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Wisdom

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Abstract

Wisdom has been a central theme in the philosophical inquiry of the human experience for centuries, with the earliest written teachings dating back to the ancient Egyptian vizier, Ptahhotep 25-24 century BCE. The virtue of wisdom has been attributed to the great deities of various cultures and mythologies (e.g., Anahit of Armenia, Athena of Greece), and a quality humankind is encouraged to embody millennia later. In more recent decades, psychological scientists have begun to study the concept of wisdom, exploring characteristics of a wise person as well as meta-cognitive processes and moral aspirations involved in wise decision-making. At the core of wisdom is the recognition and acceptance that for any given issue there are different possible perspectives, interests, contexts, and outcomes, as well as the willingness to consider and take into account these different possibilities when working through the issue. This chapter reviews the psychological study of wisdom, with a focus on the conceptual and empirical construct of wisdom as it relates to *the possible*.

Keywords

Wisdom · Wise reasoning · Metacognition · Moral aspirations

Defining Wisdom

Greek philosophers viewed wisdom as a way of understanding the world (Durant 1961). To philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, wisdom was one of the most fundamental human virtues, a means of contemplating truth and guiding human conduct (Adler 1952). Though this perspective dominated Western philosophy for hundreds of years (Birren and Svensson 2005), the conceptualization of wisdom evolved throughout history, leading to numerous and culturally diverse definitions of wisdom (Kung and Grossmann 2020). This presented a challenge to its empirical study, because while the plurality provided rich roots for empirical investigation, it also created conceptual ambiguity among researchers regarding the components that comprise such a complex psychological construct, with different researchers prioritizing different philosophical accounts in their conceptualization of wisdom (Grossmann et al. 2020b).

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In lay terms, wisdom has many definitions, ranging from knowledge drawn from traumatic life experiences and personal growth, to intelligence, and rationality (Staudinger and Glück 2011). Within psychology, some scholars have studied wisdom from a person-centric perspective (e.g., Ardelt 2003), while others have argued that wisdom can vary based on context (e.g., Grossmann et al. 2016; Grossmann et al. 2020a; Staudinger and Baltes 1996). Early psychological studies took a person-centric conceptualization of wisdom, where wisdom was characterized as a stable trait that an individual possessed (Birren and Svensson 2005). According to this account, people portray consistent and stable levels of wisdom across time and situations (e.g., "a wise or unwise person"; Webster 2007). In other words, wisdom is a trait that one either possesses or does not possess, reducing the notion of wisdom to (often) immutable characteristics of an individual. Recent empirical investigations take a broader approach. Although there is a moderate stability in people's tendency to deploy wisdom in reasoning (e.g., metacognitive processes that lead to wisdom), there are also considerable within-individual differences in how much people use wise reasoning, which varies according to context (Brienza et al. 2018; Grossmann et al. 2016, 2019a). Thus, the degree to which a person engages in wise reasoning can differ across time and situations, with certain contexts facilitating wisdom while other situations constrain it. For example, recent work has found that people use more wise reasoning when they are around others (Grossmann et al. 2016), when they take others' perspectives (Kross and Grossmann 2012), or in relationships they care more about (Rotella and Grossmann in preparation).

To overcome the operationalization heterogeneity of wisdom in the social sciences (Staudinger and Glück 2011), leading scholars in this area of research established a common wisdom model (CWM), which includes moral, social, and cognitive approaches to wisdom, and provides a clear and overarching conceptualization of wisdom as a psychological construct (Grossmann et al. 2020b). The CWM is especially useful to understand wisdom from a social-sciences perspective. According to this model, wisdom is defined as "morally-grounded excellence in social-cognitive processing," highlighting two elements which are most characteristic to the construct: *metacognition* and *moral aspirations* (Grossmann et al. 2020b). Metacognition refers to higher-order thinking; in other words, thinking about and regulating one's thought-processes, cognitions, emotions, and motives (Dunlosky and Metcalfe 2008). In the context of wisdom, metacognitive processes allow people to step back from a situation (e.g., the problem they are considering at the moment) to assess, evaluate, and adapt their approach, taking into consideration things like "*what is my goal?*", "*is the current approach working?*", and *"what are the consequences of this approach?"* (Grossmann et al. 2020b). Though not an exclusive list, the CWM encompasses the following metacognitions as central to wise reasoning: (1) context-adaptability; (2) epistemic humility; (3) integration of diverse viewpoints; and (4) perspectivism. Context-adaptability involves recognizing that contexts can change, and maintaining an open mind about such possible changes. It could present as searching for different solutions as a situation evolves, or considering alternative possible ways in which a situation could unfold (Grossmann 2017; Grossmann and Dorfman 2019). Epistemic humility involves recognizing the limits of one's knowledge. This can manifest as questioning whether one's existing opinion on an issue is correct, recognizing that one may be lacking relevant information, and actively searching for extraordinary circumstances prior to forming an opinion. Integration of diverse viewpoints involves searching for a compromise between competing perspectives and interests. This process can include identifying possible compromises, or searching for a solution that would bridge competing interests. Lastly, perspectivism involves maintaining an open mind toward the possibility that there are different viewpoints concerning a given situation. It could manifest as making an active effort to take others' perspectives, or seeking a variety of opinions on a matter prior to arriving at a conclusion.

