

# Introduction to Psychology and Wisdom

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## I: Introduction: History of scientific psychology and wisdom

The study of wisdom in scientific psychology is still in its first generation, its results not immediately striking, and it might easily have been overlooked in the planning of this volume. Yet if wisdom is to flourish in the coming years, psychology can, and perhaps must, have an important place. The resources of scientific psychology may turn out to be of utmost value to humans as we struggle to gain a contextual perspective to match a radically new and challenging contextual reality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the following pages, two major models of wisdom in psychology are described in detail, and several other models and quantitative and qualitative studies are discussed more briefly. Areas of conflict between traditional wisdom and empiricism and the dominant world system are noted. It is maintained that traditional wisdom cannot be neglected by psychologist researchers.

To provide at least rough clarification to some terms: Practical wisdom is assimilative in a piagetian sense, assimilating new phenomena into an old schema. It accepts conventional interpretations of reality and operates well within them. Transcendent wisdom perceives conventional reality as lacking ultimate reality: it is something humans have created to allow them to survive successfully.

*What psychology is.* Scientific psychology is considered to have begun in 1879 when Wilhelm Wundt opened his laboratory for psychological experimentation in Leipzig. The field of psychology is broad, ranging from neuro- to developmental- to social psychology. Generalizations that apply to the entire discipline are few. The American Psychological Association, principle authority in the field, defines psychology as the study of “both normal and abnormal functioning”, while at the same time psychologists “also study and encourage behaviors that build wellness and emotional resilience” (5). This quite practical, in relation to ontological, study is carried on by both quantitative (statistical) and qualitative (e.g., interviews, historical research) methods.

Of the 108 published research studies of wisdom that were identified for this Introduction, five appeared in the first decade (1980-1989) of wisdom research. Four of these involved “implicit theories” of wisdom—that is, the notions of wisdom held by average people who may never have given a moment’s conscious thought to the topic. This approach continued to be popular through the 1990s, with 6 of the 22 studies in that decade being studies of implicit theories of wisdom. The others included two studies using longitudinal data, three qualitative studies, and eight research reports from the Berlin Wisdom Project (BWP). In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the amount of wisdom research significantly increased, and its range widened. At least 65 studies were published in these ten years; and in the first year of the second decade, 14 studies were published.

The sort of research being carried out can be categorized quite roughly as Model testing and developing; Wisdom’s correlation with age, occupation, and gender; with life-satisfaction. Personality correlates of wisdom. Self-transcendence. Applied wisdom. Measuring wisdom (including Qualitative research). Multicultural wisdom. Developing

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wisdom (including studies with adolescents and Longitudinal studies), Implicit theories (average people's inchoate notions of wisdom), Marginally related studies.

In the century between the establishment of scientific psychology and the first published research on wisdom, wisdom had been almost entirely ignored, exceptions being C. G. Jung and Erik Erikson. Jung's understanding of wisdom has had little impact on the research except in gerotranscendence and (unmentioned) in the Adult Self-Transcendence Inventory (or ASTI. 39). Self-transcendence was defined in this article, as "increasing interiority and spirituality, and a greater sense of connectedness with past and future generations" (39, p. 127).

Erikson's scattered writings on wisdom amount to no more than a couple pages, but proved fruitful, as the psychological research of wisdom began with a young researcher's questioning his theory of psychosocial development. Erikson had claimed (25) that wisdom is the virtue of the eighth and final developmental task: the acceptance of all one's different qualities and choices, and all the events of life, maintaining unattached concern for the future. The young researcher, Vivian Clayton, had wondered aloud in an earlier paper (23, p. 120), "Realistically speaking, however, is the eighth stage ever attained? Are there any wise elderly men?" She maintained that Erikson's model was good in theory but not reality, and with pioneer geropsychologist James Birren, published the first empirical study of wisdom (24) in which 83 people of varying ages, and higher than average level of education, were given a list of fifteen words set in all possible combinations of pairs (121 pairs). Among the fifteen was the word "wise". Participants rated all pairs on their similarity. With increasing age, respondents associated the terms "aged" and "experienced" less closely with "wise," but associated "understanding" and "empathetic" more closely to "wise."

