

PART I

Introduction to Wisdom Theory and Research

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-316-51463-4 — The Psychology of Wisdom
Edited by Robert J. Sternberg , Judith Glück
Excerpt
[More Information](#)

CHAPTER I

*Introduction**What Is Wisdom and Why Is It Important?*¹

Robert J. Sternberg and Judith Glück

1.1 Introduction

There are many tales in great works of literature, including religious literature, of people who, by any standard, would be considered exceptionally wise. For example, King Solomon, in the Old Testament, allegedly discovered which of two women was the true mother of a child by suggesting that the child be cut in half, and each woman be given half. He believed that the woman who rejected the offer would be, for sure, the true mother of the child. In the New Testament, Jesus is alleged to have told the story of the Good Samaritan, who helps a Jew who has been robbed and beaten, despite the fact that, at the time, the Jews and the Samaritans detested each other. And the Buddha is quoted as having said that the best ornament is humility, and the greatest wealth, **wisdom**. The wisdom shown by King Solomon in his dealings with the alleged mothers, by Jesus in his story of the Good Samaritan, and by the Buddha in his recognition of the importance of wisdom, is the topic of this chapter and of this book.

Stories of wisdom are not limited to the murky past. In modern times, Nelson Mandela transformed himself from a violent revolutionary into one of the greatest and wisest leaders that the world has seen in a long time, bringing peace to a country, South Africa, that had been torn by dissension and violence. Martin Luther King, Jr., of the USA, defied enormous societal pressure and imprisonment to become one of the foremost leaders advocating civil rights and equality for all. In recent times, Malala Yousafzai fought for rights for women in Pakistan and got shot in the face for doing so. Even after the shooting, she continued to campaign for human rights. And Alexei Navalny fought for human rights in Russia, was poisoned, in all likelihood at the direction of the Russian government, and almost died as a result. Upon miraculously recovering, he returned to Russia again to fight for human rights, only to be imprisoned. Wisdom and the courage that goes with it are not stories just from the past. They are stories of current times as well.

If one thing has become abundantly clear in modern times, it is the importance and, indeed, the indispensable nature of wisdom to societies around the world (Sternberg, 2019a). We sometimes refer to the world today as a “knowledge society,” to distinguish it from earlier industrial society, where the role of industry was king, and from pre-industrial societies, where industry had not yet taken over the means of production. A knowledge society is one in which knowledge – what you know and what you know how to do – drives society and its development. The importance attached to knowledge in today’s world is shown by the importance attached to

¹ This chapter draws in part on ideas earlier presented in Sternberg, R. J. (2019a). Race to Samarra: the critical importance of wisdom in the world today. In R. J. Sternberg and J. Glück, eds., *The Cambridge Handbook of Wisdom*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 3–9.

education – to college and university degrees attesting to one’s level of, and success in, becoming educated.

This chapter, and many of the chapters to follow, will argue that we may need to shift our emphasis – that what matters most to the world today is not knowledge, but rather how we use the knowledge we have. And what matters especially is not just any use of that knowledge, but rather, especially, the wise use of that knowledge.

1.2 What Is Wisdom?

What, exactly, is wisdom? In this textbook you will find many definitions of wisdom. We shall not attempt an exact definition, because the field does not yet have a consensus. However, there are some characteristics that most researchers and experts on wisdom would agree are characteristics of the wise person (see, e.g., Grossmann et al., 2019; Jeste et al., 2010; Sternberg & Glück, 2019; Sternberg et al., 2019). Here, we first discuss some general points about what wisdom is and what it is not, with the intention of illustrating why today’s world urgently needs more wisdom.

1.2.1 *Wise People Seek a Common Good*

Wise people have in common that they are not focused only on their own benefit, or on the benefit of those who are in some way like them – their metaphorical “tribe.” In making judgments and decisions, in general, they think beyond themselves and those who are somehow like them – family, friends, colleagues, or people of the same nationality, ethnicity, or other group.

It is too easy, in making our decisions, just to consider our own interests and those of others like us, especially in an age in which self-preoccupation and narcissism seem to be on the rise. Often, success in individualistic societies is about one’s own outcomes, without considering also how those outcomes affect others. As a result, people no longer work together as harmoniously as they sometimes did in the past.

