

Making Things Better and Learning a Lesson: Experiencing Wisdom Across the Lifespan

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ABSTRACT Autobiographical memory narratives concerning times in which individuals said, thought, or did something wise were collected from adolescents and young and old adults. This “wisdom of experience” procedure is shown to be a valid means of studying experienced wisdom in everyday lives across the life span. Results show that all age groups use experienced wisdom to transform negative to positive life situations and are equally likely to link these experienced wisdom events to larger temporal life periods. Young and older adults also relate wisdom experiences to the life story by explaining how they are connected to later life consequences or to the direction that their life has taken. Unlike adolescents, older and, especially, young adults report having learned

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lessons about themselves or having gained a life philosophy from the wisdom-related event. Thus, the wisdom-of-experience procedure highlights both similarities and differences in the life span manifestation of experienced wisdom.

There is no disputing the sociocultural importance of the image of the wise man, for example, Gandhi, or the Buddha. In considering individual-level personal identity, however, it is important to ascertain whether the ordinary person also has some sense of self as capable of wise thought and action, and if so, how such a view of self is embedded in the life story (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 1990; Randall & Kenyon, 2001). Even if this view of self as wise does not appear as a trait-like semantic self-representation (Campbell et al., 1996), it may contribute to identity through autobiographical memory (Bluck & Levine, 1998; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2001). In the present study, therefore, our goal is to analyze descriptively individuals' narrative accounts of remembered wisdom in their own lives, which we have termed *experienced wisdom*. This term is used to connote that individuals are asked to define wisdom subjectively in their own lives and to recall events that they see as reflecting their own wisdom. By collecting narratives from adolescents, younger, and older adults, we also examine whether these accounts offer a picture of developmental differences or similarities.

Wisdom and Age

"Older and wiser" thrives as a cultural conception. Cognitive theories of aging suggest growth or at least stability in wisdom (Smith, Dixon, & Baltes, 1989; Staudinger, 1999). If wisdom is a matter of experience (Assmann, 1994; Clayton & Birren, 1980), however, it should not automatically come with age (Webster, 2002), but age may be one of several facilitative contexts for the development of wisdom (Staudinger, Lopez, & Baltes, 1997). The data on explicit wisdom (the quantitative measurement of how wise one is) suggest that age is not a satisfactory predictor. In a review of four studies, stability, but not growth across adulthood (ages 20 to 89 years), was found for level of wisdom-related knowledge (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). There is steep growth in wisdom-related knowledge, however, from adolescence into adulthood (Pasupathi, Staudinger, & Baltes, 2001).

The lack of quantitative age differences in explicit wisdom, however, does not imply that age is not an interesting parameter by which to examine experienced wisdom. We have pursued a life span developmental approach in our work because we feel that although the wisdom literature can benefit by continuing to embrace the search for age differences in quantified level of wisdom (e.g., also see Webster, 2002 for a self-assessed wisdom scale), it is equally valuable (a) to examine qualitative aspects of wisdom, and (b) to identify both similarities and differences in the nature of wisdom and wisdom-related events across age groups. Though the life span development approach is often tantamount to searching for age differences, life span theory suggests that the assessment of continuity across the life span, or similarities between age groups, is also important (Baltes, 1987). Thus, we developed a memory narrative procedure for qualitatively examining similarities and differences in experienced wisdom in the context of specific, experienced life events in adolescence and across adulthood. The data thus collected allowed us to examine age-related differences and similarities in wisdom-related events, and qualitative forms of experienced wisdom. Age-related hypotheses are introduced as relevant in each of the sections that follow. First, however, we define *wisdom* and introduce our new procedure for the study of experienced wisdom.

Defining Wisdom:

Validity of the Wisdom-of-Experience Procedure

Wisdom has been defined in multiple ways and measured by various criteria (e.g., Hershey & Farrell, 1997; Smith et al., 1989; Sternberg, 1998). The definition of wisdom that we employ is based on this past literature, which, in convergence, suggests that wisdom is an adaptive form of life judgment (Kramer, 2000) that involves not what but how one thinks. It is a combination of experiential knowledge, cognition, affect, and action that sometimes occurs in social context (e.g., Ardelt, 1997; Clayton & Birren, 1980; Labouvie-Vief, 1990; Sternberg, 1998). Wisdom is defined as a personal resource that is used to negotiate fundamental life changes and challenges and is often directed toward the goals of living a good life or striving for the common good (Baltes & Staudinger 2000; Kekes, 1983). The literature shows agreement concerning these features of a basic definition of wisdom.

The characteristics of wisdom just described make the wisdom-of-experience procedure an ideal method for examining wisdom: cognitive, affective, social, experiential and behavioral components play interactive roles in autobiographical narratives. The idea that anyone can be wise (Randall & Kenyon, 2000), given the right knowledge, or using knowledge in the correct way (McKee & Barber, 1999), or through the right person–environment fit (Sternberg, 1998, 2000), suggests that individuals should (as we ask them to in this approach) be able to remember and recount at least one life situation in which they feel they acted wisely. Similarly, we all have life expertise (e.g., Baltes, Glück, & Kunzmann, 2002; Baltes & Smith, 1990) in the parameters and experiences of our own lives, and thus we are all well suited to nominate events from our own lives that we consider wise. In short, the wisdom-of-experience procedure is grounded in past conceptions of wisdom; the collection of autobiographical narratives and their qualitative analysis seems a dynamic new way to operationalize this old construct.