## **II. The Nature of Wisdom**

To understand the nature of wisdom as psychology has described it, it is necessary to understand modern scientific thought in general. As contemporary psychology is quite committed to the physicalist scientific perspective (32, 61), it is resistant to admitting wisdom of any sort, and if psychology does admit wisdom at all, it is practical wisdom, *prudentia*, with which it is most comfortable (see below for details). Wisdom itself, *sapientia*, wisdom *simpliciter*, appears to be invisible to many wisdom researchers. While all generalizations are inexact, in the standard scientific perspective, the world simply is. For the purposes of science, the world has no intrinsic value, and extrinsic value is subjective and in pluralistic societies negotiable. The currently dominant model of science avoids values. It restricts itself to that which can be perceived by the senses. It is hostile to metaphysics and dismisses claims to knowledge of ultimate reality. Traditional wisdom is in many ways a polar opposite to this perspective. This creates a situation in which proponents of this view are *ipso facto* not heard seriously. Respectful references to the Buddha, Lao-tse, Jesus, and the like are made, but there is no awareness of the wisdom tradition within the separate religious traditions. It is not tried and found wanting, it is simply not recognized.

Scientific orthodoxy dominates in psychological study of wisdom. It is the view followed by the four main measures of wisdom: the BWP, the 3D-WS, the SAWS, and the Wisdom Development Scale, although Ardel (11) has followed initial screening by means of the 3D-WS with qualitative interviews that have added valuable testimony regarding the experience of wisdom.

Two recent reviews describe the concepts of wisdom dominating in the research. Shih-ying Yang (66) says that most definitions of wisdom can be categorized in one of four ways. As (1) a composite of personality characteristics or competences, (2) positive results of human development, (3) a collective system of practical knowledge, and (4) a process that emerges in real-life contexts (p. 62). Ursula Staudinger (48) distinguishes two main divisions of the research: personal and general wisdom. The former relates to insight regarding one's own life, and research into personality and its development. General wisdom refers to knowledge about life from the point of view of an observer of life, rather than that of a participant. This includes conceptualizations of wisdom as neo-Piagetian postformal thought, Sternberg's balance theory of wisdom, and the BWP.

Brugman (22) discerns two main approaches to conceptualizing wisdom in psychology: pragmatic and epistemic. In pragmatic theories wisdom is the instrument to be used for living a good life, with respect to oneself and to others. Epistemic theories highlight the limitations of human endeavors, especially with respect to knowing reality. They put emphasis on our powerlessness and on restrictions in our capacity to act on reality (p. 448). What Brugman does not include in wisdom is the positive knowledge epistemic wisdom was traditionally said to include: the intuitive knowing of ultimate reality.

The foregoing descriptions of wisdom give a fair notion of psychology's orientation toward that "ultimate possible achievement of a normal person's growth" (46, p. 245). In fact, throughout history, wisdom has been understood as transcendent wisdom. The distinction between practical wisdom and transcendent wisdom was made by Aristotle (as *phronesis* and *sophia*, 14, Book VI). Although transcendent wisdom takes different forms, it always involves recognition of reality that goes beyond conventional, or social, consensus, material reality. These two forms of wisdom, practical and contemplative, are so distinct as not to be a single thing; the difference between them should be clearly understood. Unfortunately, an understanding of this difference is not shown by any of the psychological researchers. None demonstrates comprehension of traditional wisdom (a clear depiction of which is contained in 44).

In traditional teachings, transcendent wisdom (*sophia*) is primarily self-knowledge, meaning (with variations in emphasis in particular traditions) the existential insight that the human is placed in an ordered universe that has a goal, and that the purpose of human existence is to become aware of this design and conform oneself to it. This means, in almost all traditional teaching, and in strains within all major religions as well as Western philosophy, one's fundamental identity is not constricted to the individual organism. At the least, the organism, the individual ego-personality-self is constrained within a system of "act-consequence" (63) as part of the cosmic plan.

In traditional wisdom this knowledge is gained by means of contemplation, development of a mental faculty called *nous* (*νοῦς*, Greek) or *intellectus* (Latin). Through exercise of this contemplative activity a person becomes aware of the divine pattern. "As sight is in the body, so is *nous* in the soul" (*ὡς γὰρ ἐν σώματι ὄψις, ἐν ψυχῇ νοῦς*, 14, Book I.vi. 1096b29). The goal is to conform oneself to the ultimate pattern, that is, the ultimate identity. This is the ultimate possible achievement of human existence. On the other hand, practical wisdom (*φρόνησις*, *phronesis*) is concerned with successful functioning in the social world. It is this kind of wisdom that academic psychology recognizes and studies, with some ineluctable exceptions.

