

Virtuous Qualities and Personality Traits of Wise Individuals

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Abstract

Introduction: Wisdom is a desired master virtue and a lot can be learnt from the qualities and personality traits of wise individuals. Philosophers and psychologists have attempted to understand the qualities that make an individual wise because wisdom entails a life of personal growth and maturity. Keeping the benefits of wisdom in mind, the present study investigated various virtues and personality traits that characterize it.

Method: Wisdom was studied in relationship with Big Five Personality Traits (extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, neuroticism, conscientiousness) and Virtues (wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, transcendence) among a sample of 360 Indian adults in the age range of 18-75 years. Pearson's product moment correlation and stepwise multiple regression analyses were conducted with wisdom as the criterion variable. Cross-sectional predictors of wisdom were also found across the three age groups i.e. young adults, middle aged adults, and older adults.

Results: Results revealed that humanity, transcendence, extraversion and wisdom and knowledge virtues account for 29% variance in wisdom in the total sample. The virtues of wisdom and knowledge and openness personality trait emerged to be the most significant predictors of wisdom in young adults (n=120) and accounted for 17% variance. Middle-aged adults (n=120) reflected transcendence, temperance and humanity virtues as significant predictors of wisdom accounting for 41% variance. The older adult group displayed transcendence as the only significant predictor of wisdom accounting for 5% variance.

Conclusion: The present study indicates that in order to develop wisdom, one needs to inculcate healthier personality traits of openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness, humility, forgiveness, ego transcendence, gratitude, hope, playfulness, humor, kindness, curiosity, judgment and perspective-taking abilities.

Keywords: Virtues, Wisdom, Personality, Development

Introduction

Everyone experiences challenges in their lives, and probably most feel that they have learnt something significant from those encountered challenges [1]. But the question arises as to why some people learn things that make them wiser over their life course while others remain rigid, bitter, depressed, superficially content, or overly self engrossed [1]. The answer to such questions can be answered if we analyze the personality profile of a wise individual. Considering the intricate problems of materialism and individualism, which the present society is facing, wisdom may provide answers needed to deal with such issues as well [2, 3].

Erikson [4] defined wisdom as the ego strength that manifests after a lifetime of resolving psychosocial crises. Webster [5] defined wisdom as "the competence in, intention to, and application of, critical life events to facilitate optimal development in self and others". Some have defined it as an expertise in the conduct of life [6] while others view it as a virtue of

“balance” [7, 8]. A wise individual has to manage his or her self-interests with those of others and society at large [9].

Virtues enable individuals to flourish and live the good life. Some researchers have viewed virtues to be stable but others have found them to be malleable. Peterson and Seligman [10] have identified six virtues that are made up of character strengths, namely, a) Wisdom and knowledge virtue (use of knowledge, creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning and perspective). These are also known as cognitive strengths; b) Courage (bravery, speaking the truth when needed, perseverance and zeal); c) Humanity (looking after other’s needs, showing kindness, valuing close relationships and social intelligence); d) Justice – involves civic strengths like teamwork, leadership and fairness; e) Temperance or self-control involves strengths that protect one against carrying out a behavior in excess viz. humility, forgiveness, prudence (being careful with one’s choices) and self-regulation; f) Transcendence (appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, playfulness and spirituality). It would be interesting to understand which of these virtues characterize a wise person.

Wisdom by itself has been viewed as an important virtue in Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Judaism [11]. Every situation calls for different kinds of virtues and their execution in varying intensities [12]. Wise people know which virtue to be demonstrated at which time and under what circumstances. Wise individuals would neither be highly prosocial at the cost of disregarding one’s self nor would be exclusively motivated to serve their self-centered interests.

Prior literature has revealed contradictory findings with regards to wisdom and its relationship with personality traits. The personality trait of introversion versus extroversion has faced uncertainty when it comes to wisdom across eastern and western cultures. In eastern cultures, such as India, Japan and China, introversion is viewed as a desirable trait characterizing a wise person [13] whereas, in western countries, extroversion is viewed as a wisdom-related trait [14].

Webster [15] found a significant relationship between wisdom and self-enhancing values viz. personal growth, self-understanding, coherence, purpose, choice and goal seeking, but an insignificant relationship with hedonistic values, such as, seeking a pleasurable life. It seems that wisdom is related with eudaimonic virtues instead of hedonistic virtues.

Several virtues of wise individuals have been explored before but most studies have used qualitative interview methods. Peterson and Seligman’s [10] strength and virtue model still remains empirically unexplored with regards to wisdom, thereby, leading to reasons to envisage the current study. Specifically, the virtues of temperance, courage and justice have been less researched upon.

