

Why is Gandhi Wise? A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Gandhi as an Exemplar of Wisdom

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Abstract This study explores cross-cultural differences in why Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi is nominated as an historical exemplar of wisdom. We compare the answers of emerging adults (aged 18–30) from three populations: Indian citizens, Canadian citizens, and Indian immigrants to Canada. Chi-square analyses showed that these groups emphasize significantly different aspects of Gandhi’s wisdom: Canadian citizens see Gandhi’s wisdom as practical and intellectual; Indian citizens see Gandhi’s wisdom as practical and benevolent; Indian immigrants to Canada consider Gandhi to integrate benevolent, intellectual, and practical aspects of wisdom; they also differ significantly in attributes associated with their implicit theory about his wisdom. Participants who know more about Gandhi also claim that he had a greater impact on their own lives. These findings suggest that historical exemplars of wisdom are filtered through the sociocultural contexts of each participant’s own lived experience, but that they still can be an inspiration in personally meaningful ways.

Keywords Culture · Wisdom · Exemplar · Emerging adulthood

Introduction

In the words of Sharad and Misra (2013), Mohandas (Mahatma¹) Gandhi was an ‘extraordinary ordinary man’; almost 70 years after his death, his life continues to inspire many people around the world.

Gandhi was equally influenced by western sources (notably, the Christian Gospels, Tolstoy, Thoreau, Ruskin) and Indian sources of wisdom (notably, the Ramayana and the Bhagavad Gita, as well as two Indian mythological characters, Shravana Kumara² and Raja Harishchandra³). However, as we hope to show, he is cited as an exemplar of wisdom in different parts of the world for different reasons: reasons that depend significantly on the particular socio-cultural setting in which his name is invoked. Gandhi famously said, “My life is its own message” [Chicago Defender, June 10, 1945; cited in Slate (2006, p. 883)], so it is important to know something about Gandhi’s life to appreciate how different aspects of that life are understood to illustrate wisdom.⁴

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¹ The term Mahatma means ‘great soul’, a title given to him for his selfless services to the nation.

² Shravana Kumara was the only son of blind parents, whom he carried on a pilgrimage to holy places in two baskets attached to a pole slung on his shoulder, personifying the ideal of duty.

³ Harishchandra was a king and made enormous sacrifices to keep his word, personifying the ideal of devotion to truth.

⁴ For a more complete account of Gandhi’s life and work, see the Gandhi Heritage Portal (<https://www.gandhiheritageportal.org>).

Who was Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi?

On October 2, 1869, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born into a politically influential household in Gujarat, India (Gandhi 1968). At age 7, he moved to Rajkot, India. A British Education Inspector once asked to spell a number of words in class; when he misspelled some, his teacher prompted him to cheat from his neighbors' slate but he refused, even then believing that teachers should stop students from cheating.

He married Kasturbai Makanji in 1883, when they were both aged 13 (Parekh 2001). According to tradition, it was forbidden to sleep together at such a young age, even if married; but Gandhi and his wife became pregnant while he was a student. He later said that he felt 'double shame' for allowing his lust for his wife to sacrifice his duty to meet his parents' and the society's expectations. He felt guilty thinking about the bedroom as he cared for his ailing father (Gandhi, 1940). When he was 15, Gandhi "stole a bit of gold out of (his) meat-eating brother's armllet (who) had run into a debt [with him] of about 25 rupees...not difficult to clip a bit out... and the debt cleared" (Gandhi 1940, p. 23). Gandhi confessed to his father, and asked for forgiveness; he even asked to be punished for his behavior and pledged to never steal again. This honesty healed their relationship, as he witnessed his father in tears, "which carried (his) sin away (with) pure Ahimsa⁵... (which has) no limit to its power..., (and is) wonderfully peaceful" (Gandhi 1940, p. 24). Some scholars argue that his early marriage, and the fact that he abandoned his dying father's bedside to sleep with his pregnant wife, who later miscarried in 1885, had a considerable influence on Gandhian ideals of celibacy and his concern for others (Erikson 1969).

