

A Cross-Sectional Study of Wisdom: A Matter of Age and Gender

Rukhsana Maroof and Muhammad Jahan Zeb Khan

University of Peshawar

Mussarat Anwar and Ayesha Anwar

College of Home Economics, University of Peshawar

The current study was designed to explore the potential relationship of wisdom with age and gender. A sample of 400 individuals, representative of both genders (men=185 & women=215 with age range 17-50 years) was drawn from various educational institutions and work places of Khyber Pukhtunkhwa. Ardel's (2003) three-dimensional wisdom scale (3D-WS) was used as a tool to collect the relevant information. According to the results, gender accounted for significant variation in wisdom. Men outperformed women on affective and reflective dimensions of wisdom. However, there was no significant gender difference on the cognitive dimension that indicates that, on average, men and women are equally high in cognitive aspect of wisdom. A strong relationship was also observed between age and wisdom attesting wisdom as dependent on age.

Keywords: Wisdom, cognitive, affective, reflective, 3D-WS

Decades ago, Jung (1959) suggested that adult development involves greater integration of the self, that is, combining all parts of the self into a unified whole. It is a prerequisite for achieving maturity. Reiterating this philosophical view on adult development, Erikson (1963) argued that the goal of adult development is ego-integration or wisdom. The importance of wisdom cannot be ignored as a harmonizing agent in one's life. It enables people to establish the priorities of their life and bring them back into right relationship with others and self. Wisdom is essential for a person's well-being, advancement, and contribution in life, as argued by Ardel (2009). Generally, wisdom represents the ability to distinguish or foresee what is true or eternal. Orwoll and Achenbaum (1993) state that the ways to acquire wisdom differ for men and women because of differences in the nature of experiences the members of both genders go through. Achenbaum and Orwoll (1991) defined wisdom as the combination of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal experiences that are related to the areas (dimensions) of cognition (thought), affect (feelings or emotions) and conation¹ (behavioral aspect). The cognitive dimension covers self-knowledge, capacity to understand the situation, and the awareness about the limits of knowledge. The affective dimension comprises of development of self, compassion, and the act of going beyond ego (self-transcendence), and the conative dimension consists of truthfulness, developing a mature perspective about relationships, and commitment of faith. Keeping in view this definition, Orwoll & Achenbaum (1993) assert that men are expected to excel women in the cognitive skills and intrapersonal sphere, whereas women might be ahead of men in the interpersonal facets of wisdom such as compassion or sympathy.

Moving further along the same lines, Ardel (2003) defined and operationalized wisdom as a combination of cognitive, reflective, and affective personality attributes. Presence of these components can ease the pain associated with crises in life, by preserving mental harmony. The cognitive dimension refers to the desire to know the truth and have deeper understanding of life. The reflective component of wisdom indicates self-examination or self-awareness (regarding one's strengths and limits), and the ability to analyze the life events and phenomena from different angles which, in turn, may lead to decreased egocentricity. Some researchers (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1990; Kekes, 1995; Le & Levenson, 2005; Taranto, 1989) noted that the reduced self-centeredness and the transcendence of projections increase insight into one's own as well as others' good or bad intentions and behavior and, it

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Rukhsana Maroof, Associate Professor, Higher Education Department, Peshawar

¹Conation is a term that stems from the Latin *conatus*, which means any natural tendency, or directed effort. (Wikipedia)

is an important prerequisite for the emergence of greater sympathy and compassion for other people. These feelings explain the affective dimension. Gluck, Bischof, and Siebenhuner (2010) argue that elements of cognitive skill and compassion are found even in the elementary school child's conception of wisdom.

