ISSN 0019-4247

JIAAP

Journal of the Indian Academy of Applied Psychology

A Publication of the Indian Academy of Applied Psychology
Volume 40 July 2014 Number 2

© Journal of the Indian Academy of Applied Psychology
July 2014, Vol.40, No.2,315-323.

The Role of reflection of Difficult Life Experiences on Wisdom

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The goal of this research was to find out the role of reflection of difficult life experience towards wisdom attainment. It consisted of four stages, by using questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaires used were Wise Person Characteristic, Wisdom, Reflection, Reflection Strategy, and Difficult Life Experience Questionnaire. The participants consisted of 29 nominators, 30 nominees (18 wisdom nominees and 12 less-nominated), and 110 laypersons. Results revealed that the reflection of difficult life experience has significant role in achieving one's wisdom. Wisdom and reflection increase with age on people nominated as wise. As well as lay persons who got high score on the questionnaires. People nominated as wise used self-distanced reflection strategy, showed positive characteristics, do self-reflection, be grateful, supported, dan have role models. While non wise people used self-immersed reflection strategy, tended to be less able to overcome problems, focus on negativity, less in self-reflection, and regrets.

Keywords: wisdom, reflection, self-distanced, self-immersed, difficult life experience.

Wisdom is an expert knowledge in the fundamental pragmatics of life, that permits exceptional insight, judgment, and advice about complex and uncertain matters (Pasupathi, Staudinger, & Baltes, 2001). It is an exceptional skill in facing fundamental problems concerning the meaning of life, as well as how to live a better life (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). Wise people are more prepared to deal with problems and uncertainties in life (Baltes & Kunzmann, 2004). Wisdom also includes the ability to make decision appropriately (Matindas, 1993; Pasupathi et al., 2001; Trowbridge, 2006).

Ardelt (2003) stated that wisdom includes three aspects—c ognitive, affective, and reflective. Cognitive aspect refers to individual's ability to understand life. Affective aspect is a positive emotion and behaviour in individual. Reflective aspect refers to individual ability in viewing a phenomenon or a problem from many points of view, leading to self-awareness and self-insight. Basri (2001), found five common characteristic of a wise man, based on the view of an Indonesian person. Those five characteristics are divided into 28 specific characteristics: (a) spiritual-moral condition (pious, religious, virtuous, kind, humble, soft spoken/gentle/polite, tough, firm), (b) interpersonal relationship ability (generous, willing to sacrifice, loving, sincere, nurturing/protecting, forgiving, understanding), (c) judgment and decision making ability (viewing problems from many points of view, putting others' importance on top, being able to decide percisely, philosophical/holistic view of life, fair), (d) personal condition (introspective, responsible, consistent, self-confident), and (e) exceptional/specific ability (smart/competent, intuitive, knowledgeable, insightful, empathetic).

However, there have been debates on the relationship between wisdom achievement and age. On one hand, Clayton and Birren (1980), Farquhar (2010), Holliday and Chandler (1986), argued that wisdom is an achievement of the elderly. This happens since older persons have relatively more experiences than the younger ones, so that they can use it to overcome problems in their life. On the other hand, there are some researchers who found that wisdom achievement has nothing to do with age (Staudinger & Gluck, 2011). Pasupathi et al. (2001) found that adolescents have actually the seeds of wisdom as the starting potential

to develop wisdom. Staudinger, Smith, and Baltes (1992) found that there is no difference among young adult, middle adult and older adult, in wisdom attaintment. The young adult can achieve wisdom, as well as the middle and older adult (Sahrani, 2004).

The role of life experience in the development of wisdom is often emphasized in research (Gluck & Bluck, 2011). Wisdom can be achieved partly through experience, in a long process and can last throughout one's life (Kekes, 1983). Eventhough old age is not a guarantee to achieve wisdom, it ensures more opportunities to get more knowledge needed in achieving wisdom (Ardelt, 2008). Kramer (2000), however, argued that the accumulation of common life experience (normative) is not the determiner of one's wisdom achievement. Experience in dealing with difficult life problems is the one that will support people in achieving wisdom (Webster, 2003).

The experience in overcoming difficult life problems will encourage people to do self-reflection (Brugman, 2006). Reflection is an activity that involves cognitive and affective aspects, which enable individual to review his life experience (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985). In reality, however, reflection is often avoided. Reflection is considered to create negative feeling, and will be thoroughly thought by the doer (rumination) (Kross & Ayduk, 2011). They argued that this condition happens because people usually use self-immersed strategy. Individuals, in this case, think about difficult life experience in details, as if they experience them all over again. Meanwhile to have effective reflection, self-distance reflection is the correct one to apply. Through this strategy, individuals rethink the incidents from the third person's point of view which will create a 'distance' with the problem. If self-distanced strategy works out, it will create positive emotion (becoming more patient). Individuals will gain insight or enlightenment, and they can resolve conflicts or execute problem solving behavior (Ayduk & Kross, 2010).

