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0521834015 - A Handbook of Wisdom: Psychological Perspectives

Edited by Robert J. Sternberg and Jennifer Jordan

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A Handbook of Wisdom

A topic ignored in mainstream scientific inquiry for decades, wisdom is beginning to return to the place of reverence that it held in ancient schools of intellectual study. *A Handbook of Wisdom* explores wisdom's promise for helping scholars and lay people to understand the apex of human thought and behavior. At a time when poor choices are being made by notably intelligent and powerful individuals, this book presents analysis and review on a form of reasoning and decision making that is not only productive and prudent but also serves a beneficial purpose for society.

A Handbook of Wisdom is a collection of chapters from some of the most prominent scholars in the field of wisdom research. Written from multiple perspectives, including psychology, philosophy, and religion, this book provides the reader with an in-depth understanding of wisdom's past, present, and possible future direction within literature, science, and society.

Robert J. Sternberg is IBM Professor of Psychology and Education at Yale and Director of the PACE Center at Yale. He was the 2003 President of the American Psychological Association. He is the author of more than 1,000 publications on topics related to cognition and intelligence. He has won numerous awards from professional associations and holds five honorary doctorates.

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Psychological Perspectives

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Foreword

Monika Ardelt

Back in 1990, when I was a graduate student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I decided to investigate predictors of life satisfaction in old age as my dissertation topic. I was not convinced by the traditional sociological explanation that well-being in old age depended mostly on the conditions older people encountered, such as physical health, finances, socioeconomic status, social involvement, and residential situation. I was searching for a concept that would represent the internal strength of older adults, which enabled some older people to be satisfied with their life despite adverse circumstances. After studying the literature on lifelong psychosocial growth, it occurred to me that the acquisition of wisdom might hold the key to subjective well-being in old age. Although I now had the concept, I had no idea how to define and much less how to measure wisdom.

I remember going to the library to pick up another book on the life course and aging when, right next to it, I saw the edited book by Sternberg (1990) on *Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins, and Development*. It felt like a book sent by heaven, and it became instantly my “bible” on wisdom. Up to this point I had no idea that wisdom was actually a topic of modern scientific inquiries and that respected researchers had tackled this somewhat esoteric topic. Not that it made my life much easier at first. As Birren and Svensson mention in this *Handbook*, the 13 chapters in the 1990 edited *Wisdom* book resulted in 13 different definitions of wisdom. However, the 1990 book introduced me to the contemporary wisdom research at that time and led me to the wisdom studies by Vivian Clayton (e.g., Clayton & Birren, 1980), whose model of wisdom as an integration of cognitive, reflective, and affective personality qualities

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has been the basis of my own wisdom research ever since (e.g., Ardelt, 2003).

The 1990 edited *Wisdom* book was not called a handbook, and rightly so. Contemporary empirical research on wisdom was in its infancy, and there just was not enough research to summarize and synthesize to justify the title of "Handbook." Yet, times have changed and the publication of the present *Handbook of Wisdom* was sorely needed. In fact, wisdom research has grown tremendously during the past 15 years. A search in PsycINFO (via EBSCO Host Research Databases) under the subject or key concept of "wisdom" yielded 12 entries of published articles, books, chapters, or dissertation abstracts before 1980, 10 entries between 1980 and 1984, 18 entries between 1985 and 1989, 40 entries between 1990 and 1994, 71 entries between 1995 and 1999, and 146 entries between 2000 and the present. Although such a search is not necessarily precise because not all relevant literature is listed and some listed items are unrelated to wisdom research, it still is an, albeit crude, indicator for the exponential progress in wisdom research. It appears that between 1980 and 2004, published entries on the subject or key concept of "wisdom" have doubled approximately every 5 years.

Whereas the 1990 edited *Wisdom* book was able to present almost the entirety of contemporary wisdom research, this is no longer possible in a single volume. Yet, the *Handbook of Wisdom* comes close to this task. It provides an extensive overview of the state of the art of modern inquiries and debates in the study of wisdom.