Modern empiricism, beginning more or less with David Hume, rejected the mental faculty of intuitive knowing. It confined reason to discursive reason, that is, reasoning in

words and concepts, for the purposes of attaining goals that the individual autonomously chooses in a world that serves solely as a resource for humans. This basic practical/ contemplative distinction, and the corresponding disagreements, often bitter, is also seen in defenses/criticisms of capitalism and the technological society, Lockean doctrines of democracy emphasizing rights over responsibilities, the distinction between the religious and the secular, modern empirical science, and the transformation from the Medieval to the Modern Period in the West. In psychology, the distinction is reflected in H. R. Moody's (43) concepts of successful aging and conscious aging. Thoreau's observation of "improved means to unimproved ends" (58) is one of the more incisive and pithy critiques of this practical, modern perspective. It would be unrealistic to expect that wisdom would avoid such discussion—to the extent that it has not been forgotten altogether.

However, while peripheral, transcendent wisdom has been an ongoing topic in the psychological literature on wisdom, at least since 1980. Clayton & Birren (24) wrote that wisdom reflects the ultimate nature of reality and humans' relation to it, including a figure-ground shift of identity from individual to universal. In 1991, just one year after the BWP's first empirical study of wisdom based on a theory of wisdom appeared, Eugene Thomas (57) presented a qualitative study of wisdom among "three religious renunciates". There were two more qualitative studies of transcendent wisdom in the 1990s, one with Buddhist monks, and one with Iranian Sufi emigrés in Sweden. Self-transcendence was first discussed by Wink & Helson (65), and in a qualitative study by Ahmadi (2). In the latter, interview responses from Islamic Sufis were compared with Lars Tornstam's model of gerotranscendence. Tornstam wrote (59, pp. 203-4), and was to repeat, "As in Jung's (1930) theory of the individuation process, gero-transcendence is regarded as the final stage in a natural process toward maturation and wisdom."

In 2003, transcendent wisdom in the form of gerotranscendence received its first statistical test (60). Le & Levenson's (38) "Adult Self-Transcendence Inventory" soon followed. Ardelt (12, p. 222) writes that "A person in search of wisdom will eventually come to the realization that what is conventionally called the 'self' the 'I', or the 'ego' is an illusion." It is worth pointing out that there is no sense in which Ardelt's interviewees in this study expressed any sense of oneness with the divine characteristic of traditional wisdom.

### ***The Research***

In the following section the research of the two major models of wisdom—that is, the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm (or Project: BWP), and Monika Ardelt's 3-dimensional model of wisdom. Research focusing on measuring wisdom, on transcendent wisdom, qualitative studies and applied wisdom will be described.

### **The Berlin Wisdom Paradigm**

The Berlin Wisdom Project or Paradigm (BWP), was the first psychological theory of wisdom to be operationalized, and to date it is the one most researched: sixteen studies from this group have appeared. Baltes and Jacqui Smith (18, p. 87) begin their article:

The conceptual focus of our approach is to conceive of wisdom as an expert knowledge system (expertise). Specifically, we view wisdom as a highly developed body of factual and procedural knowledge and judgment dealing with what we call the "fundamental pragmatics of life." The fundamental pragmatics of life concern important but uncertain matters of life. Specifically, they involve know-

ledge and judgment about the course, variations, conditions, conduct, and meaning of life.

Their five wisdom-related criteria are reported in detail in (53), and in many of the writings from the BWP: 1) Rich factual knowledge about the fundamental pragmatics of life; 2) Rich procedural knowledge about dealing with the fundamental pragmatics of life; 3) Life-Span Contextualism: Understanding of Life Contexts and Their Temporal (Developmental) Relations; 4) Value-Relativism: Knowledge About the Differences in Values and Life Goals; 5) Uncertainty: Knowledge About the Relative Uncertainty of Life and its Management. Regarding the criterion Value-Relativism, the authors write that “there may well be a restricted number of universal values, rendering total relativism unacceptable” (53, p. 24)

The BWP assesses the wisdom, or “wisdom-related performance” of participants by presenting them with hypothetical situations regarding difficult life situations in areas of life planning, life management, and life review, and having them respond to the question of what should the person, or *a* person, do or consider in the situation? What further information is needed? For example, one question in life managing is “A 14-year-old girl absolutely wants to move out of her family home immediately.” Responses are recorded and transcribed, and scored by trained judges according to the five criteria mentioned above.