In his theory of psychosocial development, Erikson (1968, 1982) postulated that wisdom is a character trait that gives power to individuals to deal with difficult and tedious tasks of life effectively or commendably. Thus, it is one of the most important attributes needed to age successfully. According to Kekes (1983, p. 286), 'one can be old and foolish, but a wise man is likely to be old simply because such growth takes time'. His statement explains the importance of age and experience for wisdom development as supported by other researchers (Ardelt, 2009; Kramer, 2000; Sternberg, 2005; Taranto, 1989). Since elderly develop "ego integrity" (Erikson, 1986) that comes with the realization that youth is gone, and physical disintegration and death have to be accepted as realities, this sort of balance results in wisdom. Emphasizing the importance of age for wisdom, Erikson (1982) stated that the maturity requires a set of experiences over a period of time. While explaining the same phenomena, investigators (Birren and Svensson, 2005; Kramer, 2000) held that wisdom is mainly perceived as a constructive capacity that flourishes completely in all respects in the late years of life. However, the fundamental aspects relevant to wisdom make debut early in adolescence (e.g., Pasupathi, Staudinger, & Baltes, 2001; Richardson & Pasupathi, 2005). Yet, Erikson (1982) warned that these younger adults need to resolve all previous age-related crises (including identity crisis) and attain fidelity to qualify for wisdom. Bluck and Gluck (2004) maintained that wisdom cannot be reserved for older adults only, as it can be found in the younger adults as well. Moreover, researchers have also addressed the issue of gender gap in wisdom. In many cultures (older) men are considered wiser than women (Orwoll & Perlmutter, 1990), and the stereotype of wise (older) man is still widely held as indicated in some empirical literature, though people from Eastern cultures do adhere to this principle more strongly than those from Western societies. For example, in the nomination studies in which the respondents had to nominate persons that they thought to be wise, men (with age range 55 to 60 and above, such as Gandhi, Socrates, Confucius) were generally rated as being wise (Sternberg, 2005). Gluck, Strasser, and Bluck's (2009) study examined various aspects of gender differences in lay man's conceptions of wisdom. In study 1, respondents had to rate attributes and other factors that contribute to fostering wisdom. Results suggest that men were slightly ahead of women in cognitive aspect of wisdom. In study 2, respondents were asked to report events in which they acted wisely. This phase indicated large gender differences: men mostly mentioned professional life events while women chose to report events from different spheres of life especially the events that related to illness/death and family life. In study 3, very small gender differences appeared when the participants had to ascribe some particular traits to a female wise individual and a male wise individual: women (wise) were thought of as more concerned for others than men. In short, the results of this study reveal very small or insignificant differences between men and women in some aspects of wisdom (such as abstract conceptions) while noticeable differences could be observed when persons perceived wisdom because of the happenings that took place in real life. However some empirical studies have found gender to be unrelated to wisdom (even though, substantial variations can be seen in the operationalization, and methods relating to assessment of this construct). For example, using a sample of Vietnamese American and European American adults (ages between 35 and 105 years), Le (2008) found no association between gender and transcendent wisdom which refers to a combination of detachment, integration, self-knowledge, and self-transcendence. Likewise, Ardel's (2009) study on a sample comprising of college students ($M_{age} = 21$) and older individuals with age range from 52 to 87 ($M_{age} = 71$) having different ethnic origins, arrived at the same conclusion.

Bearing in mind that there is an inconsistency in the findings regarding wisdom and its relationship to gender (and age), this study was designed and conducted on individuals from Pakhtun society to explore age and gender differences in the cognitive, reflective, and affective dimensions of wisdom in a sample of 400 men and women.

From very early age, girls and boys are given different treatment by their family members and others who surround them. Generally, men hold high esteem in the social contexts and capture powerful and prestigious positions. This makes them more confident of themselves, and self-reliant. Making men powerful to have complete control of their fates and lives enables them to become very useful and constructive persons, while lack of women empowerment keeps them subjected and affects their performance in many areas of life including wisdom-related performance.