In the USA, in the third decade of the twenty-first century, the two major political parties, the Republicans and the Democrats, have become practically incapable of working together and cooperating toward the achievement of a **common good**. In many other countries, political polarization is increasing as well. In every country, strict guidelines have been set with regard to priority levels for people receiving a COVID-19 vaccine, but this has not stopped many individuals from relentlessly trying to push ahead of others in higher-priority categories. In some cases, the violations of protocol have been ridiculous, as in the case of a multi-millionaire couple who flew to Canada’s remote Yukon Territory and pretended to be local motel workers in order to become eligible for the vaccine, which they did indeed receive (Farzan, 2021).

Why is a common good so very important? In a less connected world, it actually probably was less important. It mattered for communities, then states or provinces, then perhaps nearby countries that might go to war with each other. But today the entire world is highly interconnected. What people do in one country can affect countries halfway around the world. In case there are any doubters, perhaps nothing showed this interconnectedness better than the worldwide spread of COVID-19. Although the origin of the particular novel coronavirus is unknown, it appears likely to have started in or near some kind of animal market, probably in or near Wuhan, China (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). The world would soon discover how

an isolated event in China – or anywhere – could become a worldwide problem that would cost millions of people their lives, and sicken many millions more.

It appears clear that local Chinese government officials initially hid the existence and certainly the severity of the outbreak from national officials (Wong et al., 2020). But then, other nations did not realize the severity of the outbreak. Today, that is all history. An event that once would have remained a problem in a very localized part of the world had caused a catastrophic global mess.

Society is more fractured recently than it has been in many years. Competition rather than cooperation with respect to COVID-19 vaccines is one example, but there are so many others. One obvious example is the unprecedented incursion into the US Capitol Building that occurred on January 6, 2021. Many of the raiders appear to have believed they were acting like patriots in invading the Capitol Building, trashing part of it, and causing the death of five people. Some planned to take hostages, or worse (Biesecker et al., 2021). Many of these people were well educated. What has gone wrong? How could such events take place in the twenty-first century?

1.3 Why Intelligence Is Not Enough

Intelligence – the ability to learn, reason, and adapt to the environment – is often viewed as multipartite. Modern models of intelligence divide the construct into many factors and hierarchically arranged subfactors (Carroll, 1993; McGrew, 2005). Many of the commonly used models derive from the work of Cattell (1971), who distinguished between crystallized and fluid intelligence.

1.3.1 *Crystallized Intelligence*

Crystallized intelligence is basically knowledge base. It is what you know. When we talk about a “knowledge society,” we are talking about the build-up of crystallized intelligence. Crystallized intelligence and the knowledge that represents it are clearly needed, in some degree, for wisdom. One cannot make recommendations about a field or about the world, in general, if one’s knowledge base about the field or the world is severely limited. One great advantage of the Internet is that knowledge has been made much more accessible to people around the world. Unfortunately, this has also meant that falsehoods – so-called “alternative facts” – which are sometimes hard to distinguish from actual facts, have become much more widespread. In addition, maybe the concept of a knowledge society itself is not as good an idea as it might first seem to be.

First, having knowledge provides no guarantee that the knowledge will be used wisely. Many of the US congresspeople who are at each other’s throats have degrees – in some cases, advanced degrees – from prestigious colleges and universities. Their well-developed knowledge bases have not helped them to work together effectively. Similarly, government officials around the world had been warned for years – decades, in fact – that a pandemic of some kind was just over the horizon. Yet almost all of them were ill-prepared when the pandemic finally arrived in 2020.

It gets worse. Nazi doctors had medical degrees and others among the Nazis had other kinds of advanced degrees. Not only did their knowledge not stop them from slaughtering people, but that knowledge was actually used by many of them in the service of the creation of a spurious ideology of racial superiority. Going back a bit further, during the US Civil War, many educated, even

highly educated White people in the South supported slavery, while many in the North opposed it. A deadly war was fought in part over whether slavery should be allowed to exist.

Knowledge is important, but, in the end, what matters most is how that knowledge is deployed. People can know a lot and have all kinds of advanced degrees attesting to that knowledge, but possessing knowledge is, at best, necessary but not sufficient for wise thinking. And it is even worse than that, because there is quite general agreement that the kind of knowledge that most matters for wisdom is not academic or formal knowledge, but rather informal knowledge about people and about life. This kind of knowledge is sometimes also called tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1976; Sternberg et al., 2000). It is what one needs to know in order to succeed in everyday life that is not formally taught, and that may not even be verbalized. Wisdom is built primarily, although not exclusively, on a foundation of informal knowledge (Baltes & Staudinger, 1993, 2000; Sternberg, 1998, 2019b; Webster, 2003, 2007; Weststrate & Glück, 2017). People can have a lot of academic knowledge but lack informal knowledge about the world, or simply not know how to use that knowledge.