After more than a quarter century of ever-growing wisdom research, does a uniform definition of wisdom exist? The answer is still no, but we might be getting closer to a common and generally agreed-upon definition of wisdom, although measuring wisdom is a different matter. In fact, the authors in Part I of the *Handbook of Wisdom* – the largest section of the volume – address the questions of what wisdom is; how the answer varies across time, culture, and peoples; and why wisdom disappeared until recently from modern psychological and philosophical research. Birren and Svensson investigate how the concept of wisdom evolved historically, starting with the ancient Sumerians and ending with modern psychological sciences. Both Birren and Svensson and Takahashi and Overton unearth the roots of contemporary definitions of wisdom. Takahashi and Overton focus particularly on the difference between Western and Eastern wisdom traditions and introduce a culturally inclusive developmental model of wisdom that integrates the (Western) analytic mode with the (Eastern) synthetic mode of wisdom.

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Robinson and Osbeck examine wisdom from the perspective of classical Greek philosophy. How did the ancient Greeks fathom the acquisition of wisdom and why did they consider the possession of wisdom desirable? What is the distinction between Aristotle's concepts of practical and theoretical wisdom, and how is this distinction relevant for our contemporary lives? How is wisdom dependent on the perception of an objective truth?

Bluck and Glück explore people's implicit (or lay) theories of wisdom and ask how those theories are assessed, how they are used in everyday life, how they vary by culture and age, how they differ from explicit (or expert) theories of wisdom, and why it is necessary to distinguish between implicit and explicit wisdom theories. After reviewing five implicit wisdom theories, Bluck and Glück identify five aspects that they deem essential for wisdom: cognitive ability, insight, reflective attitude, concern for others, and real-world skills.

Explicit theories are the theories of an elite group of experts in the field. Yet, if wisdom is considered a highly advanced stage of human development that only very few individuals attain, wisdom experts might be extremely rare. Hence, one might argue that most wisdom theories are implicit theories since not many people, even among wisdom researchers, might be genuine experts in wisdom and an externally verifiable criterion of wisdom does not exist. That would mean that "explicit wisdom theories" are simply the implicit theories of wisdom researchers. Most explicit theories of wisdom researchers, however, show considerable overlap with implicit (lay) theories of wisdom.

Kunzmann and Baltes introduce the Berlin wisdom paradigm, an explicit theory of wisdom developed by Baltes and colleagues at the Max Planck Institute of Berlin and probably the most widely known contemporary model of the empirical study of wisdom to date. According to this paradigm, wisdom can be defined as expert knowledge in the meaning and conduct of life and in the fundamental pragmatics of life (i.e., life planning, life management, and life review). Wisdom-related knowledge is assessed according to five wisdom criteria: rich factual knowledge, rich procedural knowledge, life-span contextualism, value relativism, and uncertainty. Kunzmann and Baltes also give an overview of the antecedents, correlates, and consequences of wisdom-related knowledge.

The authors in Part II of the *Handbook* investigate the development of wisdom across the life span, using the Berlin wisdom paradigm. The questions that are addressed are (a) when and how does wisdom-related

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knowledge develop and (b) what is the relation between wisdom-related knowledge and age in adulthood? Pasupathi and Richardson report that wisdom-related knowledge increases during adolescence as the result of normative developmental changes in cognitive abilities, self/identity development, and personality development. In adulthood, however, Jordan does not find any evidence that wisdom-related knowledge changes with age. Rather, the relation between wisdom-related knowledge and age appears to support the crystallized model of wisdom in adulthood: Wisdom-related knowledge tends to neither increase nor decrease during the adulthood years but remains relatively stable.

Because this result is based on cross-sectional data alone and on the assessment of wisdom as general wisdom-related knowledge, the evidence is not conclusive at this point. On the one hand, it supports the generally held assumption that wisdom does not *automatically* increase with age. On the other hand, longitudinal studies have shown that wisdom tends to increase during adulthood for people who might be particularly interested and motivated to pursue the attainment of personal wisdom (Helson & Srivastava, 2002; Wink & Helson, 1997).

The authors in Part III of the *Handbook* analyze the connection between wisdom and the person. Staudinger, Dörner, and Mickler start with the question whether wisdom is (a) a personality characteristic, (b) the result or correlate of specific personality characteristics, or (c) both. To answer the question, Staudinger, Dörner, and Mickler differentiate between general and personal wisdom, based on their notion that one can have general wisdom without being wise (personal wisdom). General wisdom (i.e., insight into life in general) is considered a precursor for personal wisdom (i.e., insight into one's own life). Even though not all researchers might agree with this distinction (Ardelt, 2004; Moody, 1986), it is useful to highlight some of the existing differences in the theoretical and empirical approaches to the study of wisdom.