The results of the sixteen studies of the Berlin wisdom researchers indicate what the practical wisdom approach has found, and the sort of results it can yield, given its empiricist limits. They have found that wisdom scores are higher if the hypothetical person whose difficulty is being considered is of a close age to the one considering it. Clinical psychologists scored higher than professionals who had similar education but were not employed in counseling. People nominated as wise performed equally well as clinical psychologists. The greatest predictive factor for wisdom-related scores was profession, with personality characteristics somewhat less predictive, and intelligence less still. Scores remain constant from about ages 25 to 80, although the responses of elderly respondents are proportionally over-represented among those rated highest in wisdom.

Staudinger, Lopez, & Baltes (51) found that intelligence, personality traits, and the intelligence-personality interface (i.e., creativity and cognitive styles as measured by Sternberg’s thinking styles model) were all significantly correlated with wisdom-related scores. In the personality domain, openness to experience and psychological-mindedness emerged as the strongest predictors of wisdom-related performance. Psychological-mindedness is a concept introduced in the latter half of the twentieth-century, referring to the use of cognitive and emotional processes for evaluating subjective experience in pursuit of knowledge of self and others.

Scores correlated positively with affective involvement; that is, with concern for others as well as self, and a cooperative conflict resolving style (34). Staudinger & Pasupathi (52) found that the abilities in adolescence that correlate with higher scores are crystallized intelligence and openness to experience.

Mickler & Staudinger (41) tested participants regarding wisdom scores for situations in their own lives rather than in hypothetical situations. Personal maturity and “a medium amount of reported life events” (p. 795) correlated most strongly with higher scores for personal wisdom, whereas adjustment and crystallized intelligence were the strongest correlates for general wisdom.

Several studies have explored ways to increase wisdom scores. Staudinger & Baltes (49) demonstrated that the quality of wisdom responses in regard to wisdom is signifi-

cantly improved if a person is given the opportunity to discuss the situation with another (even if only in imagination), and has time to think over the situation. It appears that scores can be improved by mentally envisioning different cultures (21). Glück & Baltes (26) found that a prompt to respond wisely was effective for persons high in mental and experiential resources, but had a negative impact for those without these resources.

### **Ardelt**

Next to the members of the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm, Monika Ardelt has been the most productive researcher on wisdom (author or co-author of 12 published studies and several theory-oriented articles), and has used a variety of approaches for studying it. In contrast with the BWP, she holds that wisdom exists only in individuals, and that “wisdom should be measured by assessing the wisdom of people rather than the ‘wisdom’ of their knowledge” (10, p. 263).

As was the case with Baltes, Ardelt’s interest was primarily well-being in later years. Her first three studies were interpretations of data from an earlier longitudinal study. She found that “Wisdom’ is clearly the most powerful predictor of life satisfaction in old age for women in the sample” (6, p. P22), and it is highly and positively related to the life satisfaction of both men and women, regardless of their objective conditions. It appears that wise elders were able to mature psychologically through the experience of a severe economic crisis while those who faced the same challenge but scored low on wisdom in old age did not (7).

In 2003, Ardelt (9) introduced a self-administered assessment of wisdom, the 3-Dimensional Wisdom Scale, or 3D-WS. This is a Likert-type questionnaire, i.e., responses were made on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 = strongly agree, to 5 = strongly disagree) She proposed that the three components: cognitive, affective, and reflective are both necessary and sufficient “for a person to be called wise” (9, p. 314). The scale for wisdom was joined with other assessments to measure interviewees’ mastery (internal sense of control), general sense of well-being, purpose in life, subjective health, depression, feelings of economic pressure, attitude towards death, financial status and social desirability. The study concludes, “The analyses show that the 3D-WS is a reliable and valid instrument and a promising scale to assess respondents’ indicators of the latent variable wisdom in large standardized samples of older populations if the latent variable wisdom is defined and operationalized as a combination of cognitive, reflective, and affective personality characteristics” (9, p. 311). She notes that “The present study is just the first step in the construction of a valid and reliable standardized self-administered wisdom scale” (p. 314).

In Ardelt (11), to test the content validity of the 3D-WS, participants with high, low, and medium scores on the 3D-WS were interviewed on the most pleasant and unpleasant events in their lives. The interviews of three persons who scored highly on both interview ratings and the 3D-WS were compared with those of three persons who scored low on both. The three who scored/were rated as relatively high on wisdom were more reflective and used more active coping strategies that can be summarized as mental distancing, active coping (e.g., reframing), and application of life lessons, than did the three elders who scored and were rated as relatively low on wisdom, who used passive coping and avoidance of reflection.

