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THE PERCREPTIONS OF  
MIDDLE AGE AND OLD AGE  
IN CROSS - CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

BY

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## *The Perceptions of Middle Age and Old Age in Cross-Cultural Perspective*

Recently, Neugarten and Neugarten (1986) stated that: "In all societies lifetime is divided into socially relevant units and biological time is translated into societal time ... Societies from the simplest to the most complex define various periods of life." (p. 32) Several years earlier Neugarten, Moore and Lowe (1965) reported on the age norm timetable which society used to identify the expected age for major events to occur. Based on their findings, they concluded that these age norms were used to determine the "best time" for many critical social behaviors. However, Kimmel (1980) concluded that many people established their own personal age norms by using society's "best age" determination as guidelines. Therefore, society was, in fact, defining appropriate actions for people at different ages. It turned out that conforming with these social clock norms led to favorable results; violations, on the other hand, did not. These social norms identified the standards shared and conformed to by the members of different cultural, social or ethnic groups. Another approach was explored by Hagan and Yorke (1986) in a paper titled: "Stages and ages in adult development: A commentary and research note." In their study they analyzed the responses of men and women college students who identified themselves with three ethnic groups: Black, Caucasian and Hispanic. While they differed somewhat in degree of perceived mean ages, most of the schemata were the same or similar.

Previously, Dr. Leonore Loeb Adler had conducted some informal studies that investigated the perception of age for two age-linked periods in adult life. The results gathered in her Introductory Psychology classes showed that 20 to 30 year old college women perceived "middle age" from 40 to 45 years, while 35 to 45 year old college students perceived this stage from 50 to 55 years. When the same groups were asked about "old age" the younger group responded with 65 or 70 years, which was probably prompted by the social security law and the

“retirement age.” The older age group, on the other hand, perceived “old age” from 75 to 80 years. Such informal results then lead to the query: Do the actual (chronological) ages at which the age-stages, i.e. middle age and old age, occur correspond with the perceived age-periods? To this question, Adler responded, based on the answers her students gave, that the perception of age varies depending on the age of the perceiver.

Several studies followed that focused on different aspects. The first of the series were conducted with a large tri-ethnic population in New York City's college (Adler, Davis, Ray, Deitch, and Hill, 1986; Adler, Davis and Adler, 1987). The results of these studies revealed that with increasing age of the perceivers, the perceptions of age-related periods in adulthood increased as well. In addition, the data both men and women showed that the females' ages were perceived as younger than those of their male counterpart. Based on these findings, a pilot study was started (Davis, Mrinal, and Adler, 1987) with an Indian (Asian) and a U.S. population. This study was then superseded by a cross-cultural comparison which was expanded to include three different age groups of women and of men in each sample of Indian and U. S.- American subjects. The three age groups ranged for the young group from 16-34 years, for the middle group from 35-54 years, and for the old group from 55-80 years (Adler, Mrinal, Adler, Davis, Goldberg and Walsh, (1989). Regardless of gender and age groups, the schemata remained the same or similar. However, the actual means for the three age categories differed in each population. The U. S. sample perceived both “middle age” and “old age” older than their Indian counterparts. The authors suggested that perhaps the life-expectancies in each country may have influenced the perceptions of age? In none of the three age groups in both populations was there ever any overlap in perceived age from “middle age” to “old age.” However, again as in previous studies, as the age of the subject increased the perceived ages increased. Yet, only the Indian sample in each gender category (men and women) perceived the two age-periods as about three

to four years younger for females than for males. This was not the case generally in the U. S.-American population, where especially the women perceived the ages the same for males and females. Most U. S. men perceived the males at about half-a-year to one year older than the females in each age period. One possible explanation for these findings could be the increase in an androgynous attitude in the Western cultures.

In order to test these suggestions, the present research was conducted: here two Mid-Eastern populations, i. e. Kuwait and the Sudan, were compared to a sample from the U.S.A. Based on some of the previous results, the following hypotheses were advanced:

H 1: While the actual age-norms may differ from country to country, the schemata would remain the same from culture to culture.