Rationale of the study

Most of the wisdom studies are carried out in western culture, whereas the Pakistani investigators have paid little attention to the virtue of wisdom despite its practical and social significance, especially with respect to enhancing mental health, and shaping the youngsters' academic and career domains. It is argued that research into the construct of wisdom would create awareness about the abilities or skills that make up wisdom. Moreover, the role of demographics cannot be underestimated in the growth of wisdom. However, existing literature review highlights inconsistency in the findings in this respect. Some researchers (e.g., Ardelt, 2009) argue that wisdom has nothing to do with gender, while others held that wisdom and gender are related (Sternberg, 2005). Likewise, research scholars and theorists differ with regard to whether age affects development of wisdom. Given the above mentioned facts, this study was undertaken to explore (and develop better understanding of) the impact of demographic factors on wisdom in Pakhtun culture. This research would contribute substantially to the existing empirical body of research on the relationship between wisdom development and demographics.

Research Objectives

Keeping in view the theoretical and empirical linkage between wisdom and demographic variables such as age and gender, as mentioned in the introductory section, the major purpose of the current study was to examine the inter-correlations among wisdom, age, and gender.

Hypotheses of the study

Based on prior research, the following hypotheses are tested.

1. Men are more likely to score higher on the cognitive and reflective aspects of wisdom than women.
2. Women tend to score higher on the affective aspect of wisdom than their male counterparts.
3. A strong positive correlation is expected between age and wisdom (overall wisdom and cognitive, affective, and reflective aspects).

Method

Sample

A sample of 400 randomly selected adolescents and adults including 185 (46.25 %) men and 215 (53.75 %) women ($M_{age} = 26.095$, $SD = 8.59$, age range: 17-50 years) who were enrolled in various courses of social science, humanities, pure science, engineering, and agriculture, at various colleges and universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, participated in this study. Mean age of the men was higher (26.89 ± 8.89) than women (25.41 ± 8.28). The participation was voluntary and for this purpose, the subjects were provided with a consent form to show their willingness in writing. Participants were predominately (69%) single. Among them, 160 (40 %) were adolescents, 153 (38.2 %) were early adults, and 87 (22 %) were middle adults. Almost all of them belonged to middle socioeconomic class. Following the completion of an informed consent form and a demographic questionnaire, subjects completed the self-report inventory on wisdom as described below.

Wisdom Measure

Ardelt (2003), after extensive work on wisdom came up with the Three-Dimensional-Wisdom Scale (3D-WS) comprising of 39 items to examine the three dimensions of wisdom: Cognitive (14 items, all worded negatively), reflective (12 items), and affective (13 items). The participating individuals respond to items on two different 5-point Likert scales in accordance to the nature of the statements. The first 15 items are answered on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree), and the remaining 24 items are answered on a scale ranging from 1 (definitely true of myself) to 5 (not true of myself). After reverse scoring of negatively worded items, scores for each wisdom dimension are computed by averaging relevant responses, and an overall wisdom score is computed by taking the average of the three dimensions' averages. Cronbach's alpha for all components ranged from .71 to .85 (Ardelt, 2003). In the current investigation, Cronbach's alpha for the three dimensions were .86 (for cognitive), .74 (for affective), and .71 (for the reflective dimension) respectively, which are not different from Ardelt's alpha scores.

Procedure

This study was conducted to determine the relationship of wisdom with age and gender among student population enrolled in various colleges and universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. All the subjects were contacted beforehand. Confidentiality of their responses was guaranteed. After obtaining consent

to take part in the study, personal information sheet was administered on the entire sample to get information with regard to demographic profile of each of them. Later, the Three-Dimensional-Wisdom Scale (3D-WS) was handed over to the subjects, with a specified set of instructions printed on the first page of the questionnaire, which were also verbally explained.

Results

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for age and components of wisdom (N=400)

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	26.095	8.588
Wisdom-Cognitive Dimension	3.515	0.609
Wisdom-Affective Dimension	3.456	0.493
Wisdom-Reflective Dimension	3.495	0.638
Overall Wisdom	3.488	0.557

The mean age of the respondents was 26.095 with standard deviation of 8.59. Similarly, the mean scores on cognitive, affective and reflective dimensions were 3.52 (SD=.61), 3.46, (SD=.49), and 3.495 (SD= .64), respectively. The mean score on overall wisdom was 3.49 (SD=.56). The scores in this range show that the majority of the subjects were average in the level of wisdom.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of wisdom by gender for N=400