In 1888, Gandhi sailed to England to study law, returning in 1891 to practice law in India (Brown and Parel 2011; Parekh 2001). Not having much success, in 1893 he accepted a job as a lawyer for an Indian firm in Durban, South Africa. In June the following year, at the age of 25, Gandhi was kicked out of a first-class train compartment in South Africa and then denied hotel accommodations due to racial discrimination (Brown and Parel 2011; Parekh 2001). This led him to found the Natal Indian Congress in 1894, as he became determined to resolve the plight of the Indians there (Brown and Parel 2011). He was sensitive to the context and complied in removing his turban in the Supreme Court of Durban, saying that "I wanted to reserve my strength for fighting bigger battles. I should not exhaust my skill as a fighter insisting on retaining my turban."

In 1906, he 'formally' vowed to lead a celibate life; he said he wished to focus all his energies on serving the community, and if he was free of sexual desires, he could fulfill this duty better. Gandhi gave up sexual relations with his wife without consulting her, although she did not oppose his decision when informed of it. [However, some of his 'experiments' in his later years generated a lot of controversy, especially sleeping naked with his 18-year-old niece to test his self-restraint (Sharma 2013).]

Gandhi began his famous Satyagraha⁶ movement in 1907, although it was officially termed as Satyagraha in 1908 (Brown and Parel 2011). Despite being revered by many, Gandhi was thought by some to have some discriminatory, even racist, ideals, as quoted in his prison experience in 1908: "We could understand not being classed with the whites, but to be placed on the same level as the Natives seemed too much to put up with. It is indubitably right that Indians should have separate cells. Kaffirs are as a rule uncivilized—the convicts even more so. They are troublesome, very dirty and live almost like animals" [cited by Lelyveld (2011, p. 54)].

Gandhi left South Africa in 1914 to return to India. Although he originally supported British rule by working enthusiastically for the war effort of 1914–1918, when innocent people were massacred at a public meeting in Punjab, he publicly lost all faith in the oppressive colonial rule (Sharma 2013) and started the non-cooperation movement; this eventually led to his arrest in 1922, and to his being jailed for 6 years (Adams 2011; Parekh 2001).

Not long after his release in 1930, then 60-year-old Gandhi led a 240-mile march, known as the Dandi Salt March, from his settlement on the Sabarmati River to the sea to gather salt, in defiance of the British salt laws. The British arrested Gandhi and 60,000 others in the Salt March's violent aftermath; even so, the next year (1931), the British government invited Gandhi to be the Indian National Congress party's sole representative in talks on the status of India held in London (Adams, 2011). Once back in India, he continued his protests on behalf of the poorest members of Indian society and, in 1932, he fasted to protest treatment of the untouchables. Gandhi's own homespun cotton from India's fields denied all manufactured clothing from England. He started movements to increase education, sanitation, and the abolition of discrimination against the untouchables (DiSalvo 2013).

In 1934, disenchanted with the reception of his philosophy of nonviolence, he quit the Congress party (Brown and Parel 2011). In 1942, he began his influential nationwide 'Quit India' movement (Adams 2011), demanding an

⁵ The principle of nonviolence toward all living things in the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain tradition.

⁶ A term coined by Gandhi from the Sanskrit: "Truth (satya) implies love, and firmness (agraha) engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force" (Gandhi 1968).

immediate end to British colonial rule in return for Indian support of the war against Japan (Slate 2006). This stand led to his imprisonment for the rest of World War II, along with the entire leadership of the Congress party. However, in 1947, the war now over, Gandhi met with India's last viceroy, Lord Louis Mountbatten, in Delhi to discuss Indian sovereignty from Great Britain (Brown and Parel 2011). Although Gandhi envisioned a united India, the Mountbatten Plan divided British India into two states, India and Pakistan. Gandhi thought the terms of independence made for 'a sorry affair'; on Independence Day (August 15, 1947), Gandhi refused all requests for speeches to spend the day fasting and spinning. His fasts stopped violent rampages between Hindus and Muslims in Calcutta and Bombay in September 1947 as well as January 1948 (Brown 2010). Unfortunately, his wife did not live to see the day that Gandhi had devoted so much of his life to achieve: Kasturba died in 1944 at the age of 74 (Adams 2011).

On January 30, 1948, a Hindu fanatic assassinated Gandhi at a prayer meeting in Delhi. Although idolized for his role in the struggle for independence, Gandhi himself was very modest: "The only virtue I want to claim is truth and non-violence. I lay no claim to superhuman powers. I want none" (Gandhi 1922/1999, p. 178).

