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Wisdom

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Introduction

A first approach to the definition of wisdom from a psychological perspective is its treatment in dictionaries. The major German historical dictionary, for instance, defined wisdom as 'insight and knowledge about oneself and the world … and sound judgement in the case of difficult life problems'. Similarly, the Oxford Dictionary includes in its definition of wisdom: 'Good judgement and advice in difficult and uncertain matters of life.'

In a next step, psychologists further specified the content and formal properties of wisdom-related phenomena. These initial efforts for the most part were theoretical and speculative. G. Stanley Hall in 1922, for example, associated wisdom with the emergence of a meditative attitude, philosophic calmness, impartiality, and the desire to draw moral lessons that emerge in later adulthood. Furthermore, writers emphasized that wisdom involves the search for the moderate course between extremes, a dynamic between knowledge and doubt, a sufficient detachment from the problem at hand, and a well-balanced coordination of emotion, motivation, and thought. In line with dictionary definitions, such writings refer to wisdom as knowledge about the human condition at its frontier, knowledge about the most difficult questions of the meaning and conduct of life, and knowledge about the uncertainties of life, about what cannot be known and how to deal with that limited knowledge (for an overview see Kramer, 2000; Staudinger, 1999; Sternberg, 1990).

Wisdom certainly is a phenomenon rich in history and connotations. Some even argue it is a phenomenon that defies empirical investigation. And certainly the application of scientific methods changes the phenomenon under study. Nevertheless, it seems useful to study and assess wisdom as it may help us to learn more about conditions that facilitate the development and well-balanced integration of human mind and character.

Some Historical Background to the Psychological Study of Wisdom

Since the beginning of human culture, wisdom has been viewed as the ideal endpoint of human development. Certainly, the psychological study of wisdom is still rather young compared to its philosophical treatment when considering that the very definition of philosophy is 'love or pursuit of wisdom'. Important to recognize is that the identification of wisdom with individuals (such as wise persons), the predominant approach in psychology, is but one of the ways by which wisdom is instantiated. In fact, in the general historical literature on wisdom, the identification of wisdom with the mind and character of individuals is not the preferred mode of analysis. Wisdom is considered an ideal that is difficult to be fully represented in the isolated individual.

Throughout history, the interest in the topic of wisdom has waxed and waned (Baltes, in press). In the Western world, the question of whether wisdom is divine or human was at the centre of wisdom-related discourse during the Renaissance. An initial conclusion of this debate was reached during the later phases of the Enlightenment. Recently, in conjunction with value pluralism and the need for orientation characteristic of postmodern times, interest in the concept of wisdom has been revived. Finally, archeological-cultural work dealing with the origins of religious and secular bodies of wisdom-related texts in China, India, Egypt, Old Mesopotamia and the like has revealed a cultural and historical invariance with regard to wisdom-related proverbs and

tales (Baltes, in press). This relative invariance gives rise to the assumption that concepts such as wisdom with its related body of knowledge and skills have been culturally selected because of their adaptive value for humankind.

Among one the major reasons for the emergence of the psychological study of wisdom in the late 1970s and early 1980s was the search for the potential of aging or more specifically, the search for domains or, types of intellectual functioning that would not show age-related decline.

Implicit (Subjective) Theories about Wisdom and Their Assessment

Most empirical research on wisdom in psychology, so far, has focused on further elaboration of the definition of wisdom. Moving beyond the dictionary definitions of wisdom, research assessed the nature of everyday beliefs, folk conceptions, or implicit (subjective) theories of wisdom. The pursuit of answers to questions such as What is wisdom?, How is wisdom different from other forms of intelligence?, Which situations require wisdom?, What is a wise act?, What are the characteristics of wise people? have been at the centre of psychological wisdom research during the 1980s (for a review see Staudinger & Baltes, 1994).

Wisdom in these studies is 'assessed' in two ways. Either participants are asked to sort adjectives according to their similarity (Clayton, 1975) or their probablity to co-occur in one person (Sternberg, 1985). Such ratings were subsequently analysed using multidimensional scaling. In other studies, participants were asked to rate items describing a wise person, a non-wise person, and non-relevant characteristics to which degree they reflect their prototype of a wise person (Holliday & Chandler, 1986). These ratings were then entered into a factor analysis. In both cases, the stimulus material (adjectives, items) was developed based on pilot studies in which participants described their concept of a wise person. Characteristics that were mentioned most often during those interviews were subsequently turned into questionnaire items.