1.3.2 *Fluid Intelligence*

Fluid intelligence is one's ability to solve relatively novel problems or more familiar problems that are nevertheless presented in relatively novel contexts. According to Cattell's theory, fluid intelligence gives rise to crystallized intelligence (Cattell, 1971).

Fluid intelligence is measured by tests such as number series (e.g., 2, 5, 8, 11?) and word classification (e.g., Which word does not belong? BOAT, SHIP, SAIL, VESSEL). Fluid intelligence, like crystallized intelligence, is needed for wisdom. Wise people are always confronting novel tasks and situations largely unlike any they have encountered before. And yet . . .

Fluid intelligence, like crystallized intelligence, may not be all it is cracked up to be. James Flynn (1987, 2012) discovered that, during the twentieth century, the IQs of adults around the world increased by roughly 30 points between 1900 and 2000. That's about 3 points every 10 years. A difference of 30 points roughly represents the difference between a person who is identified as borderline mentally challenged and someone identified as intellectually average, or between a person who is identified as intellectually average and someone identified as borderline intellectually gifted. Clearly, that is a huge difference. The average IQ remained 100 only because test publishers re-normed the tests. That is, they kept resetting the average to 100, regardless of the number of correct answers that test-takers supplied. Most of this gain – really, almost all of it – was in fluid intelligence.

Flynn (2012) has explained this difference as reflecting the increased cognitive demands of the modern world. Part of the difference may also be the result of more intelligence-oriented parenting and early education. In any case, IQs are not fixed generationally. Rather, they respond to the demands of the environment. However, Flynn and many others have recognized that, even with all those IQ points, people do not seem to be doing such a great job in responding to all the challenges the world presents. The initial response to the pandemic of COVID-19 was a mess. Governments all over the world bungled the response – first in being unprepared, then in stopping the spread of the disease, and then in equitably distributing the vaccine. Governments have also failed to rise to the challenge of global climate change, which has been getting worse and worse as governments, at best, talk the talk without walking the walk. And then there is the absurd overuse of antibiotics, which has resulted in many harmful bacteria being enabled to develop mutations

that would allow them to resist the effects of the antibiotics. Experts have been warning about all these dangers for a long time, but despite all their collective intelligence, many governments do not seem to be heeding the warnings.

As Flynn (2012) recognized, the greatest challenges of the twenty-first century are not in our levels of intelligence, but rather in how our intelligence is deployed. Sternberg (2021a) has even defined a construct of *adaptive intelligence*, or the intelligence that is needed to make the world a better place. And a key part of this adaptive intelligence is wisdom – seeking a common good rather than using our own intelligence only for our own exclusive benefit. So, intelligence seems to be up to today’s challenges only if it includes a wisdom component.

1.4 Why Creativity Is Not Enough

Creativity offers possibilities for innovation that intelligence, at least as traditionally defined, does not offer. Creativity is usually defined as the making of a contribution – an idea or a product – that is both novel and useful or effective in some way (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2019). Intelligence tests measure primarily your knowledge (crystallized intelligence) and your analytical thinking with that knowledge (fluid intelligence), but creativity goes beyond this in requiring one, somehow, to go beyond the given in a meaningful way.

Many of the greatest ideas and inventions have been a result of human creativity. Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, Plato’s *Republic*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Mozart’s *Requiem*, Marie Curie’s explorations of radium, and, in a different domain, Jacinda Ardern’s plan to keep New Zealand almost free of COVID-19, all required creativity. Without creativity, we would not have computers, cell phones, TVs, or flush toilets, for that matter. Creativity has made possible a world that would scarcely have been imaginable in the past, except in science fiction (itself a product of creativity).

However, creativity has not yet been adequate to solve many of the world’s greatest problems. Oddly enough, creativity has been, in part, responsible for many of these problems. For example, global climate change is due in large part to human-caused innovations, such as internal-combustion engines, industrial farming, and various kinds of pollutants emitted by factories. Antibiotics were a wonderful creative innovation that was undermined by humans when they decided to overuse them. Nuclear technology could have been, and still is and can be, a tremendous innovation with regard to production of energy, but it also has been used to produce weapons of mass destruction. And human errors in nuclear plants can be catastrophic, as they were at Chernobyl.

