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Emotional memory bias toward negative memories is a central characteristic of depression and anxiety (Mathews & McLeod, 1994). Recent findings in cultural neuroscience suggest that cultural values (more specifically, levels of individualism and collectivism) can moderate the relationship between vulnerability to anxiety and depression and the development of these memory biases. It has also been shown that certain races are more vulnerable to negative affect. For example, Chiao and Blizinsky (2010) illustrated that having the short allele of the 5-HTTLPR Serotonin-Transport Gene, which is significantly more prevalent in Asian populations, left individuals more prone to anxiety and depression in the face of environmental threats and were more sensitive to negative information. This study investigated the complex relationship between race, culture, and negative memories.

20 Asian and 20 Caucasian students at Northwestern University were first primed with either individualistic or collectivistic cultural values using a prime (Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991), and were then asked to view a series of positive, negative, and neutral photos from the International Affective Picture System (Lang, 1993; Ochsner, 2000). Participants were then asked to complete the “Reading the Mind” task, in which they were asked to look at pairs of eyes from 72 faces (36 Asian and 36 Caucasian faces) that expressed some form of emotion, and were asked to choose the correct emotion from 4 answer choices given. Afterwards, participants were given a surprise memory recognition task in which they had to identify the original 45 photos from a combined set of 90 IAPS photos (the 45 originals with 45 foils, matched with each of the originals). Participants were then asked to complete a series of surveys, namely the State and Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI), Beck’s Depression Inventory (BDI), and Ryff’s Well-Being Scale (WBS). It was hypothesized that people primed with collectivistic cultural values would remember more of the negative IAPS pictures (and respond more quickly in terms of reaction time), be better at guessing the correct emotions for the pairs of eyes they saw, show ingroup bias for eyes that were members of their ingroup (i.e. an Asian participant primed collectivistic should be better at interpreting the emotions of an Asian pair of eyes compared to an Asian participant primed individualistic). Furthermore, it was predicted that participants primed with collectivism would report higher levels of state anxiety only, higher levels of depression, and report less well-being. The results of the study are currently being analyzed, but there have been significant effects of the collectivistic prime for state anxiety and well-being in accordance with the hypotheses.