The second foundation of the common wisdom model concerns moral aspirations, implying that wisdom meta-cognitions have to be morally grounded. The notion that these metacognitive processes are morally grounded means that wisdom guides individuals to make decisions that promote the common good and well-being of others (Grossmann 2017, 2020). The moral component of wisdom encompasses balancing self- and other-oriented interests, the pursuit of truth (vs. dishonesty), and an orientation toward shared humanity (i.e., recognizing we all share a common human experience regardless of group memberships; Grossmann et al. 2020b). Importantly, according to the CWM, wisdom-related metacognitive processes and moral aspirations work as a unit; these metacognitions *without* moral aspirations would be more descriptive of a sociopath than a wise person (Grossmann 2020; Sternberg 1998), as the fundamental reasoning processes of a sociopath would be focused on the self in isolation of others, rather than considering how one's actions are integrated into a broader context. Relatedly, moral aspirations without metacognition would simply be abstract concepts that would be difficult to implement. For example, to effectively pursue the truth, one would need to engage in perspectivism (e.g., maintaining an open mind about different possible viewpoints) and intellectual humility (e.g., acknowledging the limits of their own knowledge).

Notably, wisdom as conceptualized by the CWM is not fully explained by other conceptually related constructs (Grossmann et al. 2020b). Wisdom is not merely intelligence: in examining the relationship between intelligence (IQ) and wisdom, scholars suggest that while a certain level of IQ is necessary for wisdom, in that it facilitates cognitive processes, it is not sufficient to achieve wisdom. Moreover, IQ does not consistently predict the moral aspects of wisdom and only weakly predicts performance on tasks assessing the various features of wisdom (e.g., Grossmann et al. 2020b). Wisdom is also distinct from rationality, with empirical work showing that wisdom and rationality share only a weak relation (Brienza et al. 2018). And though some scholars have suggested that wisdom and emotional intelligence (i.e., the ability to perceive, understand, express, manage, and use emotions; Mayer and Salovey 1997) are conceptually the same (Zacher et al. 2013), both lay perceptions of wisdom and wisdom scholars tend to contradict this suggestion (Grossmann et al. 2020b). In a study evaluating short statements associated with wisdom, participants perceived that wise people are equally capable of problem-solving and reasoning as intelligent people; however, wise people also had sagacity – which are interpersonal skills associated with knowing when to listen to others, having flexibility in interactions and relationships, and balancing long- and short-term consequences (Sternberg 1985). Moreover, in a recent survey among experts of the Wisdom Task Force which explore this idea, none of the experts viewed emotional intelligence alone as a sufficient factor for wisdom. That is not to say that emotional intelligence is unrelated to wisdom. In fact, many experts view emotional intelligence as a prerequisite for wisdom; however, they argue that these are two distinct constructs (Grossmann et al. 2020b). Similarly, most wisdom experts identified perspective-taking (i.e., "the capacity to recognize and coordinate the differences in people's perspectives," Baltes and Staudinger 2000) to be a necessary component of wisdom, but not sufficient on its own to capture the entire wisdom construct (Grossmann et al. 2020b).

Wisdom and the Possible

Although wisdom is desirable across many contexts, it is particularly relevant in social relationships and social conflicts (Grossmann et al. 2020a; Grossmann and Dorfman 2019). While relationships are an integral part of the human experience, maintaining them requires effort. Interpersonal conflicts can arise, calling for one or both parties to keep an open mind, consider different possible solutions, and reach a compromise that maximizes both parties' interests. In other words, one would need wisdom to effectively sustain relationships. Consider the following scenario:

> A person at the department where I work is angry at me over something that isn't my fault. It is actually another person's fault for not communicating information with them. I feel stuck in the middle and like no one will take responsibility. I just tried to defend myself when the angry person came in and talked about the situation. I explained that the head supervisor had told me that they wanted to communicate with this person. I promised to avoid miscommunications in the future. I feel annoyed and attacked because it's not my responsibility to play their office politics games.