Whereas Staudinger, Dörner, and Mickler believe that general wisdom precedes personal wisdom, Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura argue that a wise person is an individual who has sought and found general wisdom. Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura are particularly interested in the emotions that accompany the pursuit and acquisition of wisdom-related knowledge. They conclude that both the pursuit and realization of wisdom bring forth positive emotions of joy and serenity through the transcendence of self-centeredness. This finding, however, is in direct contradiction to Staudinger, Dörner, and Mickler's viewpoint that personal wisdom does not result in subjective well-being

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because the development of wisdom has its costs. The question remains whether seeing reality more clearly is intrinsically rewarding and enjoyable or leads to the somber realization that life is suffering. A third possibility is that the mental clarity that accompanies wisdom illuminates not only the reality of human suffering but also the path to the cessation of suffering (e.g., Nanamoli, 2001).

Part IV deals with wisdom in society. Kupperman discusses the difference between knowing-how (e.g., to live) and knowing-that (e.g., knowledge and theories about the good life or the fundamental pragmatics of life). He argues that the “knowing-that” of wisdom by itself is meaningless unless it is applied in “knowing-how” to live a life that is good for oneself, good for others, and good for the larger society. In other words, wisdom is knowing how to live a good life, which must be exhibited in the life of a wise person. To develop wisdom, scholarly learning is less important than the realization of wisdom, which requires a personal transformation and good role models. Kupperman demonstrates that moral and ethical choices necessitate the knowing-how of wisdom.

Gardner, Solomon, and Marshall give an overview of their study on generative wisdom. They define generative wisdom as work (i.e., products, outcomes, and initiatives) by professionals that is intended to maximize the benefit and welfare of present and future generations. Gardner, Solomon, and Marshall present six case studies that illustrate the development of generative wisdom through three mental models of boundary crossing: (a) going beyond conventional knowledge or understanding, (b) seeing beyond the here and now, and (c) going beyond traditional professional boundaries.

Etheredge states that wisdom in public policy includes good judgment and commitment to the well-being of all present and future members of society and, in international politics, also to members of other nations. He defines wise policies by eight values for human betterment: power, enlightenment (education and personal growth), wealth, (physical and mental) well-being, skill, affection, rectitude, and respect. Theoretically, political wisdom should lead to a better world, but as Etheredge shows, it is not necessarily clear how political wisdom might be implemented and how a better world might be attained.

The *Handbook* concludes in Part V with a discussion of the absence of wisdom. Sternberg opens the last chapter with the observation that “smart people can be foolish.” Hence, intelligence and knowledge by themselves do not protect against foolishness. Sternberg introduces an

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imbalance theory of foolishness, which is a mirror image of his balance theory of wisdom (Sternberg, 1998). Five fallacies in thinking increase the likelihood of foolish behavior: unrealistic optimism, egocentrism, and illusions of omniscience, omnipotence, and invulnerability. Sternberg argues that the study of foolishness is important, because the costs of foolishness to the individual, others, and/or society can be great.

The different wisdom perspectives presented in the *Handbook of Wisdom* might remind the reader of Buddha's story of the blind men and the elephant. According to the story, a king gathered several men who were blind from birth around an elephant and told them to describe the animal to him. Each of the blind men gave a different definition of the elephant, depending on the part of the elephant he was investigating (Nanamoli, 2001). In some sense, this might still be the stage of current wisdom research. We concentrate on certain aspects of wisdom, depending on the focus of our research interests, but the whole meaning of wisdom escapes us. Interestingly, Takahashi and Overton report in the *Handbook* that people's implicit theories of wisdom tend to correspond to an ideal self, which varies in different cultures. Could it be that lay persons' and wisdom researchers' theories of wisdom represent an ideal and desired image of (their own) perfect development? Yet, if wisdom (the "elephant") exists and is not just in the head of the beholder, it is to our advantage to describe and investigate as many of its parts as possible until a coherent and complete picture of wisdom emerges. I believe that the *Handbook of Wisdom* does just that; it contributes essential pieces to the overall puzzle of wisdom.

April 2004

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