Ultimately, Gandhi (1940) strived to reform both society and himself, saying: "What I want to achieve—what I have been striving and pining to achieve these 30 years—is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain Moksha.⁷ I live and move and have my being in the pursuit of this goal. All that I do by way of speaking and writing, and all my ventures in the political field, are directed to this same end." (p. x)

Gandhi and the Scientific Study of Wisdom

Wisdom uses a consensual criterion of truth (Habermas 1970; Staudinger and Glück 2011), so implicit theories of wisdom remain an important way to scientifically study wisdom across cultures, since different cultures may differ in their consensual opinion about what wisdom means and who best exemplifies it. Implicit theory studies typically use one of two main approaches: descriptor rating and nomination of exemplars (Bluck and Glück 2005).

⁷ Moksha means freedom from being reincarnated repeatedly in the mundane world where one is under the grip of one's passions. According to Hindu beliefs, Moksha is one of the fourfold goal of human life.

Descriptor Rating Studies of Wisdom

The earliest research on implicit theories of wisdom used attribute-rating methods (e.g., Clayton and Birren 1980; Holliday and Chandler 1986; Jason et al. 2001; Sternberg 1985), which is still the most common method (Staudinger and Glück 2011). In such studies, participants first list attributes they associate with wisdom; these are then merged into a master list with repetitions, idiosyncrasies and synonyms removed; the master list is then presented to a second (often larger) sample of participants, who rate each attribute for how central it is to wisdom. Multidimensional scaling is used to extract underlying components from ratings, with dimensions labeled according to their characteristic attributes.

Exemplar Approaches to Implicit Theories of Wisdom

Another way of studying implicit theories of wisdom is to ask people to nominate individual exemplars of wisdom (Brezina and Ritomský 2010; Orwoll and Perlmutter 1990; Takayama 2002). An exemplar theory depends on one's assessment of particular people or events and has been very fruitful in the study of intelligence, creativity, and moral virtue (Gardner 1993; Nosofsky 1992; Orwoll and Perlmutter 1990; Paulhus 2000; Paulhus and Landolt 2000; Smith and Zarate 1992; Zagzebski 2015, in press). Exemplars have been used in two ways: (1) to identify attributes that motivated their nomination; (2) to study their lives in order to better understand how wisdom develops and how it is embodied in particular individuals.

Nomination Studies

Nomination studies of wisdom ask people to nominate someone they consider wise from history or from their personal acquaintance. Sometimes, participants are asked for autobiographical memories of moments when they considered themselves wise. For example, Gluck and colleagues (Glück et al. 2005; König and Glück 2012) used autobiographical memories to identify attributes associated with personal wisdom. Other nomination studies ask participants to identify and describe a person whom they consider wise (Sowarka 1989).

Finally, some studies ask participants to nominate a person from world history. Paulhus and colleagues (Paulhus and Landolt 2000; Paulhus et al. 2002) found a remarkable consistency in exemplars of intelligence through a longitudinal study spanning 16 years of data collection. Interestingly, exemplars that lost popularity over time were replaced by an exemplar of the same 'ideal type' (e.g., Lee Iacocca was replaced by Donald Trump, and later by Bill Gates) (Paulhus et al. 2002).

When Paulhus et al. (2002) asked psychology undergraduates to nominate four people they considered intelligent, creative, wise, or simply famous, Gandhi was the top nominee for wisdom; he was not nominated as an exemplar for intelligence, creativity, or as someone merely famous. Despite a 27 % overlap between the nominees for intelligence and creativity, Paulhus et al. (2002) found only a 7 % overlap between intelligence and wisdom, and no overlap between wisdom and creativity. However, Paulhus et al. (2002) also found that Gandhi and M.L. King Jr. were among the most frequent nominees for ‘moral intelligence’, as distinct from scientific intelligence (Einstein, Hawking), artistic intelligence (Mozart, Shakespeare), entrepreneurial intelligence (Turner, Trump, Gates), and communicative intelligence (President, Prime Minister, Oprah Winfrey). Weststrate et al. (2015) also found Gandhi among the top nominees for exemplars of wisdom in a recent study carried out in Canada and the USA that identified three ‘ideal types’ of wise figures: ‘intellectual’ (e.g., Einstein), ‘practical’ or political (e.g., Jefferson), and ‘benevolent’ (e.g., Mother Theresa). Of course, particular exemplars can sometimes blend these three prototypes.

