

# Teaching: Stereotypes About Age / Cultural Norms and COVID-19 Mortality

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Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching *Current Directions in Psychological Science* offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal [Current Directions in Psychological Science](#). *Current Directions* is a peer-reviewed bimonthly journal featuring reviews by leading experts covering all of scientific psychology and its applications and allowing readers to stay apprised of important developments across subfields beyond their areas of expertise. Its articles are written to be accessible to nonexperts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.

[Visit the column](#) for supplementary components, including classroom activities and demonstrations.

Visit David G. Myers at his blog [“Talk Psych”](#). Similar to the APS *Observer* column, the mission of his blog is to provide updates on psychological science. Myers and DeWall also coauthor a suite of introductory psychology textbooks, including *Psychology*, *Exploring Psychology*, and *Psychology in Everyday Life*.

## Teaching the Truth About Aging

### Do Cultural Tightness and Looseness Predict COVID-19 Mortality?

#### Student Activity: Teaching Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST)

Almost all undergraduates have older people in their lives, so they'll be eager to discuss the stereotypes around aging.

**Critiquing media:** Start the discussion by asking students to watch this advertisement [for Jitterbug phones](#). As students nominate stereotypes depicted in the ad, you could present the data contradicting those stereotypes (from the table).

**Manipulating time horizon:** Continue the discussion by having students engage in a within-subjects version of a classic SST experiment (Fung & Carstensen, 2006). First tell students they have 30 minutes free to spend time with one of the following people:

- (a) the author of a book they just read
- (b) a recent acquaintance with whom they have much in common
- (c) a close friend or member of their family

(Among traditional-age undergraduates, you'll likely see an equal distribution among these three choices. In contrast, older people show a preference for Option 3—the emotionally meaningful choice.)

Next, tell students they are moving across country alone. In the middle of packing, they find themselves with 30 minutes free to spend time with someone.

Given the same three options, you should find (as researchers have) that younger people now tend to prefer Option 3. Carstensen reports that this exercise helps students understand older people better.

**Using SST to predict messaging success:** As an application exercise, ask students to make SST-based predictions about which messages are likely to be effective among older adults.

Which intervention will get older people to start walking more (as measured by a pedometer)?

- (a) "Walking has many benefits for people of all ages. It helps preserve flexibility and improves posture. Walking can reduce anxiety and tension."
- (b) "Not walking enough has many dangers for people of all ages. You can lose flexibility and your posture may deteriorate. Not walking enough can increase anxiety and tension."

Which camera advertisement caption would be more successful among older adults?

(a) “Capture those special moments.”

(b) “Capture the unexplored world.”

Each pair of examples was tested in experiments with older adults (by Notthoff & Carstensen, 2014, and Fung & Carstensen, 2003, respectively). In both cases, the positive option (A) was more effective.

Students can also screen Carstensen’s 10-minute TEDx Talk, [Older People Are Happier](#).

## Teaching the Truth About Aging

By Beth Morling, University of Delaware

[Carstensen, L. L., & Hershfield, H. E \(2021\). Beyond stereotypes: Using socioemotional selectivity theory to improve messaging to older adults. \*Current Directions in Psychological Science\*, 30\(4\), 327–324.](#)

Browse the “humorous” section of the birthday card aisle and you’ll see many stereotypes about what it means to get old. Older people are comically depicted as being wrinkled, hobbled, and baffled by technology. Outside the card aisle, they are stereotyped as lonely, idle, and cognitively impaired.

APS Fellow Laura Carstensen and Hal Hershfield take on those stereotypes. Older people are *not* the lonely, bewildered people they are stereotyped to be (see table). And when public health and marketing messaging is based on such stereotypes, it’s not likely to motivate people. Grounded in socioemotional selectivity theory (SST), Carstensen and Hershfield argue that public health and consumer messages should focus not on older people’s chronological age but instead on how long they perceive their futures to be.

SST begins with the observation that humans are uniquely aware of their own mortality, and they estimate how much time they have left to be alive. A typical young adult perceives that they’ll live for decades. They’re motivated to try, explore, and learn new things. As people age, however, their remaining time shrinks and they adjust their goals. They’re less likely to expand their horizons and more likely to prioritize emotionally positive and meaningful experiences.

Multiple studies support the “time left” theory of aging: People (of any age) who perceive that they have less time left to live report *more* positive emotions. Rather than being confused and melancholy, they feel more appreciative, happy, and joyful (Carstensen et al., 2020). As the suggested activity illustrates, whereas younger people prefer to pursue novelty (e.g., talking to a new acquaintance), older people prefer emotionally gratifying and personally meaningful activities (e.g., spending time with friends and family). Older people want to savor life.

