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## **Abstract**

The article aims to depict the most common ideas regarding wisdom from young people across different countries: Latvia, Lithuania, Mexico, Republic of 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 differences were found between countries, more consistent differences by gender were reported. From a global perspective, factor analysis established three major traits to describe wise people: charismatic, goal oriented and unconventional. Also, participants consistently excluded a person from the concept

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of wise if they were poor, pessimistic, naïve or inconsistent. Results indicate a lack of values attached to the description of wisdom and it is argued that schools 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.

## **Keywords**

cross-cultural comparison, 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 among different countries. From 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 was to describe and compare, in a preliminary fashion, the ideas about the concept of a wise person between young people of five different countries with significant cultural differences. People all over the world have their own perception about wisdom that needs to be studied to develop implicit theories of wisdom across cultures.

Baltes and Smith (2008) define wisdom as a system of expert knowledge, experience and judgement ability in the main areas that relate to differences in cultural contexts and relativity of life. Sternberg (2003), a classic in the field, claims that wisdom is the use of one's intelligence and experience as mediated by values towards 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 judgement 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 on one's ability to effectively balance creative and analytical intelligence, interests of self and others, and short- and long-term benefits when attaining one's goals. Sternberg emphasizes the importance of cultural context, as different things are seen as important in different cultures.

During the past decade, there has been a growing interest in the psychological study of wisdom (Baltes and Smith, 2008; Clayton and Birren, 1980; Holliday and 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 and Langer, 1990; Sinnott and Cavanaugh, 1991) and the search for new forms of intellectual functioning with presumed high ecological validity for the period of adulthood (Dixon, 1992; Dixon and Baltes, 1986; Simonton, 1988; Sternberg and Wagner, 1986).

However, much of the work on wisdom is theoretical and speculative rather than empirical, and there are few studies on the cultural variations of wisdom and on the differences and commonalities in the perception of wise people around the world.

## *Wisdom around the world*

Worldwide, there are cultural differences on the concept of wisdom, although 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 of a wise person are the most important.

In Finland, wise persons were perceived as collaborative, persuasive, sophisticated and prudent (Raty and Snellman, 1992). In Latvia, wise persons were perceived to have high social skills and intrapersonal abilities, comprehensive knowledge and adaptation and forecasting abilities (Ivanova and Raščevska, 2010). In the USA and Australia, a wise person was associated with experience, knowledge and age, while in India and Japan, wise people were depicted as discreet, aged and experienced (Takahashi and Bordia, 2000). These results indicate salience on the cognitive dimension in Western cultures, whereas emotional and cognitive characteristics are poignant in Eastern cultures.

A study of Taiwanese concepts of wisdom revealed three main components of wisdom as a process: cognitive integration, positive effects (activities resulting in profit for self and others) and embodiment of ideas into real life (Yang, 2008). Interestingly, it has been 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 the field of management considered them not to be related.

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

## *Assumptions about wisdom*

In this study, three assumptions were 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, 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. Across cultures, the conditions of intelligence seem to be a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for wisdom: people can be intelligent without being wise. As Sternberg (2003) argued, merely smart people—who have not achieved wisdom—are especially susceptible to egocentrism, omniscience, omnipotence and beliefs in their invulnerability.

The cultural variation in the perception of the 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 lessons about the sense of life. As Staudinger and Pasupathi (2003) assert, wisdom is seen as the ideal

destination of personal development. Knowledge can be used for 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 going to come into play.

Schools should help students use their knowledge for good rather than ill. For example, one learns history in part to learn the lessons of the past, particularly the heinous effects of wars and annihilation, so we do not repeat such mistakes. Wisdom in the current humankind situation is an important concept to analyse, 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.

— (Ray, 2010)

Thus, a concept 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 and Baltes, 1993).

## Method of research

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

### *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 aged between 15 and 19 years old from five countries participated in the study. Table 1 depicts the sample composition.

It can be observed that there is a balance in gender and age differences, due to sampling accessibility between the countries: American and Korean students were freshmen at a college level, whereas Mexican, Latvian and Lithuanian students were in high school.

### *Instrument*

In order to explore the 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 five major dimensions of wisdom: social competence (cooperative–competitive),

**Table 1.** Sample composition of the study.

Country	Males	Females	Mean age	Total	Percentage
Mexico	104	75	17.18	179	21.23
USA	75	28	18.27	103	12.21
Lithuania	102	111	15.23	213	25.26
Republic of Korea	35	109	19.07	144	17.08
Latvia	100	104	15.03	204	24.19
<i>Total</i>	<i>416</i>	<i>427</i>	<i>16.62</i>	<i>843</i>	<i>100</i>

self-regulation (flexible–strict), social recognition (respected–ignored), positive emotional disposition (joyful–serious) and personality traits (rebellious–obedient).