H 2: Perceived ages, i. e. both "middle age" and "old age", for women will be discerned as younger than the same age categories for men.

## Method

### Subjects

Following the method described by other researchers (Sechrest, Fay, Zaidi & Flores, 1973; Lonner & Berry, 1986), special attention was given to the selection of the subjects in order to draw equivalent samples. All participants, both men and women, were enrolled in colleges. In the U. S. A. the subjects came from three colleges in the Greater New York area. The Sudanese students attended two different colleges; and the same was the case with the students from Kuwait. A total of 698 subjects participated, which included 347 men and 351 women. The majority (95 percent) of the participants ranged in age from 16 to 34 years.

### Procedure

Each participant received one questionnaire. The U. S. subjects received the original English version. For the Kuwaiti

and Sudanese populations the instructions and questions were translated into Arabic and then back-translated into English by the senior author, for additional confidence in the accuracy of the translation. There were 25 questions which represented age-related events and "milestones" during the lifespan. Each question was responded to with regard to males and to females, which totaled 50 items. Two questions, i. e. four items, were analyzed and are reported here. They were: 1. "The age of middle-aged...(male, and female);" 2. "The age of an old ...(male and female)." Some demographic information was collected for each subject. The questionnaires were handed out either individually or to entire classes (groups). It took approximately 10 minutes to fill out the questionnaires.

### Results and Discussion

Two age-related stages, or age-linked periods in adulthood, were analyzed for the present study. These life-events were "middle age" and "old age" which were perceived for both males and females. The results confirmed--with qualifications-- Hypothesis 1, which stated that, while the age-norms might differ from country to country, the schemata would remain the same from culture to culture. Inspection of Table 1 showed that there was a great similarity in the responses. The perceptions of "middle age" by the Kuwaiti and Sudanese men were about identical; the same was the case for Kuwaiti and Sudanese women. (See Table 1).

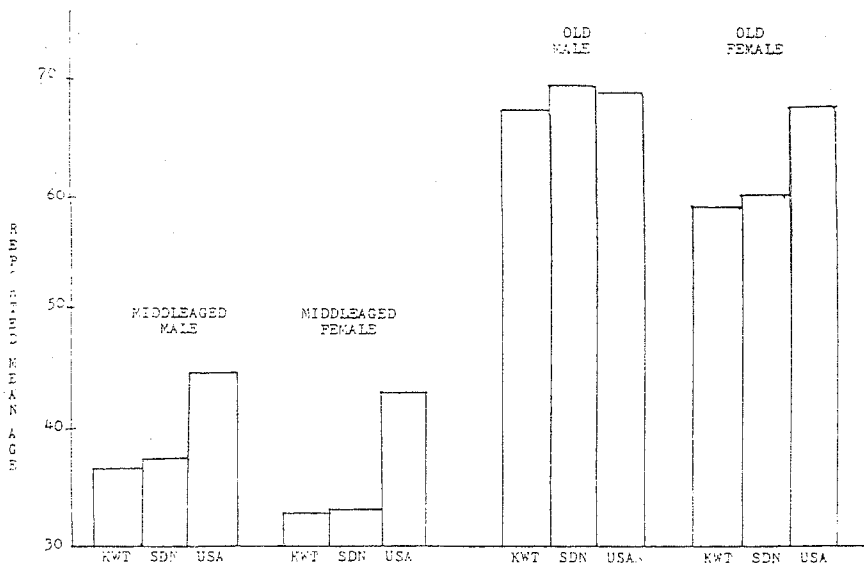


Fig #1 Reported Mean "Best Age" for Middleaged Males and Females, Old Males and Females by Groups of Men Participants from Kuwait, Sudan and the United States