From the literature about wisdom, there are still open questions about the relation between age and wisdom. As mentioned earlier, Farquhar (2010) argued that wisdom is an achievement of older persons. Contradictory to them, Staudinger and Gluck (2011) found that wisdom achievement has nothing to do with age. This research takes Staudinger and Gluck's position. We argue that reflection of difficult life experience have more central role rather than age in wisdom attaintment. The objectives of this research was to find out whether wisdom and reflection develop as age does (in adolescent, young adults, middle adults and older adult who were nominated as wise). Next, we wanted to study the role of reflection of difficult life experience in wisdom attaintment. We also wanted to know how wise and also non wise persons do the reflection of their difficult life experiences.

We had some hypotheses in this research: (1) reflection of difficult life experience plays a role in achieving one's wisdom, (2) wisdom is influenced by reflection, reflection strategy, and difficult life experience, (3) the reflection will increase as age does, for the wise-nominated people, (4) Wise people tend to use self-distanced reflection strategy, while the less nominated people use self-immersed reflection strategy.

Method

In this research, the researchers applied mixed method, that is concurrent triangulation mixed method design. In this model, we combined quantitative with qualitative data comprehensively in four stages.

Stage 1

The purpose of this stage is to get wise and less nominated people, who experienced the difficult life problems. The researchers indicated nominators (individuals who recommend wise and less-nominated people), and also distributed Wise People Characteristic Questionnaire to nominators. Through this questionnaire, it is hoped that nominators have guidance in nominating the wise people. Wise-nominated person is the individual who was nominated as being wise by nominator. Less-nominated person is the individual who was not nominated as being wise by nominator.

Participants:

Participants in this stage are nominators, and consist of a number of people representing adolescent (12 - 20 years old), young adults (21 - 40 years old), middle adults (41 - 60 years old) and older adult (61 - 80 years old). The nominators consist of two groups—the nominators with social educational background and laypeople nominators. The researchers assumed that people with education and training in social field, will tend to be more sentive in social issue compare to those who are less educated. We chose one of the social based education fields, that is Psychology. We agreed with previous researchers' point of view (Staudinger et al., 1992) that people who get psychology education are indeed trained, and hoped to have skill in valuing people, while the second nominator group choice was in accordance with the opinion by Baltes, Staudinger, Maercker, and Smith (1995), that is, wisdom is hard to achieve but is easily recognized, including by ordinary people (in this case people without psychology educational background). There were 29 nominators in this research, from two groups: the first one was people with psychology educational background (2 adolescents, 13 young, 4 middle, and 2 older adults). The second one was the laypeople, consists of 6 young and 2 older adults.

Instrument:

The researchers managed Wise People Characteristic Questionnaire, as the reference tool in determining wise and less-nominated people. The questionnaire were arranged based on Basri's research (2001) about the characteristics of wise people according to Indonesian. There are 28 items in the questionnaire, supported with comprehension dictionary of the items, so that the nominators was hoped to have similar understanding.

Procedure:

In filling out the questionnaire, the nominators were asked to imagine and determine wise and less-nominated people that they know well in their environment. The nominators are supposed to know that the chosen nominees have difficult experience in their life. Further, the nominators were asked to rate the items, which refer to the people they chose beforehand. The researchers then did statistical calculations to figure out the average value (mean), to obtain the most chosen characteristics in determining the wise people.

Stage 2

The purpose of this stage was to get the score of wise and less-nominated persons, on wisdom, reflection, reflection strategy, and difficult life experiences areas. We gave questionaires to wise and less-nominated people. The questionnaires consist of four types: (1) Wisdom Questionnaire, (2) Reflection Questionnaire, (3) Reflection Strategy Questionnaire, and (4) Difficult Life Experience Questionnaire.

Participants:

Participants are wise and less-nominated people, chosen by the two groups of nominators. There were 30 participants, consisted of 18 wise and 12 less-nominated people. The wise-nominated people were 4 adolescent, 6 young, 4 middle, and 4 older adults. On the other side, less-nominated people consisted of 4 adolescents, 5 young, 2 middle, and 1 older adult.

