

Cambridge University Press

0521367182 - Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins, and Development - Edited by Robert J. Sternberg
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Its nature, origins, and development

Edited by

ROBERT J. STERNBERG

Yale University



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Preface

Wisdom is about as elusive as psychological constructs get. It is perhaps for this reason that it is one of the least studied such constructs. Indeed, few people even view wisdom as defining a field of inquiry, in the way that, say, perception, learning, thinking, intelligence, or creativity would be viewed as defining fields of inquiry. But within the past few years, a field that came close to being a nonentity has burgeoned, and the present book is an attempt to document the progress that has been made – mostly during the 1980s – toward understanding wisdom and to point the way for future theory and research.

Fields of knowledge go through a series of overlapping periods, which might roughly be characterized in terms of four stages:

1. an initial stage in which people become interested in a phenomenon and start thinking about how to study it;
2. an early developmental stage in which theory and research really get going and people try to set paradigms and convince others of the worth of their paradigms;
3. a mature stage in which one or more of a small number of paradigms become prominent while others wither on the vine, and a bevy of researchers further develop those paradigms that have passed the early stages;
4. and a postmature stage in which researchers become frustrated with inconsistencies in experimental results and with the inability of the going paradigm or paradigms to answer the questions they really want to answer.

During the postmature stage, people are searching around for new paradigms. If they succeed, they enter the first stage, which merges almost imperceptibly with the last. If they do not succeed, the field usually becomes dormant until one or more investigators with some new ideas reinitiate the first stage.

I believe that the ideal time to edit a book on a topic is during the second stage of development. During the first stage of development, there is not enough research and often not enough well-formulated ideas to support a substantial book. By the third stage, the going paradigms are already established, so that an edited book serves less to guide a field than to review what has already been done. This latter is a valuable function but I believe results in a book that is less influential because the ways of the field have already been set. Of course, by this third stage there is more to review and less

likelihood that the leads provided in the book will be viewed as false. But not to worry, because by the end of the fourth stage, all of the leads will be viewed as false anyway – as having led to a dead-end or down a garden path with no clear end.

It was a combination of my interest in the topic of wisdom with my perception of the field as being in the second stage of development that encouraged me to initiate the present project. I came to believe that after years of being moribund, the field was experiencing a rebirth, and that the time to nurture the field in its growing years had come. I hope, of course, that readers of this book will view it as serving that function.

This book is intended for advanced undergraduates, graduate students, and professionals interested in understanding the nature of wisdom. Although the authors of the book are all psychologists, many of them draw heavily upon the philosophical literature, and hence I believe the book will be of interest to philosophers as well as psychologists. Within psychology, the authors draw upon the theories and methods of developmental, cognitive, social, personality, differential, and educational psychology, and hence I believe that the book will be readable by individuals in many areas of specialization. To my knowledge, it is the only book of its kind, and hence I believe that it will be indispensable reading for those wishing a broad review of current psychological thinking about wisdom.

As usual, there are several people to thank for helping this book come to be. Most important are the authors: This was that rare edited book where everyone asked to contribute agreed to do so and then actually came through with a chapter. I am particularly grateful to Paul Baltes: It was while listening to him lecture about the results of his program of research on wisdom, probably the most comprehensive such program in the field, that I became convinced that this book could become a reality. I am also grateful to Susan Milmoe, my acquisitions editor at Cambridge University Press, for supporting this project, as she has supported many others. Finally, I wish to thank my children, Seth and Sara, whose entrance into the world probably taught me more about wisdom and the need for it than has any other single event in my life. We all hope that the current children of the world will grow up to have more wisdom than we have had: If they don't, there may not be a world in which their children can have the chance to have more wisdom than their parents.

RJS

September 1989