

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WISDOM

The Psychology of Wisdom: An Introduction is the first comprehensive coursebook on wisdom, offering an engaging, balanced, and expert introduction to the psychology of wisdom. It provides a comprehensive and up-to-date account of the psychological science of wisdom, covering wide-ranging perspectives. The extensive pedagogical features in each chapter include a glossary, bolded key terms, discussion questions, a brief description of the authors' research interests, and practical applications. The topics covered include: philosophical foundations, folk conceptions, and psychological theories of wisdom; the relationship of wisdom to morality and ethics, to personality and well-being, and to emotion; wisdom and leadership; and wisdom and social policy. These topics are presented in a non-technical, bias-free, and student-friendly manner. Written by the most eminent experts in the field, this is the definitive coursebook for undergraduate and graduate students, as well as for interested professionals and researchers.

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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WISDOM

An Introduction

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Preface

During the twentieth century, IQs around the world increased by 30 points. Yet this steep rise in IQ seems to have achieved little in helping humanity to address and successfully cope with the enormous challenges that face the world today – global climate change, air and water pollution, pandemics, hunger, political instability, global inequality, and weapons of mass destruction, to name just a few. Something beyond IQ, and the education that is based on it, is needed to successfully confront these major problems. We suggest that this “something” is wisdom.

Throughout human history, wisdom has been defined in many different ways, and there is still no one universally accepted definition. However, most scholars of wisdom would agree that wise people are concerned not just for their own interests and those of their friends and family, but also for those of humanity at large. They seek to create a better world by making a positive, meaningful, and potentially enduring difference, whether at the level of family, community, country, world, or some other level.

Not long ago, the field of wisdom research was moribund, at least among psychologists. Among philosophers and theologians, of course, the study of wisdom has long been a major pursuit. Their methods are not empirical, and it was not clear to empirical researchers just how to study or even to think about wisdom.

Perhaps the scholars who turned the field around most were Paul Baltes, Director of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin, and Vivian Clayton, who started off as a graduate student at the University of Southern California. In the latter half of the twentieth century, Baltes proposed a theory and conducted empirical tests of it that still figure prominently in the field of wisdom research today. Clayton wrote an impressive theoretical and empirical doctoral dissertation on wisdom that also led to one of the earliest theories. The field was ready to take off – and it did.

In 1990, Cambridge University Press published a volume titled *Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins, and Development*, edited by Robert J. Sternberg. The volume contained essays by many of the major figures in the field who were studying wisdom at that time. According to Google Scholar, the book has been cited over 1000 times, but the individual essays in the book have been cited far more often. Much of the work was still theoretical, but it was clear that psychologists were converging on what they believed to be an important but neglected construct in psychology. The work of Baltes and Clayton helped enormously, because it provided measurement tools. However, the field was still in its infancy and, for some time, Baltes’s research group was by far the best known one studying wisdom empirically.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the field had begun to diversify, and research on wisdom was making real progress. This work was captured in the *Handbook of Wisdom: Psychological Perspectives*, edited by Robert J. Sternberg and Jennifer Jordan, and published in

2005. The book represented the state of the field at the turn of the twenty-first century, and according to Google Scholar it has been cited around 400 times, but again the individual chapters have been cited far more often.

In 2011, Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe published *Practical Wisdom: The Right Way to Do the Right Thing*, a fine and well-regarded exposition of the importance of wisdom in everyday life. In 2014, Michel Ferrari and Nic Weststrate published *The Scientific Study of Personal Wisdom: From Contemplative Traditions to Neuroscience*, an edited volume that provided a good summary of the state of the field.

The field was now growing exponentially. The handbook was out of date within less than a decade, and in 2019, Cambridge University Press published the *Cambridge Handbook of Wisdom*, edited by Robert J. Sternberg and Judith Glück.

