

Do We Really Get Wiser As We Get Older? Japanese Show Wisdom Earlier than Americans

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Reviewed by John M. Grohol, Psy.D. on August 31, 2012

Do we get wiser as we get older? It depends on where you grow up, according to a new study.

Social psychologist Dr. Igor Grossman and colleagues at the University of Waterloo in Canada hypothesized that having wisdom means that you are good at resolving conflict.

But conflict is handled in different ways in different cultures.

So they set out to see if they could document the differences between conflict resolution — and thus wisdom — in Japanese and American cultures.

According to the researchers, Americans emphasize individuality and solve conflict in a direct manner, such as by using direct persuasion.

In contrast, the Japanese place a greater emphasis on social cohesion, and tend to settle conflict more indirectly, using avoidance strategies or relying on mediation through another person.

This led the researchers to postulate that Japanese individuals, who tend to be socialized to value interpersonal harmony, would be better at resolving conflict and show more wisdom earlier in life.

Americans, who experience more conflict over time, would be continually learning about conflict resolution throughout their lives, showing greater wisdom later in life, according to the researchers' hypothesis.

To test their theories, the researchers asked a number of Japanese participants and American participants, ranging in age from 25 to 75, to read newspaper articles that described a conflict between two groups and respond to several questions, including "What do you think will happen after that?" and "Why do you think it will happen this way?"

Next, they were asked to read stories about conflict between individuals — including siblings, friends, and spouses — and answer the same questions.

The researchers measured the extent each response illustrated six previously established characteristics of wise reasoning:

1. Considering the perspectives of others,
2. Recognizing the likelihood of change,



3. Recognizing multiple possibilities,
4. Recognizing the limits of one's own knowledge,
5. Attempting to compromise, and
6. Predicting the resolution of the conflict.

As the researchers predicted, young and middle-aged Japanese participants showed higher wisdom scores than same-aged Americans for conflicts between groups.

For conflicts between people, older Japanese people still scored higher than older Americans, though this cultural difference was much smaller than the difference observed between the younger adults.

And while an older age was associated with higher wisdom scores for the American participants, there was no such relationship for the Japanese participants.

The research also shows that some abilities — specifically those involved in resolving conflicts — remain intact into old age. Grossmann said he hopes that the study acts as an antidote to the “detrimental ageism stereotypes in both Western and East Asian societies.”

The study will be published in *Psychological Science*.

Source: [Association for Psychological Science](#)

APA Reference

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