ABSTRACT. The research investigated the stereotypic perceptions of older adults in Singaporean society. One hundred and two university students completed the 300 item Adjective Check List (ACL) differentially assigning traits to young or old adults. Item level analysis of ACL data demonstrated a depiction of old adults as intellectually impaired, cantankerous, and conservative but also serene, nurturant and responsible. The affective meaning analysis indicated that the stereotypes of old adults were characterized as less potent and less active than the stereotypes of young adults but that there were no significant differences in the favorability indices. Singaporean data were compared with research on stereotypes in India and the United States and discussed in terms of cross-cultural theories of modernization and aging.

Key Words: Stereotypes of aged, Singapore, aging and modernization theory

INTRODUCTION

The majority of psychological investigations of perceptions of older persons has demonstrated salient negative stereotypes and unfavorable attitudes toward the aged (Ahammer and Baltes 1972; Bassili and Reil 1981; Collette-Pratt 1976; Green 1981; McTavish 1971; Tuckman and Lorge 1952) although there have been trends in more recent research to challenge this unidimensional negative characterization (Austin 1985; Schonfield 1982; Tibbitts 1979). The bulk of the psychological literature on age stereotypes, however, has originated in Western, developed countries, most notably the United States. Although a small number of comparative studies have been undertaken (e.g., Arnhoff, Leon and Lorge 1964; Noesjirwan, Gault, and Crawford 1983), far less is known about perceptions of older persons on a cross-cultural basis. It would be expected, however, that stereotypes of the aged like other stereotypes (Williams and Best 1982), would reflect some pan-cultural similarities as well as some culture-specific differences.

Perceptions of older persons and attitudes toward aging are undoubtedly influenced by wider social, economic, cultural and political characteristics of a society. Unfortunately the precise relationship between the macro social factors and the micro psychological variables has not been clarified. Cowgill (1972) has argued that the status of the aged is inversely proportional to the degree of modernization in a society, postulating a negative linear relationship between status and technological development. In contrast Slater (1964) has suggested that prestige of the elderly is highest in those societies falling within a median range of cultural
modernization, implying a curvilinear relationship between the two variables. Alternatively, Palmore and Manton (1974) propose a more dynamic model contending that positive regard of older persons declines in early stages of modernization but may later stabilize and even begin to rise.

Given the theoretical concern for the influence of modernization on perceptions of older persons, Singapore provides an interesting context for psychological research on stereotypes of the aged. Within the past 20 years Singapore has rapidly industrialized its economy and since the 1970's has ranked as a developed country and the second wealthiest nation in Asia. Other indicators of development such as a decrease in the fertility rates, a rise in the standard of living and increased levels of education are also prevalent. In addition, the nuclear family has become the predominant family type (Kuo and Wong 1979). In short Singapore is now characterized by the level of high technological development that Atchley (1977) describes as contributing to lowered social status of older persons — health technology (decremental birth rates and incremental proportions of old people in the community), economic technology (lower demands for workers) and educational technology (youth centered education which makes traditional knowledge obsolete). In contrast to this rapid modernization, however, there has been a strong social and political emphasis on retaining traditional values; the family is expected to serve an important function as a social unit, and language, customs, and religion are relied upon and strengthened as cultural ballasts against the tide of Western decadence and modern values (Chiew 1983; Clammer 1981; Kuo 1980; Kuo and Wong 1979; Ward and Hewstone 1985). With regard to the elderly the traditional values specify status and respect for the aged, strong family ties, a collectivistic orientation and reciprocity between paternalism and filial piety (Wee 1963; Yap 1968). Within the Singaporean milieu, then, a fundamental tension is displayed between modernization and traditional values.

The research presented here derives from psychological studies on perceptions of the aged, particularly early work by Altrocchi and Eisdorfer (1968) and more recent investigations by Williams, Pandey, Best, Morton and Pande (1987). The research includes the examination of stereotypes of older persons and the affective meaning analyses of those stereotypes (Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum 1957). In the original United States research Altrocchi and Eisdorfer reported that stereotypes of the average man/woman were significantly more favorable than those of old man/woman; likewise, the “average person” stereotype was accorded more potency and activity. Williams et al. implemented a similar technique to assess perceptions of old and young persons in Indian and United States university students and replicated the potency and activity findings; however, in the United States old adults were viewed more favorably than young adults while the reverse was true in India. Williams et al. interpreted