One issue that arises as a result of this operationalization, however, is that we do not define explicit criteria for wisdom and then examine whether individuals measure up to those criteria. Due to our interest in how wisdom is experienced by individuals and the meaning making that comes from adaptively negotiating life challenges, we allow individuals' subjective definition of wisdom (i.e., use of their implicit theory of wisdom) to be their guide in nominating and describing a wise event from their own life. Of course, some readers may wish to argue that what these individuals report to us is not actually wise by some externally defined criteria (though who is able to unwaveringly identify universal, external criteria is an open question in our view). As our interest is in individuals' meaning making from their own subjective experience, however, it is only fitting that they (not we or other "experts") define what is wise and what is not. This subjectively defined, or implicit, wisdom is philosophically parsimonious with our study aims. Also, as it happens, the differences between lay persons' and experts' definitions of wisdom (as described below) vary little, making the issue rather moot.

Since this is a new procedure, however, and some readers will have lingering concerns about allowing participants to subjectively define wisdom, we delineate some external criteria from the wisdom literature by which to validate the use of the autobiographical

approach to study wisdom. First, participants should be able to list one or more wisdom-related situations from their lives (i.e., such events are accessible in memory) and have more than a few words to say about such wisdom-related events (i.e., be able to produce a narrative). Second, if our procedure indeed assesses wisdom, the large majority of remembered events should not be trivial, but should be related to important life situations, that is, to what has been termed the “fundamental pragmatics of life” (e.g., Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). Finally, people should recall types of situations (e.g., making life decisions) that are consistent with other models of wisdom (e.g., Smith & Baltes, 1990). Beyond validating the use of this narrative procedure in which wisdom is subjectively defined, the study aimed to examine the role that experienced wisdom plays in resolving life situations (“making things better”), the relation of the experienced wisdom event to other events in the life story, and the lessons that individuals learn about themselves and about life from such experiences.

Making Things Better: The Eliciting Event and Its Outcome

Based on the literature, our hypothesis is that wisdom is specifically applied as a reaction to problematic events or situations for which individuals are striving to produce novel solutions (McKee & Barber, 1999; Sternberg, 1998), or cope successfully under uncertainty (Brugman, 2000). Thus, we expected that if, as part of their narrative, people mentioned the event or situation that elicited their wise thoughts and actions, it would usually be a negative or challenging one. Additionally, viewing experienced wisdom as a resource that people can draw on to transform such life situations, we expected that the narratives should usually end in positive resolutions to negative life situations. This structure parallels what have been called “redemption sequences” in the life story (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). This negative to positive transformation should be a general structure of wisdom-related events that holds for people of all ages. That is, we saw no reason to hypothesize that older adults might use this resource, but adolescents would not. To the extent that each has wisdom, we suggested that they would endeavor to use it as a resource to resolve negative situations positively in their lives.

Due to its transforming property, we view wisdom as a special coping strategy in which the individual brings together whatever intellectual and affective strengths (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000) are available to them to resolve a unique problem. Retrospectively, such remembered wisdom experiences are important to the life story for two reasons. First, wisdom may be employed in dealing with significant experiences that act as turning points in a life. Second, these experiences are ones in which the self is highly efficacious (Bandura, 1977) in dealing with change or uncertainty, so recalling them and integrating them in the life story may be self-enhancing (Wilson & Ross, 2001). This second point, how memories of experienced wisdom fit into the life story, was our next area of interest. Wisdom-related events may not be isolated episodes: to what extent are these experienced wisdom episodes, in which the self is viewed as highly efficacious, connected to other life events or themes, and how might that vary by age?

Unifying Lives: Relation of Experienced Wisdom to the Life Story

Past research on wisdom has focused on the use of tacit knowledge for specific problem solving in various domains (Sternberg, 2000), or on hypothetical resolution of specific life scenarios (e.g., Smith & Baltes, 1990; Staudinger & Baltes, 1996). We expected that wisdom-related events assessed through the wisdom-of-experience procedure would frequently be more than just isolated episodes; they would be unified with other experiences in the person's life (McAdams, 1990) or be integrated within the whole life frame (Staudinger, 1999). Habermas & Bluck (2000) have discussed several types of coherence that bind together events in the life story (see also Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Baerger & McAdams, 1999). These include temporal and causal, or explanatory, coherence.

In terms of temporal coherence, we surmised that although experienced wisdom may sometimes relate to the handling of short-term, one-time events, it might also be used to achieve changes in difficult, long-term situations, and therefore not be connected only to specific autobiographical events but to more generic memories, that is, to events that recur or that exist over time in an individual's life (Bluck & Habermas, 2001; Brewer, 1986; Singer & Moffit, 1992).

In terms of causal or explanatory coherence, we examined the extent to which this experienced wisdom event was described as meaningfully related to later events or to the person's overall self-direction, or life story. Our expectation was that, unlike more trivial autobiographical events, this sort of event would probably be well linked to other parts of the person's life (Bluck & Habermas, 2001) through reasoning and narrative (Singer & Bluck, 2001). In short, we examined the relation of wisdom-related events to ongoing events and the life story through assessment of temporal and causal linkages within the narrative.

How might these forms of coherence that link wisdom-related events to the life story be likely to vary across different life phases? Both McAdams (1990) and Habermas and Bluck (2000) have provided detailed accounts of how coherence in the life story develops across adolescence due to both the development of cognitive tools across late childhood and adolescence, and the social imperatives of creating a life story as one enters adulthood. Thus, we expected differences between the adolescent and adult groups in the extent to which their experienced wisdom narrative was temporally and causally linked to other life events.