Whereas the first Cambridge volume, *Wisdom* (Sternberg, 1990), ran to 352 fairly small pages, and *A Handbook of Wisdom* (Sternberg & Jordan, 2005) had 406 pages, *The Cambridge Handbook of Wisdom* (Sternberg & Glück, 2019) ran to 828 pages. It is probably fair to say that not only the book length but also the amount of theory and research roughly doubled between 2005 and 2019.

Motivation for Writing This Book

At the time of writing, the topic of wisdom is producing 3.5 million hits in Google Scholar and 388 million hits in Google. However, until now there has been no widely available textbook on the subject of psychological approaches to wisdom, despite the importance of the field not only to psychology, but also to the world.

Our motivation for editing this book has therefore been to produce the first and, at the time of publication, the only widely available textbook on the psychology of wisdom. Our goal is to facilitate the teaching of a course on the topic by faculty in psychology, human development, and related disciplines.

The Target Readership for the Book

The primary audience for the book is upper-division undergraduates and graduate students who are studying wisdom in the context of psychology and related social-science disciplines. In addition, there may be laypeople who are interested in educating themselves on the topic, but who would find the full *Cambridge Handbook of Wisdom* too forbidding.

The Concept of a Multi-Contributor Textbook

This is an edited textbook containing contributions from multiple authors. The concept underlying an edited textbook is different from that underlying a textbook written by one or just a few authors. There are two obvious potential drawbacks – that the book will not have a single coherent point of view, and that there will be differences in the writing styles among the various chapters.

First, let us consider the fact that, instead of representing a single coherent point of view, the book will offer multiple viewpoints. This actually reflects the state of the field of wisdom today, and is likely to be the state of the field for a long time to come. In contrast to, say, the fields of physics or chemistry, there is no single unified consensus point of view on major issues. An edited

textbook represents the diversity of the field. The book can and should be reflective of the current state of the field, showing the various viewpoints that exist, and the strengths and weaknesses of the different approaches. One of us is currently using a textbook in one of his courses that takes a single position in a field where there are diverse points of view. The downside to this textbook is that the professor constantly has to be reminding students that the author has a strong point of view that does not represent a consensus in the field. The author also often fails to adequately address other points of view, the reasons why his scholarly competitors hold those views, and the evidence supporting them.

Second, with regard to writing style, we have found that careful editing can achieve a largely unified sense of writing style within a multi-contributor book. For example, *Human Intelligence: An Introduction*, edited by Robert J. Sternberg and published by Cambridge University Press, has multiple authors, but the combined work of the book's editor and the editing team at Cambridge University Press has provided a strong sense of a unified volume.

An edited textbook also has three additional advantages.

First, the involvement of multiple authors ensures that various well thought out points of view will be adequately represented and defended. In the field of wisdom there are few, if any, final answers. It is a field that, historically, has invited many different perspectives, some of which, such as the philosophical one, lie outside of psychology proper. Having multiple authors ensures that the different points of view will be properly characterized, and their strengths and weaknesses elucidated.

Second, the field of wisdom has quickly expanded from what it was in earlier times. Researchers have specialized in different topics within the field, which now represents an almost astonishing array of different approaches and kinds of expertise. One of the advantages of an edited textbook is that it draws on diverse types of expertise that are unlikely to be found together in any one person.

Third, an edited textbook can present the viewpoints of the authors at first hand, ensuring that they are correctly represented and that the current research is being described by the people who are actually conducting much of that research.

On balance, we believe that an edited textbook has advantages over one written by one or just a few authors. These advantages have been shown in *Human Intelligence: An Introduction* and in another textbook, namely *Creativity: An Introduction*, edited by James Kaufman and Robert Sternberg. Both are published by Cambridge University Press.

The present textbook is divided into 15 chapters in order to provide coverage of all the main topics currently being investigated in the field. At this length, the book fits conveniently into a one-semester course. The content of the chapters is briefly summarized below.

Part I Introduction to Wisdom Theory and Research

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

This chapter introduces the concept of wisdom, defines it, and describes why it is so important in today's world.

