

Preface

Since its inception into contemporary scientific inquiry over 30 years ago, wisdom researchers have debated the empirical definition of wisdom and how to measure it. These conceptual and methodological tensions in the science of wisdom have made for a remarkably diverse field of inquiry. Rather than view this variety as a limitation of the field (i.e., violating the scientific principle of parsimony), we envision the science of wisdom as a richly colored and varied tapestry woven by eminent researchers and theoreticians. In assembling this book, our goal was to render some of this tapestry visible.

This book is not only an update on recent work in the empirical field of wisdom, it also represents an important shift to the scientific study of *personal wisdom*, as opposed to general wisdom, which was the focus of past volumes (e.g., Sternberg, 1990; Sternberg & Jordan, 2005). As such, this book is an effort to capture the current trends in the psychological science of personal wisdom. We asked contributors to consider and comment on the distinction (or lack thereof) between personal and general wisdom within their theoretical frame. We also asked them to discuss how their account of personal wisdom might be measured scientifically. The contents of this book, however, go well beyond these basic considerations.

The chapters of this book are organized into four parts, each approaching personal wisdom from a different perspective. Naturally, there is some overlap across parts, and we acknowledge that this is but one of potentially many ways to conceive of this book's organization. What follows is a walk through the most salient points of each chapter and a description of how we see them fitting together in a meaningful landscape.

Part I: Person-Based Wisdom

In the first part, we have included chapters that consider personal wisdom to be an ability or aspect of the person. Some models adopt the perspective that personal wisdom is deep insight into the reality of life matters and expertise in judgment or

self-directed action about those matters. Others conceive of personal wisdom as an aspect or trait of the person, including basic neurobiological differences. These approaches identify various “components” that reside within the individual at the personality or biological levels.

In many ways, **Staudinger** was a catalyst in the science of wisdom’s shift from general to personal wisdom, a distinction first introduced as a concept in the late 1990s (Staudinger, 1999). For this reason, we open the volume with her chapter, in which she appropriately orients us to the short history of the science of personal wisdom. Staudinger distinguishes personal wisdom and its ontogenesis (concerned with developing personal maturity) from general wisdom or advice giving, both theoretically and by drawing upon recent empirical evidence to propose a parallel structure for personal and general wisdom. Staudinger proposes a procedure for measuring personal wisdom comparable to research conducted within the traditional Berlin Wisdom Paradigm (see Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). Staudinger concludes her chapter with a comparison of personal and general wisdom’s respective antecedents and correlates and their differential responses to intervention strategies.

Vervaeke and Ferraro anchor their understanding of personal wisdom within the cognitive sciences. On this view, wisdom involves the enhancement of cognition (broadly construed); more specifically, it asserts that the central process of cognition that makes an agent intelligent is their ability to realize relevance. Therefore, a powerful way to enhance cognition and generate wisdom is to enhance relevance realization. Intelligence is necessary but not sufficient for wisdom because intelligence is not sufficient for rationality. Rationality recursively applies intelligence to the problem of using intelligence well. Likewise, wisdom recursively applies rationality to the problem of using rationality well. Wisdom is rationality transcending itself rationally so as to greatly enhance one’s ability to realize relevance. In particular, people who so engage their rationality should experience more active open-mindedness, insight, self-regulation, and perspectival knowing. But the aim of such rational reflection is to develop a mature personality of the sort Staudinger sees as personally wise.

Likewise, relevance realization seems key to what **Sternberg** seeks to promote in his balance theory of wisdom (see Sternberg, 1998). The balance theory of wisdom argues that personal wisdom applies one’s knowledge and abilities to maximize the common good while at the same time coordinating the larger interests of society with one’s own interests and the interests of others over the short and long terms. Importantly, in considering personal wisdom, Sternberg adds that such actions be infused with positive ethical values. Sternberg proposes an eight-step process through which one may act ethically and discusses the greater significance of this process for personal wisdom by drawing many real-world exemplars of both wise and foolish leaders.

In their chapter, **Glück and Bluck** unveil a conceptual model that explains the development of personal wisdom based on their ongoing work that integrates wisdom, lifespan development, growth from negative experiences, and autobiographical memory. This model assumes that wisdom develops out of life

experiences that involve fundamental change, but only when individuals bring certain personal resources to such experiences. The core resources include sense of *mastery*, *openness*, *reflectivity*, and *emotion regulation/empathy*. Together, these capacities make up what the authors have coined the “MORE” model of personal wisdom. Glück and Bluck discuss the theoretical background of this model and describe how these resources influence which life experiences people encounter, how they appraise them and deal with them, and how they integrate them into their life story, as illustrated by data from two empirical studies. The first study investigated people’s autobiographical narratives of situations in which they had been wise. The second study, currently in progress, tests predictions from the MORE life experience model directly.