Discovering Aspects of Self and Life: Lessons Learned From the Event

We also considered how wisdom-related events may be carried forward in time, and thereby act as directives for current or future behavior (Pillemer, 1998), and whether this directive use is equally likely in individuals of different ages. When people face a challenge and deal with it wisely, they may not only integrate it into the life story, but may also extract a lesson (Pillemer, in press). We were interested in the extent to which individuals of different ages use remembered examples of their own virtue and efficacy to determine general guidelines about how to live, or to learn new things about themselves. Overall, we expected most participants of all ages to report learning a lesson from the wisdom-related event. We were, however, also interested in a more stringent test, that is, the extent to which that lesson would be generalized beyond the given event, to other events, to self-development, or to a life philosophy. Thus, while we expected similarities across age groups in the likelihood of reporting that a lesson had been learned, we also expected age

differences in the scope of that lesson. That is, we expected that adolescents might limit the scope of the lesson learned, focusing largely on the event at hand. Younger and older adults were expected to move beyond that, taking full benefit of their wisdom experience, and, as a result, to report learning a lesson that generalized further, to one's self or life.

In sum, the study examined the nature of wisdom-related events in the lives of ordinary people. It focused on validating the wisdom-of-experience procedure, mapping the eliciting events and outcomes of wisdom-related events, examining how the events were temporally and causally linked to the larger life story, and understanding what, if any, lessons were learned through experiencing one's self as wise. In terms of predictions concerning the role of age, we expected that all age groups would show the transformative ("making things better") pattern of experienced wisdom, but that in regard to temporal and causal coherence, as well as generalization of life lessons, the adolescents would differ from the two adult groups, who would show a greater likelihood of temporally and causally integrating the event into their life story and be more likely to learn a generalizable life lesson. Thus, while individuals of all ages may exhibit some form of experienced wisdom and use it to improve their lives, younger and older adults are more fully able to build on wisdom experiences by integrating them into a coherent life story and by learning lessons that can be applied in facing future challenges.

METHOD

Participants

The data were collected in Berlin, Germany, as part of a larger project (Glück & Baltes, 2002). Participants who were 15 to 20, 30 to 40, or 60 to 70 years old were recruited for the study through newspaper advertisements. Additional adolescents were contacted through flyers distributed at sports facilities. We obtained a sample that was balanced in professional status and gender; all participants were Caucasian Germans. Participants were paid DM 80 (about U.S. \$40) for participation. Only procedures and measures relevant to the present study are described here.

We began interviews with 92 participants. Two adolescents, three younger adults, and one older adult reported that they could not remember a wisdom-related event. The final sample included 86 participants:

28 adolescents, 27 younger adults, and 31 older adults. Of these, 44 were male and 42 were female; 42 were classified into the lower and 44 into the higher professional status categories which reflect the two German schooling pathways (one that leads to university and to professional or “white collar” careers and the other that leads to trade and technical or “blue collar” jobs). Gender and professional status were balanced within age groups.

Procedure

The data come from a semi-structured autobiographical interview performed by one of six trained interviewers. At the beginning of the wisdom-of-experience interview, the researcher informed participants that we would like to talk to them about their own lives (the measures collected for the larger project involved standard assessments with no autobiographical component). The participant was given a sheet with 15 numbered lines and asked to “write down as many situations as possible from your life in which you said, did, or thought something that was wise in some way.” Participants were given two minutes and wrote key words for each situation. The interviewer emphasized that most people reported fewer than 15 situations, but that the participant should list as many situations as possible. The participant then selected the one situation in which he or she had been wisest. This procedure was used to allow the person to review his or her life’s events more carefully, as opposed to being interviewed about the first wisdom-related event that came to mind.

With consent, the interviewer switched on a tape recorder saying “Now let’s talk about this situation. What was it about, and what did you consider and do?” The participant spoke for as long as he or she wanted. If participants said little or nothing, the interviewer probed by asking, “What were your considerations in this situation?” Unless participants explicitly said what had been wise, the interviewer asked, “In what way would you say you were wise?” Next, the interviewer asked whether the participant had learned a lesson from the event, and if yes, what. Some participants were quite emotional in retelling their wisdom memories. The interviewer gave the participant the opportunity to talk informally about the event when the session was over. Note that this was an open-ended interview. Thus the emergence of material in the narratives that was coded is not due to forced responses to individual questions but to characteristic ways in which individuals recall and retell autobiographical wisdom experiences.

Coded Variables

The 86 tape-recorded interviews were transcribed. Fifty additional interviews were collected and transcribed. Twenty of these 50 were used, in addition to theoretical considerations, in developing the categories of the coding scheme. The remaining 30 protocols were used to establish inter-rater reliability before coding the study protocols. The practice protocols were coded by the second author and two senior psychology students. Disagreements were used to further refine coding categories. All 50 protocols were then used to train two other senior students who served as final coders. When the 86 study protocols had been coded independently by both coders, disagreements were resolved by discussion. We only report variables for which the coders reached at least 80% agreement before discussing disagreements. Other variables not presented here included coded forms of experienced wisdom, age at wisdom-related event, and self-ratings of experienced wisdom (see Glück & Bluck, 2002).

The next section is structured in four parts. The first concerns the validity of our wisdom-of-experience interview. The second concerns the role of experienced wisdom in “making things better,” that is, transforming proximal aspects of a life situation. The third concerns the relation of the reported event to the participant’s life story. The fourth concerns learning a lesson about one’s self or life. Table 1 lists examples of all coded variables, including both Kappa coefficients and exact percent agreements as measures of inter-rater reliability.

