In social dealings, being older is being wiser

April 5 2010, By RANDOLPH E. SCHMID , AP Science Writer

(AP) -- It turns out grandma was right: Listen to your elders. New research indicates they are indeed wise - in knowing how to deal with conflicts and accepting life's uncertainties and change.

It isn't a question of how many facts someone knows, or being able to operate a TV remote, but rather how to handle disagreements - social wisdom.

And researchers led by Richard E. Nisbett of the University of Michigan found that older people were more likely than younger or middle-aged ones to recognize that values differ, to acknowledge uncertainties, to accept that things change over time and to acknowledge others' points of view.

"Age effects on wisdom hold at every level of social class, education, and IQ," they report in Tuesday's edition of Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

In modern America, older people generally don't have greater knowledge about computers and other technology, Nisbett acknowledged, "but our results do indicate that the elderly have some advantages for analysis of social problems."

"I hope our results will encourage people to assume that older people may have something to contribute for thinking about social problems," Nisbett said.

In one part of the study the researchers recruited 247 people in Michigan, divided into groups aged 25-to-40, 41-to-59 and 60 plus.

Participants were given fictitious reports about conflict between groups in a foreign country and asked what they thought the outcome would be.

For example, one of the reports said that because of the economic growth of Tajikistan, many people from Kyrgyzstan moved to that country. While Kyrgyz people tried to preserve their customs, Tajiks wanted them to assimilate fully and abandon their customs.

The responses were then rated by researchers who did not know which individual or age group a response came from. Ratings were based on things like searching for compromise, flexibility, taking others' perspective and searching for conflict resolution.

About 200 of the participants joined in a second session, and a third section was conducted using 141 scholars, psychotherapists, clergy and consulting professionals.

The study concluded that economic status, education and IQ also were significantly related to increased wisdom, but they found that "academics were no wiser than nonacademics" with similar education levels.

While the researchers expected wisdom to increase with age they were surprised at how strong the results were for disputes in society, Nisbett said. "There is a very large advantage for older people over younger people for those."

Lynn A. Hasher, a psychology professor at the University of Toronto, called the study "the single best demonstration of a long-held view that wisdom increases with age."

"What I think is most important about the paper is that it shows a major benefit that accrues with aging - rather than the mostly loss-based findings reported in psychology. As such, it provides a richer base of understanding of aging processes. It also suggests the critical importance of workplaces' maintaining the opportunity for older employees to continue to contribute," said Hasher, who was not part of the research team.

Lead author Nisbett, co-director of the University of Michigan's Culture and Cognition Program, is 68 and his team of co-authors ranged in age from mid-20s to mid-50s.

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More information: Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences: http://www.pnas.org

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