 3, an ANOVA revealed no reliable main or interaction effects of this variable on any of the dependent measures. Next, we performed an ANOVA, treating scale ratings on the three types of rating dimensions (strong description-related, weak description-related, description unrelated) as a within-subjects factor and goal priming (interpretation, control) and target gender (female, male) as between-subjects factors. This revealed a main effect of scale, $F(2, 67) = 189.97, p < .01$; Scale \times Goal interaction, $F(2, 66) = 5.83, p < .05$; Scale \times Target interaction, $F(2, 66) = 4.48, p < .05$, and the predicted Scale \times Goal Priming \times Target interaction, $F(3, 66) = 8.54, p < .01$. No other effects reached ordinary levels of significance ($ps > .10$).

As was predicted (see Experiment 3), goal priming manipulations exerted no effect on any of the measures of the female target (F s < 1). Goal manipulations did influence measures of the male target. For the male target conditions, a Scale \times Goal Priming ANOVA revealed main effects of scale, $F(2, 32) = 127.22, p < .01$; goal priming, $F(1, 32) = 6.08, p < .05$; and the predicted Scale \times Goal Priming interaction, $F(2, 32) = 15.69, p < .01$. As can be seen in Table 4, the data pattern is as predicted: As in the no-trait-priming conditions of Experiment 3, for weak description-related and description-unrelated ratings, no effects were found (F s < 1). For ratings on dimensions that had a strong descriptive relation to the target behavior, participants’ scores were higher ($M = 7.58$) in the goal-priming condition than in the no-interpretation condition ($M = 6.22$), $F(1, 68) =$

TABLE 4: Experiment 4: More Spontaneous Stereotyping

Target Gender	Goal Priming			
	Interpretation		Control	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Strong description-related traits	7.58 _a (0.82)	6.29 _b (1.29)	6.22 _b (0.66)	6.44 _b (0.58)
Weak description-related traits	6.61 _a (0.88)	6.55 _a (1.16)	6.56 _a (0.75)	6.53 _a (0.62)
Description-unrelated traits	4.88 _a (0.64)	4.86 _a (0.71)	4.86 _a (0.58)	4.99 _a (0.60)

NOTE: Table shows mean ratings, with standard deviations in parentheses, of an ambiguously aggressive target as a function of Goal Priming (interpretation, control) \times Target Gender (male, female). Scale range is from 1 to 10. Higher scores indicate higher ratings on the relevant type of rating dimensions. For each of the three measures, means with different subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$.

17.60, $p < .05$, with Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons.

These findings again show (but now for a different stereotype than in Experiment 3) that the activation of an interpretation goal is sufficient to instigate stereotype-congruent judgments of a target that is otherwise perceived more neutrally. The cognitive accessibility of constructs such as “comprehend” and “understand” leads to a processing mode in which stereotypes are applied more readily.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Four studies were designed to examine one primary question: Does the activation of interpretation goals facilitate accessibility effects such that accessible knowledge affects person judgments that otherwise remain unaffected when such knowledge is primed? We found that accessible knowledge is indeed used more readily and extensively in the disambiguation of target behavior when an interpretation goal is activated. Our experiments show a previously undocumented effect of the subtle and implicit activation of interpretation goals. The findings support the hypothesis that accessible trait concepts and beliefs are more readily applied in person interpretations when people are interpretation motivated. Not all accessible knowledge is used in the encoding of ambiguous stimuli, but the threshold for whether to use knowledge may be lowered significantly when people are extramotivated to “make sense of the world.”

Experiment 1 revealed that priming trait concepts that are descriptively inapplicable to the interpretation of a target stimulus results in assimilation when individuals are interpretation motivated but not when they are not so motivated. In Experiment 2, we demonstrated that priming descriptively applicable traits affects a larger range of target judgments under interpretation conditions. In Experiments 3 and 4, we investigated the impact of interpretation goals on stereotyping and showed that individuals whose behavior is only ambiguously related to stereotypical beliefs about their social category are more readily evaluated in stereotypical

terms when perceivers are interpretation motivated than when they are not. Furthermore, in Experiment 3, we showed that (similar to Experiment 2) previously exposed stereotyped information affects a larger range of judgments under interpretation priming conditions. Together, these studies suggest that when the goal to “understand” and “make sense” of the world is activated, the likelihood that contextual cues or constructs may aid in the fulfillment of this goal increases dramatically. When the goal to “make sense” is activated, ambiguity may be more difficult to live with than when no such goal is salient. Hence, interpretation-motivated perceivers will use contextual cues (e.g., accessible trait concepts) or target-related cues (e.g., stereotypical beliefs about the target’s social group) more easily and extensively, and this will influence their judgments accordingly.

