Laypeople's Conceptions of Wisdom and Its Development: Cognitive and Integrative Views

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Objectives. This study examined individual differences in laypeople's conceptions of wisdom using a person-oriented approach, as previous studies using a priori group variables may have underestimated the variability. Although there is a tradition of examining people's implicit theories of wisdom, this study is the first to also investigate their views of how wisdom develops.

Method. A total of 1,955 participants rated the importance of 8 items concerning what wisdom is and 9 items concerning how wisdom develops.

Results. Cluster analyses identified 2 conceptions of what wisdom is. Participants with a "cognitive conception" rated cognitive and reflective characteristics as central to wisdom; participants with an "integrative conception" additionally endorsed affective characteristics. Conceptions varied by age and sex. Concerning the development of wisdom, participants with a cognitive conception viewed learning from experiences and from wise persons as central; participants with an integrative conception rated experience with life challenges as equally important.

Discussion. Laypeople's views of wisdom are not unitary, and the way in which wisdom is viewed is related to how it is seen as developing in a person's life. These empirical differences in implicit theories of wisdom map onto theoretical differences in the views of wisdom researchers.

Key Words: Development of wisdom—Implicit theories—Individual differences—Wisdom.

AFTER more than thirty years of study, researchers' definitions of wisdom converge on some elements but still differ in their emphasis of the components that comprise wisdom (Staudinger & Glück, 2011). To what extent do laypeople agree on what wisdom is? If laypeople have less variant conceptions of wisdom than researchers, perhaps lay conceptions could be useful in guiding expert theory. If laypeople also show variation, however, researchers may want to embrace a flexible model that allows different weightings of the components of wisdom.

Previous studies of lay conceptions not only identified central elements of wisdom (Ardelt, 2000; Clayton & Birren, 1980) but also found variability (Bluck & Glück, 2005). The typical components are *cognitive* (understanding the human condition and having knowledge/experience about life), *reflective* (willingness and ability to thoughtfully examine issues, including oneself), and *affective* (compassion and benevolence). Variations were investigated with respect to sex, age, occupation, and culture (Bluck & Glück, 2005). No consistent differences between males and females were found (Glück, Strasser, & Bluck, 2009). Two studies have found that, on average, older people have more differentiated conceptions and view affective aspects as more central to wisdom than younger people (Clayton & Birren, 1980; Knight & Parr, 1999). Concerning occupation, Sternberg (1985) showed that professors' wisdom conceptions differed in ways that may represent requirements of their respective disciplines. Reviewing cultural differences, Takahashi and Overton (2005) distinguished an analytic "Western" definition emphasizing knowledge and cognitive complexity and a synthetic "Eastern" definition focusing on the integration of cognition and affect. Although this distinction is supported by comparisons of Asians and Americans, it seems important to also investigate individual differences within cultures. The current study was based on the assumption that people within a "Western" society might differ in their views of the centrality of affect for wisdom.

Wisdom researchers' theories can be classified in a similar way (Takahashi & Overton, 2005). Cognition-focused theories (e.g., Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Sternberg, 1998) define wisdom as knowledge and reflection about fundamental life issues and skill in dealing with them. Integrative theories suggest that wisdom is a personality characteristic encompassing cognition, reflection, and affect (Ardelt, 2000) or see wisdom as self-transcendence (Le & Levenson, 2005), which includes aspects such as compassion and concern for others. Thus, although the theories have large commonalities, one point of contention is the weight of the affective component of wisdom.

The first goal of the current research was to examine individual differences in Western laypeople's conceptions of wisdom using a large sample and a novel cluster-analytic approach. We expected to identify a "cognitive conception," defining wisdom largely as life knowledge and insight based on reflection, and an "integrative conception" that includes those aspects but puts equal emphasis on affective characteristics. Note that all previous studies compared groups

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(e.g., age, sex) defined a priori. If people's conceptions are not strongly related to these grouping variables, this approach underestimates actual variability. The current study is novel in that it used a person-oriented approach (Bergman, Magnusson, & El-Khouri, 2003), employing cluster analyses to identify typical response patterns in the data and then relating them to individual-difference variables.

Integrative conceptions were expected to be more frequent in older participants (Clayton & Birren, 1980; Glück, Bluck, Baron, & McAdams, 2005) because life experience should foster recognition of the role of affect in dealing with challenges (Labouvie-Vief, 1998). Integrative conceptions were also expected to be more common in females: Accounts of sex differences in wisdom (Levenson, 2009; Orwoll & Achenbaum, 1993) imply that concern for others might be more commonly integrated in women's conceptions.

Conceptions of the development of wisdom

A second goal of the study was to investigate laypeople's views of how wisdom develops. The study is the first to collect empirical data on this issue. We expected participants with a cognitive conception of wisdom to view wisdom as developing through general life experience and learning from others. Individuals with an integrative conception should be more likely to see wisdom as developing through emotionally challenging life experiences (Ardelt, 2000). Analogous differences are seen in wisdom researchers' developmental theories of wisdom. Integrative theories tend to weight personal challenges more strongly than cognition-focused theories (Ardelt, 2004; Takahashi & Overton, 2005; but see Mickler & Staudinger, 2008).