Validity of the “Wisdom of Experience” Procedure

Number of situations listed and length of narrative. We counted the number of wisdom situations listed on the initial sheet in a 2-minute period. Events crossed out by the participants were not counted; events not readable because of bad handwriting were counted. The length of narrative variable was a simple word count of the number of words in each participant’s wisdom narrative.

Fundamentality of wisdom-related memories. We wanted to ensure that our wisdom-of-experience procedure produced memories that were not trivial or mundane. Theory suggests that wisdom is employed to deal with central and important life matters. The “fundamentality” variable assessed whether the elicited memories concerned the fundamental pragmatics of life (e.g., Baltes & Smith, 1990; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). We developed a list of situations that did or did not refer to fundamental life pragmatics while being sensitive to life stages. Coders evaluated whether or not each recalled situation was fundamental.

Type of situation reported. The events nominated by the participant for the interview were coded into three types of situations derived from the

data: life decisions, strategies of life management, and reactions to negative events, or coded as unclassifiable. *Life decisions* refers to decisions that influence one's future life. *Life management* is different in that it refers to a way of dealing with or managing longer-term situations or difficulties. *Reactions to negative events* refers to dealing with a negative event or situation.

Making Things Better: The Eliciting Event and Its Outcome

Both the event or situation that elicited the wise behavior and the outcome of the situation were coded as "positive," "negative," "both," or "neither." If the participant did not explicitly mention the valence of the outcome, "neither" was coded. If no eliciting event or outcome was mentioned, "no event" or "no outcome" was coded. The outcome was defined only as the reported consequences of the participant's behavior in the situation. For example, in one narrative a positive outcome was coded because a woman talked about how she was able to draw on her own strength in order to help her husband who had been in a serious accident. The fact that her husband recovered medically would not be coded as an outcome.

Unifying Lives: Relation of the Event to the Life Story

Time frame of the narrative. We used the time-frame categories developed by Singer & Moffit (1992) including (a) a single event, (b) a generic event: an event that encapsulates, or represents, repeated similar events, or (c) an extended event that spans a long period of time. Coders chose the one code that best described the situation or event. If two codes applied, they used the "higher" code. Participants had been asked to respond, based on a specific biographical event. Some participants, however, gave temporally extended narratives. If this occurred, interviewers were trained to ask politely that participants focus on a specific event. Therefore, extended events were rare in the final data.

Causal coherence in the narrative. Note that participants were not explicitly asked to relate the reported event to later events, or to life more generally. Thus, if they mentioned such relations, it was because they perceived the event as wise in the context of other events or their larger life story. Based on Habermas and Bluck's (2000) notion of causal coherence in the life story, participants were coded as (a) drawing no relations to other events, (b) relating the event to one or more specific events that happened later, or (c) relating the event to their life or self-direction. If participants showed types (b) and (c), the more encompassing level (c) was coded.

Discovering Aspects of Self and Life: Lessons Learned From the Event

Perception that a lesson was learned. Responses concerning learning a lesson were assigned “Yes” if participants stated they had learned a lesson, and “No” if they stated they had not. “Maybe” was coded if the participant showed uncertainty by making statements like “Yes, maybe, but...” or “No, except maybe....”

Type of lesson learned. Most participants said they had learned a lesson from the event. We were concerned that this might be due to demand characteristics. Although interviewers were carefully trained to ask the question in a nonsuggestive way, it was asked at the end of an in-depth interview focused on an important life situation. Participants may have felt a need to say they had learned something, and it is probably not difficult to generate spontaneously a superficial lesson if one feels pressure to produce one. Thus, to screen out superficial, glib, cliché lessons, we additionally coded what participants said about the lesson with respect to whether it indicated generalizing the lesson beyond the situation in which it was learned. First, we coded whether participants showed *no generalization*, for example, if they repeated what they had done in the situation and said they would do that again. These cases may imply a demand characteristic. Second, lessons could involve gaining *factual or procedural knowledge*, that is, knowledge about the world or about ways to deal with life. Third, lessons could involve discovering things that changed the participant as a person, or gave him or her a *new life philosophy*. Fourth, participants might say that there was a lesson, but that they had *learned that lesson before* the event. If more than one category applied, coders chose the code that described the participant’s response best.

RESULTS

The results are presented in the order followed in the Methods section (also see Table 1). We present results pertaining to the validity of the wisdom-of-experience procedure, then those that refer to the events that elicit experienced wisdom and to their outcomes, how the event sits in temporal and causal relation to the life story, and finally, if a lesson was learned from the event, and if so, its nature.

Chi-square tests against theoretical distributions are used to test questions concerning the study variables. Tests against a uniform distribution do not make sense in examining the validity criteria because for these indicators a uniform distribution is not theoretically justified. Therefore, for the validity variables only, the results

are presented descriptively. With the exceptions of causal coherence and likelihood of learning a lesson (discussed below), there were no age or gender differences in any of the reported variables.

Validity of the Wisdom-of-Experience Procedure

Number of situations listed and length of wisdom narrative. On average, participants listed 4.1 wisdom-related situations ($SD = 2.2$), with a minimum of one and a maximum of 13 situations. There was no effect of age group, $F(2, 83) = .08$, $MSE = .39$, $p = .93$, on the number of situations listed.