2 Philosophical Foundations for the Study of Wisdom

This chapter covers the philosophical literature that has served as the core for the psychological study of wisdom, from the time of Plato and Aristotle up to the present day.

3 *Folk Conceptions of Wisdom around the World*

This chapter discusses how laypeople have conceived of wisdom in cultures around the world, both in the past and at the present time. It also explores how wisdom is in part a socio-culturally defined construct, and how folk theories (also known as “implicit theories”) determine the way in which people judge the wisdom of others and of themselves in daily life.

4 *Psychological Theories of Wisdom*

This chapter describes past and current theories of wisdom, and the expansion from only one or two theories to what has come to seem like a whole panoply of them. It also discusses the similarities and differences between these theories, and considers whether there are any core elements that are shared by all of them.

5 *Wisdom: Situational, Dispositional, or Both?*

This chapter discusses how situational variables, such as emotional states and the environmental context in which a person is operating, affect wisdom both positively and negatively. In particular, the chapter considers whether wisdom may be a trait, or whether instead a person’s wisdom is totally determined by the situation they are in.

6 *Measurement of Wisdom*

This chapter discusses various approaches to the measurement of wisdom, and describes studies that have been conducted in order to validate these approaches.

Part II Foundations of Wisdom in the Individual and in the World

7 *Wisdom, Creativity, and Intelligence*

This chapter reviews how wisdom relates to two germane constructs – intelligence and creativity. It explores the ways in which wisdom is similar to and different from these constructs, and raises the question of whether we really need three separate constructs.

8 *Wisdom, Morality, and Ethics*

This chapter reviews the interrelationships between wisdom, morality, and ethics. It also asks whether it is possible to be wise without being ethical, or to be ethical without being wise.

9 *Wisdom, Personality, and Well-Being*

This chapter discusses how personality and well-being relate to wisdom. Five-factor theory and other theories of personality are considered. It explores what traits are associated with higher levels of wisdom, and what traits are linked with lower levels. Does wisdom contribute to psychological and subjective well-being, and if so, how?

10 *The Wisdom in Emotions*

This chapter discusses the role of emotion in wisdom, by considering how emotion can facilitate or impede wisdom, and how wisdom interacts with emotions under a range of different circumstances.

*Part III The Modifiability of Wisdom**11 The Development of Wisdom*

This chapter describes how wisdom develops, from childhood through old age. It also considers the longstanding debate as to whether, in adulthood, wisdom increases or decreases with age, or whether it remains largely unchanged.

12 Interventions for Developing Wisdom

This chapter describes how schools and parents can teach children in a way that enhances the wisdom of young people.

*Part IV Wisdom in the World**13 Wisdom in the Professions*

This chapter describes wisdom as it is manifested in various professions, and how it can be developed through those professions.

14 Wisdom and Leadership

This chapter describes the characteristics of wise leadership, and why wise leadership is so important for the world today. It also discusses why people often fear wise leaders and instead choose “toxic” leaders.

15 Wisdom and Social Policy

This chapter describes how wisdom can and should be incorporated into social-policy decisions. How can wisdom help the world to address the problems that it is currently facing, such as global climate change, air and water pollution, resource shortages, severe economic inequality, and global pandemics?

Pedagogy

This textbook includes the following pedagogical features to enhance learning and make it easier for students to understand the material that is presented in each chapter:

- (1) **Comprehension and discussion questions.** These questions challenge students to actively and reflectively think about the material in the chapter.
- (2) **Key terms.** Bold print identifies those terms that the authors of the chapters believe are most important for students to learn.
- (3) **Glossary.** The glossary defines the bolded terms for students, so that they do not have to spend valuable time looking them up.
- (4) **Investigations.** This section of the chapter gives a brief description of the authors’ research programs on wisdom. The investigations acquaint students with cutting-edge research in the field.
- (5) **Practical applications.** This section of the chapter describes how contemporary research can be applied in real-world practice in order to improve people’s lives.

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