Method

Participants

A wisdom questionnaire developed by the authors appeared in GEO (a German magazine similar to National Geographic but with a broader range of topics including the social sciences and humanities) as part of a contest. In total, 2,276 readers submitted questionnaires; 321 were excluded due to incomplete data or incorrect scale use. Average age of the remaining participants (881 males and 1,004 females) was 47.3 years (SD = 14.6; range: 13–93). For analyses, participants were divided into age groups by decade. Not surprisingly, the sample was highly educated: 9–10 years of school (17.1%), 12 or 13 years (20.1%), and college–university degree (62.8%). There was a significant association between educational level and sex (males: 68.2% academic degree and females: 58.1%), χ^2 (2, N = 1,912) = 22.25, $p < .001$, and age group, χ^2 (12, N = 1,889) = 249.67, $p < .001$; no participant below age 21 years, 42.1% of participants aged 21–30 years, and 67.6% of participants older than 30 years had academic degrees.

Wisdom Questionnaire

The questionnaire assessed conceptions of what wisdom is and how wisdom develops. Wordings, rationales for construction, and descriptive statistics for all items are provided in the online supplement. The eight "What is wisdom?" items were derived from research on lay and expert theories of wisdom to represent cognitive, reflective, and affective components. The nine "How does one become wise?" items represented theoretical views of wisdom's ontogeny (e.g., Baltes & Smith, 2008; Brugman, 2006) including that wisdom develops through observation, reflection, and major life challenges but also a potential role for spiritual experiences and practice (Rosch, 2008), studying philosophy, and growing older as such. Participants rated the importance of items on 5-point scales where 1 reflected no relevance and 5 reflected extremely high importance for wisdom. Participants reported their age, sex, and educational status.

Results

Cluster analyses of participants' "What is wisdom?" ratings were performed using the cross-validation procedure of Milligan and Cooper (1987) (see Supplement 1). Cluster 1 contained 37.9% and Cluster 2, 62.1% of the participants. The left panel of Figure 1 shows the item means ordered by size and direction of cluster difference. As expected, Cluster 1 represented a cognitive conception and Cluster 2, an integrative conception of wisdom. Both clusters viewed cognitive aspects (knowledge and life experience; complexity) as central. However, Cluster 2 rated affective aspects (empathy and benevolence) as markedly more important and reflective aspects as somewhat more important than Cluster 1 did.

There were significant associations between cluster membership and sex, χ^2 (1) = 6.44, p = .01, age group, χ^2 (7) = 55.51, $p < .001$, and education, χ^2 (2) = 16.32, $p < .001$. Logit analysis showed that age group and sex but not education or any interactions predicted cluster membership; thus, the relation between cluster membership and education was accounted for by the age differences in education. The cognitive conception was more frequent in males (40.9%) than in females (35.3%). Also, configural frequency analysis showed that cluster frequencies in the two youngest age groups differed significantly from each other (11–20 years: 68.0% in the cognitive cluster and 21–30 years: 51.4%) and from all older age groups (overall percentage: 35.0%; no significant differences among the older age groups).

Both clusters rated "a broad spectrum of positive and negative experiences" as most important for the development of wisdom, followed by "learning from wise individuals" (right panel, Figure 1). They also agreed that growing older as such and guided spiritual steps are least important. As expected, the clusters also differed: Participants with a cognitive conception endorsed emotionally challenging events and experiences (confronting mortality, confronting uncertainty, negative events, and spiritual experiences) to a lesser degree (although they still had means around the scale midpoint; see Figure 1) than those with an integrative conception.

