Old age and wisdom

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Wise old man under the banyan tree, does the wisdom come from his age or the man himself?

Wisdom is very elusive [1], so seeking wisdom is not easy. It is common among laypeople that wisdom comes with age, but is it right?

In 2018, a large-scale study was published in The Journals of Gerontology: Series B to provide more insights into the relationship between age and wisdom [2]. Specifically, it analyzed 14,248 people participating in the online "wisdom test" organized by the German magazine GEO (equivalent to National Geographic in the United States). The three-dimensional (3D) wisdom scale, including cognitive, reflective, and compassionate (or affective) dimensions, was used to estimate the participants' wisdom [3]. The authors defined the three dimensions as follows:

- *The cognitive wisdom dimension* refers to a person's "ability or willingness to understand a situation or phenomenon thoroughly, knowledge of the positive and negative aspects of human nature, an acknowledgment of ambiguity and uncertainty in life, and the ability to make important decisions despite life's unpredictability and uncertainties."
- *The reflective wisdom dimension* refers to a person's "ability and willingness to look at phenomena and events from different perspectives and the absence of bitterness, subjectivity, and projections."
- *The compassionate wisdom dimension* refers to a person's presence of positive, caring, and nurturing emotions and behavior and the absence of indifferent or negative emotions and behavior toward others."

The findings suggested that the relationships between age and the aggregate 3D wisdom, cognitive dimension, and reflective dimension had an inverse U-curve with the peak at midlife. In other words, early age was positively associated with cognition-related wisdom,

but after a midlife threshold, the cognition-related wisdom started to decline as age increased [2].

Figure: Banyon Tree, Rainbow Falls, Hilo, Hawaii by Ethel Shelhamer Dunn Gripper (Public domain); https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Banyon_Tree,_Rainbow_Falls,_Hilo,_Hawaii_by_Ethel_Shelhamer_Dunn_Gripper.jpg

We can clearly explain this result through the lens of mindsponge theory [4]. Assuming that each person's mind is an information collection-cum-processor. People of higher age are associated with having more time to accumulate and process information, resulting in better wisdom. However, when passing a certain age, the information processor faces biological constraints (e.g., cognitive decline) [5]. These constraints worsen the information storing and processing functions, leading to lower wisdom.

References

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