Many of us can relate to a conflict similar to the one highlighted above. How might one deal with such a situation? Recall that wisdom involves taking others' perspectives, placing a problem into a broader context, realizing the limits of one's knowledge, and integrating these ideas (Grossmann 2017; 2020). By engaging in these metacognitive processes, people *interact with the possible* – that is, they deliberate about alternate possibilities, which would have otherwise been constrained without using wise reasoning processes. A person dealing with the above situation could entertain the possible by double-checking if their formed opinion of what occurred is in fact correct. For example, is it true that this "other person" did not communicate the pertinent information? Are there extraordinary circumstances that could explain why this information was not passed on to the appropriate people? One might also consider taking the perspective of the others involved, prior to forming a conclusion about the given event. In a conflict such as this, wisdom would allow one to approach the situation with a focus on the "big picture" (Grossmann and Dorfman 2019; Grossmann et al. 2016), instead of concentrating on little details that could misconstrue the event or misjudge those involved. Deploying wisdom-related meta-cognitive considerations in such a conflict would facilitate the consideration of a variety of possibilities in terms of understanding what occurred and how the situation might further unfold.

In fact, wise reasoning has been related to many constructs that facilitate engagement with the possible. Wise reasoning has a moderate positive relationship to crystallized intelligence (e.g., Grossmann et al. 2013; Staudinger et al. 1997, 1998) which can allow people to relate current experiences to more accumulated knowledge, facts, and skills. Wisdom has also been related to personality constructs, where people who used more wisdom were also more open to experience, agreeable, and less neurotic (Brienza et al. 2018; Huynh et al. 2017; Kunzmann and Baltes 2003; Levenson et al. 2005; Mickler and Staudinger 2008; Webster et al. 2014). People who are more open to experience, have a larger active imagination, greater aesthetic sensitivity, are more attentive to feelings, have a preference for variety, and have greater intellectual curiosity (Costa and McCrae 1992), all of which are characteristics that allow people to engage in more experiences and possibilities. Agreeableness is a personality construct associated with being kind, sympathetic, cooperative, warm, and considerate (Costa and McCrae 1992), which also facilitates perspective taking and integrating perspectives – two wise characteristics that enable cognitive engagement with alternate possibilities. On the flipside, people who score high on neuroticism have greater anxiety, worry, fear, anger, frustration, envy, and loneliness, and are more likely to interpret ordinary situations as threatening (Costa and McCrae 1992). These characteristics constrain engagement with alternative possibilities, and instead are associated with less cognitive flexibility (Murdock et al. 2013). Likewise, wise reasoning is associated with greater emotional diversity, emotional regulation (Grossmann et al. 2019a, b; Grossmann et al. 2016), and interest and inspiration (Kunzmann and Baltes 2003). Thus, wise reasoning is associated with cognitive and personality characteristics that enhance engagement with the possible.

Wisdom further facilitates engagement with the possible for large-scale and important social issues (Grossmann and Brienza 2018; Sternberg 1998). In recent years, we have seen the devastating consequences of climate change, observed terrorism in various parts of the world, and lived through a global pandemic. Circumstances such as these require us to deliberate on what is possible, in both considering how a situation may unfold and ways of resolving it. Wisdom facilitates this. For example, during a pandemic,

nations would benefit from wise leadership (Grossmann and Dorfman 2019). This could look like national leaders maintaining an open mind of how the trend of positive cases may evolve throughout the year and searching for different solutions accordingly (context-adaptability). In fact, leadership learning has been associated with greater wisdom (Yang 2014). This could also include maintaining an open mind about the various viewpoints offered by experts in different fields (e.g., health, economics) and integrating these prior to making any decisions (perspectivism). Here, wise leadership could also manifest as acknowledging that one does not have all the answers and could be lacking relevant information (epistemic humility). As well, it could entail searching for a solution that maximizes the number of interests satisfied (e.g., for students, elders, business owners; integration of diverse viewpoints). As established previously, wisdom is rooted in morality; as such, wise leadership during a global pandemic could look like recognizing that all humans share a common fate regardless of their country of residence and thus collaborate internationally to discover a vaccine (shared humanity). Wisdom in this context would enable leaders to consider the different possible ways in which the pandemic could evolve and the possible ways in which it would be best addressed.

In addition to identifying and considering different perspectives and possibilities, wisdom is also concerned with balance and integration. This component of wisdom is necessary to avoid infinite deliberation on possible alternatives. Integration of alternatives becomes particularly relevant in situations in which one must decide how to act. To illustrate this point, consider the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Government officials and their consultants do not have an infinite amount of time or resources to consider *all* of the ways in which it could unfold and develop mitigation strategies in accordance with each and every possibility. A delay in decision-making can have catastrophic consequences (e.g., thousands of preventable deaths). Faced with multiple alternatives in such a situation requires consideration of how to balance and integrate them.

