

# Does Wisdom Really Come with Age? It Depends on the Culture

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“Wisdom comes with winters,” Oscar Wilde once said. And it’s certainly comforting to think that aging benefits the mind, if not the body. But do we really get wiser as time passes?

There are many way to define what exactly wisdom is, but previous literature suggests that having wisdom means that you are also good at resolving conflict. But conflict is not handled the same way across cultures. Americans have been shown to 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.

In a study forthcoming in [Psychological Science](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#), psychological scientist Igor Grossmann of the University of Waterloo, Canada and his colleagues investigated how the resolution of conflict and, by extension, wisdom differ between Japanese and American cultures.

The researchers hypothesized 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, on the other hand, experience more conflict over time and the researchers hypothesized that this would result in continued learning about conflict resolution across the lifespan and greater wisdom later in life.

Japanese participants and American participants, ranging in age from 25 to 75, were asked 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 read stories about conflict between individuals – including siblings, friends, and spouses – and answered the same questions.

The researchers measured the extent to which participants’ responses 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 Grossmann and his colleagues 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 still scored higher than older Americans, though this cultural difference was much smaller than the difference observed between the younger adults.

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

These findings underscore the point that culture continues to be important for human development, even into old age. While wisdom may come with winters for Americans, the same may not be true for other cultures.

“Cross-cultural researchers have been very good at situating their results in a cultural context, but don’t often consider how lifespan development may contribute to cultural differences (or lack thereof),” says Grossmann. This study is one of the few extensive cross-cultural studies in psychology that includes people of different ages and different socio-economic backgrounds.

This research also shows that some abilities – specifically those involved in resolving social conflicts – remain intact into old age. Grossmann hopes that the study may act as an antidote to the detrimental ageism stereotypes in both Western and East Asian societies.