Historical nominees of wisdom are not universal because they are constructed within each cultural community to serve as role models for people’s lives, or at least as figures to be admired (Zagzebski 2015, in press). Jewish Canadians frequently nominated Gandhi as a historical exemplar of wisdom among a wide range of political and intellectual figures—many of importance to Judaism, like Moses or Maimonides. However, Gandhi was nominated only once in Pakistan, with 60 % of Muslim participants choosing the Prophet Mohammed (Ferrari et al. 2011). Similarly, Takahashi and Ide (2003) explored implicit theories of wisdom among three generations of Japanese and American families (young, middle-aged, and old), preselected as part of a larger study on spirituality (Ide and Takahashi 2002); they indicated how wise they considered eight internationally known individuals: Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, John Paul II, Mother Teresa, Bill Clinton, Adolph Hitler, Saddam Hussein, and Shoukou Asahara. However, as over half of either the Japanese or American participants claimed to know nothing about Nelson Mandela or Shoukou Asahara, these two figures were excluded from subsequent analyses. Japanese participants of all ages and both genders rated Hitler and Hussein as wiser than did American participants, perhaps because wisdom is not always positive for the Japanese: a cunning strategist can exhibit ‘evil wisdom’.

Studies of Wise Lives

Yang (2013) seems right to say that wisdom exemplars are important because they embody knowledge or a way of life that can inspire others, and can sometimes transform what

it means to live a good life. For example, Yang (2013) details the life of Mother Theresa, one of the top nominees from her studies in Taiwan.⁸ Psychologists have also written about Gandhi. Erikson (1969) wrote a psychobiography of Gandhi,⁹ emphasizing his generativity, which contains the basic virtue of caring for others, and being involved within the community in order to contribute to the world and make an important mark. Gardner (1993, 1997) identified Gandhi as an extraordinary and creative mind, without specifically claiming to write about his wisdom. In all these cases, the point is to explain why these individuals’ lives were so influential; however, it is impossible to tell if the general population knows as much about these individuals or why they exemplify wisdom.

Present Study

The present study aims to investigate why Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi was nominated as an exemplar of wisdom by: (1) Indian citizens, (2) Canadian citizens, and (3) Indian immigrants to Canada. We hypothesized that these three groups would understand the exemplar of Gandhi differently, reflecting different cultural prototypes of wisdom and their own life experiences: More specifically, Indian citizens were expected to know the most about Gandhi, to provide the most detailed narratives, and to be most influenced by his example; Canadian citizens were expected to know the least about Gandhi, and be the least influenced by him; finally, Indian immigrants were expected to fall somewhere between these two groups.

Methods

Participants

Participants are all emerging adults (aged 18-30), drawn from a larger international sample of interviews about wisdom;¹⁰ the present study examines only those who

⁸ While we generally share her assessment of this remarkable person, as with virtually all wisdom figures, her choice is not without its critics [see Larivée et al. (2013)].

⁹ An entire tradition of psychobiography has explored other figures without claiming that they are wise. And while Erikson himself does not specifically claim to be writing about wisdom, since wisdom is integral to his theory of psychosocial development, it seems a fair inference to consider his psychobiographies as addressing this theme.

¹⁰ Participants in the larger study included 50 Indian citizens from Tamil Nadu recruited from Chennai (formerly Madras) and 25 Indian citizens from Baroda (formerly Varodara), in Gujarat (Gandhi’s home province), recruited through the Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda; 50 native-born Canadian citizens and 17 Canadian immigrants from India recruited through the University of Toronto.

nominated Gandhi among historical exemplars of wisdom: (1) 13 Indian citizens living in India[six Tamil Indians (12 % of the original 50) and seven Gujarati Indians (28 % of an original 25)]; (2) 12 Canadian citizens (24 % of the original 50); and (3) 11 Immigrants to Canada from across India (65 % of the original 17). Although frequency of selection differs for Tamil and Gujarati Indian groups, they are considered together given our small sample size and their very similar discussion of Gandhi.

Procedure

Participants took part in a semi-structured interview lasting about 90 min, audiotaped and later transcribed, that included the following questions: “Please take a moment to think of the wisest person you know of in history: What makes this person so wise? What is one story you know about them, or one thing they said or did that shows them to be wise?” We also asked: “How has this person affected or inspired you in your own life? Is it possible for you to become more like this person?” Finally, we also asked for the participants’ own definition of wisdom: “Now that we have had a chance to talk about it, what is wisdom? What does wisdom mean to you?”.