In Ardelt (12) the purpose of the study was to illustrate the process of self-development through a quieting of the ego. This was described as transcending the ego self and feeling “more part of the ocean instead of than an individual wave” (pp. 221-2). The analysis of semistructured interviews with three older adults who scored relatively high on all three dimensions of the Three-Dimensional Wisdom Scale

showed that through mindful reflection, self-examination, and a willingness to learn from experiences self-development ultimately leads to a quieting of the ego and to self-transcendence manifested in a concern for the well-being of all and an altruistic, all-encompassing love. . . . (12, p. 231)

In a study of people of different ages, Ardelt (13) found that older adults who scored in the highest quintile of the 3D-WS grew wiser with age, and that while college age students scored as high as older adults, college-educated older adults scored significantly higher than young people attending college.

### **Other measurements of wisdom**

Testing a 40-item Likert-type questionnaire, the “Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale” (SAWS), Jeffrey Webster (64) found that high scorers tended to be generative, and that wise persons are low in attachment avoidance, but not in attachment anxiety. Defining wisdom as consisting of the six factors of “Self-Knowledge, Understanding of Others, Judgment, Life Knowledge, Life Skills, and Willingness to Learn” (27, p. 292), Scott Brown created a 79-item Wisdom Development Scale, in the form of a Likert-type questionnaire. Self-knowledge refers to knowing one’s own personality and characteristics, not to perceiving one’s ultimate identity.

### **Transcendent wisdom**

Wink & Helson (65) tested both practical and transcendent wisdom, defining the latter as transcending ego boundaries. Their Ratings of Transcendent Wisdom correlated significantly with Flexibility, Psychological Mindedness, and Empathy from the California Psychological Inventory taken at age 21. Although the same data was used in Helson & Srivastava (29), very little was said in either report about the results of the test for transcendent wisdom. In their test of the Adult Self-Transcendence Inventory, Levenson et al. (39) refer to the similarity of their model to Tornstam’s (59) model of gerotranscendence and also to Habermas’ (28) emancipatory form of knowledge.

Thao N. Le’s three published studies involve transcendent wisdom, which she describes in 37, p. 385) as centering “on quieting of the mind so as to gain direct intuitive insight. Others have also considered transcendent wisdom as a developmental process involving self-knowledge, detachment, integration and ultimately self-transcendence”. Investigating whether immature love has consequences for self-transcendence as a dimension of wisdom, Le & Levenson (38) assessed cultural syndromes, immature love, and self-transcendence among groups of two different ethnicities. Hierarchical, or competitive, individualism was found to be negatively associated with self-transcendence, and in the second study, an egalitarian stance was significantly related to self-transcendence. Le (37) studied the relationship between life crises and wisdom among two groups: Vietnamese Americans and European Americans. Among both groups, transcendent wisdom was negatively related to “values related to security, tradition, and conformity” (36, p. 264). Life experiences that were challenging, in interaction with low endorsement of such conservation values (security, tradition, and conformity), predicted

transcendent wisdom for the European Americans but not the Vietnamese Americans. Le (36) found that in addition to belonging to a religious or spiritual community, having mystical experiences correlated positively with ratings for transcendent wisdom. Mysticism was not related to practical wisdom.

### **Qualitative studies**

To date, at least eleven qualitative studies on wisdom have been published. Qualitative studies have found that Hindu religious renunciates exhibited acceptance of their lives, and “each has about him a quality of positive acceptance that might be termed ‘spontaneous gaiety’” (57, p. 225). Further, they show a remarkable lack of fear of death, and each spend significant time in meditation.

Ahmadi (2) conducted single interviews with thirteen Iranian Sufis living in Sweden. She compared their responses to people rated high in gerotranscendence, to explore the effect of ways of thinking on development of wisdom and a cosmic perspective. She noted that “the ultimate goal of a Sufi is nothing but to pass from the state of ‘I-ness’ and reach the state of ‘one-ness’” (2, p. 197). The interviewees had experienced a shift of attitude from an egocentric to a cosmic perspective. They had reached a state of nonjudgmentalism, and refraining from giving advice. Further interviews with apparently the same participants (3) illustrated in more detail their development of a state of oneness from a prior sense of separateness. In a third study (4), the author found that among two of the groups, the Iranian and the Swedish participants, no difference in gerotranscendence appeared between secular or Sufi interviewees. Among the Turkish participants, only the religious group showed evidence of gerotranscendence. The author proposed that gerotranscendence is facilitated by the presence of mystical ideas in the participants’ customary ways of thinking; otherwise secular people, at any rate, will find gerotranscendence more difficult.