Participants were able to produce narratives of a reasonable length concerning their experienced wisdom. In terms of number of words spoken, experienced wisdom narratives had a $M = 983.1$ with $SD = 653.5$. There was a significant age difference in narrative length, $F(2, 75) = 6.03$, $MSE = 2, 278, 322$, $p < .01$. On average, adolescents produced 661.4 words ($SD = 367.0$), young adults, 1270.6 ($SD = 858.7$), and older adults, 1030.8 ($SD = 553.1$). Post-hoc Scheffé tests showed that only the difference between adolescents and young adults was significant ($p < .01$). Older adults were intermediate and did not differ significantly from the adolescents ($p = .09$) or the younger adults ($p = .38$).

Fundamentality of wisdom-related memories. The clear majority (89.5%) of remembered situations referred to “fundamental” life situations. Thus, the procedure elicits situations equivalent in importance to those discussed in the theoretical and explicit wisdom literature.

Types of situations. The large majority of the narratives were about life decisions (44.2%), reactions to negative events (25.6%), or life management (18.6%). The procedure elicits the types of situations that have been discussed in the theoretical literature as requiring wisdom (Smith & Baltes, 1990).

Making Things Better: The Eliciting Event and Its Outcome

Recall that we did not prompt individuals to define the *eliciting event or situation* and its outcome and to rate its valence. Instead, the elicitors and outcomes were integral parts of the open-ended narratives that individuals chose to tell us. In six narratives, no eliciting event was mentioned, and in 13 narratives the eliciting event was not described as either positive or negative. Of the remaining 67 narratives, 58 were about negative eliciting events or situations, eight

Table 1
Overview of Coded Variables

Variable	Codes	Examples
Fundamentality of Event/Situation Kappa = .71 % agreement = 92.4	fundamental not fundamental	deciding on a school or career giving advice about dealing with serious depression dealing with family conflicts deciding what type of pet to have planning a vacation giving advice about rental contracts
Type of Situation Reported Kappa = .80 % agreement = 86	life decisions strategy of life management reaction to a negative event	deciding to give up a dancing career dealing with depressive episodes dealing with spouse's car accident
Valence of Eliciting Event Kappa = .81 % agreement = 90.7	positive negative both positive and negative neither positive nor negative	finding out that someone is in love with one having a serious accident falling in love with someone when already married participant does not mention valence

Valence of the Outcome of the Event

Kappa = .62

% agreement = 82.6

positive
 negative
 both
 neither

constructively dealing with spouse's death
 marriage breaking up
 moving in with a new partner and having to leave the
 previous partner
 participant does not mention valence

Time Frame of The Narrative

Kappa = .82

% agreement = 91.9

single event
 generic event
 extended event

deciding between two jobs
 learning to live with one's depressive episodes
 participant describes entire life period

Causal Coherence in the Narrative

Kappa = .64

% agreement = 84.9

none
 specific events
 life in general

no mention of relation to any later events or life path
 "And one year later, he told me that my decision to
 just listen to him instead of blaming him was the right
 thing to do. He hasn't stolen anything since..."
 "That decision has made it easier for me with other
 things in life that are also important, to listen more to
 myself, to what I want, not what others do, or what
 you ought to do ..."

Subjective Perception of a Lesson

Kappa = .94

yes

"With this situation in my mother's life, I think I have
 learned something for myself about the human
 psyche."

Table 1 (cont.)

Variable	Codes	Examples
% agreement = 97.7	no maybe	<p>“No, people don’t learn from experience. I’d make the same mistake again.”</p> <p>“Well, I didn’t really learn something, but then, given that I was able to express the main point in two words...”</p>
Type of Lesson Learned Kappa = .72	no generalization	<p>“Yes, I’ve learned that in this case a rather drastic solution that you would not use normally was really the best one.”</p>
% agreement = 82.1	factual or procedural knowledge life philosophy lesson had been learned before	<p>“I have learned that you have no idea how much of the things that happened to you in your early childhood come back later because you didn’t get over them.”</p> <p>“Stay calm. That’s what I’ve learned and that helps me a lot now. Small or big things, no problem anymore. That has helped me a lot.”</p> <p>“That I learned something from that situation? I don’t think so, I think I would have acted the same way before.”</p>

Table 2
Cross-Tabulation of Eliciting Event and Outcome

		Outcome			
		Positive	Both	Negative	
Eliciting Event	Positive	1	0	0	1
	Both	5	2	0	7
	Negative	37	3	1	41
		43	5	1	49

mentioned both positive and negative aspects, and one had a positive event as elicitor. This distribution across the three categories is clearly not equal, $\chi^2(2, N = 67) = 86.54, p < .01$. Thus, of participants who included an eliciting event in their experienced wisdom narrative, most remembered negative situations that required wise responses. Positive situations are rarely viewed as requiring wisdom.

Outcome of the situation was not mentioned in 16 narratives, and in eight cases the outcome was not described in terms of its valence. Of the remaining 62 narratives, 55 had a positive outcome; in six cases the outcome had both positive and negative aspects, and one narrative had a negative outcome, $\chi^2(1, N = 62) = 86.16, p < .01$.

Table 2 gives a cross-tabulation of eliciting events and outcomes for those 49 situations in which both outcome and eliciting event could be coded as positive, negative, or both. As the table shows, the most typical pattern (37 of 49 cases) is that of a negative eliciting event and a positive outcome. The table as a whole is markedly asymmetrical; there is not a single case in which the outcome is more negative than the eliciting event. In 91.8% of the cases, the outcome is more positive than the eliciting event or situation. Four cases show no change between valence of eliciting event and outcome. In sum, the stories participants told of autobiographical wisdom-related events most often involved times in which they viewed their thoughts, feelings, and actions as having changed negative events or situations into more positive outcomes.