Because creativity has been used for negative as well as positive purposes, much as intelligence has been, some investigators of creativity distinguish between positive and negative creativity. Positive creativity is the production of ideas, products, and any innovations at all that are novel and useful, as per the definition of creativity, but that are also beneficial in some way to humanity at any level (Clark & James, 1999; James et al., 1999; James & Taylor, 2010; Sternberg, 2021b, in press). *Transformational creativity* goes beyond positive creativity, in that it seeks transformational change that makes the world a better place (Sternberg, 2021c). Positive creativity can be distinguished from negative creativity, which is creativity that is in some way, and at some level, harmful to humanity. At its extreme, negative creativity is sometimes referred to as *malevolent creativity* (Cropley et al., 2008, 2010, 2014), which is creativity that is intended to be harmful. Scams and hacking of people’s computer accounts are examples of malevolent creativity.

Positive creativity can be viewed in different ways, but our way of viewing it is as creativity tempered by wisdom. It is the utilization of creativity to attain some kind of common good, even

if at a very basic level, such as the well-being of people close to one, whereby that well-being does not come at other people's expense.

Clearly, the judgment of something as either positive or negative is, to some extent, in the eye of the beholder. However, believers in the value of wisdom as a psychological construct generally agree that there is some sense of common good that rises above people's mere personal opinions or ideologies. For example, the so-called golden rule – to act toward others as you would have them act toward you – is a principle of wisdom that seems to transcend boundaries of personal taste. Similarly, acting so as to minimize harm to others, so far as is possible, is a precept of wisdom that would seem to transcend personal idiosyncratic judgments.

Thus, both intelligence and creativity in themselves are not sufficient for negotiating the serious problems that face the world today, unless they draw upon wisdom.

1.5 Why Wisdom Is So Hard to Find

Why is it so much easier to find intelligence and creativity in the real world than to find wisdom? One can fairly easily think of intelligent leaders, relatively easily think of creative leaders, but only with difficulty call to mind wise leaders. We make some suggestions here regarding the paucity of wisdom, building upon Sternberg (2019a). Basically, the reasons amount to there being so many other options besides wisdom, many of which are rewarded more, in the short term at least, than is wisdom.

1.5.1 *Kinds of Wisdom*

Wisdom can apply, outside oneself, across domains of inquiry and within specific domains of inquiry, or it can apply to oneself. For example, Staudinger (2019) has suggested that wisdom is quite different when it is applied outside oneself to others, and Grossmann et al. (2019) have suggested that wisdom can be quite domain-specific.

Table 1.1 lists the kinds of wisdom that might be relevant to dealing with a wide variety of situations (domain-general wisdom), specific kinds of situations (domain-specific wisdom), and

Table 1.1 *Kinds of wisdom*

Depth of wisdom: Domain application of wisdom:	<i>Deep (D)</i>	<i>Shallow (S)</i>
<i>Domain general (G)</i>	GD Deeply insightful advice across domains	GS Modestly insightful advice across domains
<i>Domain specific (S)</i>	SD Deeply insightful advice in a single domain	SS Modestly insightful advice in a single domain
<i>Personal (P)</i>	PD Deeply insightful realization regarding oneself	PS Modestly insightful realization regarding oneself

Rows (first letter in acronym): G = domain general; S = domain specific; P = personal.
 Columns (second letter in acronym): D = deep; S = shallow.

oneself (personal wisdom) (Sternberg, 2019a). An example of domain-general wisdom would be acting toward others as you would have them act toward you. An example of domain-specific wise advice would be to ensure that you cite relevant previous scholarship upon which you base your new arguments in a scholarly paper. An example of personal wisdom would be to recognize that if you study wisdom but tend to be arrogant or selfish, you must try to control those tendencies because they will undermine your credibility if your audience finds out about them. People may be generally wise but not wise when it comes to matters concerning themselves.

The problem with regard to wisdom being displayed in the world is twofold. If, indeed, much of wisdom is specific to particular kinds of domains and situations, wisdom across all of these domains and situations might be hard to attain, given the amount of tacit knowledge that one would need in order to be wise across such a wide range of human endeavors. As with creativity, which tends to be largely domain-specific (Baer, 2015) – in part because of the domain-specific knowledge needed within a given domain in order to be creative – people might exhaust their domain-specific wisdom pretty quickly outside domains in which they possess high levels of world knowledge. Furthermore, if personal wisdom is indeed a relatively distinct construct, in the manner of interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences in Gardner's (2011) theory of multiple intelligences, then people might be wise with respect to either certain domains or personal situations, but not both. In other words, wisdom might be out there, but just be very limited in how widely it can be applied.

