

The wisdom of experience: Autobiographical narratives across adulthood

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This research uses an autobiographical approach to examine the relation of age to several aspects of wisdom. In Study 1 ($N = 86$), adolescents', young adults', and older adults' wisdom narratives were content-coded for the types of life situations mentioned and the forms that wisdom took. Types of life situations reported (e.g., life decisions) were the same across age groups. Three different forms of wisdom emerged (empathy and support; self-determination and assertion; balance and flexibility) and their frequency differed with age. In Study 2, middle-aged and older adults' ($N = 51$) autobiographical wisdom narratives were also analysed for type of situation and form of wisdom, but with the addition of two comparison life events: being foolish and having a very positive experience. Most findings replicated Study 1. Unlike Study 1, however, regardless of age, Study 2 participants largely showed the wisdom form, empathy and support. Results are discussed in terms of variations in individuals' implicit theories of wisdom as applied to their own lives.

Introduction

“Can you remember a situation in your life in which you did, said, or thought something wise?” In two studies, we posed this question to adults of different ages to collect narratives of wisdom in people's own lives. We examine characteristics of, and age differences in, these autobiographical wisdom narratives with respect to both the types of life situations that elicit wisdom and the forms that wisdom takes.

To date, wisdom has been studied either by collecting individuals' conceptions of the term “wisdom” (usually abstract conceptions or as related to other people's wisdom) or by presenting individuals with hypothetical problems to respond to. Our approach (see also Bluck & Glück, 2004) is novel in that it links the abstract concept, or implicit theory of wisdom that individuals hold, to personal events that have occurred in their own lives: We examine how individuals view themselves, or their own life events, as wise. What types of events are seen as eliciting wisdom and what forms does wisdom take?

An individual's ability to produce the wisdom narratives collected in our research is dependent on: (1) that person's autobiographical memory, that is, the events of his or her remembered life story (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 1990), and (2) a person's conception of the term “wise” (i.e., their implicit theory, e.g., Bluck & Glück, in press; Sternberg,

1985). An individual's implicit theory or definition of wisdom will necessarily guide the memory search that results in a reported autobiographical wisdom narrative. Thus, in these two studies we examine individuals' implicit theories of wisdom “in action” and as related to the self.

In the following review, our first aim is to identify elements of existing scholarly definitions that support an autobiographical approach to studying wisdom. We then relate the autobiographical wisdom approach to other research on implicit theories, suggesting that the way people view their own personal wisdom may vary depending on individual differences in what is considered wise (e.g., differences in age). The relation of wisdom to age is then discussed in more detail.

Why study wisdom autobiographically?

Other researchers have used hypothetical scenarios and standard criteria for assessing levels of wisdom (e.g., Smith & Baltes, 1990), or have relied on wisdom questionnaires (Ardelt, 1997; Webster, 2003). These methods are useful because of their standardisation, or control properties. Autobiographical narratives are congruent with past theoretical and empirical work that suggests that wisdom: (1) involves more than cognition, (2) is context-dependent, and (3) is gained from life experience. As such, autobiographical narratives provide a rich complement to the literature.

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Wisdom involves more than cognition. Wisdom may never be ultimately defined, but most authors agree on several of its components. Wisdom is “not exclusively cognitive but involving a broader experience” (McKee & Barber, 1999, p. 151). That is, it is a combination of experiential (or tacit) knowledge, cognition, affect, and action (e.g., Ardel, 1997; Clayton & Birren, 1980; Labouvie-Vief, 1990; Sternberg, 1998). Autobiographical accounts of wisdom, because they are representations of complex life experiences, involve more than simply the “cognitive side” of wisdom. Actions, emotions, cognitions, and motivations are integral parts of such narratives.

Wisdom is context-dependent. The humanist philosophical approach declares that “the facts a wise man knows are known by everybody” (Kekes, 1983, p. 280). In this view, wisdom is not just knowledge of the human condition but the ability to interpret it in human context. Previous definitions of wisdom have elaborated the role of context at different levels. Sternberg (1998) suggests that life-relevant, action-oriented knowledge is at the core of wisdom. That is, he posits that the balance between people and their environment depends on their tacit knowledge of their encountered life context. Wisdom has also been recognised to involve social context: Wisdom influences and is influenced by interactions with others (Staudinger & Baltes, 1996). At a different level, Baltes and colleagues (e.g., Baltes & Staudinger, 2000) suggest that wisdom depends, in part, on putting judgments in the context of a person’s developmental history, or lifespan context.

The autobiographical approach to studying wisdom integrates these multiple levels of context: Wisdom-related events are recalled from the individual’s store of autobiographical life events (i.e., an evaluative, remembered, developmental history; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 1990). They are reported as unique and often social events that are embedded in real-life contexts and that occur in developmental time. Unlike other approaches, the autobiographical approach allows us not only to examine forms of wisdom but also to identify the actual types of life situations that are seen as eliciting or requiring wisdom.

Wisdom is gained through life experience. Definitions of wisdom converge on the notion that wisdom develops through experience. The insight shown in wisdom is “hard won from engagement with life” (McKee & Barber, 1999, p. 151). Wisdom is seen as an adaptive form of life judgment (Kramer, 2000), and Randall and Kenyon (2000) argue that each person has the ability to use “ordinary wisdom” to interpret life experiences.

Autobiographical memory acts as a storehouse of complex, integrated information about our life experiences, including the experience of having acted wisely. Tapping memory, through narratives, is a rich source of data on wisdom in individuals’ lives. But what is wisdom?

Implicit theories of wisdom

If we ask individuals for autobiographical wisdom-related events, they use their own definition or implicit theory of wisdom to search memory for such events. A number of studies have examined laypersons’ theories of wisdom. Identified components of wisdom in such studies (Clayton & Birren, 1980; Hershey & Farrell, 1997; Holliday & Chandler, 1986; Kramer, 2000; Sternberg, 1985, 1990) show high overlap not

only between studies, but also with scholarly theories of explicit wisdom (for a review, see Bluck & Glück, in press). There is a *cognitive component* (i.e., intellectual ability, knowledge and experience which can be practically applied), and a *social component* (i.e., sensitivity, empathy, social skills). A third component is *reflective judgment and openness* (self-examination, learning from mistakes). A superordinate principle is that wisdom is a *virtue* (based on good intentions, concern for the common good).

While the overall definition of wisdom uncovered by implicit-theory studies is somewhat consistent across studies, this does not mean that every person carries the exact same implicit theory in his or her head. Instead, different individuals may focus more on different aspects of the construct (for example, see Sternberg, 1985). Especially with an experience-related concept such as wisdom, it seems likely that individual differences might be related to age.

