

# Psychologists uncover list of characteristics shared across cultures in N. America that shape today's vision of 'wisdom'

April 6 2016

---

Benjamin Franklin, Socrates, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa: All well-recognized names. In a recent study from *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, researchers studying Americans and Canadians found preferences for practical wisdom when people were asked to name important figures and tell stories about their wisdom.

Psychologists Nic Weststrate and Michel Ferrari (University of Toronto) along with Sociologist Monika Ardelt (University of Florida) studied average people to determine how everyday people understand wisdom and uncovered a set of characteristics shared across North America that shape today's prototypical vision of "wisdom."

"In North America, wisdom is a somewhat diverse concept—there is more than one way to be wise and each manifestation of wisdom has merits from a societal perspective," says Weststrate.

The authors examined cultural-historical exemplars, provided by 209 Canadians and Americans in open-ended responses to a series of questions, and analyzed this research by generating three wisdom prototypes based on grouping the most prevalent examples from the first study.

Over 100 different exemplars were mentioned during the study, but certain names, like Mahatma Gandhi, Jesus Christ, Abraham Lincoln,

and Martin Luther King Jr., were more prevalent.

Weststrate and colleagues found that the most frequently mentioned exemplars clustered into three basic "wisdom" prototypes: practical (Lincoln, Franklin), philosophical (Socrates, King Solomon), and benevolent (MLK Jr, Mother Teresa). They completed this task by utilizing data from 202 Americans, who were presented with all possible pairings of the most commonly named exemplars and asked to rate how similar they were to each other.

While the benevolent and philosophical prototypes were often rated as wiser than the practical prototype, the researchers found 70% of the exemplars represented practical wisdom, 32% benevolent and 12% philosophical. Practical wisdom includes those who have insight into real-life issues and work strategically to deal with social problems.

"We hope this research influences our evolving understanding of the concept of wisdom as far as psychological theories are concerned," says Weststrate. "Wisdom is a quintessentially "human" concept, so the average person should have a good sense of what it is—their perspectives are an important source of information for psychologists to consider."

The authors remind us that no one type of [wisdom](#) is "best" and hope to conduct similar analyses across other cultures, "because the average person's implicit theories are hugely affected by cultural factors," says Weststrate. Further research could find other prototypes that "illuminate what people are striving for and how this differs regionally and globally."

**More information:** *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, [dx.doi.org/10.1177/0146167216638075](https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167216638075)

Provided by Society for Personality and Social Psychology

Citation: Psychologists uncover list of characteristics shared across cultures in N. America that shape today's vision of 'wisdom' (2016, April 6) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-04-psychologists-uncover-characteristics-cultures-america.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.