Instrument:

The participants were given four questionnaires. The Wisdom Questionnaire is adapted from 3D-WS Scale (Three-Dimensional Wisdom Scale) made by Ardelt in 2003, whereas the last three were prepared by researchers. This 3D-WS scale was chosen because as it is closer to the wisdom view in the east. Besides measuring cognitive aspect, this tool also measures reflective and affective aspects which more relatively reflects Eastern culture, especially Asia (Takahashi & Overton, 2002). This scale consists of 39 questions, 14 cognitive aspect items, 13 affective aspect items and 12 reflective aspect items. This tool was applied in Indonesian, through the back-translation process. The coefficient alpha of cognitive aspect was .688, affective aspect .676 and reflective aspect .741. The validity coefficient was .212-.538.

The second tool was Reflection Questionnaire arranged by the researchers based on reflection theory. This tool measures one's tendency in doing reflection of difficult life experience. There are 25 statements in this questionnaire. It had .850 coefficient alpha and validity coefficient was .204-790.

The third tool was Reflection Strategy Questionnaire, which was arranged based on reflection strategy theory. Reflection strategy is divided into two—self-distanced and self-immersed. Self-distanced is a more effective reflection strategy rather than self-immersed. In self-distanced strategy, people make a distance from the experience, which decreases negatives emotion. This questionnaire consists of 40 statements. The coefficient alpha was .834 (self-distanced) and .783 (self-immersed). The validity coefficient was .234-.663.

The fourth tool was Difficult Life experience Questionnaire. This tool consists of eight items of difficult life experiences. The description of the greatest difficulty experienced by participants was due to the death of someone close (24%). However, the highest frequency of difficult experiences was due to disharmony in the family, that caused conflict and quarrels (25%), while the biggest effect of the difficult life experience was in thinking about the incident for a long time (32%) out of all answers.

Procedure:

The researchers handed out 4 kinds of questionnaires above to 30 participants, consisting of 18 wise and 12 less-nominated people. After the application, the results of the questionnaire were counted statistically using multiple regression technique, especially in finding out the role of reflection of difficult life experience towards wisdom attaintment.

Stage 3

The goal of this stage was to gain comprehensive understanding, concerning how wise and less-nominated people reflect their difficult life experiences. The researcher conducted in-depth interview to the wise and less-nominated people thoroughly.

Participant:

There were 30 participants on this stage, 18 wise and 12 less-nominated people. The participants had already completed the given questionnaires.

Instrument:

The instruments were an interview guidance as a guidance for the researcher, in doing the in-depth interview. The questions, however, were open-ended questions, so that the researcher did not use the guide rigidly. The researcher also noticed the answers given by the participants, and then asked them further. The interview guidance was arranged based on the theories of wisdom, reflection, reflection strategy, and difficult life experience.

Procedure:

The researcher interviewed every participants thoroughly, in 60 to 180 minutes. In this case, the researcher did the interview steps and data analysis as explained by Seidman (2006). After reading those transcripts for a few times, the researcher summarized the life experience of each participants. The theme which often appeared in all participants, was chosen as essence in wise and less-nominated people.

Stage 4

The goal of this stage is, to get wider comprehension of wise and less-nominated people, concerning the role of reflection in achieving wisdom. The samples, however, were laypeople. They were chosen from the environment without any nominators. Then the researcher gave 4 kinds of questionnaire as done previously. There were 110 participants, consisting of 16 adolescent, 83 young adults and 11 middle adults. They were given the previous questionnaires. The results of the were processed using multiple regression statistics technique.

Results and Discussion

The illustration obtained from quantitative data showing that the character which was mostly chosen by the nominators is self confidence. It is valued as the main character

of wise people (M=3.9, SD=1.062). Empathy character (M=3.77, SD=1.251), humble (M=3.73, SD=1.202) and generous (M=3.73, SD=1.033) were chosen as the next main characters. Whereas the last was the ability to decide fast (M=3, SD=1.259). Therefore, for the nominators, a wise person is one who is able to demonstrate good personal qualities, especially in keeping good relationship with others in the environment. Cognitive ability is the ability to decide fast, and is not thought as the main consideration in determining wise people.

Therefore, in daily life, the wise-nominated people will be more valued in terms of personality. Those people must be the ones who care of their environment, and are adaptable, while they show their conviction towards themselves. They have motivation to learn, formally as well as informally, about knowledge in general or from life experience. They also have to be able being the role model for others, sociable, think positively about themselves and others', and have good self-control. Therefore, they do not easily get irritated when facing problems.

