

The New York Times

The New Old Age

Caring and Coping

MAY 6, 2010, 12:38 PM

Sometimes Older Really Is Wiser

By **PAULA SPAN**

Maybe Supreme Court justices, United Nations ambassadors, presidential envoys to troubled parts of the globe and divorce mediators should all be at least 60 years old.

This, let me hastily note, is my own hypothesis after wading into a [provocative new study](#) in The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. Its lead author, Igor Grossmann, a psychologist at the University of Michigan, is far too cautious a scientist to make such sweeping suggestions. But look at what he and his colleagues have discovered.

Take a handful of (fake) newspaper stories about social group conflict — immigration quarrels in Tajikistan, ethnic tensions in Africa, that sort of thing. Ask about 250 people of various ages to read them and talk about what might happen next and why. Record and transcribe their responses, and score them on six dimensions of wisdom as the psychological literature commonly defines it.

Some of those dimensions, as explained by Mr. Grossmann, a doctoral candidate in social psychology, include, “Do they recognize that the world is changing all the time? Do they have the ability to see events from the perspective of the people involved? Do they recognize the limits of knowledge? Do they search for conflict resolution?” The researchers gave each participant six scores and a composite wisdom score.

And guess what? “Folk psychology, what laypeople believe, is indeed correct — older people have wiser abilities to resolve conflicts,” Mr. Grossmann summarized. The differences were significant, even when the investigators controlled for education level and socioeconomic status. The average age of those who ranked in the wisest 20 percent: nearly 65. Average age of those in the less-wise 80 percent: about 45.

The psychologists tried it again with (fake) advice columns, dealing with family and marital conflicts. Same result: older equaled wiser.

Certain cognitive skills do decline with age, the study showed, as others have before it. The older respondents didn’t process information as quickly. They had lower “fluid intelligence” scores, which reflect the ability to discern logical patterns and perform abstract reasoning, than those in their 20s through 50s. And older participants were more easily distracted.

“Most of the research on aging shows older people at a huge disadvantage,” Mr. Grossmann said. “Our study is one of the first to show that some cognitive processes seem to improve in old age.”

Once I discovered that Mr. Grossmann is 27 (he confessed with some embarrassment), I was a bit hesitant to trust him on this. But he assured me that one of his co-researchers was 68, so I’ll take his word for it.

Paula Span is the author of “When the Time Comes: Families With Aging Parents Share Their Struggles and Solutions.”

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