Sanders and Jeste are among the first to envisage a brain-based model of personal wisdom (see also Hall, 2010; Jeste & Harris, 2010; Meeks & Jeste, 2009). Through a careful reading of the wisdom literature, they point to keystone qualities of wisdom and explore neurobiological bases of these qualities. In fact, they propose a set of “neural pillars” of wisdom, to the extent that these brain systems are foundational to the expression of wise traits. Sanders and Jeste examine data available on the components of wisdom in both human and nonhuman species in an effort to understand their underlying neurocircuitry, providing a firm foundation for future neuroscientific studies on personal wisdom.

Part II: Wisdom in Everyday, Real-Life Contexts

The second part advocates for the study of personal wisdom in real-life contexts. It explores how contextual factors are relevant to the development and manifestation of personal wisdom in persons’ lives. Indeed, many of the previous chapters discuss wisdom with little acknowledgement of the ecologies in which it dwells. Such contexts may both constrain and facilitate its development or simply vary its overall expression. With wisdom, one size truly does not fit all situations, and the chapters in this part are an exploration in this variability.

At the heart of her model, **Yang** defines wisdom as a “real-life process” that involves the integration of conflicting ideas, which can then be embodied through action for the purpose of positively impacting one’s self and others. In this chapter, Yang provides theoretical rationale for why wisdom should be studied in real-life contexts and carefully considers methodological issues that manifest in real-life studies. Finally, to substantiate her argument, Yang discusses some of her own recent empirical work that is located at the nexus of wisdom and leadership.

Ferrari, Weststrate, and Petro propose that any complete science of personal wisdom must consider wisdom in a narrative mode. They argue that life narratives not only offer a rich viewpoint from which to study personal wisdom, but, from a process perspective, they propose that crafting meaningful stories about autobiographical experiences may be central to the development of personal wisdom itself. In particular, they point to two capacities that may be particularly important to the

development of wisdom: autobiographical reasoning and narrative simulation. Some evidence for this view is provided from a study on engagement with cultural master narratives of wisdom.

In their chapter, **Wink and Dillon** take us deeper into a real-life contexts within which personal wisdom is manifest, exploring the areas of religion and spirituality. The relationship between wisdom and religion has been of long-standing interest to scholars and laypeople alike. Situating their discussion within contemporary America and drawing from longitudinal data, the authors offer a stimulating analysis of the lived experiences of two women: one who is religious and the other spiritual. The case studies presented here describe two distinct ways of being wise, speaking to the complexity of personal wisdom and its variability across persons and contexts.

Edmondson, in her chapter, blends ethnography with philosophy by considering the various ways in which wise processes can be enacted in everyday life. She does this by reconstructing the details of socially embedded, culturally influenced forms of interaction to illuminate what wisdom means in practice in different settings and by exploring what is considered “personal” wisdom within them. The main social context approached in this chapter—the rural West of Ireland—offers an approach to wisdom that accentuates interpersonal processes in which people regarded as wise exercise an enabling influence on others. Edmondson explores what happens in these processes, the parallels between wisdom in the West of Ireland and in other traditions, and how they illuminate what is involved in being a “wise” person.

Part III: Self-Transcendent and Contemplative Wisdom

As opposed to previous parts, where wisdom is viewed as an embodied phenomenon, the third part looks at wisdom’s self-transcendent qualities and primarily situates the discussion within Buddhist philosophy. The Eastern viewpoint on wisdom has been noticeably absent from previous volumes (e.g., Sternberg, 1990; Sternberg & Jordan, 2005), and we take the current interest in this area as an emerging direction for the contemporary science of personal wisdom, despite its ancient roots in Eastern philosophical and religious texts and practices.

In their chapter, **Levenson and Aldwin** propose a theory of personal wisdom that bridges it with the contemplative psychologies, such as Buddhism, Sufism, and mystical Christianity. They make the general point that contemplative psychologies are centrally concerned with transformational change in adult psychological development. They do not elevate cognitive complexity to some ultimate psychological development but rather endorse “simplicity on the other side of complexity.” Contemplative psychologies are teleological with similar goals across traditions; goals that can be seen as “equifinal,” with many paths leading to the same goal. Their chapter discusses the moral implications of such a theory of self-transcendence that unifies all contemplative traditions.