Wisdom and age

Although psychologists may disagree on the nature of the relation of wisdom to age, their linkage remains a societal conception (Bluck & Glück, in press). Cognitive theories of ageing have also suggested growth or at least stability in wisdom with age (Smith, Dixon, & Baltes, 1989). Empirical evidence has not, however, supported societal conceptions. Studies show steep growth in wisdom-related knowledge between 15 and 25 years (Pasupathi, Staudinger, & Baltes, 2001), but no age gradient across adulthood is found (i.e., stability from ages 20 to 89 years; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Staudinger, 1999). These studies, however, focus on quantifying wisdom using standard criteria for evaluating levels of wisdom in participants’ responses to hypothetical life situations.

We were interested to add to this literature by investigating potential age differences in the actual types of life situations that elicit wisdom and also the qualitative forms that wisdom takes. Our expectations concerning where we would, and would not, find age differences are based on the view that people’s implicit theories of what is wise are shaped by the perceived challenges of their current life phase. Several autobiographical memory studies have shown that current appraisals can affect how and what individuals recall about past events (e.g., Levine & Bluck, in press). Thus, a participant’s choice of, and description of, a certain event as indicative of wisdom is partly due to what the person did at the time the event occurred, and partly a function of what the person considers to be wise (i.e., implicit theory) from his or her current developmental vantage point.

In terms of the types of life situations that have been theorised to require wisdom (e.g., making decisions, facing uncertainty, life management; Brugman, 2000; Smith & Baltes, 1990), we assumed that most people have experienced such situations at some points in their lives, although the content of the events varies with age (e.g., deciding what career to pursue in one’s youth, deciding at what point to retire in one’s later years). With respect to these general categories, we did not have specific expectations about age differences in the types of situations our participants would report. In contrast, however, in response to such life situations particular forms of wisdom might be required in different life periods in response to unique developmental tasks (Havighurst, 1972) or to one’s

developmental “life space” (Lewin, 1926). Based on Havighurst’s, Neugarten’s (1996), or Erikson’s (1959) ideas of different life phases placing different demands on the individual, we believe that people in different life phases may differ systematically in what they consider wise behaviour in their own life. For example, Neugarten suggests that people’s view of time changes as they move across the lifespan: Each person goes from a sense of an open-ended future in youth, to finally seeing that most of their life is behind them. Thus, older people, facing the challenges of dealing with losses and with personal mortality, may have qualitatively different ideas about how to behave wisely than young people whose focus is on how to set goals and plans for their future. More particularly, Erikson’s theory suggests that we might expect wisdom to reflect individuals’ needs to resolve specific developmental tasks: to seek intimacy in young adulthood, to be generative in midlife, and to establish a sense of meaning and integrity in one’s later years.

In sum, in the current research, we expect age similarities in the types of life situations being seen as having required wisdom (e.g., life decisions made at any point in the lifespan) but different forms of wisdom being reported at different ages.

The current research

In the following, we report two studies concerning autobiographical narratives of wisdom. Since the use of autobiographical narratives for studying wisdom is a new approach, the first aim of Study 1 was to assess the viability and validity of such a procedure (e.g., how many situations can individuals generate, how fundamental or important are these situations, do accounts focus largely on process or only on outcomes associated with the event?). Beyond that, the aims of Study 1 were (1) to identify and describe the types of real-life situations individuals nominate as having required wisdom (expecting age consistency), and (2) to examine the qualitative forms that wisdom takes (expecting life phase differences).

In Study 2, we analysed a second set of experienced-wisdom narratives produced by two groups of adults (no adolescent group was included). In addition, so as to have comparison events against which to examine dimensions of the wisdom narratives, foolishness and peak experience narratives (see description in Methods) were also collected. We aimed (1) to replicate the Study 1 findings concerning fundamentality, type of event, and forms of wisdom, (2) to extend Study 1 by testing whether fundamentality, types of situations, and forms of wisdom are unique to wisdom-related events (i.e., less evident in the comparison events), and (3) to replicate the central age findings from Study 1 concerning types of life situations and forms of wisdom (across the two age groups included in both studies).

Study 1

Method

PARTICIPANTS

Study 1 data were collected as part of a larger study (Glück & Baltes, 2005). Participants, who were 15 to 20, 30 to 40, or 60 to 70 years old, were recruited through newspaper advertisements in Berlin, Germany, and were paid DM 80 (US \$40). Adolescents were also contacted through athletic

clubs. “Experienced Wisdom Study” participants were part of the control group in the larger study: They were unaware that they would participate in a study concerning wisdom. We attempted to interview 92 participants but 6 could not remember a wisdom-related event. The final sample ($N = 86$) included 28 adolescents, 27 early midlife adults, and 31 older adults. Of these, 44 were male and 42 were classified into the lower education group (< 11 years of school; in the German educational system the “lower track” involves up to 10 years of school, the higher track, required for university attendance, takes 12 or 13 years). Gender and education status were balanced between age groups. There were significant age group differences in crystallised intelligence, as measured by the HAWIE (German version of the WAIS-R) Vocabulary subtest, $F(2, 81) = 12.23$, $MSE = 308.81$, $p < .01$, and in self-rated health, $F(2, 82) = 10.61$, $MSE = 7.65$, $p < .01$. Post hoc tests showed that both differences were between adolescents and adults, with no differences between the two adult groups. Adolescents were lower in crystallised intelligence and higher in self-rated health.

PROCEDURE

At the beginning of the “Experienced Wisdom” interview, the researcher informed the participant that the final part of today’s session would be different, because it referred to participants’ own lives (the previous interview had not) and was about wisdom. Participants were given a sheet with 15 spaces 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 2 minutes and wrote key words for each situation. The participant next selected the one situation in which he or she had been wisest. The interviewer then switched on a tape recorder saying “Now let’s talk a little about this situation. What was it about, and what did you consider and do?” If participants said little or nothing about their considerations or actions, the interviewer probed again about considerations and actions taken in this situation. Unless participants explicitly said what had been wise, the interviewer also asked, “In what way would you say you were wise?” Participants were also asked to date the event as precisely as possible.

MEASURES

Number of situations listed. This variable is the number of wisdom situations listed on the initial sheet in a two-minute period.

Age at event. This variable refers to the participant’s self-reported age in years at the time the reported event occurred.

CODING VARIABLES

In addition to the 86 participant interviews, 50 independent interviews were transcribed solely for coding scheme development and coder training. Twenty of these were used in developing coding categories. Thirty were used to test the coding procedure and refine categories before study coding began. When a final version of the codebook had been established, all 50 protocols were used to train two advanced students who served as the coders. Disagreements were resolved by discussion. However, in the following we report coder agreements and Kappas that were obtained before discussing ambiguous protocols.