The second issue highlighted in Table 1.1 is that wisdom can be either deep or shallow. When wisdom is shallow, it analyzes a problem but at a superficial level. Superficial wisdom is probably not sufficient to solve challenging real-world problems. The result may be that the solution just is not wise enough to provide a basis for dealing adequately with the problem at hand. Some scholars do not even view shallow wisdom as actual wisdom, but rather as an attempt at wisdom.

1.5.2 *Non-Wisdom*

A second class or problem in the manifestation of wisdom in the real world is that so much of what appears to be wisdom is not in fact wisdom (Sternberg, 2019a). Table 1.2 lists six kinds of non-wisdom that might appear, at first glance, to be wisdom, but that in fact are not.

The first kind of non-wisdom is *quasi-wisdom*, in which there is a limited definition of the common good. Someone may believe that they are being wise, but they apply their quasi-wisdom only to people like themselves or to people whom they perceive as being members of the same

Table 1.2 *Kinds of non-wisdom*

<i>Kind of non-wisdom</i>	<i>Manifestation</i>
Quasi-wisdom: limited definition of common good	Incomplete specification of affected stakeholders
Quasi-wisdom: limited balancing of interests	Imbalance of interests to favor one group over another
Veneer of wisdom	False appearance of wisdom as a result of position of power or authority
Egocentric pseudo-wisdom	False appearance of wisdom motivated by self-interest
Dark pseudo-wisdom	False appearance of wisdom motivated by evil intentions
Unrealized wisdom	Wisdom in words but not deeds

tribe as them, such as people from their family or extended family, or of their race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, or whatever.

The second kind of non-wisdom is *quasi-wisdom*, in which there is a failure to adequately **balance** – to weigh fairly against each other – different and often competing interests. Rather, the quasi-wise person favors the interests of one group or some groups over others, whether deliberately or inadvertently, or simply balances the scale heavily in their own favor.

The third kind of non-wisdom is the *veneer of wisdom*, in which the individual is labeled by some in authority or by some followers as wise, merely by dint of their position of power or authority or their charismatic leadership. They may have no wisdom at all, but their followers act, either voluntarily (as in a voluntary cult) or involuntarily (as in a dictatorship, often disguised as a democracy), as though the individual is wise.

The fourth kind of non-wisdom is *egocentric pseudo-wisdom*, which is the false appearance of wisdom that is really motivated by self-interest. The individual acts as though they are helping others, although they are only interested in benefiting themselves.

The fifth kind of non-wisdom is *dark pseudo-wisdom*, in which the false appearance of wisdom is motivated by evil intentions, such as to harm others.

The sixth kind of non-wisdom is *unrealized wisdom*, which is the production of a wise course of action that is not then followed through with action. It is not easy to generate wise ideas, but it is far easier to generate a wise idea than to enact it, as there is often serious opposition to the enactment of wise ideas.

In summary, there are at least six kinds of ideas that can appear at first to be wise but which, upon closer examination, turn out not to be.

1.5.3 Foolishness

People also fail to be wise because they succumb to **foolishness**. Intelligence is no guarantee against foolishness. Rather, people who are intelligent may actually be more susceptible to foolishness because they believe they are immune to it. Table 1.3 lists eight kinds of foolishness, although there are certainly others (Sternberg, 2005, 2019a).

First, people are unrealistically optimistic when they believe that, because an idea is theirs, it must be good. Second, people are egocentric when they believe that, in the end, everything is about them. Third, people are falsely omniscient when they mistakenly believe they know everything, or at least everything that is needed to solve a complex problem. Fourth, people are

Table 1.3 *Kinds of foolishness*

<i>Fallacy</i>	<i>Manifestation</i>
Unrealistic optimism	“If it’s my idea, it must be good”
Egocentrism	“It’s all about me”
False omniscience	“I know everything I need to know”
False omnipotence	“I am all-powerful”
False invulnerability	“No one can get back at me”
Ethical disengagement	“Ethics are important for other people”
Myside (confirmation) bias	“So many others just don’t see things as clearly as I do”
Sunk cost fallacy	“I’ve already invested so much in this way of doing things”