From this research on implicit theories of wisdom and wise persons, it is evident that people in Western samples hold fairly clear-cut images of the nature of wisdom. Four findings are especially noteworthy. First, in the minds of people, wisdom seems to be closely related to wise persons and their acts as 'carriers' of wisdom. Second, wise people are expected to combine features of mind and character and balance multiple interests and choices. Third, wisdom carries a very strong interpersonal and social aspect with regard to both its application (advice) and the consensual recognition of its occurrence. Fourth, wisdom exhibits overlap with other related concepts such as intelligence, but in aspects like sagacity, prudence, and the integration of cognition, emotion, and motivation, it also carries unique variance.

Explicit Theories and Assessment of Wisdom

A more recent line of empirical psychological inquiry on wisdom addresses the question of how to measure behavioural expressions of wisdom. Within this tradition, three lines of work can be identified (Staudinger & Baltes, 1994): (1) assessment of wisdom as a personality characteristic, (2) assessment of wisdom in the Piagetian tradition of postformal thought, and (3) assessment of wisdom as an individual's problem-solving performance with regard to difficult problems involving the interpretation, conduct, and management of life.

Assessing Wisdom as a Personality Characteristic

Within personality theories, wisdom is usually conceptualized as an advanced if not the final stage of personality development. Wisdom, in this context, is comparable to 'optimal maturity'. A wise person is characterized, for instance, as integrating rather than ignoring or repressing self-related information, by having coordinated opposites, and by having transcended personal agendas and turned to collective or universal issues. The assessment of 'optimal maturity' poses the problem that it is a highly desirable characteristic. Thus, most of the extant operation-alizations suffer from the skewed distributions due to social desirability. Walaskay, Whitbourne and Nehrke (1983), and Ryff and Heincke (1983), for example, have undertaken the effort to develop self-report questionnaires based on the Eriksonian notions of personality development, especially integrity or wisdom. Other attempts have used extant personality questionnaires to assess wisdom, in the sense of self-development and maturity. For instance, Wink and Helson (1997) used a personality measure and open-ended responses to assess practical (i.e. interpersonal skill and interest, insight, clear thinking, reflectiveness, tolerance etc.) and transcendent wisdom (i.e. transcending the personal, recognizing the complexities and limits of knowledge, integrating thought and effort, spiritual depth). More recently, Ardelt (1997) employed Haan's Ego Rating Scale and Block's California Q-sort to operationalize a cognitive, reflective and affective component of wisdom.

Assessing Wisdom as Neopiagetian Form of Mature Thought

Central to Neopiagetian theories of adult thought is the transcendence of the universal truth criterion that characterizes formal logic. This transcendence is common to conceptions such as dialectical, complementary, and relativistic thinking. Such tolerance of multiple truths, that is of ambiguity, has also been mentioned as a crucial feature of wisdom. A number of different approaches all linked to this basic understanding can be distinguished: dialectical thinking, complementary thinking, relativistic thinking, reflective judgement. Usually, these kinds of mature thought are assessed as performances. Thus, participants are asked to respond to a fictitious problem. The answers are subsequently coded according to respective coding schemes reflecting ascending levels of mature thought (e.g. Basseches, 1984; Blanchard-Fields, 1986; Kitchener & Brenner, 1990; Kramer & Woodruff, 1986; Labouvie-Vief, 1980). Reported interrater agreements usually range between 75% and 85%.

Assessing Wisdom as Expert-Level Judgement and Advice in Fundamental and Difficult Life Dilemmas

Besides these measures of wisdom as a personality characteristic, or as a feature of mature thought, there is also work that attempts to assess wisdom-related performance in tasks dealing with the interpretation, conduct, and management of life. This approach is based on lifespan theory, the developmental study of the ageing mind and ageing personality, research on expert systems, and cultural-historical definitions of wisdom (Baltes, Smith & Staudinger, 1992). By integrating these perspectives, wisdom is defined as an expert knowledge system in the fundamental pragmatics of life permitting exceptional insight, judgement, and advice involving complex and uncertain matters of the human condition (Balles et al., 1992).

The body of knowledge and skills associated with wisdom as an expertise in the fundamental pragmatics of life entails insight into the quintessential aspects of the human condition, including its biological finitude and cultural conditioning. Wisdom involves a fine-tuned and well-balanced coordination of cognition, motivation, and emotion. More specifically, wisdom-related knowledge and skills can be characterized by a family of five criteria: (1) rich factual knowledge about life, (2) rich procedural knowledge about life, (3) lifespan contextualism, (4) value relativism, and (5) awareness and management of uncertainty (see Baltes & Staudinger, 2000 for an extensive definition).