Table 1*Forms of wisdom: Coding categories*

<i>Empathy & support</i>	<i>Self-determination & assertion</i>	<i>Knowledge & flexibility</i>
Offering or providing problem-focused support (16/19)	Taking control of situations (12/2) Standing by values or goals (12/0)	Reliance on factual or procedural knowledge (10/1)
Offering or providing emotion-focused support (8/ 8)	Trusting oneself and one's intuition (11/0) Being honest and responsible (9/0)	Making compromises (8/0) Recognition and management of uncertainty (5/0)
Considering other's situation/life context (2/1)	Being willing to take a risk (2/1)	Thinking things through carefully (4/1)
Taking other's perspectives, accepting different values (1/5)	Accepting short-term tradeoffs for long-term priorities (2/0)	Being willing to take time with things (3/2)
Acceptance and/or forgiveness of others (1/0)	Dealing with one's own emotions (2/1)	Taking others' advice (3/0)
Cooperating with others (1/1)		Forgiving oneself (0/0)
Recognising and dealing with other's emotions (1/0)		Being self-critical (0/1)

The first number in parentheses is the frequency with which this category was coded in Study 1; the second number is the frequency for Study 2. Zero (0) implies that the item was used in coding but no protocol received that code.

Fundamentality of wisdom-related memories. We expected that our autobiographical wisdom procedure would produce memories that concerned important life matters. Baltes and colleagues define wisdom as expertise in the domain of the fundamental pragmatics of life, that is, "... knowledge and skills about the conditions, variability, ontogenetic changes, and historicity of human development, insight into obligations and goals in life, knowledge and skills about the social and situational influences on human life..." (Baltes, Glück, & Kunzmann, 2002, p. 331).

We used this definition to develop a list of sample situations relevant across age groups that coders used in assessing fundamentality. Fundamental situations included such things as deciding on a career, giving advice about dealing with serious depression, and dealing with family conflicts. Examples of nonfundamental situations included such things as deciding what type of pet to have, planning a vacation, and giving advice about rental contracts. Coder agreement on fundamentality was 94%; Kappa = .71.

Wisdom as process versus outcome. This variable assessed participants' explanations about why they thought they had been wise. We were largely interested in *process*, the ways that individuals show wisdom. We were concerned, however, that some participants might base their selection of wisdom-related events from their life solely on the *outcome* having been positive (i.e., it turned out well, so I must have been wise). Narratives were coded separately for whether the participant referred to the outcome as well as whether they referred to the process through which they had handled the situation. By coincidence, coder agreements for process and outcome were both 85%; Kappa was .58 for process and .62 for outcome.

Type of life situation and referent. Three types of situations were coded. *Life decisions* refers to making decisions that influence one's future life (e.g., deciding to pursue a certain job or deciding whom to marry). *Reactions to negative events* refers to dealing with a negative event or situation (e.g., coping with the death of a spouse or handling a financial crisis). *Life management* refers to ways of dealing with longer-term situations (e.g., managing chronic depressive episodes; principles for bringing up one's children). Coder agreement on situations was 86%, Kappa = .80.

In a number of narratives the referent was not the narrator but another person who the narrator helped in some wise way. Self-related vs. "other-related" codes were assigned to refer to the participant's own challenges versus those faced by another. The coders agreed on referent in 98% of the cases, Kappa = .94.

Forms of wisdom. In order to be highly inclusive of what was mentioned in the protocols, we developed 22 categories concerning the participants' narrative of wise behaviours, thoughts, and feelings in the situation. Development was largely based on themes in the data, but also on previous definitions of wisdom. After coding the entire protocol, coders selected a maximum of three codes as the major indicators of wisdom in the protocol.

We realised that a detailed coding scheme would most inclusively capture the wisdom-related behaviours, thoughts, and feelings narrated by the participants. For analyses, however, we needed to group minor codes into larger conceptual units. We grouped the categories (through card-sorting by the authors) into three a priori forms of wisdom based on their conceptual similarity. Table 1 lists the 22 categories grouped into three forms of wisdom; Table 2 gives examples of the three forms. Two coders rated all protocols for the dominant theme of wisdom present. Twenty protocols included more than one form¹, but a dominant form was always chosen. The coders agreed in 84.4% of the cases, Kappa = .77.

The first form, *empathy and support*, consists of categories such as considering others' perspectives and feelings, and offering or providing social support. The major theme of this form of wisdom is "putting yourself in someone else's shoes" or offering advice or help. *Self-determination and assertion* comprises categories such as taking control of a situation, and following one's goals or priorities. The major theme of this form is "taking the bull by the horns", that is, taking control of

¹ Of the 20 participants who showed more than one form of wisdom, 3 were adolescents, 10 were in early midlife, and 7 were older adults. Frequencies of different combinations of forms were as follows: Empathy and support + self-determination and assertion, 5; empathy and support + knowledge and flexibility, 5; self-determination and assertion + knowledge and flexibility, 10. There was no relationship between age and combination of forms.

Table 2*Examples of the three forms of wisdom**Empathy & support**Situation:* Mother suffered from depression (female, 20 years)

... and then I noticed somehow that something was wrong with her, and I began having contact with her again and saw her more often and never blamed her for anything; instead, I tried to simply be there for her.

Situation: Daughter panicked before an important performance (male, 62 years)

Then she was really lucky to have me, because I had finally completely understood her and said “my goodness, this happened to me too when I was young”, an almost similar situation, and that was a big relief for her, to have my understanding.

*Self-determination & assertion**Situation:* Decided to stop training for a particular career (female, 17 years)

And then I lay awake all night and thought about it, and on the next day I said, “ok, that’s it, it’s over.” [...] And I think it was the first really important decision in my life that I had to make on my own.

Situation: Decided to leave her husband (female, 37 years)

... and then suddenly one Sunday evening I noticed that I absolutely didn’t want to live this way, that I somehow wanted to live in a completely different way and not with him, because we just didn’t treat each other well [...], and then I found all the courage I had and said “I’m leaving you”.

*Knowledge & flexibility**Situation:* Chronic conflicts with his father (male, 18 years)

Concretely, with my father it is important to simply give in sometimes, just so as to be able to have a reasonably functioning life together.

Situation: Police caught her teenage son committing a crime (female, 40 years)

If I had punished him somehow right away, by yelling, as usual, I would have achieved nothing. Nothing at all. And so I think that in many situations that are difficult, you can always achieve much more by patience than by anything else you do.

Literal translations from German are by a native English speaker.

life situations. The third form, *knowledge and flexibility*, consists of categories such as relying on the knowledge gained from experience, and having the tolerance for both compromise and uncertainty. The major theme of this form of wisdom is “experience is the best teacher”. It concerns applying previously gained knowledge where possible but also accepting uncertainty and trade-offs.

Results

The results are organised so as to address three major aims. First, we present evidence of the viability and validity of the procedure. Next, we consider the types of situations where wisdom manifests and the qualitative forms that wisdom takes. Relations between wisdom form and type of life situation are also examined. We present descriptive results as well as age-group analyses for all variables. There were no significant gender effects for any of the variables.

