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National Stereotypes Common, Mistaken, Study Reports

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Contact:

Jeannine Mjoseh

(301) 496-1752

mjosehj@nia.nih.gov

Simplified stereotypes of "typical" Americans, Brazilians, Chinese, and other groups are common but highly mistaken, according to a National Institute on Aging (NIA) study that examined the accuracy of national character stereotypes in 49 cultures worldwide. The finding has important implications regarding beliefs that characterize groups of people, including the elderly, the researchers said.

National character stereotypes are not generalizations based on observation of the personality traits of people in a country. Instead, they are social constructions, probably based on the socio-economic conditions, history, customs, myths, and values of a culture, according to the study, *National Character Does Not Reflect Mean Personality Trait Levels in 49 Cultures*. The study appears in the October 7, 2005, issue of *Science*. The study was conducted by Antonio Terracciano, Ph.D., and Robert R. McCrae, Ph.D., investigators in the NIA's Laboratory of Personality and Cognition. Joining them were 85 colleagues from around the world who participated in the Personality Profiles of Cultures Project, a basic research study on features of personality traits across cultures that is supported by the NIA.

"This study contributes to a basic understanding of stereotypes, which affect social interactions for many groups," McCrae said. "National stereotypes can provide some information about a culture, but they do not describe people. In fact, unfavorable stereotypes of national or ethnic groups are potentially very dangerous, forming the bases for prejudice, discrimination, persecution, or even genocide." Stereotypes become "cultural phenomena" and are perpetuated through media, hearsay, education, history, and jokes, according to the study.

In previous studies, researchers estimated the average trait levels in 49 cultures by obtaining self-reports or ratings from individuals in each culture. For this study, researchers asked 3,989 raters to describe the "typical" member of their own culture.

When researchers compared the average trait levels to the stereotypes, there was no agreement. For example, Americans believe the typical American is very assertive, and Canadians believe the typical Canadian is submissive, but in fact Americans and Canadians have almost identical scores on measures of assertiveness, a little above the world average. Looking at other personality traits, the researchers found that Indian citizens type themselves as unconventional and open to a wide range of new experiences, but measurements of personality show that they are more conventional than the rest of the

people in the world. Czechs believe that Czechs are antagonistic and disagreeable, but when personality is actually observed, Czechs score higher than most people in the world on measures of altruism and modesty.

McCrae and his international collaborators will extend this line of cross-cultural research back into adolescence and examine age stereotypes around the world. Research already conducted by the Laboratory of Personality and Cognition has shown that stereotypes depicting older people as withdrawn and rigid are largely groundless and contribute to age discrimination.

"People should understand that we are all prone to these kinds of preconceptions and likely to believe that they are justified by our experience, when in fact they are often unfounded stereotypes. We need to remind ourselves to see people as individuals, whether they are Americans or Lebanese, Gen Xers or senior citizens," McCrae said.

The National Institute on Aging is one of 27 Institutes and Centers that constitute the National Institutes of Health. The NIA leads Federal efforts to support and conduct basic, clinical, epidemiological, behavioral, and social research on aging and the special needs of older people. Press releases, fact sheets, and other materials about aging and aging research can be viewed at the NIA's general information Web site, <http://www.nia.nih.gov>.