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A Cross Comparative International Study on the Concept of Wisdom

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Abstract

The study aims to depict the most common ideas regarding wisdom from young people across different countries: Latvia, Lithuania, Mexico, Korea and the United States.

A questionnaire was administered to nearly 800 adolescents from these countries and comparisons, by country and gender were made regarding participants perceptions of a wise man and a wise woman. Although difference was found between countries, more consistent differences by gender are reported. In a global perspective, factor analysis allows to establish three major traits to describe wise people charismatic, goal oriented and unconventional. Also, participants consistently excluded a person from the concept of wise if they were poor, pessimistic, naïve or inconsistent. Results evidence a lack of values attached to the description of wisdom and it is argued that school should foster the development of conceptions of wisdom as a desirable stage in human development that includes values such as justice, equity and respect for others. Difficulties in international comparative research are discussed.

A Cross-Comparative International Study on the Concept of Wisdom

Wisdom and Culture

The concept of wisdom varies across cultures. However, few studies have attempted to clearly establish differences and commonalities regarding this construct between different countries. In this perspective, wisdom is a concept that has not been fully approached in the scientific literature and its meaning depends on various issues such as cultural values, expectations and ideals.

The purpose of this study is to describe and compare, in a preliminary fashion, the ideas about the concept of a wise person between youngsters of 5 different countries with significant cultural differences. People in all over the world have their own perception about wisdom that needs to be studied to develop implicit theories of wisdom across cultures.

Baltes & Smith (2008), define wisdom as a system of expert knowledge, experience and judgment ability in main areas that relate to differences in cultural contexts and relativity of life. Sternberg (2004), a classic in the field, claims that wisdom is the use of one's intelligence and experience as mediated by values toward the achievement of a common good through a balance among our own interests, considering our own environment in the long term. In general, wisdom is knowledge of what is true or right and it is related to judgment as to action, insight and problem solving skills. In some cultures wise people are considered special and wisdom is commonly associated with giftedness and success in life.

Sternberg (2003) argues that wisdom depends upon our ability to effectively balance between: creative and analytical intelligence, interests of self and others and short-term and

long-term benefits when attaining one's goals. Sternberg emphasizes the importance of cultural context as there are different things being seen as important in different cultures.

During the past several decades, there has been a growing interest in the psychological study of wisdom (Baltes & Smith, 1990; Clayton & Birren, 1980; Holliday & Chandler, 1986). This line of inquiry has been spawned by several streams of scholarship. Among them are the formulation of life-span developmental theory (Lerner, 1984;), the identification of positive aspects of aging (Alexander & Langer, 1990; Sinnott & Cavanaugh, 1991; and the search for new forms of intellectual functioning with presumed high ecological validity for the period of adulthood (Dixon, 1992; Dixon & Baltes, 1986; Simonton, 1988; Sternberg & Wagner, 1986).

Much of this work on wisdom, however, is theoretical and speculative rather than empirical, and few studies on cultural variations of wisdom and on differences and commonalities in the perception of wise people around the world.

Wisdom around the world

Worldwide, there are cultural differences in the on the conception of wisdom, though there are also some similarities. For example, different kind of social skills and cognitive abilities are seen as important in most cultures, but there are variations on which features are the most important to a wise person.

In Finland wise persons were perceived as collaborative, persuasive, sophisticated and prudent (Raty & Snellman, 1992). In Latvia, wise persons were perceived with high social skills and intrapersonal abilities, comprehensive knowledge and with adaptation and forecasting abilities (Ivanova & Raščevska, 2010). In USA and Australia a wise person was associated with experienced, knowledgeable and aged; whereas in India and Japan

wise people were depicted as discreet, aged and experienced (Takahashi & Bordia, 2000). These results indicate salience on cognitive dimension in Western cultures whereas emotional and cognitive are poignant in Eastern cultures.