We used analyses of variance to test for age-group differences in overall number of situations listed. With respect to the categorical wisdom variables (fundamentality, type of situation and referent, wisdom as outcome vs. process, and forms of wisdom) we used simple χ^2 tests to test for age-group differences. In some of these analyses, the expected frequencies for some of the cells were below 5. In such cases, we ran Monte-Carlo simulations with 10,000 samples to determine lower and upper limits of the significance levels. For these analyses, we give the Monte-Carlo-based p value for the χ^2 test and the 99% confidence interval.

NUMBER OF SITUATIONS LISTED

On average, participants listed 4.1 situations ($SD = 2.2$; range: 1–13). There was no age difference, $F(2, 83) = 0.08$, $MSE = 0.39$, $p = .93$.

AGE AT EVENT

Naturally, the age range in which the events could have occurred was restricted by the participants’ current age. As Table 3 shows, the distribution for the older adults does not show a concentration of events in any particular decade. Notice also that all groups reported some events that occurred in their teens, and a few adolescents and early midlife adults even talked about events that occurred before age 10.

Table 3*Study 1: Distributions of age at event in three age groups*

<i>Age at event (yrs)</i>	<i>Adolescents (15–20 yrs)</i>	<i>Early midlife adults (30–40 yrs)</i>	<i>Older adults (60–70 yrs)</i>
0–10 Years	2	1	0
11–20 Years	26	5	4
21–30 Years		8	4
31–40 Years		13	7
41–50 Years			10
51–60 Years			3
61–70 Years			3
Total	28	27	31

FUNDAMENTALITY OF WISDOM-RELATED NARRATIVES

The large majority (89.5%) of the remembered situations refer to fundamental life situations (82.1% of adolescents, 92.6% of early midlife adults, and 93.5% of older adults). Although the percentage for the adolescents is somewhat lower, the difference is not significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 86) = 2.44$; Monte-Carlo $p = .35$; 99% confidence interval $.34 \leq p \leq .36$ (expected frequencies below 5 in three of the six cells).

WISDOM AS PROCESS VERSUS OUTCOME

In 11.6% of the 86 protocols, no reason for selecting the event as wisdom-related was provided (recall that participants were not explicitly asked to provide this information; they were only asked in what way they thought they had been wise). In 64.5% of the remaining 76 cases, the process by which the participant dealt with the situation was given as the reason. In 11.8% of the cases, positive outcome was mentioned as the reason. Both outcome and process were mentioned in 23.7% of cases. Thus, overall, process was mentioned in 88.2% of the coded stories. There were no age differences in process versus outcome, $\chi^2(4, N = 76) = 2.71$; Monte-Carlo $p = .65$; 99% confidence interval $.63 \leq p \leq .66$ (expected frequencies below 5 in three of the nine cells).

TYPE OF LIFE SITUATION AND REFERENT

The majority of the narratives concerned three types of life situations: life decisions (44.2% of the narratives), reactions to negative events (25.6%), and life management (18.6%). Only 11.6%, or 10 narratives, were about miscellaneous other topics. There were no age differences in the types of situations reported, $\chi^2(4, N = 76) = 5.14$; Monte-Carlo $p = .28$; 99% confidence interval $.27 \leq p \leq .29$ (expected frequencies below 5 in one of the nine cells).

With respect to referent, 72.1% of the narratives were self-related, and 27.9% were other-related. There was a significant age difference, $\chi^2(2, N = 86) = 17.82$, $p < .01$. Of the 28 adolescents, less than half (42.9%) talked about a self-related

situation, while the majority of the 27 early midlife adults (88.9%) and of the 31 older adults (83.9%) talked about a self-related situation.

FORMS OF WISDOM

Overall, empathy and support was reported in 27.9% of the 83 narratives, self-determination and assertion in 40.7%, and knowledge and flexibility in 27.9%. There was a significant relationship between form of wisdom and age, $\chi^2(4, N = 83) = 14.95$, $p < .01$. Figure 1 shows the frequencies of the three forms of wisdom across age groups. In each age group, only one form of wisdom was mentioned more frequently than expected, assuming no relationship between age group and form of wisdom. Empathy and support was quite frequently mentioned by the adolescents, but by less than 20% of the two adult groups. Self-determination and assertion was most often mentioned by the early midlife adults, but also by one third of each of the other groups. The older adults mentioned knowledge and flexibility most often (and more often than both other age groups), but self-determination and assertion almost as often.

Forms of wisdom in relation to type of life situation. We examined whether the form that wisdom takes is related to the type of situation narrated. For example, empathy and support might be more frequent in narratives about reactions to negative events. There was a significant relation between form of wisdom and type of situation, $\chi^2(4, N = 74) = 13.86$; Monte-Carlo $p = .006$; 99% confidence interval $.004 \leq p \leq .008$ (expected frequencies below 5 in two of the nine cells).

Inspection of the cell frequencies showed that the largest deviation between observed (23) and expected (17) frequencies was in the cell "life decision" \times "self-determination and assertion". Thus, with respect to life decisions, self-determination and assertion was most frequently mentioned; the two other forms of wisdom were mentioned less frequently than

