

2016

Correlates of Wisdom

Monika Ardelt

Hunhui Oh

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Monika Ardel¹ and Hunhui Oh²

¹University of Florida, USA, and ²St. Ambrose University, USA

Although wisdom has always played a prominent role in philosophy and religion, contemporary empirical wisdom research started around 1980, when several research teams tried to determine what wisdom is and how it can be measured. Two different approaches emerged, divided into implicit and explicit theories of wisdom. The implicit approach asked lay people to name characteristics of wise individuals that were then summarized into several dimensions, while the explicit approach referred to experts and classical wisdom texts to define the essential elements of wisdom. Based on these implicit and explicit wisdom theories, several wisdom measures have been developed in the past decades, ranging from measures that assess the cognitive aspects of general wisdom-related knowledge to those that attempt to capture the noncognitive elements of personal wisdom. Not surprisingly, correlates of wisdom vary, depending on what kind and what aspects of wisdom are assessed. Wisdom measures are distinguished on three dimensions: whether the measure assesses general or personal wisdom, whether cognitive or noncognitive aspects of wisdom are emphasized, and whether a rating measure or a standardized scale is used to assess wisdom.

Measures of Wisdom

The wisdom of research participants can be rated based on performance tasks that ask study participants to respond to ill-structured problems, on examples of participants' own wisdom, or on qualitative interviews with respondents. The most established measure

of general wisdom among the performance measures is the *Berlin Wisdom Paradigm* (BWP), which assesses the cognitive aspects of wisdom-related knowledge in life planning, management, and review and the meaning and conduct of life by asking participants to discuss ill-defined hypothetical problems. The transcribed answers are rated by trained judges regarding the participants' performance on five wisdom criteria: rich factual knowledge, rich procedural knowledge, lifespan contextualism, value relativism/tolerance, and the recognition and management of uncertainty. General wisdom-related knowledge is measured as the average of those five criteria (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). Another performance measure of general wisdom is wise reasoning about social conflicts that describe either intergroup tension over ethnic differences, politics, and natural resources or interpersonal dilemmas between friends, spouses, and neighbors. Responses are rated based on the participants' perspective-taking ability, consideration of the possibility of change, search for compromise and conflict resolution, and acknowledgment of multiple possibilities, uncertainty, and the limits of one's own knowledge (Grossmann, Na, Varnum, Kitayama, & Nisbett, 2013).

Parallel to the BWP, a rating measure of personal wisdom (PW) was developed by asking participants about their typical behaviors, strengths, and weaknesses as a friend; how they act as friends in difficult situations; and what they would like to change about themselves. Answers are rated according to participants' self-knowledge; emotion regulation and expression; ability to maintain close social relationships; insight into the nature of interdependence and the causes of one's emotions and behavior; self-relativism (reflection, self-reflection, and the acceptance of self and others); and tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008). Transcendent wisdom

ratings (TWR) are obtained by rating participants' written descriptions of their own wisdom and its development, using the criteria of insight; self-transcendence; recognition of the complexity and limitations of knowledge; integration of thought and emotion; and concern with philosophical and spiritual issues (Wink & Helson, 1997).

Standardized wisdom scales, by contrast, use questionnaires that ask study participants whether or how strongly they agree or disagree with certain statements or adjectives that describe their personality, attitudes, and/or behavior to assess personal rather than general wisdom. The *Practical Wisdom Scale* (PWS) taps into cognitive, reflective, and mature aspects of wisdom, using 18 self-descriptive adjectives from the *Adjective Check List* (Wink & Helson, 1997). The *Three-Dimensional Wisdom Scale* (3D-WS) is a 39-item instrument that measures wisdom as an integration of cognitive (a thorough understanding of the interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects of life, including the limits of knowledge), reflective (the ability and willingness to perceive things from different perspectives and an absence of subjectivity and projections), and compassionate (positive, caring, and nurturing emotions and behavior toward others) dimensions (Ardelt, 2003). The *Adolescent Wisdom Scale* (AWS) has 23 items and three subscales, consisting of intelligence, harmony/warmth, and spirituality (Perry et al., 2002). Two standardized scales assess only the noncognitive aspects of personal wisdom. The *Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale* (SAWS) contains 40 items and five subscales that measure critical life experiences, emotional regulation, reflectiveness/remembrance, openness to experience, and humor (Webster, 2007). The *Adult Self-Transcendence Inventory* (ASTI) contains 18 items and two subscales that gauge how much participants have transcended their self or feel alienated compared to 10 years ago (Levenson, Jennings, Aldwin, & Shiraishi, 2005).

Only a few studies have explored the differences and similarities between the diverse

measures of wisdom. However, a comparison of the BWP, 3D-WS, SAWS, and ASTI showed that all measures were significantly and positively correlated with each other (Ardelt, 2011a; Glück et al., 2013; Taylor, Bates, & Webster, 2011). Yet, only the reflectiveness/remembrance subscale of the SAWS was significantly related to the wisdom criterion of uncertainty of the BWP, and only the cognitive dimension of the 3D-WS was significantly correlated with all four remaining wisdom criteria of the BWP. With the exception of uncertainty, the five BWP criteria and the three 3D-WS dimensions were either unrelated or even negatively related to the critical life experiences and reflectiveness/remembrance subscales of the SAWS. In addition, the five BWP criteria were unrelated to the compassionate dimension of the 3D-WS and the emotional regulation and openness subscales of the SAWS, except for a positive correlation between openness and the procedural knowledge criteria of the BWP. This indicates that the wisdom measures capture overlapping yet not identical aspects of wisdom, depending on their respective definitions, and therefore might correlate differently with other variables.