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Cognitive Dimension	Female	215	3.462	.597	.041
	Male	185	3.576	.618	.045
Affective Dimension	Female	215	3.381	.502	.034
	Male	185	3.543	.471	.035
Reflective Dimension	Female	215	3.415	.633	.043
	Male	185	3.589	.633	.047
Total Wisdom	Female	215	3.418	.557	.038
	Male	185	3.565	.548	.040

The descriptive statistics indicate that on total wisdom, women obtained mean score of 3.42 (SD=.56) and men, 3.57 (SD= .55). On cognitive dimension, mean score of women was 3.46 (SD=.597) and that of men was 3.58 (SD=.62). On affective dimension, mean score achieved by women was 3.38 (SD=.50) and that of men was 3.54 (SD= .47), whereas on the reflective dimension, women and men obtained mean scores of 3.42 (SD= .63) and 3.59 (SD= .63) respectively.

Table 3

Difference between the means on wisdom by gender

	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Wisdom-cognitive Dimension	-1.878	398	.061
Wisdom-Affective Dimension	-3.315	398	.001
Wisdom-Reflective Dimension	-2.738	398	.006
Overall Wisdom	-2.729	398	.007

Table 3 indicates significant difference between men and women respondents on total wisdom, [t = - 2.73, p < .05]. Similarly, results show that men and women were significantly different on two of three dimensions of wisdom; affective dimension, [t = - 3.32, p <.05], and reflective dimension, [t = -2.74, p <.05]. However, no significant difference was found for cognitive dimension by gender, [t = -1.88, p >.05].

Table 4

Inter-correlations among Three-Dimensional Wisdom scale (3D-WS), its dimensions (cognitive, affective, and reflective), and age (N = 400)

	Age	W_{coa}	W_{aff}	W_{ref}	W_{total}
Age	1	.485**	.544**	.470**	.517**
W_{coa}		1	.885**	.869**	.957**
W_{aff}			1	.899**	.960**
W_{ref}				1	.964**
W_{total}					1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed).

Table 4 indicates the correlations among age, wisdom (total) and its dimensions (cognitive, affective, and reflective). From these results, significant positive correlations were found among age, total wisdom, and all three components of wisdom.

Discussion

The goal of current study was to investigate pattern of relationships between wisdom, gender, and age. This study used Three-Dimensional Wisdom Scale, which was initially developed for the older adult individuals (Ardelt, 2003), but it can also be used with adolescents and younger adults. The correlations among the three dimensions of wisdom were statistically significant, and there is a significant positive correlation between Three-Dimensional wisdom scale (3D-WS) and its dimensions. Previous literature also shows that all three dimensions are positively correlated with each other (Ardelt, 2003).

Relationship between Wisdom and Gender

Gender wise variation in wisdom was supported by the data. Men tended to score significantly higher not only on the reflective dimension (as predicted) but also on the affective dimension of wisdom (contrary to hypotheses 2). Men and women differed on total wisdom scores as well (see Table 3). Compared to women, male participants had a significantly higher overall wisdom score. However, no gender related differences were reported for cognitive aspect which suggests that, on average, women and men are equally high on cognitive aspect of 3D-WS. The present findings with respect to cognitive component are similar to Perry et al's (2002) study that was carried out on high school seniors and found no significant difference between male and female students on the intelligence subscale of Adolescents Wisdom Scale. Similarly, this result is partially consistent with Ardelt's (2009) work on college students (they did not differ on cognitive component) and older persons (older adult men tended to report higher scores on cognitive aspect of 3D-WS than older women). These findings reveal that members of both genders are keen to discover the deeper truth of life, that is, to have detailed and thorough knowledge about different phenomena, particularly relating to interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects (of life). Moreover, they understand that life is ambiguous and uncertain. Also, they are ready to honestly acknowledge what they don't know, which enables them to make search for new resources and skills. They both have got ability to make timely and right decisions as well. As regards Hypothesis 2, it is particularly interesting to see that against the expectation, women scored lower on the affective aspect compared to men which shows that men not only have better control over their emotions but also develop positive feelings for others. This result is contrary to the previous literature as described below.