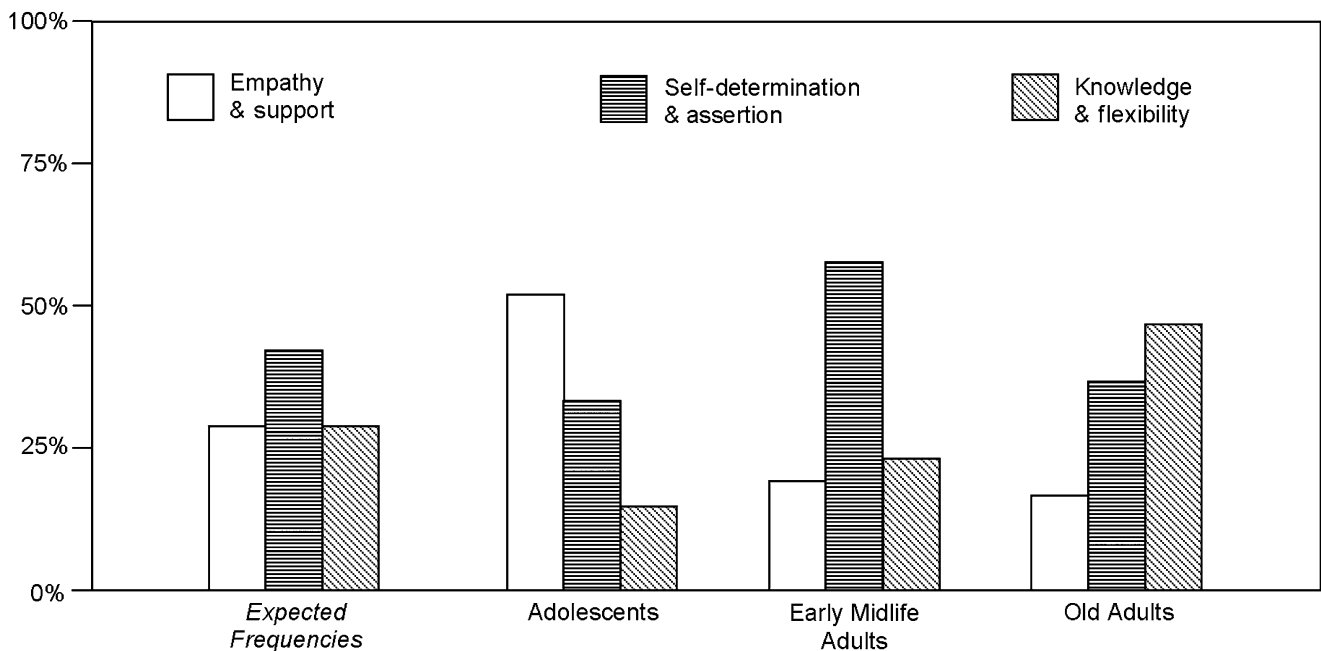


Figure 1. Study 1: Expected and observed frequencies of three forms of wisdom by age group.

expected. For the two other types of situations, there was no clear predominance of one form of wisdom.

Forms of wisdom and referent. It seemed likely that the form that wisdom takes would be congruent with whether one narrated an event from one's own life, or concerning another person's life (e.g., empathy and support would occur in relation to advice-giving to others). There was a significant relationship between forms of wisdom and referent (self/other), $\chi^2(2, N = 83) = 29.32, p < .01$. Of the narratives referring to empathy and support, 70.8% were about other-related situations. In contrast, only 8.6% of the narratives referring to self-determination and assertion and 16.7% of the narratives referring to knowledge and flexibility were about other-related situations.

Discussion

Our first aim was to show that the autobiographical "Experienced Wisdom" method is a valid way to tap wisdom as perceived and experienced in individual's lives. Indicators suggest that individuals are not simply responding to study demand characteristics. Participants of all ages were able to generate several wisdom-related events from their life in a short time period; they largely talked about wisdom events in terms of what they actually thought, did, or said (not just in terms of positive outcome), and the majority of the events were coded as meaningful, important life events, not trivial or mundane ones (fundamentality; Smith & Baltes, 1990). In addition, events did not only reflect memory accessibility due to recency. Individuals did not simply grasp for the latest thing done that they might be able to describe as wise. Instead, wisdom-related events came from all decades of life, excluding childhood.

When people are asked to remember times when they have done something wise, what types of situations do they talk about? Theory suggests that wisdom is used when facing uncertainty (Brugman, 2000), confronting challenging life situations, or managing life (Smith & Baltes, 1990). This is clearly evident in the types of situations described by our participants: Almost half the situations they discussed involved life decisions (i.e., facing uncertainty). Reactions to negative (or challenging) circumstances and life management were also common. A shortcoming of the current study is that we do not have a comparison event. That is, we cannot be sure that these three categories of life situations do not simply reflect all significant life events, not just wisdom-related events. In Study 2, we attempt to replicate this finding by including two non-wisdom-related life events as comparisons.

While we found no age differences in the types of situations participants reported, we found significant differences between the three age groups with respect to the forms that wisdom can take. Although all age groups recalled some situations involving each of the three forms of wisdom, there were age differences in the most commonly reported form of wisdom, and these differences map quite neatly onto the challenges of each life phase. Adolescents' autobiographical accounts of wisdom involved more situations in which another person's life decisions or negative events were the focus, and more situations in which they showed empathy and support, which fits well with the importance of developing and maintaining peer relations during this life phase (Cairns & Cairns, 1994). The early midlife adults' accounts focused largely on self-

determination and assertion. These individuals, just entering midlife, are often grappling with issues of exerting themselves toward multiple goals (Heckhausen, 2001; Staudinger & Bluck, 2001; Sterns & Huyck, 2001) in which self-determination and assertion play an adaptive role. Older adults recalled situations involving knowledge and flexibility as their predominant form of wisdom. Flexibility may help to negotiate this late life phase in which roles have become less clear (Rosow, 1985). The self-focused developmental tasks faced by older adults, the resolution of integrity versus despair (Erikson, 1959), and the review of one's life (Butler, 1963; Jung, 1971) require reliance on past knowledge and uncertainty-management.

Of course, our entire explanation of the differences in forms of wisdom as related to life phase has a flaw. The data are cross-sectional, so our age differences are indistinguishable from cohort differences. There are differences between the three cohorts in the historical events they encountered during their life, and it is impossible to assess whether these cohort differences might affect wisdom. Are the life phase parameters that appear to be shaping implicit theories specific to Germany or would they act on Americans' implicit theories of wisdom in the same way? We were interested in seeing if these life phase differences were strong enough that they would also occur in a new sample, from a currently close but historically and, in part, also culturally different nation.

Study 2: Replication and extension

As discussed above, Study 1 left questions unanswered and also raised new questions. Study 2 addresses these through the collection of data from a culturally close, but different, nation. By using narrative data collected as part of a larger American study (McAdams, 2001), we were able to include comparison event narratives about a time in which a person was foolish, and a time when a person had a peak experience. Peak experiences refer to times when an individual felt very positive, or a high point in life, but differ from wisdom events in that the individual did not necessarily do or say anything particular to create the peak experience. As such, both wisdom and peak experiences are positive experiences, where foolishness is considered a negative experience. Thus beyond comparing wisdom to its opposite, we also chose peak experiences as a type of event that might be more similar to wisdom, but did not entail the application of that inner resource. That is, these two comparison events were chosen particularly to allow analysis of wisdom narratives in terms of their linguistic opposite, foolishness, but also to show that wisdom events are different from other generally positive and possibly similar events, that is, peak experiences. They allowed replication of Study 1 findings, but with the added strength of comparison events against which to test both age similarities and differences in the fundamentality, types of life situations, and qualitative forms displayed in wisdom narratives. We hypothesized that:

1. narratives concerning wisdom events and peak experiences, but not those concerning foolishness, would pertain to fundamental events;
2. three types of life situations (life decisions, reactions to negative life events, life management situations) identified in Study 1 would occur in the majority of wisdom narratives but not in the comparison events;
3. three forms of wisdom (empathy and support, self-

determination and assertion, knowledge and flexibility) would be found frequently in the wisdom narratives, and seldom or not at all in the comparison events; and

4. the forms of wisdom reported would differ by age groups as would be predicted from the Study 1 findings. Study 2 did not involve adolescents, and the age range of the sample was different from that of Study 1, but we were interested to examine whether the midlife and older American adults would replicate Study 1 findings from the German early midlife and older adults.