People’s perceptions of their future years, not their chronological age, affect whether they find public health and marketing messaging motivating. Older people prefer an advertisement that emphasizes positive emotions and experiences, such as the “joyous celebrations” and “smooth velvety flavor” of coffee, whereas younger people prefer ads highlighting the “excellent value” of coffee with “no bitter aftertaste.” Manipulating an ad’s time frame can eliminate these age differences. Adding the tagline “Life is short” reduces the time horizon and motivates a preference for positivity; adding “Life is long” stretches it out and motivates a preference for the practical (Williams & Drolet, 2005).

As this segment of our population grows, it has never been more important to learn how to motivate behavior in this age group.

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## Do Cultural Tightness and Looseness Predict COVID-19 Mortality?

By C. Nathan DeWall, University of Kentucky

[Gelfand, M. J. \(2021\). Cultural evolutionary adaptations to collective threat. \*Current Directions in Psychological Science\*, 30, 401–409.](#)

### Student Activity: How Tight or Loose Is Your Culture?

Ask students to complete the cultural tightness–looseness scale (Gelfand et al., 2011).

Instructions: The following statements refer to a country as a whole. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements about **your country** a scale of 1 to 6, with 1 meaning “strongly disagree” and 6 meaning “strongly agree.” (Note that the statements sometimes refer to “social norms,” which are standards for behavior that are generally unwritten.)

1. \_\_\_\_ There are many social norms that people are supposed to abide by in this country.
2. \_\_\_\_ In this country, there are very clear expectations for how people should act in most situations.
3. \_\_\_\_ People agree upon what behaviors are appropriate versus inappropriate in most situations in this country.
4. \_\_\_\_ People in this country have a great deal of freedom in deciding how they want to behave in most situations.
5. \_\_\_\_ In this country, if someone acts in an inappropriate way, others will strongly disapprove.
6. \_\_\_\_ People in this country almost always comply with social norms.

Next, students will score their responses. Reverse-score Item 4 (i.e., subtract the rating from 7) and then average your responses to all six items. Instructors can explain that students completed the cultural tightness–looseness scale. Cultural tightness describes countries that have strict norms and severe punishments for people who break them. Cultural looseness refers to countries with lenient norms and less severe punishments for infractions. Higher scores on the scale indicate more cultural tightness.

Ask students to discuss their responses with a partner. How tight or loose do they perceive their country to be? Compared with other countries, do students believe their country's tightness is above average, below average, or average? Why? Provide students with examples of countries whose tightness scores are above average (China, Pakistan, South Korea), below average (the United States, Brazil, Venezuela), and average (Iceland, France, Germany; Gelfand et al., 2011).

The next part of the student partner discussion focuses on how cultural tightness and looseness may predict responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Tell students that culturally tight places often have a vast history of experiencing and responding to chronic collective threats, such as war and disease (Gelfand, in press). How might their own country's tightness levels predict behavior during the initial stages of the pandemic (complying with lockdown requirements, mask mandates) and today (vaccination rates, travel restrictions, attitudes toward vaccine mandates for students and workers)? How might their country's tightness levels predict the number of COVID-19 deaths?

Finally, instructors can display the results of a multinational study showing that greater cultural tightness predicted fewer COVID-19 deaths (Gelfand et al., 2021, Figure 1). Compared with people in the most culturally tight countries, those in countries with the highest levels of cultural looseness were more than 8 times as likely to die from COVID-19. This broad difference between tight and loose countries makes sense, considering tight countries' extensive history of coping with various threats.

Collective threat is a part of life. Over the past 10,000 years, the world has witnessed pandemics, wars, the rise and fall of various world powers, genocides, and dramatic climate change. But these threats were unequally distributed across countries. Some countries have experienced a constant deluge of threats, barely getting a chance to recover before the next scourge. Other places have existed with few threats. How might a country's history of chronic threat impact its tightness—strict adherence to norms, with severe punishments for rule breakers—and looseness—lax adherence to norms and weak punishments for scofflaws (Gelfand, 2018)? And how might a culture's tightness or looseness predict its responses to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Michelle Gelfand (2021) offers a cultural evolutionary answer to these questions. According to Gelfand, countries that frequently experience collective threats develop adaptations that help them identify threats and strategies for coping with them. Over many generations, these countries become tighter, emphasizing the importance of following strict norms. Regardless of their size, tight countries, such as China and South Korea, become nimble problem-solvers in the face of collective threat because their citizens follow strict norms meant to aid their survival and reproduction.

Looser countries, such as the United States and Brazil, have far less practice dealing with collective

threats. As a result, Gelfand argues, loose countries experience an evolutionary mismatch when faced with a threat like the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders and citizens in these countries underreacted when they should have overreacted, such as when then-President Donald Trump said of COVID-19 on March 10, 2021, “Stay calm. It will go away.” In other cases, governing bodies in loose countries overreacted when they should have underreacted, such as by closing schools despite little evidence of young children catching, transmitting, or dying from COVID-19 (Leonhardt, 2021).

Teaching students about cultural tightness and looseness will help them understand how cultural differences evolved. Such cross-cultural differences can have life-and-death consequences when countries face a global pandemic.

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