Levitt (40) interviewed 13 young male Tibetan Buddhist monks living in Dharamsala, India, regarding their views on wisdom and their experiences. She found that the meaning of wisdom for the monks is associated with the Buddhist understanding of reality, particularly understanding the unreality of the physical and social self, and the interconnectedness of all things, past and present. The goal is to develop wisdom, to realize the nature of reality and live accordingly, and all people are capable of this. Montgomery, Barber & McKee (42) interviewed people expected to have lives touched with wisdom, and identified five essential elements to wisdom: guidance, experience, moral principles, time (the time it takes to realize an action was wise), and compassionate relationships.

After interviews with sixty-six Taiwanese Chinese who had been nominated as exemplars of wisdom, Yang (66, p. 73) concludes that

wisdom could be defined as a special kind of real-life process which begins when a person in his or her mind integrates perspectives to form a vision, and ends only after the embodiment of the integrated vision brings forth beneficial effects to the acting self and others.

She found that wisdom came forth most naturally when a person was following a positive, self-defined vision of a good life, fulfilling a life mission. Their mode of relating was to be of service. Yang noted in (67) that wisdom incidents could by and large be divided into a) life decisions, b) reactions to negative events, and c) life management—the latter the most commonly discussed type by participants in this study. Nominees were

particularly adept at integration of disparate phenomena, with exceptional empathy and good will aimed toward achieving common good.

Kevin Rathunde (47) searched for “experiential wisdom” in the transcripts of interviews with three persons who maintained exceptionally active minds and “flow” throughout long and distinguished careers. He found that all three relied on an intuitive connection with their topic, and were skilful in giving this intuition time to come to fruition. All were highly disciplined to devote the necessary work to their problem. All recognized the value of moments of deep engagement. In an unpublished doctoral dissertation, Drew Krafcik (33), spoke with twenty exemplars of wisdom, nominated by “particularly qualified nominators” (p. ii), to find three main themes in their lives: intimate relationships with others and with themselves, spirituality, and their importance in others’ lives (pp. iii-iv).

### **Applied wisdom**

Applications of wisdom are eagerly sought in business, education, health care, and psychological counseling. The field is very fertile and the seed very young. Fourteen studies report research in areas of applied wisdom. For example, Jennings et al. (30) analyzed the responses of veterans to find that moderate levels of combat exposure and the perception of benefits from military experience were associated with greater wisdom in later life, using the ASTI to test for transcendent wisdom. Baumann & Linden (20) have published a short book on wisdom therapy.

### **Summary**

The Berlin Wisdom Paradigm has shown that wisdom can be investigated by empirical psychology. They, along with Robert J. Sternberg’s collection of articles (54), gave wisdom life in contemporary psychology. Yet, as Baltes pointed out, advising on difficult and uncertain situations is not all there is to wisdom, even if the BWP method does assess the wisdom it claims to.

Wisdom research is notable for its creative extension to a wide range of well-chosen questions. If the results to date are not earthshaking, this is to be expected. Many of the studies are tentative, as the authors point out. The first one or two tests of a model that a researcher carries out are not likely to get much further than a test of the model and whether it meets basic standards of validity.

In areas of applied wisdom, there is cause to hope that the quality of life will be improved by initiating a consciousness and discussion of wisdom. Wisdom has been variously conceptualized throughout the centuries, and at this stage of the research it seems reasonable to try many different approaches to investigating this ultimate human quality.

Wisdom is a rootless concept in psychology. None of the researchers shows more than passing knowledge of traditional wisdom, although Yang (66, p. 64) devotes almost a full column to a historical discussion of wisdom in China. It is as if wisdom was born in 1980, even if researchers make reference to Buddhism and Aristotle.

### **III. The Cultivation of Wisdom**

While research has not found a general increase in wisdom among older people, the idea that wisdom is a developmental possibility is an enduring theme in psychological writing. It appears as a consensus view among psychologist “experts” on wisdom in 2010

(31) Tornstam (59) also maintained that gerotranscendence could be facilitated or obstructed. And there are reasons to believe that older people have unique capabilities for wisdom (4).

To my knowledge, there have been no studies on effective cultivation of wisdom in empirical psychology, other than for some short-term strategies (e.g., 26). Using college students as the object of study, Bailey and Russell (15) tested the effect of cross-country travel, community service, and nightly reflection activities on wisdom scores, without clear results. Sternberg (55) proposed teaching for wisdom and provided “16 principles derived from the balance theory [i.e., his own model of wisdom] that form the core of how wisdom can be developed in the classroom” (p. 237). The focus is on effective ways of thinking, and on encouraging the expression of wisdom. The reading of literary classics would be used for reflecting on wise people, and students would discuss the lessons they learned and their personal applications. But no results of any empirical investigation of this program have been published.