Furthermore, an essence of interview result applied to wise-nominated and less nominated people was found. There were five essences: (1) have positive characteristics (confidence, sociable, willingness to learn, helpful, positive thinking, forgiving, hardworking, responsible, independent, honest, willingness to change, decisive, have principles) (2) self-reflection (wisdom, stronger, ready for challenge, patient, faith in God), (3) be grateful (have achievement, paid attention, support, change life, get mentor), (4) supported (by parents, siblings, teachers, spouses, friends, religion figure, religious community) and (5) have role models (parents, teachers, siblings, friends, religion figure). Whereas, in less-nominated people there were 4 essences: (1) less able to overcome problems, (2) focus on negative characteristics (emotional, lack of confidence, hard to forgive, dependent, jealous, hard to change, less empathy, easily give up), (3) less in self-reflection, and (4) regretful (feel pity on himself, conflict with parents/superiors/friends, feeling failure on the school or work place, feeling it is his destiny).

Wise-nominated persons have positive characteristics, reflect themselves, have gratitude, have support and role models. The existence of gratitude was similar with the findings of Choi and Landeros (2011). The positive characteristics were in line with results of Greene and Brown's research (2009), who found that wise people is eager to learn, help others sincerely, have knowledge and skill to live, able to control emotion, make a decision, able to lead and understand their strengths and weaknesses. Regarding role models, Sternberg (2001) states that wisdom is a special form of practical intelligence which is generally based on experience or by observing role models. The role models are assumed to be able to guide and support individuals so that they can develop themselves optimally.

Good characters and personalities do not merely appear as they arise from the internal and external nature of an individual (nature and nurture). This is consistent with the view of Baltes and Staudinger (2000) who stated that wisdom can be formed as the result of the integration of general factors (internal/nature, e.g. intelligence, emotional maturity), special factors (external/nurture, e.g. learning from the role models, motivation to develop), and additional factors (e.g. age, education, parenting styles). The participants in this research were the wise-nominated people, and were predicted to have good intelligence. It is shown on the achievements they performed, for instance, being in the first rank at school, having high GPA at university, and some of them were the Dean and even Rector formers.

Further, in quantitative data, it was found that wisdom increases with age, in wise-nominated people. So the older adults are said to be the wisest people, compared to the middle adults, young adults and adolescents. Conversely, adolescents have the lowest score in term of wisdom, among the four age levels which were measured. This result is consistent with qualitative data findings, that is, older adults who is nominated as the wise people showed patience in facing others. They try to put themselves in others' positions, especially

when making a decision. The researcher also observed their behavior, in which they showed calmness and softness in speech. They also tried to value problems from different angles, with relatively stable emotion. This condition can be understood regarding the participants were indeed the chosen ones, who were selected by their environment. The wise-nominated people in this research, starting from adolescents up to older adults cross-sectionally. People are, therefore, wise as they grow older because they have "planted kindness seeds" when they were young. When the statement is put upside down, it means that adolescents who are wise-nominated, start learning to be wise people earlier. Thus, they obtain good results when they are more mature and older. In the adolescence, they start "practicing" to solve problems in life. Further, those who are diligent to train themselves, try to develop good personality, do self reflection, supported by others and role models, will potentially make them wise people.

Furthermore, from the result of Reflection Questionnaire could be concluded that wise-nominated did the reflection more often than less-nominated people. Besides doing reflection more often, the reflection on wise-nominated people increases as age does. This condition is not only for those who are valued wise, but also for laypeople in study 4 (who had the high wisdom score). This condition is inversely related to less-nominated people, who seldom did the reflection as their age. This finding is supported by qualitative data, that the wise-nominated people assumed reflection is very important. They reflected on their difficult life experiences. This condition is consistent with the theory from Scheibe, Kunzmann, & Baltes (2007) who stated that the life experience that can create wisdom is the special experience, that is, the experience in overcoming difficult problem in life. The wise-nominated people in this research had difficult life experience, for instance, having quarrelsome parents, long lasting conflict in family, abused by parents physically or mentally, having drunkard and gambling parents, being drugs addicted and many others.

Furthermore, wise-nominated people looked at their hardships of life as God's will or plan. By doing this, they take the lesson behind such events. They become tougher or more resilient, which raised their willingness to change. In essence, they have "faith" in God, which is separated from religious belief or religion. They also try to forgive and live peacefully, with themselves and others involved or played role in the problems. So, gratitude is also valued important for wise people, because by being thankful they will always remember their existence as a human. They also thought about people who played roles in their lives, so that they could be as they are now. Supporting from others is very important for their personality development.