The findings with reference to men are consistent with previous literature on nomination studies in which adults from all age groups, well-known journalists, and college students frequently nominated men (older) instead of women (or younger persons) as perfect examples of wise individuals (Ardelt, 2008a; Baltes, Staudinger, Maercker, & Smith, 1995; Glück & Bluck, 2011) while some research findings point out that the paths leading to wisdom differ for men and women. For example, Orwoll and Achenbaum (1993) suggest that men might seem to be ahead of women in the intrapersonal domain and cognitive wisdom, whereas women are likely to do extremely well in the affective and interpersonal dimensions as they have got greater tendency (than boys) to understand other people's emotional gestures and behavior (McClure, 2000; Zahn-Waxler, Shirtcliff, & Marceau, 2008). Ardelt's (2003) study on young and older persons also discovered that young adult females obtained higher scores on the affective dimension than did male subjects (however, as stated earlier, the present findings do not match

with the results of these prior studies, most of which were carried out in the west). Here, it needs to mention that a higher percentage of the present sample consisted of adolescents (40%) than middle adults (22%) which might have contributed to (gender wise) different (and unexpected) results on affective and reflective dimensions (see Ardelt, 2009). Besides, the researchers have attached huge significance to the socialization factors in producing gender differences regarding how emotions and feelings will be expressed or regulated (Revelle & Scherer, 2009) that is believed to be tied to wisdom.

As a matter of fact, girls and boys are trained or socialized differently, according to a given cultural pattern. Boys learn to be boys and girls learn to be girls from very early age. This learning takes place through various agents of socialization including parents and other members of extended family, school, friends, and media. In short, reinforcement of gender roles may happen by means of numerous obvious and non-subtle ways. The history of traditionally assigned gender-based roles dates back to the cavemen times when male members of community kept hunting together, whereas women stayed back homes to cook food and look after the children. Such a mind set is one of the stumbling blocks that impede women's progress. Male privilege is undeniable. They strongly believe that men are born to run countries. The present results might be indicative of gender socialization (differentiating socialization process) that starts from very early age and goes in favor of boys in some cultures including conservative Pakhtun society.

In patriarchal culture of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), different type of environment is created for boys that fosters and facilitates their cognitive and other abilities. Majority of the parents do not ignore the male child's mental, emotional, and physical fitness, because they assume male child's care as their appropriate investment. Boys are involved in the decision making processes relating to family matters, from much younger age, and the message is conveyed to them that their feelings are important (to their parents), and they (parents) care for them. At home man is the bread earner, advisor, decision maker, and 'model of masculinity' at the same time, as they have to take upon a lot of responsibilities including catering to the needs of the entire family. As a result, they feel more responsible for themselves and for others and acquire skill to handle complicated and sensitive issues as heads of households and in the capacity of *Jargah* members (*jargah* is a local system for resolving important issues). Involvement in such activities grows them more tolerant and compassionate; they try not to allow subjective factors to influence their decisions, make sure to understand the problem thoroughly, and look at various events from different angles, all of which give them clear edge on affective and reflective aspects of personality (when compared with women). Since wisdom is an attribute that flourishes from much exposure to knowledge and different experiences, therefore men are at advantage in this respect as they do not limit themselves to book knowledge only. Women by contrast, are told clearly or subtly that they can gain fulfillment by serving others (just like other patriarchal societies). Often, she is not expected to exert herself. Interestingly females are, mostly, found in the professions where they have to serve other people, for example teaching, air hostess, or nursing. In this kind of scenario, (educated) women may feel deprived because of unfair allocation of social statuses in a male dominating society. Ultimately, existence of such situations may curb their (women's) positive emotions and capacity to exercise self-reflection. These socio-cultural factors that differ from country to country need to be changed. If egalitarian concepts do find acceptance among various social groups, then it is possible to see comparable patterns of behavior for the members of the two sexes. Wisdom is not related to differences in biology. Therefore it makes sense that in the absence of gender inequality, women may benefit from the situation and show greater variation in wisdom achievement just like men.