Data Analysis

Prototype Analysis

We conducted a thematic analysis of participants’ answers to the interview questions based on Weststrate et al. (2015) three ‘ideal types’ of wisdom exemplars (‘intellectual’, ‘practical,’ and ‘benevolent’) to determine which participants placed Gandhi within one, or some combination, of these prototypes.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was also conducted, based on five core themes identified in Bluck and Glück’s [2005; see also Staudinger and Glück (2011)] extensive review of the implicit theories literature:

1. Cognitive ability, including a deep knowledge and reasoning ability about novel problems;
2. Insight, or being willing and able to think deeply about complex issues;
3. Reflective attitude, or thinking deeply about self, others, and the world from multiple perspectives—being self-critical and not guided by emotion;
4. Concern for others beyond the immediate circle of family and friends—manifest as self-transcendent interest and compassion; and

5. Problem-solving ability, or applying knowledge to concrete situations.

We used these five core themes to frame our own analysis of why Gandhi was nominated as an exemplar of wisdom, but we also allowed additional themes to emerge from our data.

Personal Impact

Finally, we also considered how deeply Gandhi had personally affected each participant as seen from: (1) the quality of the evidence participants marshaled in support of their nomination of Gandhi, (2) whether they believed Gandhi had influenced them personally, and (3) whether their personal definition of wisdom matched their portrayal of Gandhi’s wisdom.

Given our small sample size only nonparametric statistical comparisons were possible, so Chi-square test of goodness-of-fit tests was used to see whether groups differed significantly in the prevalence of prototypes, themes, or personal impact associated with Gandhi.

Results

Situating Gandhi Relative to Three Wisdom Prototypes

Although Gandhi is one of the most frequently nominated wisdom exemplars in all three of our target populations (Canadian citizens, Indian citizens, and Indian immigrants to Canada), he is considered wise for different reasons in each cohort.

Canadian citizens most commonly considered Gandhi to combine ‘intellectual’ and ‘practical’ prototypes of wisdom (see Table 1), saying, for example: “He came up with his own ... ideas by himself [intellectual wisdom]; ...the way he gave it out to people; the way he’s showing everybody how to do it [practical wisdom]; ... was something that made him very wise in my mind.” By contrast, Indian citizens most commonly combined ‘practical’ and ‘benevolent’ prototypes of wisdom in their discussion of Gandhi, stating, for example: “Mahatma Gandhi, why? Because he has given a way of life. ... at that point of time (when people were so rigid) he made people understand this whole—you know, small things, like sati¹¹ [benevolent wisdom] ... when we were already struggling for freedom and everything, so it is really great to me that he can really think, ‘out of the box’ you might say... and go approach people and make them understand and actually make the

¹¹ The traditional Hindu practice of a widow throwing herself onto her husband’s funeral pyre.

Table 1 Reference to three prototypes of wisdom figures across three participant groups

Category assigned	Canadians ($n = 12$) (%)	Immigrants ($n = 11$) (%)	Indians ($n = 13$) (%)	Chi square ($df = 2$)	p value \leq
Benevolent	17	39	42	11.41	.003
Intellectual	25	26	8	10.41	.005
Practical	25	26	35	2.116	.347

As some explanations can span more than one prototype, participants who mentioned two attributes in their explanation are divided equally among two prototypes (50 % each); those mentioning three attributes are spread across three prototypes, counting for 33 % in each

difference, [practical wisdom].” Immigrants were the most comprehensive in their understanding of Gandhi’s wisdom, and most commonly combined all three prototypes, saying, for example: “He realized that if you keep the philosophy of an eye for an eye, it is, it eventually leads to more violence, and this is, then—then you are no different from the people you are fighting against [intellectual wisdom]. And even in other things, like when it came to um, partition and all that and, from the history that I’ve read, he actually agreed to lead (the region and) be the prime minister, if that would save the Partition [practical wisdom] and I think that that was really a huge sacrifice [benevolent wisdom].”

A Chi-square test of goodness of fit found that preference for the three prototypes was not equally distributed; although all three groups consider Gandhi practical, Canadians are significantly less likely to consider Gandhi benevolent [$\chi^2(2, N = 36) = 11.41, p < .01$], and Indian citizens are significantly less likely to consider Gandhi intellectual [$\chi^2(2, N = 36) = 10.41, p < .01$].