In line with Levenson and Aldwin, **Rosch** proposes a contemplative view of personal wisdom. She [Rosch] draws a creative parallel between contemplative paths in Buddhism and the plot of Dr. Seuss's famous children's story *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* in order to illuminate what is essential to personal wisdom. She also makes a compelling critique of scientific studies of mindfulness. For example, she worries that the application of such research to education risks missing the essence of mindfulness, because such educational programs try to capture mindfulness within a mindset that itself is not wise.

In his chapter, **Takahashi** discusses the evolution of the general-personal wisdom division by tracing the transformation of wisdom in the East, with a particular focus on the Buddhist tradition. Although the original conceptualization of wisdom in this tradition was based on a relational epistemology, the meaning of the concept moved to a split (exclusive) epistemology, as the Buddhist texts were rewritten over the centuries; this eventually yielded dichotomies such as the personal wisdom-general wisdom divide. Takahashi proposes a relational developmental systems perspective on personal wisdom that sees synthetic and analytic approaches to wisdom as two poles on a continuum. In doing so, Takahashi treats general and personal wisdom as aspects of an integrated whole. This relational framework sidesteps debates over the semantic dichotomies of personal wisdom and general wisdom by recognizing them as parts of an integrated whole and coordinates related lines of wisdom research so they can cooperate scientifically, rather than compete semantically.

We conclude this part with the chapter by **Ardelt, Achenbaum, and Oh**, who discuss the paradoxical nature of wisdom within the context of Ardel's (2003) three-dimensional model of wisdom. Although this chapter is not uniquely about wisdom's relationship to self-transcendence or Buddhism as a system of thought and action, the authors use the story of the Buddha to illuminate their main argument: Individuals who follow the paradoxical path to wisdom will gain liberation, truth, and love, as was the case for Buddha. Notably, many of wisdom's paradoxes parallel teachings in the contemplative traditions, which previous chapters have spent some time discussing. This chapter also in part explains why wisdom continues to evade scientists—its inherent paradoxes make it difficult to conceptualize and measure with rigor.

Part IV: The Transformative Potential of Wisdom-Inquiry

The fourth and final part contains a singular chapter that is in many ways a call to arms for wisdom researchers. **Maxwell's** central thesis is that more importance must be placed on the cultivation of wisdom itself rather than our collective knowledge about wisdom. According to Maxwell, the preceding chapters aim to understand what wisdom is—something he argues is a misguided or “irrational” enterprise. This chapter serves as a reminder that, while gaining deep understanding

of the phenomenon of wisdom is important, we must not lose sight of the pragmatic value of wisdom for humankind. As wisdom researchers, we must translate our scientific knowledge about wisdom into a resource that is useable by the public at large, creating the potential for a better world—science is but a means to this end.

Maxwell takes this argument one step further and advocates a radical shift in how we approach education at the postsecondary level. He proposes a recasting of the traditional emphasis on knowledge-inquiry in higher education to that of wisdom-inquiry, leading students to depart university or college wiser and not just smarter. We conclude with Maxwell's chapter because it is a rallying call for all scientists engaged in wisdom research to bear in mind the higher purpose of this work.

The conclusion by **Ferrari and Weststrate** draws together common themes about personal wisdom that emerge in the various chapters of the volume. They propose that any particular current approach to personal wisdom can be situated on a finite series of dimensions. Historical exemplars are invoked to further differentiate the various definitions of personal wisdom, and inherent paradoxes are explored. The book closes with a discussion of the feasibility of a science of personal wisdom and future directions that such a science might take.

Wisdom, an ancient concept, has received dynamic treatment across history in terms of *what* it is, *who* has the authority to study it, and *how* it should be measured (see Assmann, 1994; Birren & Svensson, 2005; Kekes, 1983; Osbeck & Robinson, 2005; Staudinger & Glück, 2011). But, why has personal wisdom persevered as an object of scientific curiosity? It may be because wisdom is viewed by many as the ultimate resource available to humans for positive transformation in their lives. Not only can wisdom be thought of as a road map or guide to living the good life, it may also hold the key to solving the world's most dire problems. Wisdom in this light is the keeper of life's secrets and life's lessons. We hope that readers will enjoy these chapters and find them personally engaging. Ultimately, we hope the contents of this book will not only inform but also transform the reader in their search for a science of personal wisdom or for personal wisdom itself.

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