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Wisdom

UM Staudinger, Columbia University, New York, NY, USA
A Law, Bremen International Graduate School of Social Sciences, Bremen, Germany

Glossary

Life-span theory A metatheoretical approach encompassing a family of perspectives (e.g., dynamics between biology and culture, gain/loss dynamic, allocation of resources) characterizing psychosocial and behavioral development across the whole life span.

Personality-intelligence interface Wisdom-related performance has been shown to be more strongly related to measures designed to assess a combination of personality and intellectual functioning, such as creativity, social intelligence, or cognitive style, than to 'pure' personality or intelligence measures.

Psychological maturity In theories of personality development, maturity has often been specified as the ideal end point and has often been used synonymously with wisdom.

Wisdom A complex and content-rich phenomenon used to describe the ideal of human insight and character. While 'personal wisdom' describes knowledge and judgment relating to one's own life, 'general wisdom' describes knowledge and judgment about fundamental issues in life that transcend the individual.

Wisdom is a phenomenon characterized by a rich cultural history and complex associations. Across cultures and history, wisdom has been discussed as the ideal of human knowledge and character. Starting from the dictionary definition of wisdom as "good judgment and advice in difficult and uncertain matters of life," psychologists have described wisdom as the search for the moderate course between extremes, a dynamic between knowledge and doubt, a sufficient detachment from the problem at hand, and a well-balanced coordination of emotion, motivation, and thought. Within psychological research on wisdom, five kinds of approaches can be distinguished: one is the study of lay conceptions of wisdom; the second is the attempt to measure behavioral expressions of wisdom; the third is the exploration of the relationship between such expressions of wisdom and other psychological constructs, to inform an understanding of the nature and development of wisdom; the fourth investigates the plasticity of wisdom; and the fifth relates to applications of research findings in various domains including education and work (Staudinger and Glück, 2011). Within this range of approaches, behavioral expressions of wisdom are either subsumed under personality characteristics, postformal kinds of thinking, or expertise in the fundamental pragmatics of life.

A Short Historical Account of Wisdom

For millennia, wisdom and related constructs have been believed to be the ideal of knowledge and personal functioning (e.g., Staudinger and Baltes, 1994). Indeed, the idea of wisdom as one of the highest forms of knowledge and skill is evident in the very definition of the historical grand master of all scholarship, philosophy (philosophia): 'The love or pursuit of wisdom.' Historically, wisdom was defined in terms of a state of idealized being (such as Lady Wisdom), as a process of perfect knowing and judgment, as in King Solomon's judgments, or as an oral or written product, such as wisdom-related proverbs and the so-called wisdom literature.

It is important to recognize that the identification of wisdom with individuals (such as wise persons, the predominant approach in psychology) is but one of the ways by which wisdom is instantiated. In fact, in the general historical literature on wisdom, the identification of wisdom with the mind and character of individuals is not the preferred mode of analysis. Wisdom is considered an ideal that is hardly ever fully realized in the isolated individual.

In general, two main lines of argument have been in the center of the historical evolution of the concept of wisdom. First is the distinction between philosophical and practical wisdom, often attributed to Aristotle's differentiation between sophia and phronesis. Second is the question of whether wisdom is divine or human.

In the Western world, these two issues (philosophical vs. practical, divine vs. human) were at the center of heated discourse during the Renaissance, with many important works written on these topics during the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries. An initial conclusion of this discourse was

reached during the later phases of the Enlightenment. Wisdom was still critical, for instance, to the thinking of Kant and Hegel. Both understood wisdom as being based on the coordination of the world of science and the practical world of humankind. However, the eighteenth century French Encyclopedia of Diderot (and others), despite its more than 50 volumes, barely mentioned the topic. During the Enlightenment and the process of secularization, wisdom lost its salience as one of the fundamental categories guiding human thought and conduct.

Nevertheless, from time to time, scholars in such fields as philosophy, political science, theology, and cultural anthropology continued to attend to wisdom, although in our view, less in a cumulative sense of theory building than in rejuvenating and revisiting its meaning, historical roots, and implications for raising human awareness about the complexities and uncertainties of life. Toward the end of the twentieth century, for example, some philosophers struggled with the definition of wisdom, including the polarization between practical and philosophical wisdom, the integration of different forms of knowledge into one overarching whole, and the search for orientation in life.