To elicit and measure wisdom-related knowledge and skills, in this approach participants are presented with difficult life dilemmas such as the following: 'Imagine someone receives a call from a good friend who tells him/her that he/she can't go on anymore and has decided to commit suicide. What would the person/what would you do and consider in this situation?' Participants are then asked to 'think aloud' about such dilemmas. The five wisdom-related criteria are used to evaluate these protocols. To do so, an expert panel of raters is selected, and extensively trained and calibrated in using the five criteria to evaluate the response protocols. Every rater is trained on only one criterion to avoid halo effects. And always two raters apply the same criterion to establish interrater reliability. Across over 3000 response protocols now the reliabilities of the five criteria range between 0.72 and 0.93. Reliability of the wisdom score averaged across the five criteria even reaches a Cronbach alpha of 0.98. The exact training procedure and the calibration protocols are described and included in the Rater Manual that can be obtained from the author (Staudinger, Smith & Baltes, 1994).

As one indicator of external validity, it was demonstrated that when using this wisdom paradigm to study people who were nominated as wise according to nominators' subjective beliefs about wisdom, it was found that wisdom nominees also received higher wisdom scores than comparable control samples of various ages and professional backgrounds (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). Convergent and discriminant validity was established with regard to extant measures of cognitive and personality functioning. In line with the historical wisdom literature, that portrays wisdom as the ideal combination of mind and virtue, it was found that wisdom-related performance was best predicted by measures located at the interface of cognition and personality, such as a judicious cognitive style, creativity, moral reasoning. Neither intelligence nor personality independently of each other made a significant contribution to wisdom-related knowledge and judgement (Staudinger, 1999). Assessment contexts have to be considered as well. It was demonstrated that wisdom-related performance could be enhanced by one standard deviation if participants were asked to bring a partner with whom they discussed the life problem before reflecting by themselves and responding (Staudinger & Baltes, 1996).

Table 1. Selected wisdom measures (after Staudinger, 2000)

Theoretical background	Wisdom components/criteria	Assessment format	Reliability[a]	Author
Implicit theory: prototype of a wise person	Sagacity, reasoning ability, learning from ideas and environment, judgement, expeditious use of information, perspicacity	Similarity ratings	$0.89 \leq \alpha \leq 0.97$	Sternberg (1985)

Theory	Components	Measurement	Reliability[a]	Reference
Implicit theory: prototype of a wise person	Interpersonal skills, judgement and communicative skills, social unobtrusiveness, exceptional understanding, general competence	Prototypicality questionnaire	$0.83 \leq \alpha \leq 0.90$	Holliday and Chandler (1986)
Explicit theory: wisdom as personality characteristic	Integrity versus despair	Self-report questionnaire Adult ego-development scale	0.76	Walaskay et al. (1983–84)
Explicit theory: wisdom as personality characteristic	Cognitive, reflective, affective components	Interviewer rating (Haan's ego ratings, California Q-sort)	Ego ratings $0.51 \leq \alpha \leq 0.62$ Q-sort items $0.85 \leq \alpha \leq 0.93$	Ardelt (1997)
Explicit theory: wisdom as personality characteristic	Practical wisdom (interpersonal skills, insight, clear thinking, reflectiveness, tolerance) Transcendent wisdom (transcending the personal, recognition of the limits of knowledge, integration of thought and affect)	17 items of adjective check list Coding of open-ended responses	$0.75 \leq \alpha \leq 0.86$	Wink and Helson (1997)
Explicit theory: wisdom as postformal thought	Relativistic and dialectical thought	Coding of open-ended responses to fictitious problems according to levels of relativistic and dialectical thought	85% and 86% Interrater agreement	Kramer and Woodruff (1986)
Explicit theory: wisdom as expert-level knowledge and judgement in difficult and uncertain matters of life	Rich factual and procedural knowledge, about life, lifespan contextualism, value relativism, awareness and management of uncertainty	Expert raters evaluate open-ended responses to fictitious life problems quality according to 5 wisdom criteria	Individual criteria 0.65 $\leq \alpha \leq 0.94$ Overall wisdom $\alpha = 0.98$ rater reliability	Baltes and Staudinger (2000)

[a] Reliabilities refer to scale consistencies or interrater

agreements (per cent agreement or Cronbach α).

Future Perspectives and Conclusion

The concept of wisdom represents a fruitful topic for psychological research (a selection of wisdom measures is described in Table 1): (1) the study of wisdom emphasizes the search for continued optimization and the further evolution of the human condition, and (2) in a prototypical fashion, it allows for the study of collaboration among cognitive, emotional, and motivational processes. Future research on wisdom will be expanded in at least three ways: (1) the further identification of social and personality factors as well as life processes relevant for the ontogeny of wisdom, (2) further attempts to develop less labour-intensive assessment tools, and (3) gaining better understanding of the interplay between self-related wisdom and wisdom about others.

- wisdom
- dialectical thought
- Q-sort
- self-reports
- personality
- open coding
- contextualism

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Related Entries

- Applied Fields: Gerontology
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