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Trends. Geropsychology and Global Security

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Abstract: This Trends article discusses how to evaluate whether national leaders, as senior citizens, can be considered the best and brightest, and the possible role for cognitive stimulation.

It has long been the case that many national leaders qualify under the construct of senior citizen. Yet an assumption accompanying this construct is often that the highest functioning years of seniors--physically and psychologically--are behind them. So are many national leaders neither the best nor the brightest?

There are other countering assumptions. One is that age and wisdom are positively correlated among seniors until very, very late in life. Another is that this correlation may be increasingly negative throughout the senior years, but that it can be attenuated or even reversed to positive through appropriate behaviors within one's daily life style. A basic principle supporting the later assumption is that cognitive stimulation moderates the correlation between age and wisdom during the senior years--with stimulation and wisdom being positively correlated.

Is cognitive stimulation salutary in the above context? Salthouse et al. (2002) posits that three empirical conditions would need to be satisfied to support the contention that cognitive stimulation preserves or enhances cognitive functioning that would otherwise decline. First, there must be a negative correlation between degree of cognitive stimulation and chronological age. Second, there must be a positive correlation between the level of cognitive functioning and degree of cognitive stimulation. Third, there must be data supporting an interaction of cognitive stimulation and chronological age in predicting cognitive functioning. Yet in a recent study, Salthouse et al. found that only the first empirical condition could be supported in studying close to 200 individuals who ranged in age from 20 through over 90 with a mean of 16 years of formal education. Moreover, many other studies are more likely to advocate for direct physical influence of brain functioning rather than direct cognitive-behavioral stimulation as a route to improving cognitive functioning (cf. Whyte et al., 2002).

So once again, are many national leaders neither the best nor the brightest? And if so, can this be rectified? Geropsychological research might help to suggest whether rectification could better occur through ballot, bullet, coup, or cognitive stimulation. (See Lifshitz, H. (1998). Instrumental enrichment: A tool for enhancement of cognitive ability in adult and elderly people with mental retardation. *Education & Training in Mental Retardation & Developmental Disabilities*, 33, 34-41; Salthouse, T. A., Berish, D. E., & Miles, J. D. (2002). The role of cognitive stimulation on the relations between age and cognitive functioning. *Psychology & Aging*, 17, 548-557; Schwebel, M., Maher, C. A., & Fagley, N. S. (Eds.). (1990). *Promoting cognitive growth over the life span*. Hillsdale, NJ, England: Lawrence Erlbaum; Whyte, J., Vaccaro, M., Grieb-Neff, P., & Hart, T. (2002). Psychostimulant use in the rehabilitation of individuals with traumatic brain injury. *Journal of Head Trauma Rehabilitation*, 17, 284-299; Winocur, G. (1998). Environmental influences on cognitive decline in aged rats. *Neurobiology of Aging*, 19, 589-597.)