The psychological literature does indicate that there are dispositions that can be encouraged and abilities that can be cultivated in order to facilitate the development of wisdom. Positive coping with difficulties and loss has been suggested as contributing to the development of wisdom (e.g., 1, 59, 7, 30, 36).

Having some evidence that for adolescents crystallized intelligence and openness to experience correlate with wisdom scores more than personality or personality-intelligence interface factors is of some guidance in figuring out how to nurture the wisdom of young people (52). If wisdom is indeed as Monika Ardelt describes it, an integration of cognition, reflection, and compassion, then the development of these characteristics can be given priority. Staudinger, Dörner, & Mickler (50, p. 201) describe high-scoring respondents to the BWP questions as

Open, growth-oriented, moral, creative, and do not show a conservative and judgmental thinking style. They are interested in understanding the psychological functioning of others, are socially competent, have developed some emotional serenity without losing interest in the world, and are oriented toward the well-being of others and society rather than toward their own pleasure.

At least some of these qualities, to some extent, can be nurtured.

Some wisdom theorists have taken the stance that wisdom can only be acquired by living through the experiences of one’s own life (8, 10, 35). Others have argued that indirect experiences, such as learning from mentors or studying the philosophical literature, also contribute to the development of wisdom (19). There appear to be factors such as certain personality dispositions, contexts and life-experiences that are conducive to wisdom when submitted to reflective thought. Trowbridge’s (62) program for cultivating wisdom as self-knowledge through contemplative quieting the mind, and reflecting on life situations, can be mentioned.

#### **IV. Implications**

Implications of the study of wisdom can be framed in cosmic Manichaeian terms, in which humans awake to realize they are participants in a primeval cosmic battle between light and darkness. Of most practical import is the challenge to the modern Enlightenment model of science, government, human nature and human ends. While both practical and transcendent goals seem to coexist in the eternal yin and yang, the modern period has been remarkably discriminatory against the metaphysical and the spiritual absolute. Par-

ticularly in the dominating behaviorist/logical positivist tradition of twentieth-century psychology, an exclusivist insistence on the sole authority of the most inhuman, physicalist perspective of reality, makes recognition of the world's wisdom tradition problematic, as it is primarily transcendent and teleological. Modern philosophy has also turned its back on traditional wisdom, and finding a clear, brief introduction to the topic requires a bit of work; (44) and (45) provide an easily accessible start.

On the other hand, there is the possibility that traditional teaching will be forgotten, appearing quaint to a people who are no longer capable of understanding or experiencing it. Psychologists interested in wisdom would undoubtedly benefit from accepting the teachings at face value, and can no doubt reconstruct it from canonical and post-canonical texts. Thus this greatly-praised quality can be understood as it was by people who perceived human nature to be rather different from contemporary models and who dedicated their considerable talents to remaking themselves according to that model. When psychologists write that "Religious traditions in Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Judaism stress religiosity or at least spirituality as a characteristic of wise people" (31, p. 676), they seem to be attempting to acknowledge this aspect of the tradition without being able to do justice to it. This quote displays a highly impoverished understanding of traditional wisdom, which is the experience of a different reality than that of conventional reality. A similar lack of understanding by another of the major researchers is conveyed by Staudinger's reference to "the historical wisdom literature (i.e., wisdom as sound advice)" (48, p. 111).

It is not possible for transcendent wisdom to be excluded from the psychological discussion, and once it is seriously considered, existence is seen in a different perspective, as a thoroughly interwoven context rather than a collection of units. This has implications for government, science, economics, and social structures, as well as for understanding the nature of humans and their goals. Traditional wisdom provides a clear model of priorities, and favors integration, holism, and organic hierarchy.