Unifying Lives: Relation of the Event to the Life Story

Time frame of the narrative. The majority, 67.4% of the participants, recalled a single event. Generic events were reported by

30.2%, and the remaining 2.3% (2 participants) talked about extended events. Thus, most participants reported one particular event from their lives. This is unsurprising because participants had been explicitly asked for single events. Given these instructions, however, it is remarkable that almost one third of the participants reported generic events, that is, more general situations that comprised several similar or repeated events. The narratives about generic events mostly concerned the participant's ability to deal with chronic problems or life situations.

We assessed the probability of obtaining such a high number of generic events, assuming that generic events should be mentioned about as rarely as extended events and assuming a rate of 5% for each of these "unexpected" time frames. The observed distribution is significantly different from the expected distribution, $\chi^2 (2, N = 86) = 115.60, p < .01$.

Causal coherence in the narrative. Thirty-five participants (40.7%) did not draw any causal relations between the event they reported and events that happened later. A slight, but not significant, $\chi^2 (1, N = 86) = 2.98, p = .08$, majority of participants embedded the event into the larger life context in their narratives although they were not explicitly asked to do so. Among those who did mention causal coherence, relations to specific later events were spontaneously mentioned by 27.9%, and relations to the protagonist's later life and self-direction in general were drawn by 31.4%. By age, however, we found a significant difference between those who did, and did not, create causal coherence, $\chi^2 (4, N = 86) = 15.89, p < .01$; 67.9% of the adolescents but only 33.3% of the younger adults and 22.6% of the older adults showed no causal coherence in their memory narratives. This suggests that adult participants quite often discussed wisdom-related events that were interconnected with, and influenced, the later course of their life or view of self.

Discovering Aspects of Self and Life: Lessons Learned From the Event

Subjective perception of a lesson learned. Of the 86 participants, 67 (77.9%) said that they had learned a lesson, 8 (9.3%) said that they had not learned a lesson, and 11 (12.8%) were coded as "maybe." Thus, the majority said they had learned something from the event. This implies that autobiographical wisdom-related events often

taught people a lesson about life. The problem with this interpretation, as mentioned above, is with the demand characteristics of the interview. To address this, we coded whether participants reported generalizing the lesson in some way by utilizing it beyond this one event. We reasoned that if a real lesson had been learned, it would be one that was not simply specific to the exact situation the participant had just recalled.

Types of lessons learned. Eight participants said they had not learned anything from the event. Of the remaining 78 (who had

Table 3
Examples of "Life Lessons" Learned

Well, I think I've learned to get along better with my parents. And if possible, not to let problems arise in the first place. I mean, everybody has problems with their parents, but after all I'm still living with them and there's always a way to compromise, I mean you don't have to let it escalate so that in the end it erupts. (Male, 19 years)

Yes, I've sworn to myself if I have a partner, I never want to have that typical roles thing. I don't want to find myself as a housewife. That's a terrible concept for me. I don't want to be forced into that cliché. (Female, 19 years)

[...] if somebody somehow has authority over you and tells you something, then I've learned not to follow and to believe that person blindly, but to use my own head and to ask, "Do I have to do this, or am I a free person who can do what she wants?" That's quite an important thing for me. (Female, 32 years)

I've also learned to live more in the here and now. Not to be wasteful, but to sometimes allow myself things that make life more pleasant – to be a little freer and not delay everything. You never know what the future holds. (Male, 30 years)

Yes, certainly, one learns that one is not the only person with rights. With any considerations or decisions one has to take into account, to what degree are you now affecting the interests of the other person? (Male, 70 years)

The moral of the story is, you have to believe in yourself, trust in yourself. And of course, try to do your job as well as possible, but be realistic. You need to have a healthy trust in yourself, but you must not overestimate yourself and say you can do something but then fail. [...] you must know your own limitations. That's my conclusion. (Male, 69 years)

responded yes or maybe to whether they had learned a lesson), 13 (16.7%) did not show any generalization; they only repeated again what happened at the event. Twenty-nine (37.2%) described how the event had taught them factual or procedural knowledge. Thirty-two (41.0%) said that the event had changed them as a person or had become a life philosophy. Table 3 gives some examples of adolescents,' young adults,' and older adults' lessons learned from the wisdom-related life event. Three participants (3.8%) said that they applied a lesson in the described event that they had learned in a previous life situation.

We divided participants into two groups. The 21 who did not seem to have learned a lesson (that is, those who said they had not learned a lesson plus those who showed no generalization) were contrasted with the 61 who showed some level of generalization. Statistically, those who learned a lesson were in the majority, $\chi^2 (1, N = 82) = 19.51, p < .01$. Cross-tabulating this grouping with age yielded a significant pattern, $\chi^2 (2, N = 82) = 7.69, p = .02$. Of the adolescents, 40.7% showed no indications of having learned a lesson, of the younger adults, only 7.7%, and of the older adults, 27.7%. Thus, younger adults were more likely to have learned a lesson and adolescents were less likely to have learned a lesson than would be expected based on the percentage for the whole sample. The percentage for the older adults corresponds to the expected frequency.

DISCUSSION

Under the assumption that almost everyone has the possibility of being wise at some time in his or her life, even if wisdom is not necessarily part of one's semantic self-representation, the study examined the nature of wisdom-related autobiographical memories in the lives of ordinary people. After validating the wisdom-of-experience procedure, we examined the events that elicit experienced wisdom in relation to the outcomes of those events. Next, wisdom events were assessed for their temporal and causal links to the larger life story, and the life lessons learned from such events were examined. Age differences and similarities across three age groups were noted, with particular emphasis on how adolescents might differ from younger and older adults.