Method

PARTICIPANTS

The data for this study were collected as part of a larger study (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). Fifty-one community dwelling adults from Evanston, Illinois, between the ages of 30 and 72 ($M = 51.7$, $SD = 10.0$), participated in the study. Participants had previously participated in interview-based studies (e.g., McAdams, Diamond, de St Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997) and were contacted to volunteer for a written study on life narratives. Participants were paid \$150 for participation. Seventy per cent of the sample were female, 20% were members of an ethnic minority group, and 80% held college degrees. Socioeconomic status was reflected by a median household income of US \$55,000.

PROCEDURE

The data come from a structured life narrative interview booklet (McAdams, 2001) that was sent to participants by mail. The booklet contained instructions concerning the different questionnaires and participants were asked to complete them at their own convenience, and in no particular order. Booklets typically took 2–4 hours to complete. Only three of the life narrative questions in the larger booklet were considered for this study: those concerning a time in the participant's life when they were wise, were foolish, and experienced a high point in their life story (peak experience). For further details of the larger study, see McAdams et al. (2001).

MATERIALS

The booklet contained unique instructions for the wisdom, foolishness, and peak experience narratives. The three requested narratives had topically relevant, but similar, instructions. For example, for the wisdom narrative, the instructions were the following: "Please describe in some detail one particular experience or episode in your life in which you displayed wisdom. The episode might be one in which you acted or interacted in an especially wise way or provided wise counsel or advice to another person".

For the foolishness narrative, the instructions included the following: "The opposite of wisdom is folly, or being foolish. While some people may be more foolish than others in the overall, most of us can think of some moment in our lives in which we acted in a foolish and especially unwise manner, or displayed foolishness. In the space below, please describe an episode in your life in which you were foolish, acting or interacting in a foolish manner or displaying foolishness to others in some way".

For the peak experience narrative, the instructions included the following: "Many people report occasional peak experi-

ences. These are generally moments or episodes in a person's life in which he or she feels a sense of great uplifting, joy, excitement, contentment, or some other highly positive emotional experience. Indeed, these experiences vary widely A peak experience may be seen as a high point in your life story, a particular experience that stands out in your memory as something that is extremely positive".

Instructions for all three events guided participants to "write about exactly what happened, when it happened, who was involved, what you were thinking and feeling . . ." and to describe what made this a wise/foolish/peak experience. The instructions asked the participants to be specific and provide details. Participants wrote one to two pages in response to each set of instructions.

CODED VARIABLES

To prepare the narratives for coding, subject identification (age, gender) and life narrative type (wisdom, foolishness, peak experience) were randomised and blinded. After establishing inter-rater agreement using 10% of the protocols, the entire set was coded using the codebook from Study 1. Inter-rater reliabilities (percentage agreement and Kappa) are presented for each variable. See Study 1 for full variable descriptions.

Fundamentality. Fundamentality of all narratives was coded (fundamental/not fundamental; coder agreement = 93%, Kappa = .83).

Type of life situation and referent. Type of situation the narrative focused on was coded (life decisions, reactions to negative events, life management; coder agreement = 87%, Kappa = .82). Referent (self, other) was also coded (coder agreement = 100%; Kappa = 1.00).

Form of wisdom. Forms of wisdom were coded as per Study 1 (coder agreement = 97%, Kappa = .86). For description of coding categories and coding examples, see Table 1 and Table 2 respectively.

Results

For each variable, two types of χ^2 tests are performed. First, to analyse Study 2 data we compare frequencies across the autobiographical wisdom, peak experience, and foolishness narratives. Then, for additional replication purposes, we compare the variable frequencies for Study 2 wisdom narratives to those reported for Study 1 wisdom narratives. Splitting the sample into an early midlife (30–51 years) and older (52–72) group, we found no age-group differences in any of the variables. The nonsignificant age differences will only be reported in detail for forms of wisdom, where we had expected such a difference to occur. As in Study 1, in some analyses, the expected frequencies for some cells were below 5. In such cases, we ran Monte-Carlo simulations with 10,000 samples to determine lower and upper limits of the significance levels. For these analyses, we give the Monte-Carlo-based p value for the χ^2 test and the 99% confidence interval.

FUNDAMENTALITY OF THE LIFE NARRATIVES

Of the wisdom narratives, 95.8% were judged to refer to fundamental life events; 84.3% of the peak experience narratives also pertained to fundamental life events. Only

24% of the foolishness events were fundamental. Assuming equal distributions, more wisdom and peak experience narratives than expected and fewer foolishness narratives than expected were coded as fundamental, $\chi^2(2, N = 149) = 67.75$, $p < .01$. As expected, the majority of the wisdom narratives pertained to fundamental life situations. The proportions of fundamental wisdom narratives found in Studies 1 and 2 did not differ significantly, $\chi^2(1, N = 137) = 1.86$, $p = .17$. As hypothesised, the majority of the peak narratives also concerned fundamental life situations, but the foolishness narratives did not.

TYPE OF LIFE SITUATION AND REFERENT

With respect to types of situations, 78.4% of the wisdom narratives contained the three types of life situations (i.e., reaction to negative events, life decisions, life management) shown to be wisdom-related in Study 1, whereas only 25.5% of peak and 25.5% of foolishness narratives contained these three types of life situations, $\chi^2(2, N = 153) = 38.85$, $p < .01$. This replicates Study 1 findings and, as predicted, strengthens them by showing that these three types of situations are not general to all life narratives but are specific to wisdom narratives.

The most frequent type of situation was reactions to negative life events (39.2% of narratives). Life decisions were reported in 29.4% of the narratives, and 9.8% were about life management. The remaining protocols were about miscellaneous types of situations that did not form a fourth category. The distribution of wisdom events over the three categories was not significantly different from Study 1, $\chi^2(3, N = 137) = 7.43$, $p = .06$.

The wisdom narratives were also coded for referent. Of the 40 narratives that could be coded for referent, 47.5% were self-related and 52.5% were other-related. This proportion is significantly different from the overall sample in Study 1, $\chi^2(1, N = 126) = 7.19$, $p < .01$. In Study 2, significantly more participants reported an other-related event than in Study 1. In this regard, the Study 2 sample mirrored the adolescents in Study 1 for whom over half of the narratives were other-related.

FORM OF WISDOM

The three forms of wisdom identified in Study 1 were reported in 84.3% of the wisdom narratives, whereas only 9.8% of peak experiences and 3.6% of foolishness narratives contained what we defined in Study 1 as a form of wisdom, $\chi^2(2, N = 153) = 93.11$, $p < .01$. Thus, the forms of wisdom derived in Study 1 were also highly prevalent in Study 2, and occurred almost exclusively in the wisdom narratives. That is, as hypothesised, the comparison event narratives rarely contained forms of wisdom.

The relative frequencies of the three forms of wisdom in the Study 2 wisdom narratives were, however, different from those in Study 1, $\chi^2(2, N = 126) = 29.04$, $p < .01$. The majority of the wisdom narratives in Study 2 pertained to empathy and support (79.1%). Only a small percentage of narratives pertained to knowledge and flexibility (11.6%) or self-determination and assertion (9.3%). Thus, although the same forms of wisdom as in Study 1 were found in Study 2, the prevalence of the three forms was different.

