

# Study examines how stereotypes affect memory in older Chinese immigrants

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A San Francisco State University study is the first of its kind to examine how negative stereotypes affect memory performance in older Chinese immigrants. Credit: Stephane Tougard, Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0)

Ever have a "senior moment" and worry about what other people think? We might laugh, but when older people worry that their memory is failing—or worry that someone else thinks it is—they can perform poorly on cognitive tests. Such tests are often included during annual wellness exams of older people, and poor performance can lead to false diagnoses of dementia, according to San Francisco State University Professor of Psychology Sarah Barber.

Until recently, all of the testing on the ways stereotype [threat](#) can affect memory in older people had been done on adults in Western cultures. (Stereotype threat is the fear that you will

confirm to yourself or others that a negative stereotype about a group you belong to is true.) But Barber and graduate student Shyuan Ching Tan have just published the first such study of older Chinese immigrants from East Asia in the *Journals of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences*. They found that stereotype threat affects memory performance in older Chinese people, too—but that culturally appropriate interventions can lessen the threat.

As part of her work toward her master's degree in gerontology last year, Shyuan Ching Tan recruited 114 Chinese immigrants ranging in age from 55 to 84 to assess how well they performed on a memory test with and without a stereotype threat.

"I have always been curious about the aging process of older East Asian immigrants," said Tan, now a Ph.D. student at Pennsylvania State University. "I have often heard Chinese elders complain that the behavior of their children and other younger adults is at odds with the Confucian values of obedience, loyalty and propriety. I was interested in understanding how these Chinese elders cope with ageism, and whether affirmation of their cultural values could help buffer them from stereotype threat."

In the study, which was funded by the National Institute on Aging, participants completed a memory test under one of three conditions. In the first condition, the researchers removed any [negative stereotype](#) about [older people](#) by telling participants that people of all ages would perform equally well. The second and the third conditions contained a stereotype threat: Participants were told they would be taking a test to see how aging affects [memory](#)—and that their performance would be compared to that of younger adults. But the third condition also included an "intervention"—a reminder that Chinese traditions honor the aged and wise and that these beliefs had been instilled in younger generations.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, participants performed better when no stereotype was present or when the stereotype threat was alleviated with the intervention language. The findings are important, said Barber and Tan, not only because this is the first study to show that stereotype threats affect older Asian people, too, but also because they show that tests done without stereotype threats offer a more accurate assessment of cognitive skills.

"When [older adults](#) are in situations where others expect them not to do well, they can feel concerned and anxious," said Tan. "Stereotype threats can result in them forgetting more than they would have otherwise."

Barber and Tan say the study's findings are particularly timely because age-based [stereotype threat](#) could be considered a public health problem in Asia where the population is aging rapidly. If cognitive tests are better designed to eliminate [stereotype](#) threats, said Barber, health care professionals can ensure that older adults are performing to the best of their abilities.

**More information:** Shyuan Ching Tan et al, Confucian Values as a Buffer Against Age-Based Stereotype Threat for Chinese Older Adults, *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B* (2018). DOI: [10.1093/geronb/gby049](https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gby049)

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