This observed difference may be due to the direct benefits that Indian citizens gained from Gandhi’s selfless political activism not shared by Canadian citizens, who consider him merely an historical figure whose intellectual and practical skills made him an admirable and influential figure worldwide. Equally striking, about a third of all Canadians cannot be coded into any of these three prototype categories because they cannot explain what motivated their nomination of Gandhi as wise—something that never happened with Indian citizens (see Table 4).

Themes Associated with Gandhi’s Wisdom

Shifting focus from Gandhi as a prototype of wisdom to the particular themes participants consider make him wise, Table 2 shows percentage of participants in each group who mentioned each of the five core themes identified by Bluck and Glück (2005). Further themes also emerged from our study: (1) in addition to ‘concern for others,’ personality and character attributes were mentioned, as also found in König and Glück (2012); (2) in addition to problem solving (or perhaps simply expanding of the meaning of this category), several participants noted Gandhi’s political and global influence.

Each of these themes included several subthemes: cognition included critical-thinking, decision-making, positive thinking, simplicity, learning from others’ experiences, and Gandhi’s stated search for truth; insight included examples of Gandhi’s insight; reflection included mention of a ‘big picture’ perspective, spirituality, self-restraint, and reflection on personal experience; affect/compassion included references to passion, non-harm, respect, sacrifice, loyalty, and calm; other personality traits included mention of independence/self-reliance, humility, and inquisitiveness; real-world problem solving included mention of Gandhi’s pragmatic success, acting on his word, getting things done, nonviolence, and courage. Participants who considered Gandhi an influential public figure noted that he imparted knowledge, showed leadership, was a visionary, established a way of life, focused on the greater good, and believed in Swatantra.¹²

A Chi-square test of goodness of fit found that preference for attributes of wisdom was not equally distributed among the groups (see Table 2). Canadians were significantly more likely to mention insight [$\chi^2(2, N = 36) = 34.00, p < .001$] and reflection [$\chi^2(2, N = 36) = 15.70, p < .001$]. Indian immigrants were significantly less likely to mention cognitive attributes [$\chi^2(2, N = 36) = 35.52, p < .001$], or to mention Gandhi’s influence [$\chi^2(2, N = 36) = 13.68, p < .001$]. Indian citizens and immigrants were significantly more likely to mention problem solving [$\chi^2(2, N = 36) = 16.32, p < .001$]. Groups did not differ in their mention of affect/compassion or general personality traits.

Depth of Knowledge About Gandhi

A Chi-square test of goodness of fit also found significant differences in the complexity of evidence used to support the nomination of Gandhi by different groups in terms of knowledge of Gandhi’s ideas [$\chi^2(2, N = 36) = 44.36, p < .001$], in their discussion of chronicled events in Gandhi’s life [$\chi^2(2, N = 36) = 20.05, p < .001$] and in

¹² *Swatantra* is a Sanskrit word composed of two parts, *swa* and *tantra*: *Sw* means self or personal; the meaning of *tantra* includes (1) governance, rule, or control, (2) support or maintenance as a family, and (3) happiness.

Table 2 Reference to implicit theories of wisdom themes for the three participant groups

Theme	Canadians ($n = 12$) (%)	Immigrants ($n = 11$) (%)	Indians ($n = 13$) (%)	Chi square ($df = 2$)	p value \leq
Cognitive attributes	25	0	38	35.52	.001
Insight	17	0	0	34.00	.001
Reflective	50	18	31	15.70	.001
Affect/compassion	17	27	31	4.16	.125
Other personality	8	9	8	.08	.960
Problem solving	25	55	62	16.32	.001
Influential	75	36	62	13.68	.001

stories about Gandhi exemplifying his wisdom [$\chi^2(2, N = 36) = 78.00, p < .001$] (see Table 3).

Canadians clearly had only a general knowledge of Gandhi, exemplified by his quotations and two of his core ideals: freedom fighting and nonviolence (ahimsa). Indian citizens and immigrants mentioned these two ideals more often, along with many additional themes: Social service was particularly important for Indian citizens, whereas Satyagraha mattered most to immigrants. Notice that Canadians only mention one general theme regarding Gandhi's way of life (his dietary restrictions) and one event (an unspecified hunger strike). By contrast, while one immigrant mentions a hunger strike, all the other themes mentioned by Indian nationals and Indian immigrants are completely different from those brought up by Canadians. Notice, too, that Indian immigrants have a similar perspective on Gandhi to Indian citizens—one that emphasizes Gandhi's role in establishing Indian independence. Most strikingly, stories about Gandhi were mentioned only by those living in India, showing that Indians are well versed in the details of Gandhi's life, as shown by this story from a Tamil citizen in India:

Once, one little boy came to Gandhi-ji. His father complained to Gandhi that the boy was eating too much sugar. Gandhi asked the father to bring the boy the next day. That day itself Gandhi stopped eating too much sugar. Next day, he was able to tell the boy also not to eat so much sugar. He first did what he advised to others.