Therefore, the objective of the current study was to explore the relationship between wisdom, big five personality traits and virtues across young adults, middle aged adults, older adults and total sample.

Method

The sample comprised of 360 individuals in the age range of 18-75 years (Mean age=45.54, S.D=19.13). All participants were selected using stratified random sampling method wherein a list of students, workers and senior citizens was obtained from their respective educational institutes/ organizations in order to randomly select 120 participants from each age group. For this purpose, 120 young adults (18-30 years) were selected from several colleges and universities of Chandigarh, Panchkula and Mohali. One hundred-twenty middle-aged adults (30-45 years) were also selected from government schools and colleges as well as private multinational companies, and a sample of 120 older adults (60-75 years) was obtained from health clubs and senior citizen associations.

In this sample, 10% of young adults were married, 90% were still studying and unemployed. All middle aged adults were working and employed, 60% of them were married and 40% were unmarried, single or in a serious relationship. Also, 95% of older adults were married and retired, and 20% of them were engaged in volunteer or social work. The participants completed three instruments:

Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale (SAWS) [15, 16]: This scale is a 40-item questionnaire giving a total wisdom score along with scores on five dimensions, i.e., *Critical Life experiences*- “I have experienced many painful life events”; *Reflection/ Reminiscence*- “I often think about connections between my past and present”; *Emotional Regulation*- “It is easy for me to adjust my emotions to the situation at hand”; *Humor*- “I can chuckle at personal embarrassments”; *Openness*- “I enjoy sampling a wide variety of different ethnic foods”. Subjects responded to each statement using a Likert type scale with 1 indicating strongly disagree to 6 indicating strongly agree. The SAWS has a strong reliability coefficient of .90. Cronbach’s alpha reliabilities for the dimensions of SAWS have been reported to be .83 for Critical Life Experiences, .81 for Emotional Regulation, .85 for Reflection, .74 for Openness and .82 for Humor. The scale has demonstrated good construct validity by showing a negative correlation of -.24 with attachment avoidance and a positive correlation of .45 with generativity [15]. The scale shared a weak relationship with Social Desirability subscale of Impression Management. Moreover, this measure can be used across all age groups and is cross culturally relevant [17].

NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI): This 60-item NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) was developed to provide a concise measure of the five basic personality factors from the OCEAN model [18]- *Neuroticism*, *Extraversion*, *Openness to Experience*, *Agreeableness*, and *Conscientiousness*. Two-week test-retest reliability is uniformly high, ranging from 0.86 to 0.90 for the five scales, and internal consistency ranges from 0.68 to 0.86 [19]. Factor analyses of the scale has indicated factorial invariance across Indian and American cultures [20] which proves its cross cultural validity. Correlations between NEO-FFI (60 items) and NEO Personality Inventory-Revised (120 items) were .86 for Neuroticism, .78 for

Extraversion, .79 for Openness .73 for Agreeableness and .89 for Conscientiousness [48].

Brief Strengths Test: This test developed by Peterson and Seligman [10] was used to identify character strengths and virtues. This scale consists of 24 items that yield scores on six virtues, namely, *Wisdom and Knowledge, Courage, Justice, Humanity, Temperance and Transcendence*. Character strengths of creativity, curiosity, judgment, learning and perspective add up to give scores on Wisdom and Knowledge virtue. Bravery, honesty, perseverance and zest add up to give scores on Courage as a virtue. Citizenship, fairness and leadership strengths yield a total score on Justice. Scores on Humanity virtue are obtained by adding character strengths of kindness, love and social relations. Temperance virtue is obtained by adding forgiveness, modesty, prudence and self-control. Transcendence is scored by adding up the character strengths of beauty, gratitude, hope, humor and spirituality. The scale is a shorter version of the 240-item VIA Signature Strengths Inventory by Peterson and Seligman [10]. Scores from the shorter test have shown strong correlations with the lengthy 240-item signature strengths inventory [21].

Informed consent was obtained from all the participants. Confidentiality was ensured. Young adults were administered these scales in their college and university hours. It took maximum one hour and minimum 30 minutes to complete the scales. Young boys were offered chocolates and young girls were offered bracelets for their participation. Middle aged adults and older adults were offered tea and samosas for their participation. Older adults took slightly longer time than middle-aged adults in answering the questions. Participants were told that there was no right or wrong answer and that this study was meaningful for scientific purposes so that they were able to answer as accurately as possible.