The instrument was first developed in English, and then translated to Korean, Latvian, Lithuanian and Spanish. Investigators in each country translated the instrument back and forth to check for the appropriate meaning and sense of the expression, 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 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 (0.973), Spanish (0.891), Korean (0.759), Latvian (0.821) and Lithuanian (0.835).

## Procedures

In every country data were collected following the rules, demands and procedures of social research. In the USA, participants responded online to the instrument using an intranet system. In all other countries, instruments were administered to groups of students attending classes. In every case, participation was voluntary and the purpose of the study and its confidential character was explained to the students.

## Data analysis

Regardless of the format and language, all instruments were transformed into a five-point Likert scale for each independent trait. Data were analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (IBM Corp. Released 2010. IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 19.0. Armonk, NY: IBM Corp). Comparisons were made by gender and country.

## Results

### Overview

An initial exploratory analysis was carried out to identify those traits that are associated with wisdom in general, regardless of the country and the gender of the participant. The five most frequently chosen traits were strong, respected, direct, creative and flexible. The five least commonly chosen were weak, poor, selfish, unnoticed and pessimistic. However, differences were found by country and gender, as depicted below.

**Table 2.** Differences by country.

Trait	Mexico	USA	Lithuania	Republic of Korea	Latvia	F	p-Value
Creative	2.60 (1.29)	1.31 (1.14)	2.23 (1.35)	1.04 (.80)	2.25 (1.40)	30.0	0.001
Witty	2.47 (1.45)	2.00 (1.15)	2.81 (.98)	2.11 (1.35)	3.05 (1.11)	16.3	0.001
Cooperative	2.47 (1.42)	1.26 1.48	2.34 (1.31)	1.07 (.97)	2.20 (1.40)	24.3	0.001
Respected	2.31 (1.39)	1.40 (.84)	3.18 (1.09)	1.48 (.69)	2.90 (1.20)	61.6	0.001
Generous	2.12 (1.47)	2.00 (1.15)	2.47 (1.26)	1.23 (1.24)	1.69 (1.40)	18.7	0.001
Warm	2.10 (1.57)	1.60 (.49)	2.40 (1.41)	0.38 (0.63)	2.21 (1.35)	13.1	0.001
Individual oriented	1.92 (1.41)	0.50 (1.03)	1.37 (1.25)	1.20 (1.64)	1.87 (1.43)	7.9	0.001

F, Frequency.

### *Differences by country*

Analyses of variance 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. Table 2 illustrates some of the more significant differences that were found.

Warm, creative and cooperative seemed to be important for Mexicans, Latvians and Lithuanians, but less so for Koreans and Americans. Individually oriented seemed to be less important for Americans than for the rest of participants and social respect was most salient for Lithuanians.

### *Differences by gender*

*t*-Tests were conducted to explore for gender differences. In general, gender differences were found in 52% of the 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 labelled 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 wise men and wise women. To explore commonalities among participants, a factor analysis of the principal components with varimax rotation was 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 unconventionality. Interestingly, the main factor connoting a male wise person included adjectives such as kind, warm, joyful, extrovert, optimistic, cooperative and extrovert. All related to personality, and they could also be clustered within the concept of aura, angel or charm.

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 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 labelled social influence because it included sets of different adjectives when compared with those used to describe a male wise person. Clustered items could be categorized in two major lanes: intelligence and personality. The former clearly distinguishes wise women as strong, concrete, respected and influential, whereas the latter mimics the first factor of a male wise person depicted as confident and warm and kind. For a wise woman it was more explicit in 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, owing to the influence of culture. Likewise, differences were found by gender. These were more consistent and obvious than those found by country. Findings thus support the idea of globalization and the force of gender being a specific influence and eventually a stronger one than nationality and cultural origin.

In a global perspective, it is perhaps more useful to seek commonalities and universal characteristics associated with wise people. In this perspective, it is important to underline the fact that wise women need to be recognized both cognitively and affectively, whereas wise men need to be recognized from only the conative dimension. Is this difference due to the remaining differences between men and women? And will this trend change over time?

From a global perspective, 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 and inconsistent. On the other hand, wise men and women could be described as having 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. *This contradicts the sentence above: 'the force of gender being a specific influence and eventually a stronger one than nationality and cultural origin'.*

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, most importantly, what is not. Although commonalities in this study throw light on 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 on the challenges and difficulties in performing 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 the 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 this magnitude. Differences by country were so many that it was difficult to select which ones were worth comparing and analysing. Thus, cluster analysis is important in exploring data and identifying venues of future research.

In addition, there is an absence of terms that relate wisdom to values such as peace, honorability and commitment, and other values needed for social peace, equity and so forth.

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