The Validity of the Wisdom-of-Experience Procedure

Following Bruner (1990), our interview procedure was fairly open-ended and allowed individuals to implicitly define wisdom in their own lives, so as to encourage personal meaning making in the memory narrative, instead of eliciting categorical responses. We understood, however, that some readers could be concerned that allowing individuals to subjectively define, recall, and narrate what they considered wisdom-related events in their lives may result in narratives that strayed from traditional parameters of what wisdom entails. We collected validity criteria to dispel those concerns. The wisdom memories showed convergence in several validating ways to theory and methods already being used to study (nonautobiographical) wisdom.

First, participants of all age groups were able to produce one or more wisdom-related memory within 2 minutes. Second, upon choosing one of these events, all participants were able to produce a narrative of reasonable length about their experienced wisdom in that situation. Note here, however, that adolescents did not have as much to say as did younger adults. Next, the majority of the narratives dealt with significant, not trivial, events (e.g., fundamentality, Smith & Baltes, 1990), and finally, they were consistent with theoretical views of the situations in which wisdom should be employed, that is, wisdom is used when facing uncertainty (Brugman, 2000), or confronting challenging life situations or managing life (Smith & Baltes, 1990). Though we look forward to further refinement of this new method, we feel satisfied with the wisdom-of-experience procedure, in which individuals subjectively define wisdom is a valid means of eliciting experienced wisdom narratives.

But were these people truly wise? The above validity criteria suggest that in various ways the remembered situations are of the type that would be expected, based on theoretical views of wisdom. One thing is missing, however. We do not provide validation that what the person did in the situation was truly wise. We only know that this individual recalls this as an event in which he or she acted wisely, given his or her own subjective definition of wisdom. Is this “real wisdom” then? As mentioned in the introduction, laypeople and experts have quite similar conceptions of what it means to be wise, so having our participants self-nominate events did not trouble us. In addition, note that we refer to the wisdom found in these

autobiographical narratives as “experienced wisdom.” That term is used specifically to recognize that individuals recall the event as a time when they experienced being wise. External observers might suggest that this individual did not in fact act wisely. People from different cultures, historical periods, or academic disciplines might, likewise, not judge the individual as wise. However, we are attempting to understand how individuals make meaning of life’s events, how they string them together into a life story, and how and what lessons they learn. To do this, we must allow individuals to define the contents of their own experience, for it is their own definitions, labels, and memories that are employed in autobiographical meaning making.

Making Things Better: The Eliciting Event and Its Outcome

Personal memories provide an interesting approach to studying personality because, while trait representations focus on routinized behavioral tendencies (Thorne, 2000), memories allow us to see the way that individuals regard and deal with disruptive, emotional events and situations. The types of life situations in which people reported experiencing wisdom, regardless of their age, were commonly ones in which they coped with challenging events and were able to transform them and to make things better through their own personal resources. Some narratives did not refer to eliciting events or to outcomes at all or mentioned them without reference to valence. In the majority of narratives, however, the outcome was more positive than the eliciting event or situation. For example, one person talked about how her son had been caught stealing. Instead of being angry and punitive, she saw this as a time to reach out to him and be open to listening to him and his difficulties. Their relationship moved to a new level, and the son gave up his illicit activities. Another example concerned a bad relationship between a mother and teen-aged daughter. The teen-ager was very angry and threatening to leave home. The participant told how she acted as a mediator between the girl and her mother, talking to them both regularly on the phone over this difficult period. The mother-daughter relationship improved, and the daughter did not leave home to live on the street.

This pattern of “making things better” parallels the more general notion of redemption sequences in the life story (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001) or finding “happy endings” to negative events (King, Scollon, Ramsey, & Williams, 2000). The experienced wisdom events studied here are important not only due to the resultant transformations in people’s lives (or those around them), but also because, through memory, they can be used by the individual to maintain a positive self view (Wilson & Ross, 2000) and as directives to encourage and instruct later actions (Pillemer, 2001). The extent to which individuals recall such events, and do so in a manner that is self-serving or adaptive, may be related to personality factors such as optimism and neuroticism as well as one’s overall tendency to think about the past. The relation of personality to the adaptive use of autobiographical memory is an avenue for further research.

Unifying Lives: Relation of Experienced Wisdom to the Life Story

McAdams (1990) argues that a unified or integrated life story provides individuals with an identity. We examined both temporal and causal coherence between the experienced wisdom episode and one’s larger view of life. As reported in another paper (Glück, Bluck, Baron, McAdams, 2003), participants reported events from all periods of the life span. In terms of temporal coherence, about 30% of participants talked about generic (Brewer, 1986; Neisser, 1986), rather than single events, even though our instructions asked particularly for a specific event. That is, they talked about long-term or repeated situations (e.g., dealing with depressive episodes across several years) that were not isolated experiences but were extended across a temporal period in the life story. Our results are consonant with Singer & Moffit (1992) who found that when individuals are asked to recall personal memories relevant to their own self-understanding, they tend to tell more generic memories. In the current data, an adolescent boy, for example, described how he discovered ways of dealing with his father’s dominance by making compromises. A young woman dealt with her cancer by learning a lot about it and asserting herself so that doctors would take her seriously. An older man talked about several incidents in which he was able to intervene in violent conflicts between young people. These generic

memories, of not just single episodes, but of the development of wisdom over a longer situation, or a repeated situation, suggest that individuals are not only wise in a limited way in response to a specific event. Some people, instead, recall having gained and applied their wisdom over time. Such reports give us further insight into the development of wisdom through experience.