Correlates of Wisdom

Wisdom is often considered the pinnacle of human development. Wise individuals are believed to have overcome many human weaknesses and have developed their full potential. As such, wisdom should be positively related to psychosocial maturity, self-realization, and the transcendence of self-centeredness but not necessarily to intelligence. In fact, intelligence is inconsistently related to measures of wisdom and generally has stronger correlations with cognitively oriented measures and subscales (Glück et al., 2013). Indicators of human development, by contrast, show a more consistent association with wisdom measures (Ardelt 2011b; Ardelt & Ferrari, 2014; Glück et al., 2013; Staudinger & Glück, 2011). Ego development and generativity have been found to be positively related to

many wisdom measures both cross-sectionally and longitudinally. Psychological well-being, consisting of an orientation toward personal growth, purpose in life, self-acceptance, autonomy, mastery, and/or positive relations with others (Ryff, 1989), tends to be positively correlated with diverse wisdom measures, although the BWP tends to be unrelated to most aspects of psychological well-being. In addition, the 3D-WS, ASTI, SAWS, and BWP are positively related to emotional competence, but only the 3D-WS, ASTI, and SAWS are related to greater self-efficacy and empathy. Moreover, the 3D-WS and the SAWS have been found to be positively correlated with forgiveness of self, others, and situations and the 3D-WS positively with emotional intelligence and self-compassion and inversely with death avoidance and fear of death. The BWP is positively associated with the importance of other-enhancing values and negatively with the importance of living a pleasurable, hedonistic life. The SAWS is also positively correlated with positive psychosocial values and the ASTI positively with egalitarianism and inversely with immature love.

Among the Big Five personality characteristics, openness to experience is most strongly related to many different measures of wisdom and is even included as a component in the SAWS. This indicates that wise individuals embrace openness to all aspects of life, including life's uncertainty and unpredictability. Agreeableness is positively correlated with wise reasoning and the ASTI, extraversion is positively and neuroticism negatively associated with the ASTI and SAWS, and conscientiousness is positively related to the ASTI.

Growing in wisdom is generally considered beneficial to the individual, others, and the larger community. If this is the case, personal wisdom should be positively related to subjective well-being. Indeed, wise reasoning, the ASTI, AWS, 3D-WS, and ratings that assess wisdom as an integration of cognitive, reflective, and compassionate personality qualities are positively related to diverse

measures of subjective well-being, such as life satisfaction, happiness, general well-being, and the absence of depressive symptoms, in diverse samples ranging from children to older adults and even after controlling for objective life conditions. Yet, the TWR, PWS, and PW are unrelated to life satisfaction, whereas the BWP is inconsistently related to indicators of subjective well-being. This suggests that a clearer perception of reality, including one's own imperfections and the awareness of uncertainty, will not necessarily result in greater well-being if it is not counterbalanced by the transcendence of the self, leading to self-acceptance and compassion for self and others. In fact, research indicates that the positive association between the 3D-WS and subjective well-being is at least partially mediated by indicators of human development, such as emotional intelligence, resilience, mastery, and purpose in life, and tends to be stronger when individuals encounter social, economic, or personal hardship (Ardelt, 2011b; Ardel & Ferrari, 2014).

Most researchers agree that people are not born wise. If wisdom requires learning from experiences, older people have a greater probability of being wise than younger individuals. Yet, growing older is not a sufficient condition for growing wiser, as experience might come with age but not everyone is willing or able to learn from their experiences. Hence, it is not surprising that most cross-sectional studies do not find a positive correlation between age and wisdom during the adulthood years. In fact, the cognitive dimension of wisdom might be negatively related to age, particularly during the last years of life and for individuals with a lower educational degree (Ardelt, 2011b; Glück et al., 2013). However, similarly to intelligence, age appears to be positively associated with wisdom from childhood to young adulthood. This suggests a curvilinear association between age and wisdom, with higher wisdom during the middle years than early or late in life, for which some evidence exists for the SAWS and the 3D-WS (Bergsma & Ardel, 2012; Webster, Westerhof, & Bohlmeijer, 2014). In adulthood,

age has also been found to be positively related to wise reasoning (Grossmann et al., 2013) and to wisdom for those individuals who have the drive and motivation to grow psychologically, such as individuals who score high on moral reasoning and adults with a college degree in cross-sectional studies and clinical psychologists in longitudinal research (Ardelt, 2011b). Hence, growth in wisdom might primarily be driven by developmental maturational changes in childhood and adolescence and by individual motivations, favorable social conditions, and educational opportunities in adulthood. Indeed, education is a positive predictor of wisdom, particularly for cognitively oriented wisdom measures (Glück et al., 2013). Gender, by contrast, tends to be unrelated to wisdom, although women tend to score higher than men on the compassionate dimension of the 3D-WS and the warmth/harmony and spirituality subscales of the AWS (Ardelt, 2009).

Conclusions

Longitudinal studies are necessary to determine whether wisdom increases with age and the direction of the association between various measures of wisdom and indicators of human development, personality characteristics, and subjective well-being. More studies are also needed that investigate how wisdom develops and what might be negative aspects of growing wiser. If growing through adversity and learning from difficult life experiences are possible pathways to wisdom, the development of wisdom is not easy, and individuals are likely to encounter pain and loss before wisdom is attained (Staudinger & Kunzmann, 2005). However, it also appears that growing wiser is facilitated by supportive social relationships, wisdom mentors, a personality that is open to all kinds of experiences, a strong motivation for self-development, concern for the well-being of others, and an environment that is conducive to the development of wisdom (Staudinger & Glück, 2011).

SEE ALSO: Ego Integrity; Life Satisfaction; Meaning of Life; Mindfulness; Motivation; Psychosocial Development; Resilience; Self-Transcendence/Gero-transcendence; Subjective Well-Being; Successful Aging; Wisdom, Berlin Model

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