It is important to note that interpretation goals are unlikely to affect person judgments per se. Interpretation goals facilitate the use of accessible cues that may navigate target interpretations. In Experiments 3 and 4, those cues were stereotypical beliefs that were activated by the target’s social category, by previous exposure to stereotyped knowledge, or by both. In Experiments 1 and 2, those cues were contextually activated (stereotype-irrelevant) trait concepts. If such cues are absent, interpretation goals are unlikely to exert any effect on target interpretations. This is nicely illustrated by the results of a pilot study in which we asked participants to form an impression of the target description used in Experiments 1 and 2. One half of the participants were first given the interpretation priming task; the other half were given no goal priming task. Findings revealed no differences between conditions on any of the judgment measures. Interpretation goals per se are unlikely to affect interpretations of an ambiguous target if contextual cues (e.g., primed trait concepts) or target-related cues (e.g., a match between the target’s behavior and social category) that suggest a direction for judgment (e.g., positive, negative, aggressive, dependent) are absent.

In a sense, the effects of interpretation motivations on the use of accessible knowledge are somewhat ironic.

Those of us who are extramotivated to “understand” and “comprehend” a person’s ambiguous behavior are most likely to fall prey to the influence of irrelevant contextual cues on interpretation and judgment. Similarly, the disambiguation of an individual’s behavior is most likely to be affected by beliefs about the social group (stereotypes) this individual belongs to when social perceivers are interpretation motivated. This implies that suggestions that one way to prevent stereotyping is by focusing attention on a target’s personalized attributes (see Bodenhausen, Macrae, & Sherman, 1999; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990) may be somewhat counterproductive when those attributes are somewhat vague and ambiguous (as they often are). When we are focusing on people’s personalized attributes we need to know what those attributes mean, given that such attributes are often ambiguous; that is, we need to make sense of those attributes. Our research suggests that it is precisely in such a situation that stereotypes are likely to be applied.

When compared to previous investigations of the impact of motivations and goals on accessibility effects, the “ironic” nature of our findings shows the importance of delineating different types of motivation for such effects. In the present research, we demonstrated how the activation of an interpretation goal may facilitate and amplify accessibility effects. Previous studies have mainly shown that knowledge accessibility effects may reduce when a particular goal is made relatively important (e.g., Ford & Kruglanski, 1995; Sedikides, 1990; Stapel et al., 1998; Thompson et al., 1994; but see Petty & Jarvis, 1996).

A further difference between previous studies of the motivation-cognition interface and the present investigation is that in the present experiments we examined the impact of the *implicit* activation of an interpretation goal. We activated an “interpretation mindset” by using priming stimuli that were directly relevant to the representation they were supposed to activate. In particular, we used words such as “comprehend” and “understand” to prime an interpretation goal. The four studies we reported here may thus be interpreted as corroborating Bargh’s (1997) “automotive” model, which hypothesizes that given the presence of relevant situational features, goals can become active automatically and operate without any role played by conscious intention.

In the present experiments, as in the great majority of priming studies, we thus used a somewhat artificial technique to activate relevant goal representations. Exposure to the word *interpretation* seems to be a crude proxy for the motive to try “to make sense of the world.” It should be noted, however, that earlier priming studies have successfully used both the controlled priming techniques used here and more naturalistic cues (see Bargh, 1997). We are therefore confident that the present find-

ings also will be obtained when more natural priming manipulations are used. It is relatively easy to imagine naturalistic settings in which an interpretation goal may be subtly primed by certain environmental cues. Some situations may be associated more with “interpretative” thinking than others; for example, when we are trying to make sense of a job candidate, attempting to understand a new professor’s lecture, or extracting meaning from our newborn baby’s hollering. It is in those situations that interpretation goals are especially likely to be salient and will influence our use of easily accessible thoughts or readily available stereotypes.

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