A study of Taiwanese conceptions of wisdom revealed that three main components of wisdom as a process were cognitive integration, positive effects (activities resulting in profit for self and others) and embodiment of ideas into real life (Yang, 2008). Interestingly, it is even discovered that there are different conceptions of wisdom in different professions (Sternberg, 1985). One study showed that persons working in fields of art, physics and philosophy linked wisdom and creativity together. However, those working in field of management considered them not to be related.

In Korea intelligent people are associated with high social skills, ability to deal with new situations, problem solving ability, self-control and practicality (Lim, Plucker & Im, 2002). Despite these findings, still there is much to explore about how wisdom is perceived in different cultures.

Assumptions about wisdom

In this work, three assumptions have been made regarding wisdom. The first relates to the tenet that, in an international comparison, the construct of wisdom is modulated by perceptions values and experiences in a given cultural context, that sustain a number of subjective concepts associated to wisdom, such as intuitive understanding intuitive understanding, success in life and happiness.

The second relates to the unavoidable association between the concept of intelligence, which is culture specific, and its relation to wisdom. In this lane, across cultures, the conditions of intelligence seem to be a necessary but not a sufficient condition

to wisdom: people can be intelligent without being wise. As Steinberg (2003) argued, merely smart people –who have not achieved wisdom-, are especially susceptible to egocentrism, omniscience, omnipotence and beliefs of invulnerability.

The cultural variation in the perception of term achievement seems to be the third tenet to sustain this work. Indeed, in the majority of cultures wisdom is not something to be inherited (such as giftedness and talents). Wisdom is a higher stage of human development, to be achieved after being exposed to our ability to reflect upon a number of life experiences and to turn pain, suffering and discomfort into valuable lesson about the sense of life. As Staudinger & Pasupathi (2003) assert, wisdom is seen as the ideal destination of personal development.

Knowledge can be used to better or worse, it has no moral or ethical innuendo by itself. Thus, in an international perspective, it is argued that the school is a setting which must be devoted to promote wisdom beyond knowledge, if peace and global sustainable development are into play. Schools should help students use their knowledge for good rather than ill. For example, one learns history in part so as to learn the lessons of the past, particularly the heinous effects of wars and annihilation, so we not repeat such mistakes.

Wisdom in the current humankind situation is an important concept to analyze, considering what the wisdom university asserts:

...we have reached the point when the consequences of global warming alone, to say nothing of the twenty or so other major global crises, are beginning to dramatically disrupt life as we know it through increasingly erratic climactic patterns and epidemics of infectious diseases. We are headed into an era when the one constant will be a rising crescendo of crises and misfortunes emanating from the

environment and dysfunctional societies, combined with the inability of our prevailing institutions to deal with the calamities as they unfold.

(<https://www.wisdomuniversity.org/institute-emerging-culture.htm>)

Thus a conception of wisdom that enhances global economic prosperity and social harmony should be instilled in schools and families, and as some of the defenders of this new vision sustain, there is a profound realignment in fundamental human values within the emerging wisdom culture (Smith & Baltes, 1993).

Method

This is a quantitative, cross-cultural study involving participants from five countries. Investigators in each country abided to demands and procedures and regulations for research to human subjects and explained to participants the purpose of the study.

Participants.

Adolescents selected conventionally to participate in the study responded to a paper and pencil questionnaire in their native language. All were in a school setting, and they accepted voluntarily to respond to the instrument. Nearly 800 adolescents between 15 and 19 years olds from five countries participated in the study. Table 1 depicts the sample composition.

Table 1. Sample

Country	Males	Females	Mean age	Total	Percent
México	104	75	17.18	179	21.23
USA	75	28	18.27	103	12.21
Lithuania	102	111	15.23	213	25.26
Korea	35	109	19.07	144	17.08
Latvia	100	104	15.03	204	24.19
Total	416	427	16.62	843	100

Comentado [A1]: Maybe it would be useful to show also SD for the age here, in a separate column?

Participants represent a balance in gender and age differences, due to sampling accessibility between the countries. Due to cultural differences in the structures of schools, American and Korean students were freshman at a college level, whereas Mexican, Latvian and Lithuanian students were in high school.