## **V. Summary & Conclusions**

In the past thirty years or so, the ambition of professional psychology has extended to topics such as wellness, well-being, happiness, resilience, spirituality, mysticism, prayer, near-death experiences, post-formal thought, stages of morality, social and emotional intelligence, and wisdom. Research in wisdom continues to be of growing interest. Research is lacking regarding some basic issues: for example, it has not been settled whether the wisdom of women is in general distinct from the wisdom of men. Certainly women have a different experience of relationship, and perhaps this predisposes them, more than men, to the contextual view of reality that characterises wisdom. Above all, there can be no understanding of wisdom until researchers are clear regarding the distinction between 1) a secular, *dianoetic*, *phronetic*, practical wisdom, and 2) a spiritual, *noetic*, *sophian*, transcendent model of wisdom. The latter cannot be omitted for two reasons: first, practical choices ultimately depend on a person's ultimate values, and that is the field of *sophia*, transcendent wisdom. And second, the testimony of the founders of civilizations (e.g., The Hindu rshis, Confucius and Lao-tze, Buddha, Christ, the prophet Muhammad, along with platonic and neoplatonic thought in Western philosophy and theology) regarding wisdom must be discerningly understood, and put to the test, rather than simply ignored. Alas, there is no History of Wisdom Literature, and there are few studies even of parts of this central spiritual-cultural heritage of the human species.

A common definition of wisdom across time and cultures is self-knowledge, particularly the submersion of the individual, ego-self in the larger context. Perhaps a model of practical wisdom that accepts the modern world's atomistic view of the individual can be established in the global pluralistic community—there is no doubt that increased practical wisdom would be a great boon to humanity and the biosphere. At this time, psychology is studying wisdom in both guises, practical and transcendent. Being a radically different perception of self and the world, it is hard for those who have not attained the transcendent perception to grasp it clearly or even to acknowledge it. This is particularly the case in a model of empiric research that restricts legitimate inquiry to quantifiable objects of the senses, and is blind to the light of *nous* or immaterial knowing.

The practical-transcendent wisdom split is very much in evidence in the psychological research, although there is not always a recognition that there is such a thing as transcendent wisdom. For example, except for reflections from Paul B. Baltes, the major group of researchers (the Berlin Wisdom Project) include no reference to traditional wisdom in their writings. The dominating orthodoxy in empiric social science has been dismissive of the “spiritual” or “metaphysical” since the Enlightenment. Psychology has been heir to this narrow empiricism to a marked extent, and this bias is evident in the psychological work on wisdom. Writing as an expert in the academic world dominated by this bias, Baltes (17, pp. 34-35) expressed doubt about psychology's ability to understand wisdom.

Particularly since World War II, psychology has become increasingly aimed at application relative to fundamental research (32, p. 30). Wisdom, as traditionally understood, is knowledge of the relative unreality of the sensory world, and that all forms are ultimately part of the whole. It is this whole that is our primary concern, and not the individual life, which is an unstable and ephemeral part of the greater, spiritual purpose. Yet by his or her will, the individual human has an essential role to play in fulfilling the greater, spiritual purpose. This metaphysical perspective of oneness is supported by some weighty scientific evidence in regard to interrelations, and is especially in tune with an era that is comfortable with environmentalism and systems analysis.

Additionally, no psychology that claims to study wisdom can ignore the great integrating ideas, the civilization-founding, spiritual-religious visions as set down in canonical and post-canonical literature. Essentially, these forces provided a coherent persuasive narrative, and experience, that brought about a new vision of the world. In this way the latent energies of the people they addressed were focused. Their cultures defined themselves in these founders' terms, and turned their energies to fulfilling the founders' visions. These visions spread easily and widely as they reverberated with a deep longing in people not finding a response elsewhere.

It is these founders who have created the world's wisdom tradition, the literature being the most enduring, and the most profound, of the planet's spiritual, intellectual, and artistic legacy. Surely this material needs to be sifted, assayed, and compared with wisdom material from different cultures and with the research models of wisdom and its results. The traditional teaching can be tested. It can serve as another mirror in which to view contemporary conceptions of wisdom.

## **VI. Further resources**

Two volumes edited by Robert J. Sternberg are essential reading for an understanding of wisdom in psychology:

- Sternberg, R. J., Ed. (1990). *Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins, and Development*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Sternberg, R. J., and Jordan, J. (Eds.). (2005). *A Handbook of Wisdom: Psychological Perspectives*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Works of significant value or influence in the psychological study of wisdom are marked with an asterisk (\*) following their entry in section VII. References.

There are three websites particularly rich in material on wisdom from a psychological perspective:

The Wisdom Page. Perhaps the most thorough site for information on wisdom.

[www.wisdompage.com](http://www.wisdompage.com)

The Defining Wisdom Project at the University of Chicago is also a key resource for information about psychological study of wisdom. Currently 23 projects are being funded by the Project. <http://wisdomresearch.org/>.

wisdomcenteredlife.org. Contains information on the psychological research into wisdom, along with philosophic/spiritual information.

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