Pearson’s product moment correlation and stepwise multiple regression analysis were carried out to understand the correlates and predictors of wisdom for

the total sample and three age groups (young, middle and older adults). Normality and homogeneity of variance were satisfied for each variable. Collinearity between independent variables was also tested. Wisdom was set as the criterion variable while personality traits and virtues were set as the predictors. Data was analyzed using SPSS version 23.

Results

Table 1 shows inter correlations among the study variables for the total sample. As hypothesized, Wisdom was found to be significantly related with the personality traits of Extraversion (r=.28), Openness to Experience (r=.14), Agreeableness (r=.16), Conscientiousness (r=.31); and Virtues viz. Wisdom and Knowledge (r=.37), Courage (r=.28), Humanity (r=.46), Justice (r=.35), Temperance (r=.25) and Transcendence (r=.45). However, no significant negative association was found between wisdom and neuroticism.

These statistically significant findings indicate that healthier personality traits define a wise person. Significant and positive correlations with virtues imply that courage, kindness, love of learning, curiosity, looking for fairness in the system, self-control/self-restraint and spirituality define wisdom [10].

Similar patterns of correlations were found in the three age groups. Among the young adult sample, wisdom was found to be significantly and positively related with Extraversion (r=.25), Openness to Experience (r=.32), Conscientiousness (r=.29), Wisdom and Knowledge (r=.35), Courage (r=.21), Humanity (r=.24), Justice (r=.27) and Transcendence (r=.31) (Table 1).

For middle-aged adults, wisdom was found to be significantly related only with the personality trait of Conscientiousness (r=.22) and with all the six virtues (Table 1). Among older adults, wisdom was related with all six virtues and Extraversion, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness personality traits (Table 1).

Table 1. Inter Correlations of Wisdom, Personality and Virtues across Young Adults, Middle Aged Adults, Older Adults and Total Sample

| <i>Variables related with Wisdom (SAWS)</i> | Wisdom (SAWS) | | | |
|---|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | <i>Young adults (n=120)</i> | <i>Middle Aged Adults (n=120)</i> | <i>Older Adults (n=120)</i> | <i>Total Sample (n=360)</i> |
| Neuroticism | -0.06 | -0.17 | -0.07 | -0.10 |
| Extraversion | 0.25** | 0.17 | 0.39** | 0.28** |
| Openness to Experiences | 0.32** | 0.09 | 0.02 | 0.13** |
| Agreeableness | 0.10 | 0.02 | 0.29** | 0.15** |
| Conscientiousness | 0.29** | 0.22* | 0.37** | 0.31** |
| Wisdom and Knowledge Virtue | 0.35** | 0.35** | 0.44** | 0.37** |
| Courage | 0.21* | 0.35** | 0.27** | 0.27** |
| Humanity | 0.24** | 0.45** | 0.62** | 0.45** |
| Justice | 0.27** | 0.35** | 0.41** | 0.35** |
| Temperance | 0.14 | 0.45** | 0.20* | 0.24** |
| Transcendence | 0.31** | 0.56** | 0.50** | 0.45** |

Note: *p<.05; **p<.001**

Among the predictor variables, inter correlations were less than .80, which implies that the problem of

multicollinearity was not present (as suggested by Licht [22]), and the data was fit for stepwise multiple regression

analyses. For the total sample (n=360), Humanity alone accounted for 21% of the variance in wisdom ($R^2=.21$) (Table 2).

The inclusion of Transcendence accounted for 27% ($R^2=.27$) variance in step 2, which resulted in additional 6% of the variance. In step three, the inclusion of Extraversion accounted for 28% ($R^2=.28$) variance in wisdom and in step four, Wisdom and Knowledge accounted for 29% ($R^2=.29$) of the variance in wisdom, which led to additional 1% variance. The standardized beta values also reveal a decreasing pattern of predictors with Humanity virtue ($\beta=.24$) > Transcendence virtue ($\beta=.23$) > Extraversion personality trait ($\beta=.11$) and Wisdom and Knowledge virtue ($\beta=.11$) revealing that humanity and transcendence virtues are the best predictors of wisdom followed by extraversion and wisdom and knowledge seeking virtues.

The addition of other variables did not account for any amount of variance in the predictor variable and were therefore not retained as significant predictors. However, most of the remaining variables did share a significantly high Pearson product moment correlation with wisdom.

The overall model was found to be significant $F(1,355) = 37.27, p < .02$, and accounted for 29% of variance ($R^2=.29$) in the criterion variable.