Certainly, women are considered not as strong (physically) as men. Some investigators believe that differences in biological makeup produce behavioral differences between men and women (though others do not agree). This vulnerability should not be (completely) overlooked while interpreting emotion related aspects (of wisdom).

Wisdom and Age

The correlations with age were computed to establish its relationship to wisdom (see Table 4). As predicted (hypothesis 3), wisdom (composite as well as cognitive, affective and reflective dimensions) was found to show significant age contribution suggesting that age might be one of the factors in wisdom development, as argued by Erikson (1968). This finding seems to support the adage that wisdom development takes time (Kekes, 1983).

Wisdom has been regarded a quality that grows with age (Ardelt, 2008a; Asadi, et al., 2012; Richardson & Pasupathi, 2005; Takahashi & Bordia, 2000). Some studies have highlighted that adulthood is the most fertile period for the development of wisdom (Baltes & Smith, 2008; Clayton & Birren, 1980; Sternberg, 1986), while Jordon (2005) argues that age is only weakly related to wisdom. However, other researchers have noted that wisdom makes its debut as early as adolescence (Pasupathi et al., 2001; Piaget, 1970; Richardson & Pasupathi, 2005) though maturity required for wisdom comes with advanced age (Erikson, 1982). The older individuals (e.g., middle adults and late adults) especially educated ones are more open to new ideas and show high level of motivation to gain knowledge. Furthermore, they are more likely to possess characteristics related to wisdom, such as ability to recognize, accept and handle uncertainty, to learn from a variety of experiences, and, engage in critical reflection and self-reflection (Brugman, 2006; Sternberg, 2005) on the shortcomings and successes of the past years. Through self-reflection, one can resolve inner conflicts and get clear picture about self. These individuals are believed to be more tolerant toward ambiguity, and develop deep insight because of having ability to look at different events from many perspectives (reflection dimension). Adults (including middle adults) understand that wisdom is the ability to apply knowledge. Thus, they make careful use of the knowledge they possess. They might have more opportunities/chances (because of age factor) to pursue the development of wisdom throughout the life course than adolescents or younger adults.

The results on cognitive and affective dimensions of wisdom are also in line with the findings of some previous researches (e.g., Ardel, 2009) which show that scores on cognitive and affective dimensions increase with age. With advanced age, logical thinking, social skills, and perspective taking skills (which constitute cognitive component of wisdom) and compassion or gentle feelings for others (affective dimension) increase. The other reason may be that the entire sample consisted of educated persons from colleges and universities including MPhil and PhD scholars (relatively older students), and undoubtedly, higher education plays really important role to make one analyze the issues objectively, learn about ambiguous and uncertain nature of life as well as good and bad aspects of human nature, as emphasized by Ardel (2008a). The investigators (Ardel, 2009; Sternberg, 2005) also held that, for the acquisition of wisdom, time is only a necessary condition, yet not sufficient. Good chances or opportunities (as mentioned above), college education/mentors, greater motivation etc. are crucial factors besides age, in enhancing/nurturing wisdom.

Conclusion

The present study confirms the relation of wisdom to gender and age. Men scored higher than women on two of three components including the affective and reflective. This might be because society expects that boys and girls must learn different social roles. Gender socialization refers to the tendency (for girls and boys) to get socialized in different ways, and it takes place through diverse means, for example; parental attitudes, academic institutions, and mass media. The findings of this study also reveal that wisdom and age correlate positively. With advanced age, knowledge and experience grow which put adults (middle and late adults) at an advantageous position. Since in this study the entire sample consisted of educated individuals, the institution-based education might be one of the factors influencing wisdom positively. Therefore it is recommended that future studies should focus on both educated and uneducated (or non-college educated) samples. Furthermore, to answer the question whether wisdom and age positively relate to each other, longitudinal studies need to be conducted by employing subjects who differ widely in experience, opportunities, and education.

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