Fostering Wisdom

Using wise reasoning has many benefits. Wisdom is associated with greater life satisfaction, greater longevity, less negative emotions, less depressive reflection, and can promote prosociality (Grossmann et al. 2013, 2017). Thus, to facilitate engagement with alternate possibilities, perspectives, and contexts – that is, to consider the possible – we must first understand how to facilitate and promote the use of wise reasoning.

Recent research suggests that self-distancing by taking a third person's perspective – i.e., considering a conflict as a distanced or uninvolved observer – facilitates wisdom (Dorfman et al. 2020; Kross and Ayduk 2011; Kross and Grossmann 2012). In a series of studies, Grossmann and Kross (2014) examined the role of self-distancing on wise reasoning. Participants were randomly assigned to reflect on a situation in which their partner cheated on them, or their best friend's partner cheated on their friend, and to reason about how the relationship would unfold moving forward. They found that participants assigned to the "other" condition (i.e., thinking about their friend's relationship) scored higher on wise reasoning, confirming that self-distancing from a situation can facilitate greater wisdom. In a follow-up study, an infidelity situation was presented once more. This time, participants were assigned to one of four condition, instructing them to either: (a) consider this to be their own problem from an immersed perspective (self-immersed), (b) consider this to be a friend's problem from an immersed perspective (other-immersed), (c) consider this to be their own problem from a distanced perspective (self-distanced), or (d) consider this to be a friend's problem from a distanced perspective (other-distanced). Self-distancing was manipulated via the use of first-person or third-person pronouns when reflecting on the conflict (e.g., "I am feeling. . ." vs. "She/he is feeling. . ."). The authors found that participants in the other-immersed and other-distanced conditions engaged in greater wise reasoning than those in the self-immersed condition. Further, participants in the *self-distanced* condition portrayed greater levels of wise reasoning than those in the

self-immersed condition. Notably, those assigned to the other-distanced and other-immersed conditions did not differ from those assigned to the self-distanced condition in their wise reasoning, demonstrating that distancing of any manner (i.e., other-immersed, other-distanced, self-distanced), promotes similar levels of wise reasoning. In a third study, the researchers explored whether age plays a role in wisdom. Contrary to the popular belief that "with age comes wisdom," they found no age differences in wise reasoning among younger or older adults, and further, that the self-distancing intervention worked equally effectively for both age groups. These findings confirm that no matter one's age, taking the perspective of a distanced observer can inspire greater wise metacognitions, allowing one to explore the possible. This is consistent with similar research, such that perspective taking enhances creativity, and in turn, exploring what is possible (Glăveanu 2020).

Additionally, engaging in future-oriented perspectives can increase wise thinking. For example, reframing how someone reflects on a situation (i.e., *"how would I feel about this in the future"* vs. *"how do I feel about this now"*) can help people approach conflicts more wisely (Huynh et al. 2016; Kross and Grossmann 2012; Robson 2019). Further, in the context of relationship conflict, creating temporal space between the self and situation can promote greater insight, greater forgiveness, and greater relationship well-being, while reducing partner blame and negative emotions about the relationship (Huynh et al. 2016).

Another effective method of self-distancing is the use of third-person language (i.e., *"What should she/he do about this?"* vs. *"What should I do about this?"*). Engaging in ego-decentering has shown to increase wise reasoning in hypothetical scenarios (Grossmann and Kross 2014; Kross and Grossmann 2012) and in autobiographical real-life experiences (Grossmann et al. 2019b). The use of third-person language was recently examined as a means to prospectively facilitate wisdom. In a recent micro-longitudinal study, participants wrote a daily diary entry over a 1-month span; they were instructed to record their reflections of a noteworthy daily experience using a first- or third-person perspective (Grossmann et al. in press). The researchers found significant increase in wise metacognitions in participants' reflections on a recent personal social conflict after (vs. before) the third-person reflections intervention, a promising sign that one could implement a specific technique such as journaling using third-person language to promote wise reasoning when dealing with a new conflict. These findings suggest that reframing how someone thinks about a situation, problem, or conflict can promote greater wisdom and the exploration of various possibilities.

Conclusion

We have discussed the conceptualization of wisdom, highlighting that the metacognitions encompassed by the common wisdom model (i.e., context-adaptability, perspectivism, epistemic humility, and integration of diverse viewpoints) are morally grounded, guiding individuals to make decisions that promote a common good. Importantly, we established that at the very core of wisdom is the recognition and acceptance of the possible, and reviewed empirical findings of how wisdom is associated with greater possibilities. Whether it is the consideration of different perspectives, viewpoints, interests, solutions, or outcomes when reflecting on a given situation, wisdom allows us to explore the possible.

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