Instrument

In order to explore major dimensions of wisdom, a semantic differential (a pencil and paper scale assessing 25 pairs of adjectives arranged in opposites) was developed for the study. Originally, five dimensions were proposed a priori in order to organize the concept around 5 major dimensions of wisdom: Social competence (cooperative-competitive), self-regulation (flexible-strict), social recognition (Respected-ignored), positive emotional disposition (joyful-serious) and personality traits (rebellious-obedient).

The instrument was firstly developed in English. It was then translated to Korean, Latvian, Lithuanian and Spanish. Investigators in each country used the back translation method to ensure the appropriate meaning and sense of the expression across languages and cultures, in order to guarantee fair comparisons. Adaptations were made to preserve the sense and intention of the item rather than a strict translation. Two sets of items were then presented in a random order, one asking the participant to assess a wise woman and the other to assess a wise man. The alpha reliability coefficient was calculated for each version: English (.973), Spanish (.891) Korean (.759), Latvian (.821) and Lithuanian (.835).

Procedures.

In every country, data collections were conducted following the rules, demands and procedures of social research. In the United States, participants responded on-line to the instrument via the web. In all other countries, instruments were administered on paper to groups of students attending classes. In every case, participation was voluntary and students were informed of the purpose of the study and its confidential character.

Data Analysis.

Regardless of the format and language all instruments were transformed into a five point Likert scale per independent trait. Data were analyzed using SPSS. Comparisons were made by gender and country.

Results

Overview.

A first exploratory analysis was carried out to identify those traits that are associated with wisdom in general, regardless of the country and gender of participants. The five most frequently chosen traits were: *strong*, *respected*, *direct*, *creative*, and *flexible*. The five

least commonly chose were *weak*, *poor*, *selfish*, *unnoticed*, and *pessimistic*. However, differences were found by, country and gender as depicted below.

Differences by country.

ANOVAS were carried out to identify differences in some of the factors. In almost every trait there were statistically significant differences when compared by country. Exceptions to this were, in general, *rebellious* and *extrovert*. The following table illustrates some of the biggest differences found.

Table 1. Differences by country.

Trait	MEX	USA	LT ¹	KOR	LV	F	p
Creative	2.60 (1.29)	1.31 (1.14)	2.23 (1.35)	1.04 (.80)	2.25 (1.40)	30.0	.001
Witty	2.47 (1.45)	2.00 (1.15)	2.81 (.98)	2.11 (1.35)	3.05 (1.11)	16.3	.001
Cooperative	2.47 (1.42)	1.26 1.48	2.34 (1.31)	1.07 (.97)	2.20 (1.40)	24.3	.001
Respected	2.31 (1.39)	1.40 (.84)	3.18 (1.09)	1.48 (.69)	2.90 (1.20)	61.6	.001
Generous	2.12 (1.47)	2.00 (1.15)	2.47 (1.26)	1.23 (1.24)	1.69 (1.40)	18.7	.001
Warm	2.10 (1.57)	1.60 (.49)	2.40 (1.41)	.38 (.63)	2.21 (1.35)	13.1	.001
Individual oriented	1.92 (1.41)	.50 (1.03)	1.37 (1.25)	1.20 (1.64)	1.87 (1.43)	7.9	.001

X (SD),

Warm, creative, and cooperative seem to be important for Mexican, Latvians and Lithuanians, and they seem to be less important for Koreans and Americans. *Individually oriented* seem to be less important for Americans than for the rest of participants and *social respect* was the most salient for Lithuanians.

¹ LT and LV are the abbreviations of Lithuania and Latvia.

Differences by gender.

T-tests were conducted to explore for gender differences. In general, gender differences were found in 52% of items. There were no gender differences in dimensions such as: *individual-group oriented, influential-unnoticed, famous-unobserved, joyful-serious, inconsistent-persistent, and abstract-concrete*. However, women more consistently identified wise people as: *Optimistic, cooperative, extrovert and spontaneous*, whereas men labeled wise people as *strict, questioning and calculating*. When compared by country, males showed different perceptions in every trait except for *strict, competitive, and influential*.