Degree of Gandhi's Influence on Participants' Personal Lives

A Chi-square test of goodness of fit found significant differences in degree of influence of Gandhi on participants' personal lives. Canadian citizens tended to be more likely to name Gandhi as part of a list of historical wisdom nominees than are Indian citizens [$\chi^2(2, N = 36) = 5.6, p < .06$]. Immigrants and Indian citizens were significantly more

likely to provide evidence for their nomination than are Canadian citizens; $< 50\%$ of Canadians are able to do so [$\chi^2(2, N = 36) = 19.66, p < .001$]. Significantly more Indians than Canadian citizens also claim that Gandhi's example had a personal impact on their own lives, with immigrants fall in between the two [$\chi^2(2, N = 36) = 10.26, p < .005$]; indeed, Indian citizens were even more likely to claim that Gandhi had an active influence on their lives [$\chi^2(2, N = 36) = 14.85, p < .001$]; Gujarati subjects had a particularly personal connection to Gandhi; as one participant said: "Mahatma Gandhi inspires me to be human. ... Given a chance I think I would like to in the future do something which I feel is ... giving back to society." Contrary to our hypothesis, significantly fewer Indian citizens than Canadians aligned their definition of wisdom with their discussion of Gandhi; again, immigrants fall between these two groups [$\chi^2(2, N = 36) = 46.23, p < .001$].

Furthermore, significantly fewer Indian immigrants challenged Gandhi's wisdom (e.g., suggesting that he was racist, or an emotional leader who only sang songs to give the people hope, without making any hard political decisions or implementing policies) [$\chi^2(2, N = 36) = 14.7, p < .001$]. Finally, significantly more Canadian citizens claimed that they had insufficient information to justify their nomination of Gandhi as a historical exemplar of wisdom, something that never occurred for Indian citizens almost never for Indian immigrants [$\chi^2(2, N = 36) = 41.57, p < .001$] (see Table 4).

Discussion

Cultural Differences in Understanding Exemplars of Wisdom

Cultural Specificity

Historical figures provide an important window into culturally specific understanding of personal wisdom as lived experience. But although Gandhi personifies wisdom for all three of the participant groups in our study, why they

Table 3 Breadth of knowledge about Gandhi's ideas and his life for the three participant groups

	Canadians (<i>n</i> = 12)	Immigrants (<i>n</i> = 11)	Indians (<i>n</i> = 13)	Chi square (<i>df</i> = 2)	<i>p</i> value ≤
Gandhian concepts	42 %	91 %	130 %	44.36	.001
Inspiring quotations	(3)				
Freedom fighter	(1)	(4)	(6)		
Ahimsa	(1)	(2)	(6)		
Satyagraha		(3)	(1)		
Power of speech		(1)	(1)		
Social service			(3)		
Chronicles	17 %	55 %	46 %	20.05	.001
Dietary restriction	(1)				
Hunger strike	(1)	(1)			
Peace riots		(2)			
Dandi March		(1)			
Independence		(2)	(6)		
Stories	0	0	39 %	78.00	.001
Stole gold			(2)		
Shoes story			(1)		
Didn't cheat in school			(1)		
Stopped eating sugar			(1)		

Table 4 Depth of knowledge about Gandhi and the personal impact of his life as example

Depth of knowledge	Canadians (<i>n</i> = 12) (%)	Immigrants (<i>n</i> = 11) (%)	Indians (<i>n</i> = 13) (%)	Chi square (<i>df</i> = 2)	<i>p</i> value ≤
Gandhi as part of a list (% yes)	42	36	23	5.6	.06
Evidence provided for Gandhi's wisdom (% yes)	42	91	85	19.66	.001
Personal impact (% yes)					
Overall	42	64	77	10.26	.005
Active impact	25	27	54	14.85	.001
General inspiration	17	36	23	7.45	.02
Matching personal definition of wisdom	50	27	1	46.23	.001
Challenged Gandhi's wisdom	8	0	15	14.7	.001
Insufficient information	33	9	0	41.57	.001

nominated him, and their depth of understanding of Gandhi differs, reflecting their different sociocultural contexts. In India, Gandhi represents the freedom from an oppressive British Rule. Although Canada is also a former British colony, Gandhi is not recruited as part of an emancipatory narrative because we had less struggle to gain our independence, and Gandhi was not part of that struggle.

