

# Older Really Is Wiser, Study Suggests

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Wisdom and old age have been inexorably linked in the minds of many for years, but a new study has found evidence which proves the old axiom may, in fact, be true.

Researchers at the University of Michigan, led by psychology professor Richard E. Nisbett, recruited three groups of people based on age. One was 25-to-40 years old, one was 41-to-59 years old, and one was 60-plus years old. Each group was presented with fictional reports regarding foreign countries, and then was tasked with determining what the resolution would be.

Their answers were then graded by researchers, who had no knowledge of the age range each respondent was part of. According to the Associated Press (AP), “Ratings were based on things like searching for compromise, flexibility, taking others’ perspective and searching for conflict resolution.”

In the abstract accompanying their findings, which were published Monday in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, Nisbett and his associates said, “It is well documented that aging is associated with cognitive declines in many domains. Yet it is a common lay belief that some aspects of thinking improve into old age. Specifically, older people are believed to show better competencies for reasoning about social dilemmas and conflicts.”

“However, to date research has provided little evidence corroborating this assumption. We addressed this question in two studies, using a representative community sample. We asked participants to read stories

about intergroup conflicts and interpersonal conflicts and predict how these conflicts would unfold. We show that relative to young and middle-aged people, older people make more use of higher-order reasoning schemes that emphasize the need for multiple perspectives, allow for compromise, and recognize the limits of knowledge,” they added.

In an interview with AP science writer Randolph E. Schmid, University of Toronto psychology professor Lynn Hasher called the study “the single best demonstration of a long-held view that wisdom increases with age”<sup>1</sup>. What I think is most important about the paper is that it shows a major benefit that accrues with aging—rather than the mostly loss-based findings reported in psychology. As such, it provides a richer base of understanding of aging processes.”

The study was funded in part by the Russell Sage Foundation, the National Institute on Aging, and the National Science Foundation Grant.

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