Wise men and women.

Participants were asked to assess the characteristics of a wise man and a wise woman. To explore for commonalities amongst participants, factor analysis of principal components with varimax rotation were performed for a male wise person and a female wise person. In both analyses only the main factors were considered. Regarding a male wise person, 34.7% of the variance was explained by four main factors: *personality, responsibility, goal oriented, and unconventional*.

Interestingly, the main factor connoting a wise male included adjectives such as *kind, warm, joyful, extrovert, optimistic, cooperative, and extrovert*. All related to personality and they could be also clustered within the concept of *aura, angel or charm*. These results emphasise wise persons' social skills, kindness, helpfulness that can be also seen in results from other studies. The second factor, a negative one, clustered factors associated to unwise people: *pessimistic, naïve, inconsistent, and poor*. The third factor pertains to goal achievement and it is associated with *strict, competitive, systematic, and planning*. The

fourth and last main factor connoting a wise man relates to his unconventional nature and relates to *rebelliousness, lack of conformity, and notoriety*.

Regarding a female wise person, 38.3% of the variance was explained by four main factors: *social influence, responsibility, goal achievement, and unconventional*. The first factor was labeled social influenced because it included to sets of different adjectives when compare those used to describe a male wise person. Clustered items could be categorized in two major lanes: *intelligence and personality*; the first clearly distinguishes wise women as *strong, concrete, respected, and influential*; the second mimics the first factor of a male wise person depicted as *confident, warm, and kind*. For a wise woman it was more explicit the identification of cognitive traits than for a wise male. As with the male figure, the second, third and fourth factors were the same.

Conclusions

Various differences regarding the conception of wise men and women were found between countries as expected by the influence of culture. Likewise, differences were found by gender, these more consistent and obvious than those found by country. Findings thus support the idea of globalization and the force of gender being a specific influences eventually being stronger than nationality and cultural origin. Results show that both cognitive, social, and emotional qualities are important to a wise person, similarly as wisdom has been defined after initial studies of this kind (Clayton & Birren, 1980). Though, there are also some changes over time in how people think.

From a global perspective, perhaps it is more useful to seek for commonalties and universal characteristics associated with the construct of wisdom. In this perspective, it is important to underline the fact that wise women need to be recognized both cognitively and

by personality, whereas wise men only need from the conative. Is this difference due to the remaining differences between men and women? Is this trend going to change over time?

Internationally, results from this study identify, first of all, some traits that will discard or exclude a person from the concept of wise: *poor, pessimistic, naïve* or *inconsistent*. On the other hand, wise men and women could be described as with three major traits: *charismatic, goal oriented, and unconventional*.

Discussion and recommendations

It is assumed across these cultures that wisdom is a desirable and positive characteristic of a person. As expected, many more differences were found by country than by gender. Projection is a major psychological event to be explored when investigating why people ascribe some traits to wise people. Global influences describe what is wise, but more importantly what is not. Although commonalities in these study give light into a global concept of a wise person, cultural and gender differences regarding the development of this conception require further research and consideration.

International research

A reflection upon the challenges and difficulties in doing cross comparative research between cultures and countries is necessary in order to estimate the limitations and contributions of this kind of research. Translation of concepts deserves particular attention since it was found in pilot stages of the instruments, that strict translation did not always preserve the intention of the comparison among languages. Concepts should be preserved considering the broad meaning of words.

It is important to pre-establish some of the differences to be found in a study of these magnitudes, differences by country were so many, that it was difficult to select which

ones were worth comparing and analyzing. Thus, cluster analysis is important in exploring data and identifying venues of future research. There is an absence of terms that relate wisdom to values such as *peace, honorability, commitment* and other values needed for *social peace, equity* and so forth.

Future research on the construct on wisdom and the ways this can be teach and studied are needed to foster mutual understanding between cultures and people.

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