Indian subjects perceive Gandhi's influence as a political actor essential to his wisdom: Half of Indian citizens cite Gandhi's political achievements in facilitating the gain of independence as exemplary of his wisdom; half also mention the Salt March to Dandi in protest of the British rule. By contrast, many Canadian nationals who nominated Gandhi did not know that much about him; sometimes, they even chose Gandhi in a way that called their own judgment into

question; as one said, "Sure I can name whole bunch of people like, Trudeau, Gandhi, or anything like that, but at the same time, I feel like that's a lot of—like, we're told that they're wise." Those who could explain their choice emphasized Gandhi's reflective abilities as integral to his wisdom. Most Indian immigrants personally connected to Gandhi, perhaps as a way to honor their home culture; as one said: "The thing is that I am not too attached with Canadian history, as I am an Indian so...I guess I am going to say Mahatma Gandhi—actually... I can't think of anyone else. ... I mean he has his flaws, like all of us do, have but his message was more pure and peaceful than anyone else in the history of Canada or India, or any other place."

But why do only Indian citizens tell stories about Gandhi? This is perhaps because stories about Gandhi are

woven into the cultural fabric of India in a way that brings them easily to mind. For example, Gandhi is mentioned in the school curriculum and often discussed on nationally televised talk shows; indeed, his picture in every government office. Parents and teachers in India often share these stories with children to inculcate values in them, much as the figure of George Washington might be used in the United States of America. Indeed, every child born and raised in India would know how salt and home-made cloth were used by Gandhi as weapons against colonialism. By contrast, in North America, Gandhi is discussed alongside Martin Luther King Jr. and Mother Theresa as a humanitarian figure who helped the downtrodden; very little is mentioned about the details of his life.

Challenging Gandhi's Wisdom

Even those Indians who challenged Gandhi's wisdom after nominating him could articulate reasons for so doing, unlike a large number of Canadians for whom Gandhi seems an intuitive placeholder for their own ideas of wisdom. However, some challenges to Gandhi may reflect a misunderstanding of the historical Gandhi: for example, singing verses from Ramacharitmanas was Gandhi's way of connecting to God, younger participants in India, and even more so in North America may not know this. Indeed, the entire religious dimension of Gandhi's Satyagraha is rarely addressed in North America, but easily understood by Indians and Indian immigrants in connection to Hinduism. Some of our immigrant participants who challenged Gandhi's wisdom must have come to Canada when they were very young; thus, their knowledge about Gandhi reflects what their parents and family have communicated to them, or what they might have learned during their time in Canada; but we still see a strong parallel to how Indian citizens understand Gandhi.

Developing Implicit Theories of Wisdom

What this implies for the development of implicit theories of wisdom is that cultural media like history books and other socially sanctioned accounts of admirable figures provide examples of what is possible for human life—living proof of ideals that may seem unrealistic when stated within an abstract value system or ideology. In this way, historical examples can inspire all who hear of them to live as they did and to call this living more wisely (Zagzebski 2015, in press).

Limitations

One limitation of our study is that coders were not blind to the group membership of participants coded, which may

have influenced their interpretations of the interviews; coders from a different culture, age group, or country might have interpreted our results differently, finding themes that we did not notice due to our own upbringing or background. Despite this limitation, we believe our study shows something important about cultural differences in how historical exemplars of wisdom are understood.

Future Studies

In future studies, we hope to replicate these findings with a larger sample and to delve deeper into the difference and similarities in how wisdom is perceived by Indians and Canadians. We also plan to interview participants in other countries about controversial figures who some consider wise and others not; for example, Mao Zedong is considered wise in China, but not in Taiwan or the West. Ultimately, we hope to gain a deeper appreciation of other cultures and their understanding of wisdom: perhaps only cultures with certain definitions of wisdom would nominate Gandhi as wise or, more likely, would nominate him for different reasons that reflect their unique understanding of wisdom and what is most admirable in human life.

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