Age differences across the forms of wisdom were also examined by splitting the sample into an early midlife (30-51 years) and an older (52-72) group. There were no significant

age differences in the forms of wisdom expressed, $\chi^2(2, N = 43) = 0.10$, asymptotic $p = .95$; Monte-Carlo $p = 1.00$; 99% confidence interval $1.00 \leq p \leq 1.00$ (expected frequencies below 5 in four of the six cells). While in Study 1, knowledge and flexibility was found most often in older adults, and self-determination and assertion in the early midlife adults, Study 2 did not replicate these results. Regardless of age, Study 2 participants were most likely to show empathy and support². (Note, however, that of those five participants who did show knowledge and flexibility, four were in the older group.)

Forms of wisdom in relation to type of situation. Due to the low frequencies of forms of wisdom other than empathy and support, the test for relationships between forms of wisdom and type of situation has low statistical power; expected frequencies were smaller than 5 for seven of the nine cells of the table. This test, however, shows no indication of any relation between types of situations and forms of wisdom, $\chi^2(4, N = 36) = 2.41$; Monte-Carlo $p = .72$; 99% confidence interval $.71 \leq p \leq .73$. This result stays the same when, to reduce the number of small cells, self-determination and assertion and knowledge and flexibility are grouped into one category and compared to empathy and support. Recall that in Study 1 only self-determination and assertion showed a relation to type of situation (i.e., life decisions).

Forms of wisdom and referent. As in Study 1, in those protocols in which a form of wisdom was coded, there was a significant relationship between form of wisdom and referent, $\chi^2(2, N = 36) = 10.86$, $p < .01$; Monte-Carlo $p = .001$; 99% confidence interval $.001 \leq p \leq .002$. Of the narratives reporting empathy and support, 69.0% were about other-related situations. In contrast, all narratives referring to self-determination and assertion and all narratives referring to knowledge and flexibility concerned self-related situations.

DIVERGENCE IN STUDY 1 AND 2 FINDINGS: EMPIRICAL FOLLOW-UP

Although many of the results were confirmed across two studies, Study 2 showed a very high proportion of the wisdom form empathy and support, and did not show the life phase congruent pattern of forms of wisdom seen in Study 1. With the data available, we attempt some analyses here to address possible explanations for this finding based on sociodemographic differences between the two samples. Unavoidably, all analyses that rely on Study 2 data have low statistical power due to the small frequencies of forms of wisdom other than empathy and support.

Gender. There is some intuitive appeal to the notion that the higher proportion of women in Study 2 might account for the higher frequencies of empathy and support. In Study 1, however, there were no differences in forms of wisdom by gender, $\chi^2(2, N = 83) = 2.72$, $p = .26$. Similarly, in Study 2

² We also grouped the Study 2 participants into three age groups: below 40, 41-59, and 60 and above, to achieve closer comparability with the age groups in Study 1. This resulted in a young ($n = 4$), middle ($n = 28$), and older ($n = 11$) group. As expected, the dominant form across these groupings was empathy and support. The distribution of participants *not* showing empathy and support across the three age groups was as follows. Below age 40: one showing self-determination and assertion; 41-59: two showing self-determination and assertion, and four showing knowledge and flexibility; 60 and above: one showing self-determination and assertion, and one showing knowledge and flexibility.

there were no significant gender differences in forms of wisdom, $\chi^2(2, N = 43) = 4.44$; Monte-Carlo $p = .10$; 99% confidence interval $.09 \leq p \leq .10$ (expected frequencies below 5 in four of the six cells). A significant difference does emerge when self-determination and assertion and knowledge and flexibility are grouped into one category for comparison to Empathy and Support, $\chi^2(1, N = 43) = 4.33$, $p = .04$. Thus, in the Study 2 sample (but not in the Study 1 sample), women report empathy and support more often (87.1%) than men (58.3%).

Education and intelligence. We also examined whether educational background might be driving differences in forms of wisdom between Study 1 and 2. While education was balanced in Study 1, Study 2 participants were, on average, quite highly educated. Although this relation has no particular intuitive appeal, might higher education levels be related to higher frequencies of empathy and support? We tested relationships between forms of wisdom and education in both studies. In addition, where data was available (Study 1 only), we tested whether crystallised intelligence (HAWIE/WAIS-R vocabulary) was related to form of wisdom. In Study 1, there was no significant relationship between years of formal education and form of wisdom, $F(2, 79) = 0.26$, $MSE = 3.75$, $p = .77$. The same was true for crystallised intelligence, $F(2, 78) = 0.168$, $MSE = 5.59$, $p = .85$. In Study 2, level of education did not differ across forms of wisdom, Kruskal-Wallis $\chi^2(2, N = 43) = 3.21$, $p = .20$. In sum, these follow-up analyses suggest that neither education, nor crystallised intelligence can account for the differences in forms of wisdom across the two studies. Gender may be a relevant factor; interestingly, however, women report empathy and support more often than men only in the Study 2, but not in the Study 1, sample.

Discussion

Most Study 2 results replicated Study 1 findings. The narratives concerning wisdom events and peak experiences were mostly about fundamental events, whereas those about foolishness were not. The experienced wisdom events were clearly about important, meaningful life events. One reason why the foolishness events were not fundamental, however, may concern issues of response bias both in terms of impression management and self-protection (Paulhus, 1991). Participants may have been uncomfortable disclosing information about how they handled important life events poorly. Aside from this unwillingness to disclose to others, individuals often perceive and internally recall their own life events in a way that is self-enhancing (e.g., Greenwald, 1980; Wilson & Ross, 2001). This self-protection and/or impression management explanation of the nonfundamentality of most foolishness events cannot be ruled out. In addition, future work using terms such as “regretted event” or “unwise event” might provide a better comparison than “foolish”, which may have a light connotation and thereby elicit less fundamental events.

The life situations identified as elicitors of wisdom in Study 1 (life decisions, reactions to negative events, life management) were found in the vast majority of wisdom narratives but only in about 25% of the comparison events in Study 2. The three forms of wisdom (empathy and support, self-determination and assertion, knowledge and flexibility) were found in 84% of the wisdom narratives, but in less than 10% of both comparison narratives. Thus, our research supports three

forms of experienced wisdom: empathy and support, self-determination and assertion, and knowledge and flexibility, and provides evidence for theories suggesting that wisdom involves fundamental events, and is elicited chiefly in response to life decisions and negative life events.

There was, however, nonreplication of one Study 1 finding. Each of the forms of wisdom appeared about equally often in Study 1, and their manifestation differed by age. In Study 2, empathy and support was coded in 80% of the narratives: This lack of variation made it statistically unlikely that *any* individual difference variable (including age) could be related to the forms of wisdom.