For the young adult group, it was found that the virtue of Wisdom and Knowledge was the most significant predictor of wisdom followed by Openness to Experience personality trait. Wisdom and Knowledge accounted for 12 percent variance in wisdom and openness accounted for 17 percent variance. The standardized beta values were .27 for wisdom and knowledge virtue and .23 for openness to experience. The overall model was significant at $F(1,117) = 7.02, p < .01$ and accounted for 17% variance in the criterion variable.

Transcendence ($\beta=.40$) followed by Temperance ($\beta=.27$) and Humanity ($\beta=.19$) predicted wisdom in middle aged adult group. The overall model was significant at $F(1,116) = 4.16, p < .04$ and accounted for 41% variance in wisdom.

The only significant predictor for wisdom in older adults was Transcendence ($\beta=.24$). It explained 5% variance in wisdom and was significant at $F(1,118) = 7.38, p < .008$.

Table 2. Stepwise Regression Analysis Predicting Wisdom across the Total Sample and Three Age Groups

| Predictors | b | β | R^2 | t | p |
|--------------------------------|------|---------|-------|---------|-------|
| Total Sample (n=360) | | | | | |
| Humanity | 1.82 | 0.24 | 0.21 | 4.20*** | 0.001 |
| Transcendence | 1.26 | 0.23 | 0.27 | 4.20*** | 0.001 |
| Extraversion | 0.41 | 0.11 | 0.28 | 2.32* | 0.02 |
| Virtue of wisdom and knowledge | 0.52 | 0.11 | 0.29 | 2.21* | 0.02 |
| Young Adults (n=120) | | | | | |
| Virtue of wisdom and knowledge | 1.33 | 0.27 | 0.12 | 3.01** | 0.003 |
| Openness to experience | 0.92 | 0.23 | 0.17 | 2.65** | 0.01 |
| Middle aged adults (n=120) | | | | | |
| Transcendence | 2.01 | 0.40 | 0.31 | 5.07*** | 0.001 |
| Temperance | 1.65 | 0.27 | 0.39 | 3.54*** | 0.001 |
| Humanity | 1.36 | 0.19 | 0.41 | 2.32* | 0.02 |
| Older adults (n=120) | | | | | |
| Transcendence | 1.51 | 0.24 | 0.05 | 2.71** | 0.008 |

Discussion

The results of the present study provide empirical support for the theory that wisdom grows out of interaction between certain virtues, such as, humanity, transcendence, wisdom and knowledge, temperance and personality traits, such as, extraversion and openness to experience. The virtue of Humanity was found to be the most significant predictor of Wisdom for the total sample as well as middle aged adults. Humanity virtue entails interpersonal strengths and involves traits like kindness, social justice and love. Prior studies have also confirmed the findings that middle aged and older adults display higher levels of interpersonal skills and self-regulatory strengths, whereas young adults report higher levels of strengths related to exploring the world and seeking knowledge [23].

The second most significant contributor of wisdom was found to be Transcendence. This relationship stands out to be true for the total sample and older adult sample. The prototype of Transcendence is spirituality [10]. While other virtues measured in this study are social in nature, Transcendence goes beyond self-related and social concerns. It involves the traits of gratitude, spirituality,

playfulness/humor and appreciation of beauty. Studies have also shown how Transcendence plays an important role in successful ageing for older adults as it helps them see living, dying and aging as a meaningful process [24] and how egocentrism reduces well-being among young students by enhancing their maladaptive schemas [35].

Self transcendence values, such as, benevolence and universalism have been found to be significantly associated with wisdom, while self-enhancing values such as, power, hedonism and achievement have not been found to be associated with wisdom in prior studies [15]. This shows that wise individuals have concerns, which are beyond themselves.

Temperance emerged to be the only significant predictor of wisdom in middle aged adults but not among other age groups. This virtue involves the traits of self-regulation, modesty/humility, forgiveness and being careful about one's choices [26]. Middle aged adults are more likely to use adaptive methods of self-regulation or temperance in comparison with younger adults who are tempted to use situation modifiers such as avoiders/ruminators to get away with their indiscipline [27]. This explains why temperance emerged to be a

significant predictor for middle aged adults but not for young adults. In several qualitative interviews, a wise individual has been described as someone who thinks before speaking and knows when to offer an advice [28].

Prior studies have also described wise people as highly perspicacious, which is similar to the virtue of wisdom and knowledge assessed in the current study. It indicates that they are understanding and insightful. Other virtuous qualities which have been associated with wisdom are being humble, living well, being an inspiring mentor, having psychological maturity, being honest and authentic, behaving ethically and being high on relationship awareness [28].