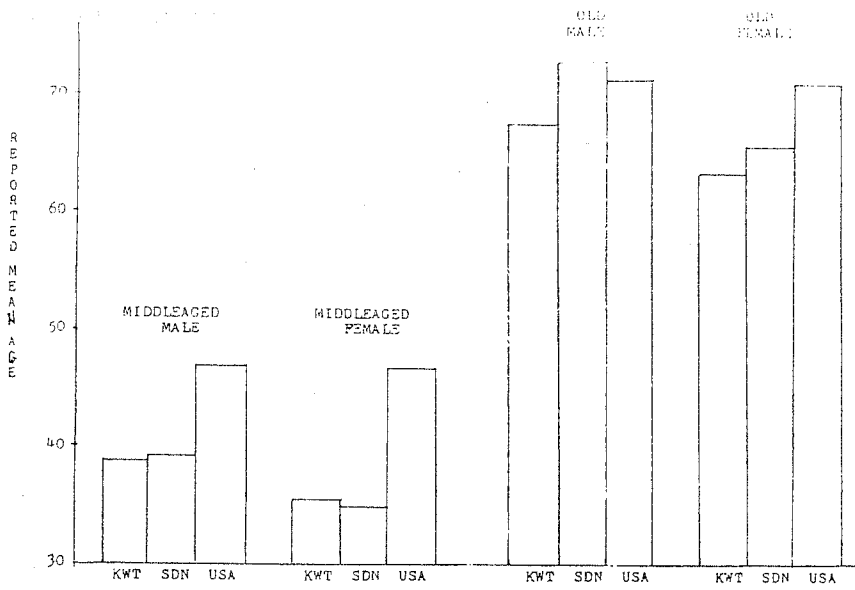


Fig #2 Reported Mean "Best Age" for Middleaged Males and Females, Old Males and Females by Groups of Women Participants from Kuwait, Sudan and the United States

Table 1

Perceptions of Age for "Middle Age" and "Old Age" by three populations of College Students

(expressed by means for each category)

Countries	Kuwait		Sudan		U. S. A.	
Gender of Subjects	M.	W.	M.	W.	M.	W.
N.	125	158	188	76	34	117
"Middle (male) Age" (female)	36.02	39.36	37.13	39.80	44.06	46.90
"Old (male) Age" (female)	66.69	67.78	69.63	7.79	68.94	71.86
	58.85	60.07	59.67	65.89	67.82	71.66

However, both of these populations differed in their responses from the U. S.-American men and women college students, who perceived "middle age" as occurring about 7 or 8 years later for males (at 44.06 years) and approximately 11 years later for females (at 43.21 years). (See Figs. 1 and 2.) For the stage of "old age," the Kuwaiti subjects perceived this age-period as somewhat younger than the other two samples did. Could it be that perhaps life-expectationcies influenced these responses? On the other hand, in the two Mid-Eastern populations both college men and women perceived the ages in each developmental stage as younger for females than those for males. Yet, the responses by the U. S. subjects did not result in any appreciable age differences between males and females. Perhaps one could speculate that such responses may be due to the laws of "equal opportunity", as well as a favorable attitude toward "androgyny." However, it also meant that Hypothesis 2 could not be accepted outright, since the ages for the "middle age female" and the "old age female" were perceived younger onley in Kuwait and Sudan. While there were no significant differences in the U. S. men's responses, a trend could be discerned that women's ages were perceived as somewhat

younger than those of their male counterparts. However, no such trend was observed for U. S. women (See Table 1).

Based on the present findings, the question arose: why is "middle age" perceived so much younger by the Kuwaiti and the Sudanese subjects in comparison to U. S. subjects? Neugarten and Neugarten (1986) advanced two classifications of "young-old" and "old-old." The two authors explained that these terms had become part of every day parlance, and were based originally on health and social characteristics, rather than on chronological age. Neugarten and Neugarten (1986) explained that these terms represented the social reality in which the line between "middle age" and "old age" was no longer clear. --This statement, however, was not corroborated by the present data, since in none of the three populations were there any overlap between these two life-events. As seen in Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2, there were always distinct age-periods, spaced from about 24 to 33 years apart between the specific adult developmental stages, i. e. between "middle age" and "old age."

In summary it can be stated that the perceptions of age for the two developmental stages in adulthood varied with the different cultural populations, though similarities were found in all three samples.

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