In this case, the self-distanced reflection strategy was applied by the wise-nominated people. They felt positive feelings and they could accept themselves. This process was in line with the sights of previous researchers who stated that in the process of reflection, individuals must put aside the negative emotion (Boud et al., 1985). This attitude is needed, because in the process of reflection, we have to be able seeing the phenomenon from different angles. In doing this, we can avoid subjectivity and projection attitudes. Reflection is an activity that people do, in order to gain a deep understanding and evaluating themselves from various viewpoints. Reflection also creates self-awareness and self-insight (Ardelt, 2003).

On the contrary, less-nominated people would avoid reflection. They reasoned that they could not change what had happened, so it was useless to do that. It would just lead to a negative emotion, liked being sad and regretful. Especially when they had to reflect the difficult life experience, which was usually the 'dark' experience for them. The sources of difficult life experiences usually originated from family economic problem, an uncomprehending superior, conflict with friends, find others more fortunate, failing to get a job or in getting desired, less self-confident, feeling the destiny, suffering from chronic disease and so forth.

Table 1. The results of multiple regression analysis of reflection, reflection strategies, difficult life experiences, and age factors toward wisdom (in wise-nominated and less nominated persons)

Variables	B	SE B	β	t	p
Reflection	.723	.355	.441	2.037	.052*
Reflection Strategy	.243	.241	.223	1.006	.324
Difficult Life Experience	.304	.314	.177	.967	.343
Age	.525	2.187	.045	.240	.812

R^2 = .343 (N = 30, p < .05)

Table 2. The result of multiple regression on reflection, self-immersed and self-distanced reflection strategy, and difficult life experience factors towards wisdom (in laypeople)

Variables	B	SE B	β	t	p
Reflection	.505	.099	.512	5.098	.000*
Self-immersed	.261	.083	.229	3.135	.002*
Self-distanced	.411	.192	.214	2.144	.034*
Difficult Life Experience	-.105	.087	-.079	-1.215	.227

R^2 = .565 (N = 110, p < .05)

The importance of the role of reflection is supported by the results of multiple regression analysis. The reflection, reflection strategy, age, and difficult life experience contributed altogether in one's wisdom achievement (R square.343). It can be concluded that these factors supported 34% towards wisdom achievement. The rest, 66% is influenced by other factors that were not examined in this research. However, the reflection aspect is the biggest significant contributor (F 3.261, sig .028). Thus it can be said that, someone will have bigger possibility in achieving wisdom if he do reflection towards his difficult life experience.

On quantitative data, for laypeople (without nomination process), also, the similar "pattern" was followed. Out of 110 samples, the researchers did further calculation towards 8 people who got highest and 8 others who got lowest wisdom score (with minimum score 2.65, maximum score 4.15, M=3.39, and SD=.456). The result achieved was wisdom and reflection increase as age does. Besides, those who got high wisdom score tend to do reflection more often than those who got low wisdom score.

In addition, from the calculation of multiple regression analysis, is known that reflection, self-immersed and self-distanced reflection strategy, and difficult life experience contributed as much as 56% on the achievement of wisdom (R square .565). While the rest, 44% was influenced by other factors that were not examined in this research. The reflection aspect was the significant biggest contributor (F 34.039, sig .000). It can be said that someone will be more likely to attain wisdom if he reflects his life experience.

Conclusion

The main conclusion in this research is that the reflection of difficult life experience plays a role in achieving one's wisdom. The first specific conclusion is, wisdom increases as age does in wise-nominated people. Thus, wisdom starts in adolescent, increases in young adult, middle adult, and reaches its peak when the people becomes older. Therefore, it can be said that adolescent who have the potential to be a wise people, can be predicted becoming a wise older adult in the future.

Second, wisdom is influenced by reflection, reflection strategy, and difficult life experience. The reflection, however, has the biggest and significant influence in one's wisdom achievement. Therefore, it can be concluded that a people will have a bigger possibility to be wise, if he reflects his life experience, especially after experiencing the hard ones.

Third, the reflection will increase as age does, for the wise-nominated people. Therefore, the potentially wise adolescent will do reflection daily, and become intensive at the young adult, middle adult and achieve its top at older age. On the contrary, the reflection decreases as age does, in the less-nominated people. Thus, the less-nominated people in older age tend to avoid reflection, compared to the people from previous age period.

Last, there is a difference regarding difficult life experience reflection between the wise and the less-nominated ones. Wise people tend to use self-distanced, while the less nominated people use self-immersed reflection strategy. The wise-nominated people will reflect themselves with positive feeling and get wisdom from the experience, while the less-nominated people will indeed do reflection along with negative emotion.

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Received: 15-04-2014
Revised: 14-05-2014
Accepted: 23-05-2014

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ISSN 1028-9097

Journal of Behavioural Sciences

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