Virtue of wisdom and knowledge was also found to be a significant predictor of wisdom in the total sample and young adult group. This virtue includes cognitive traits that are related to the acquisition and use of knowledge for the common good. It makes sense to see this virtue emerge as a significant contributor of wisdom among young adults because young adults seek to meet their developmental needs of curiosity, seeking answers, love of learning, novelty seeking, taking a bigger perspective of life and open mindedness (all of which characterize the virtue of wisdom and knowledge) [10].

In an implicit research conducted by Hollingworth et al. [29], strengths commonly rated as most typical of wise individuals were found to be - strong, respected, direct, creative, and flexible. Five least associated qualities of wise individuals emerged to be: weak, poor, selfish, naïve and pessimistic.

Further glance at stepwise regression table shows that in the total sample, extraversion predicted wisdom while for young adults, openness predicted wisdom. However, the finding of extraversion as a predictor of wisdom is contrary to the findings from other studies carried out on an Asian sample since most Asian countries have viewed introversion or being discreet as a desirable personality trait. According to Lawn et al. [30], the idealistic person in the west is supposed to be autonomous, comfortable in the spotlight and expressive unlike eastern context which views quiet, calm and reserved as desirable. However, the results of the present study did not support the introvert-virtuous relationship like other Asian countries. On the contrary, extroversion predicted wisdom in the present study. The reason why extroversion has shown a positive relationship with wisdom could be due to generational differences. The current modern generation may be more open and expressive than their elderly, which is why the relationship between extroversion and wisdom turned out to be significant [31].

Staudinger et al. [25] also found wisdom to be unrelated with emotional stability, agreeableness and conscientiousness. Similarly, in the regression analyses of the current study, neuroticism, agreeableness and conscientiousness have not emerged to be significant contributors of wisdom besides depicting significant associations with it. Wink and Staudinger [32] also stated that personality characteristics of agreeableness,

conscientiousness and emotional stability are positive correlates of wisdom but not sufficient for gaining insight and understanding fundamental questions of life, which is why they did not contribute to wisdom in regression equations.

Perception of wise individual's personality profile might also vary across different cultures. Comparing Americans and Australians representing western culture and Indians and Japanese representing eastern culture, Takahashi and Bordia [14] found an emphasis on cognitive abilities among the western sample and an emphasis on both cognitive as well as affective abilities in the eastern sample. The western sample was found to associate wisdom semantically with "experienced" and "knowledgeable." On the other hand, Indians and Japanese were found to associate wisdom with "discreet," "aged" and "experienced." The results of the American sample go parallel with the findings of the current study wherein wisdom and knowledge are found to be significant predictors of wisdom. However, the characteristic of "discreet" is opposed to the findings of the present study wherein extraversion has been found to be a positive predictor of wisdom.

Therefore, the present study can open horizons for developing programs to enhance wisdom related virtues and personality traits.

Conclusion

These findings have implications for the assessment of wisdom. Different predictors across the three age groups provide insight into the role of different virtues that would contribute to the development of wisdom. This study also has implications for wisdom enhancement programs emphasizing the need to foster humanity, transcendence, wisdom and knowledge and temperance virtues. It can be inferred that wisdom appears to be a master virtue required for all other virtues. Schwartz and Sharpe [33] had carefully stated that virtues must not be treated in isolation from each other. In order for them to be effective and in order for them to be manifested into wisdom, they must be exercised in combination with each other. For instance, one cannot exercise the strength of honesty without being kind. In the second place, they observed that nurturing more of a single strength would produce deformations of character, which implies overdeveloping one aspect of virtues while neglecting others. All virtues must be inculcated and exercised upon in a balanced manner. Schwartz and Sharpe [33] agreed with Aristotle [12] by stating that without practical wisdom, all other virtues cannot be effectively deployed. Wisdom is malleable and can be inculcated [34]. Therefore, identification of predictors of wisdom can help counselors, psychologists, employers, teachers and leaders from all walks of life in developing wisdom related attributes for smooth living and a life of flourishing. Looking at the correlates of the present study, it can be concluded that as one practices humility, forgiveness, ego transcendence, gratitude, hope, playfulness, humor, kindness, curiosity, judgment and perspective-taking, one tends to become wiser.

Conflict of Interest

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval

This study was approved by the Research Direction Committee at a meeting held in Department of Psychology, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India. The study protocol conforms to the ethical guidelines Declaration of Helsinki (1975).

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