

Where Can Wisdom Be Found?

A Reply to the Commentaries by Baltes and Kunzmann, Sternberg, and Achenbaum

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I would like to thank Baltes and Kunzmann, Sternberg, and Achenbaum for their thoughtful commentary to my critical review of the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm, and I appreciate that Baltes and Kunzmann have written their reply *sine ira et studio*. To a large extent I agree with the commentators' perspectives, and I value particularly Achenbaum's 'vision of relations' between wisdom and the concepts of love and forgiveness. In fact, I consider compassionate and sympathetic love, which represents the affective dimension of my three-dimensional wisdom model, an integral component of wisdom, and I would predict that wisdom as a personality quality is positively related to forgiveness.

I also welcome the opportunity to clarify my arguments further and to correct some misunderstandings. I will focus, first, on the difference between wisdom as an expert knowledge system and wisdom as a personality quality and, second, on the measurement of wisdom.

Wisdom as an Expert Knowledge System vs. Wisdom as an Integration of Cognitive, Reflective, and Affective Personality Characteristics

To decide whether wisdom is expert knowledge or a personality quality we have to answer two questions: (1) How do we determine what wisdom is?, and (2) Where do we find wisdom?

With regard to the first question, Baltes and Kunzmann misinterpret my insistence on studying people to mean that I advocate the study of wise persons to find out what wisdom entails. This is not correct. I propose to study people *not* to determine what wisdom is but to assess *how wise* they are. In fact, my wisdom model is as theoretical and 'utopian' as that of the Berlin group. Although my definition of wisdom derives from Clayton and Birren's [1980] empirical research on implicit theories of wisdom, the three-dimensional wisdom model that I developed is com-

patible with implicit as well as explicit wisdom theories, particularly from the Eastern wisdom traditions [Ardelt, 2003]. Whereas Western explicit theories of wisdom often focus more on knowledge and analytic ability, Eastern explicit wisdom theories tend to stress the importance of balancing the cognitive, reflective, and affective aspects of wisdom [Takahashi, 2000].

I do not advocate studying wise people to determine what wisdom is because model exemplars of perfect wisdom are hard to find, which Baltes, Kunzmann, and Sternberg confirm. Rather, as mentioned in the article, my definition of wisdom as an integration of cognitive, reflective, and affective personality characteristics represents an *ideal type* in Max Weber's [1980] sense, what Baltes and Kunzmann call 'utopia.' An ideal type defines in a pure 'ideal' form a theoretical concept, which then can be compared to concrete empirical exemplars of this concept. The ideal type of a wise person was constructed from both implicit and explicit theories of wisdom, *not* from the study of wise persons. Admittedly, very few people, even among those who are generally considered wise, might measure up to this ideal type. Sternberg mentions Jesus, I would add Buddha, and Baltes and Kunzmann might nominate neither.

Baltes and Kunzmann are correct that an average description of even an elite group of 'wise' individuals would necessarily dilute the concept of wisdom through the inclusion of human imperfections. This might also explain the phenomenon mentioned by Sternberg in his commentary that some people are wiser in one area of their life (e.g., at work) than in other areas (e.g., in their personal life). The fact that 'no one is wise all the time' (Sternberg, commentary) does not discredit the ideal type of a wise person but only confirms that most people have flaws. After all, we are 'only human,' which explains why perfect wisdom is usually only attributed to the divine, as Baltes and Kunzmann note. However, after theoretically agreeing what the ideal type of a wise person is, it becomes possible to assess how close people come to this ideal state.¹

After we have theoretically defined what wisdom is, the question arises where wisdom can be found. Baltes and colleagues suggest '... that wisdom is found in its higher forms in written materials such as the Holy Bible or legal texts' and '... that wisdom is not necessarily a property of individuals' [Kunzmann & Baltes, 2003, p. 334] because '... individuals by themselves are only "weak" carriers of wisdom' [Baltes & Staudinger, 2000, p. 130]. Achenbaum proposes that wisdom can be found both in the literature and in people.

As mentioned in the article, I suggest that wisdom-related knowledge has to be *realized* by an individual through a reflection on personal experiences to be called wisdom and that the wisdom-related knowledge that is written down in texts remains theoretical or intellectual knowledge until a person re-transforms it into wisdom. From this perspective, wisdom is a characteristic of people and not of texts.

Let us assume, for example, that all the wisdom-related knowledge in the world had been written down in 'The Complete Book of Wisdom,' and every per-

¹ The same is true for intelligence. Very few people are completely intelligent, and most are more intelligent in one area of their life than in other areas. Yet, after theoretically defining what the ideal type of perfect intelligence is, we can assess how close people come to this ideal type.

son in the world would be required to memorize its content. Would this memorization alone make the world a better place? Would people who memorized the book automatically achieve ‘excellence in mind and virtue’ as well as ‘excellence in the conduct and meaning of life’ and start to live a life that is good for themselves, good for others, and good for society at large? Knowledge that is relevant to wisdom (but not wisdom per se) can indeed be found in written materials, but I propose that this knowledge does not have the power to initiate positive change in people and in the world unless it makes people wiser. If the knowledge is not retransformed into wisdom but remains intellectual/theoretical knowledge, people might, for example, quote Bible verses to justify deeds that are harmful to others and do not benefit society as a whole.

To summarize, the three-dimensional wisdom model that I introduced in the article was not derived from the empirical study of wise people. Instead, the model is as much a theoretical construct as the Berlin group’s model, with the exception that it combines both implicit and explicit theories of wisdom and that it focuses on the ideal type of a *wise person* rather than the ideal type of *wisdom-related knowledge*.

The Measurement of Wisdom

If wisdom were equivalent to expert knowledge in the fundamental pragmatics of life that is transmitted from one generation to the next through written texts and proverbs as a property of the collective [Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Kunzmann & Baltes, 2003], it would make sense to give people hypothetical life planning, life review, or life management problems to find out how much of this expert knowledge they have learned and can reproduce. However, if wisdom is considered to be a property of the individual, it can only be measured by assessing how wise a person is, as I do in my empirical wisdom research [Ardelt, 1997, 2000, 2003], and not by determining how much a person knows. Moreover, the maximum-performance approach of hypothetical scenarios is not appropriate in the case of wisdom because, unlike abstract intelligence, the concrete expression of wisdom is context-dependent, as Sternberg [1998] has emphasized. This means that wise advice always depends on the concrete situation and on the specific people involved in the problem. Sternberg suggests in his commentary that ‘hypothetical scenarios can be useful, because sometimes one is called upon to judge wisely in giving advice to others on problems they face.’ Yet, wise advice to others usually is not given on the basis of general hypothetical scenarios. On the contrary, the more the advice-giver knows about the situation and the people involved, the more specific and effective the advice can be. In fact, as I mention in the article, respondents might be asked about their own or a family member’s/friend’s life problem that they recently encountered and what they did to solve the problem to assess their level of wisdom. Giving wise advice to a family member or friend could count as one of the indicators of wisdom.

In sum, rather than measuring wisdom as an expert knowledge system that exists independently of people and can be more or less successfully accessed by individuals, I measure wisdom by how close people come to the theoretically constructed ideal type of a wise person [Ardelt, 1997, 2000, 2003].

Conclusion

Taranto [1989, p. 2] wrote fifteen years earlier that ‘... wisdom as a concept remains wonderful and wondrous but not very clear.’ This statement is still true for the overall field of wisdom research, and I am convinced that the discussions about the nature and measurement of wisdom will continue into the future. As Sternberg states, wisdom is an important area of study, and I hope that the present dialogue might intrigue other researchers to enter this exciting field.

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