We hypothesized that adolescents might more often use the limited, specific time frame. In fact, there were no age differences in the likelihood with which the age groups described specific versus generic episodes. Though temporal coherence in narratives is not present in early childhood, a review of the child developmental literature (Habermas & Bluck, 2000) suggests that temporal coherence may develop earlier, in late childhood and early adolescence, than the more sophisticated forms (e.g., causal and thematic coherence). Our sample of 15–20 year olds may be using temporal frames in thinking about life episodes in a manner already consistent with adults.

Sixty percent of participants exhibited causal or explanatory coherence between the event and something that happened later (specific later events or life in general). For example, one man spoke of having taken the opportunity to work in the hotel business as a young man even though the work was very hard and demanded most of his time. He suggests that his decision and dedication at that time led to possibilities opening up for him that led to a very satisfying career later on. Another example is of a person who was a teacher and relied largely on punitive methods for controlling the children in his classroom. But at one point he decided to take the risk of encouraging the children's creativity instead of trying to control them. He found that this really worked, and it developed into a teaching philosophy and a way of approaching children that he has continued to work on for several decades and found highly satisfying. A final example involves a woman who finally left a bad marriage, but through her struggles with her husband, learned to be a very tolerant and diplomatic person. She describes how those qualities really helped her when she found a new mate and began a new marriage. Such narratives show the type of autobiographical reasoning (Habermas & Bluck, 2000) and narrative processing (Singer & Bluck, 2001) that is indicative of reflective meaning making about the self and the world (Staudinger, 2001).

Thus, wisdom-related events were events that had an effect on later life; they were incorporated into a larger story through their consequential linkages with later events, or with the direction that one's life later took. In general (i.e., not specific to wisdom narratives), the extent of coherence in adults' narrative accounts of their lives is related to psychological well-being (Baerger & McAdams, 1999). We might expect that linking memories of self-efficacy, such as wisdom experiences, within the life story would have even greater benefits.

As expected, we found differences in the extent of causal coherence displayed by adolescents and adults. Adolescents were about half as likely to show causal coherence. We suggest that this lack of coherence may be indicative of a life story that is still being initially crafted in adolescence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 1990) so "the life lived" is not so often used as a frame of reference as in adulthood (Erikson, 1968; Neugarten, 1996). An alternative explanation is that events in the lives of adolescents may simply have been too recent to have had effects on later events.

Discovering Aspects of Self and Life: Lessons Learned From the Event

In the study of trauma and negative life events, there is an intriguing literature that addresses how struggling with negative events, or challenges, can result in positive outcomes and lessons learned (e.g., Taylor, 1983; Lehman et al., 1993). For example, King et al., have shown that individuals facing life crises (in this case, a child's diagnosis with Down's Syndrome) who describe struggling to make sense of the event show higher levels of ego development and that those who provide a coherent narrative with a "happy ending" have greater subjective well-being.

We were interested in whether the wisdom-related events, which often involved struggling with choices or circumstances and often had positive outcomes, would result in growth in terms of lessons learned. The events reported in the current study did not necessarily involve trauma, though some were negative events and situations. We expected that because these were situations that were not only difficult, but ones in which people felt that they met the difficulties involved with the wisdom necessary to transform them, these might

be situations in which people were particularly likely to learn something about themselves or about life.

Beyond linking the events temporally or causally within the life story (or possibly because of that), the large majority of participants felt that they learned a lesson from them. Beyond that, about 80% also showed some indications of generalization of the lesson to other events, knowledge of self, or philosophy of life. This included (in equal likelihood) learning factual or procedural knowledge about life, or learning things about one's self or one's life philosophy (examples are presented in Table 3). Thus these wisdom experiences may be common candidates for self-defining memories (Singer & Salovey, 1993; Singer, 1995) that influence individuals' future life goals and choices. Note that the likelihood of learning a generalizable lesson from such events was not equal across age groups. As hypothesized, adolescents infrequently reported having learned a life lesson, even when reporting a situation in which they felt they had been wise. This finding, along with the lack of causal coherence in adolescent narratives, supports the view that wisdom is still being developed in this life phase (Pasupathi, Staudinger, & Baltes, 2001). Adolescents may not have developed enough of a view of self and life to generalize what they are learning. Young adults, however, seem to be very oriented toward making sense of life events, in terms of the lessons to be learned from experience, in order to generalize to other situations. These adult participants were extremely likely to report learning from the event. Older adults reported having learned a lesson as often as would be expected in this sample. The extent to which individuals learn lessons about self and life from experienced wisdom may depend on life phase, the nature of the event, and other individual-level variables (e.g., personality).

CONCLUSION

Recalling and retelling autobiographical experiences of having felt wise allows individuals to remember and share a sense of self as having been efficacious in facing difficulty or uncertainty. Such narratives of experienced wisdom are sometimes time-delimited episodes, but are also quite frequently linked across larger temporal periods, becoming part of one's identity through being coherently integrated into the life story. Although participants of all ages described having experienced wisdom, it seems that wisdom itself

manifests differently in different life phases, and full use of one's wisdom appears to be a developmental achievement. Adolescents may not yet have developed the ability to take full advantage of their life experiences by embedding them in a life story and learning lessons from them. Adults, however, often link these episodes to the larger life story by explaining how the wisdom experience was related to later life consequences or to the direction that their life took. In many cases, adults also report having learned lessons about themselves or having gained a life philosophy from such experiences. Through such a mechanism, especially if repeated over various events, one might surmise that individuals continue to develop the wisdom of experience over their life span.

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