What might explain the different relative frequencies of empathy and support across studies? We considered both instructional set and sample composition differences as potential explanations. Study 2 had slightly more explicit instructions (i.e., giving wise advice, making a wise decision, acting wisely). Though instructions were similar across studies, the mention of advice-giving could have influenced Study 2 participants to focus on empathy and support. That argument is unconvincing, however, since there is no other evidence for such specific effects of the instructions (e.g., life decisions were less common than negative events). In addition, advice-giving can involve empathy and support, but might also involve self-determination or especially knowledge and flexibility. Thus, it seems unlikely that small instructional differences account for the different pattern of empathy and support across studies. A second difference was that Study 1 participants shared a narrative concerning their wisest event, whereas Study 2 participants shared a narrative about a wise event (not necessarily the wisest). Likewise, while Study 1 participants shared narratives orally, Study 2 participants wrote theirs. Though these instruction differences are regrettable, we could not find a reasonable way for them to explain the differential pattern across studies.

Could sample size or sample composition play a role? Study 1 showed significant age effects, suggesting that sample size was not problematic for detecting group differences. The Study 2 sample is smaller overall, but has the same number of individuals per age group as Study 1 so should have similar statistical power. As the Study 2 sample is made up of participants aged between 40 and 60, the age groups are less clearly distinct than in Study 1. There was, however, no indication of the pattern of results seen in Study 1, even when only age-comparable participants were included in replication analyses. The samples were somewhat different in terms of education and gender composition, so we followed up these differences. We found no important differences in forms of wisdom by education or (additionally in Study 1, where data were available) by fluid intelligence. In Study 2, but not in Study 1, women tended to show more empathy and support than did men. This Study 2 gender difference fits with at least stereotypical conceptions of how women’s wisdom might differ from men’s (cf. Bluck & Glück, in press; Orwoll & Achenbaum, 1993). If this gender effect had held across both studies it might have shed light on the difference between the two studies. Its emergence only in Study 2 does not help to explain differences in the pattern of empathy and support that emerged across the two studies. Still, ideally Study 2 would have had a more reasonable gender balance. We recognise this as a study limitation.

Finally, in terms of sample composition differences, the replication was across Germany and the United States. Thus,

the difference we find may be due to linguistic differences between the German word “weise” and the English “wise”, or to cultural differences in implicit theories. Cultural differences in implicit theories of wisdom have been identified between Eastern and Western cultures (e.g., Takahashi & Overton, 2002; Yang, 2001). We approached this work without thinking that cultural differences would play a role. One post hoc and speculative interpretation of the difference between the two studies, however, is that Americans (regardless of age) have a socially oriented view of wisdom that results in their narratives containing largely empathy and support. Recall that across both studies empathy and support (unlike the other forms of wisdom) was most commonly seen in narratives that described situations in others’ (not one’s own) life. This social interpretation is at least consistent with previous research: Americans have been theorised to have less “social distance” between them (Lewin, 1936), empirically shown to self-disclose and share personal situations more than Germans (Plog, 1965), and to have a cultural conversation script that emphasises protecting others’ emotions (Wierzbicka, 1999). These musings on culture are highly speculative given our small database.

General discussion

The examination of wisdom through autobiographical narratives has proven to be a useful, ecologically valid method for studying experienced wisdom across the lifespan. Our critical indicators (see Study 1) suggest that both adolescents and adults are able to use their implicit theories of wisdom to remember and talk about meaningful, fundamental (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Smith & Baltes, 1990) life situations in which they experienced acting wisely. Our work neither quantifies level of wisdom based on theoretical criteria (explicit theories of wisdom; Baltes & Smith, 1990; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Sternberg, 1998) nor examines only abstract lay conceptions of wisdom (implicit theories; for reviews, see Bluck & Glück, in press; Hershey & Farrell, 1997). Instead it relies on individuals’ implicit theories, but goes beyond that by having individuals use their implicit theory to recruit actual autobiographical memories. This method of studying wisdom, though built on past approaches (e.g., Ardel, 1997; Baltes & Smith, 1990; Sternberg, 1998), provides a new avenue for investigating wisdom by fully contextualising this abstract concept in terms of how it manifests in thought and action in individuals’ lives.

When does life require wisdom?

Construing wisdom as a cognitive-affective resource, it is important to identify the life situations in which such a resource is activated. If individuals are asked to remember times when they said, thought, or did something wise in their own lives, under what circumstances do they recall displaying wisdom? Theoretical claims suggest that wisdom is applied in response to fundamental life issues (Smith & Baltes, 1990) and emerges in the face of uncertainty (Brugman, 2000), or when confronting challenging situations (Smith & Baltes, 1990). These theoretical ideas receive their first empirical support from the high levels of fundamentality, and the types of life situations described by participants across these studies. Regardless of age, gender, or culture, the situations participants discussed involved making life decisions (i.e., facing

uncertainty), reacting to negative (or challenging) circumstances, and, to a lesser extent, life management. Neither this level of fundamentality nor these types of situations were particularly evident across the comparison events. Thus, these particular life junctures and situations are critical ones for future research and education concerning the development of wisdom. They may act as turning points in the life story at any age (McAdams, 2001), depending on whether wisdom is brought to bear (Bluck & Glück, 2004).

Forms of wisdom

From a qualitative perspective, what forms does wisdom take? Empathy and support, self-determination and assertion, and knowledge and flexibility emerged in Study 1 as three major forms that wisdom takes in people’s narratives. These same forms were also apparent (though in different ratio) in the Study 2 data. For the most part, the three forms of wisdom manifest across all types of situations (in both studies). That is, one specific form was not always matched to one particular type of situation. In Study 1, however, self-determination and assertion was somewhat more common when facing important life decisions.

Quantitative empirical research has suggested no adult age differences in level of wisdom (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). Findings from Study 1 suggest, however, that individuals may experience wisdom in their own lives in a manner consistent with an ecological (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994) or lifespan psychology approach (Baltes, 1987). That is, in Study 1, the forms of wisdom most commonly displayed in the narratives were in keeping with the life phase of the individual. This finding was not, however, replicated in Study 2, where the majority of wisdom narratives, regardless of age, referred to empathy and support. We found no clear methodological differences or sample composition differences that would explain this result. One other possibility is that it is not the age of the person, but the age of the memory that they are narrating, that drives these results. We have little reason to believe this, however, since age at event was distributed quite evenly across decades in Study 1 (not measured in Study 2). Future work using the experienced wisdom procedure should always collect both age of participant and age of memory so that these independent effects can be separated out.

We have speculated on whether culture might play any role in these results, but clearly need future research to test any such speculations. Can we identify aspects of implicit theories of wisdom that are universal across cultures, and age groups, as well as across other individual-difference variables (e.g., personality)? Should we expect implicit theories to vary across individuals, potentially in ways that are adaptive to their use of wisdom in a contextually relevant manner? These questions provide fertile ground for the continued study of experienced wisdom.

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