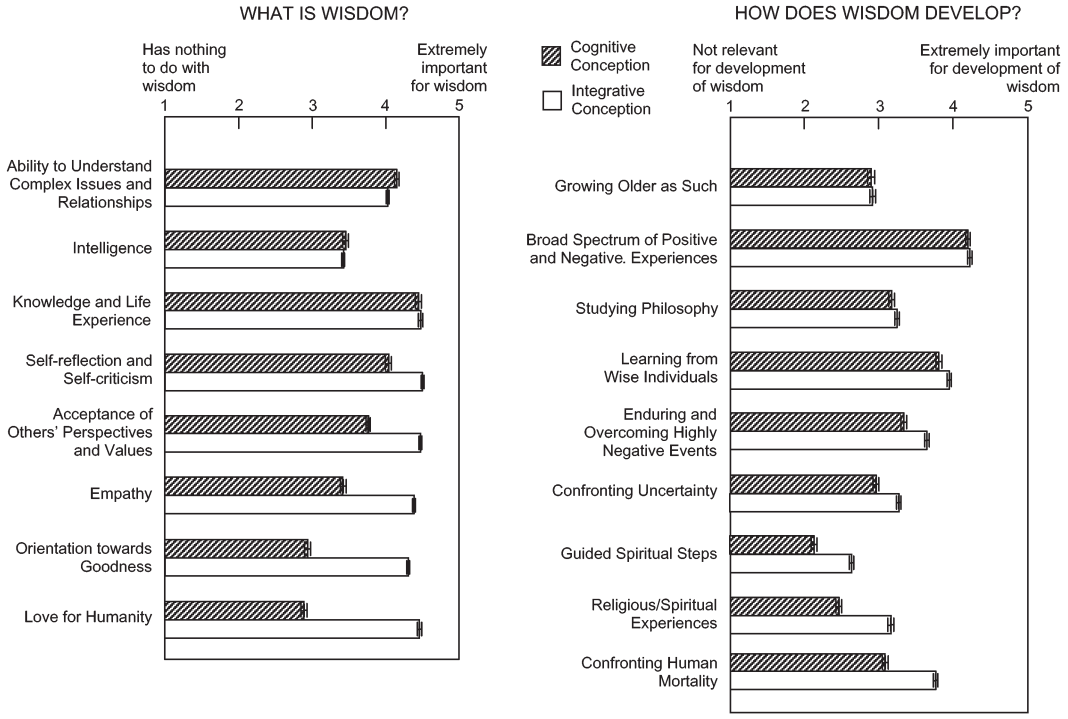

Figure 1. Means and *SE*s of the two clusters for "What is wisdom?" and "How does wisdom develop?" items.

Discussion

Using cluster analysis, this study identified two conceptions of wisdom. Both include a cognitive component (knowledge and life experience and cognitive complexity). The integrative conception views affective aspects (benevolence, empathy, and love for humanity) as markedly more central and reflective aspects (self-reflection and acceptance of others' values) as somewhat more central to wisdom than does the cognitive conception. Men were slightly more likely to endorse a cognitive conception. Less than a third of participants less than age 20 years, about half of those in their twenties, and about two thirds of those 30 years and older endorsed an integrative conception. Effects of education were accounted for by age.

Thus, the proportion of people who consider empathy and concern for others as equally central to wisdom as knowledge and life experience increases steeply in young adulthood. Although cohort effects and sample selectivity cannot be ruled out, the size of these age differences suggests a developmental shift. People's conceptions of wisdom are related to their current life contexts and developmental tasks (Glück et al., 2005). Young adulthood is typically a phase of important life changes, including starting a career, relationships, and sometimes a family (Glück & Bluck, 2007). Reasoning about these experiences (Singer & Bluck, 2001) may foster recognition of the importance of affective in addition to cognitive aspects of life challenges (Labouvie-Vief, 1998).

Views of how wisdom develops were also investigated. As expected, participants with a cognitive conception emphasized that wisdom is fostered by a broad spectrum of experiences and by learning from wise individuals. Participants with an integrative conception put additional emphasis on the role of emotionally challenging experiences (negative, uncertain, and spiritual experiences). The degree to which people see personal experience with life's challenges as important to the development of wisdom may increase with their own life experience. In particular, the relation of spirituality to wisdom is an emerging area (Le & Levenson, 2005; Rosch, 2008; Takahashi & Ide, 2003; Wink & Dillon, 2003).

Note that growing older as such was not viewed as particularly central for the development of wisdom. Most laypeople seem to agree with researchers that although correlates of older age (e.g., confronting mortality, life review) may foster wisdom, age in itself is not sufficient (Brugman, 2006; Staudinger, 1999). Studying philosophy was also seen as less central, and so were guided spiritual steps, at least in this largely Christian or secular sample.

The study has some important limitations. First, although no specific effects of education were found, participants were on average highly educated. Although the sample was large, the method of participant recruitment also suggests that participants were interested in popular science issues. Generalizations must be made with this bias in mind. Another limitation concerns the number and selection of questionnaire items. The format did not allow for including a larger set of items. The "What is wisdom?" items were

representative of current wisdom theories, but it would certainly have been better to separate knowledge and life experience, and several items for each construct would have provided a more differentiated picture. In addition, there was no direct empirical research to guide the construction of the developmental items (the rationale for each item is given in Supplement 1). Finally, we examined age, sex, and education as individual difference variables. Future research might examine the effect of life experiences (e.g., parenthood, mentorship), thereby testing the influence of people's experience on their wisdom conceptions directly.

Despite its limitations, this research identified substantial differences in laypeople's conceptions of wisdom and provides the first evidence concerning views of how wisdom develops. The findings suggest that perhaps academic controversies about the role of affect in wisdom need not be resolved unequivocally. A model that allows for differential weighting of cognitive, reflective, and affective components may be a fruitful way to move the field forward. These components may be of differential importance for different life problems and life phases, which could open new avenues for empirical research. For example, researchers could measure the components independently and compare their developmental trajectories. Perhaps, people's implicit theories of wisdom reflect quite accurately what they have learned in different life phases.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material can be found at: http://psychsocgerontology.oxfordjournals.org/

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