Finally, there is the archeological–cultural work dealing with the origins of religions and secular bodies of wisdom-related texts in China, India, Egypt, Old Mesopotamia, and other sites of ancient civilizations. This cultural–historical scholarship is important as we try to understand the cultural evolution and foundation of wisdom-related thought. Proverbs, maxims, and fairy tales constitute a great part of the materials underlying such efforts. It is impressive to realize how wisdom-related proverbs and tales evince a high degree of cultural and historical invariance. This relative invariance gives rise to the assumption that concepts such as wisdom, with its related body of knowledge and skills, have been culturally selected because of their adaptive value for humankind.

Psychological Definitions of Wisdom

A first approach to the psychological definition of wisdom is its treatment in encyclopedias and dictionaries. The major German historical dictionary, edited by the brothers Grimm, for instance, defined wisdom as "insight and knowledge about oneself and the world… and sound judgment in the case of difficult life problems." Similarly, the Oxford Dictionary includes in its definition of wisdom: "Good judgment and advice in difficult and uncertain matters of life."

When psychologists approach the definition of wisdom, they, like philosophers, are confronted with the need to specify the content and formal properties of wisdom-related thought, judgment, and advice in terms of psychological categories, and also to describe the characteristics of persons who have approached a state of wisdom and who are capable of transmitting wisdom to others. These initial efforts by psychologists in the most part were theoretical and speculative. In his pioneering piece on senescence, Hall (1922), for example, associated wisdom with the emergence of a meditative attitude, philosophic calmness, impartiality, and the desire to draw moral lessons that emerge in later adulthood. In the *Annual Review of Psychology* (Staudinger and Glück, 2011), wisdom is

described as mastering the basic dialectics shaping human existence, such as the dialectic between good and bad, positivity and negativity, dependence and independence, certainty and doubt, control and lack of control, finiteness and eternity, strength and weakness, selfishness and altruism. Wisdom embraces these contradictions of life and draws insights from them. In terms of psychological functioning, three facets need to be integrated: a cognitive, an emotional, and a motivational facet, that is, (1) deep and broad insight into self, others, and the world, (2) complex emotion-regulation (in the sense of tolerance of ambiguity), and (3) a motivational orientation that is transcending self-interest and is investing in the well-being of others and the world.

With an increase in empirical research into wisdom, a useful distinction has been made between general and personal wisdom which may clarify the definition of wisdom. While personal wisdom relates to insight into one's own self and life, general wisdom relates to the more detached insight into the lives of others and life in general. Although it is only in recent years that researchers have begun to specify which type of wisdom their work addresses, retrospective consideration of publications in light of this distinction has assisted in resolving some of the debates in the field regarding how wisdom should be measured and what other psychological constructs can be meaningfully associated with the two types of wisdom (see Staudinger *et al.*, 2005).

Implicit (Subjective) Theories about Wisdom

In the 1980s, empirical research on wisdom in psychology focused primarily on further elaboration of the definition of wisdom. Moving beyond the dictionary definitions of wisdom, some research has explored the nature of everyday beliefs, folk conceptions, and implicit (subjective) theories of wisdom. The pursuit of answers to questions such as 'What is wisdom?' 'How is wisdom different from other forms of intelligence?' 'Which situations require wisdom?' and 'What are the characteristics of wise people?' was at the center of this psychological wisdom research. These studies in principle build on research initiated by Clayton in 1976 (Sternberg, 1990). In her work, these dimensions are typically attributed to wise people: (1) affective characteristics such as empathy and compassion, (2) reflective processes such as intuition and introspection, and (3) cognitive capacities such as experience and intelligence.

Although subsequent literature building on Clayton's work on lay conceptions of wisdom shows that there is a large range of associated lexical terms, a review of this literature has identified five subcomponents of wisdom that are consistent throughout: cognitive ability, insight, reflective attitude, concern for others, and real-world skills (Bluck and Glück, 2005). The first of these, cognitive ability, includes intelligence in terms of both crystallized knowledge linked with life experiences and logical reasoning skills. The insight subcomponent involves the willing application of cognitive abilities to new situations, referring to a motivation to seek deeper insight into problems and to learn from experience. A reflective attitude refers to an introspective and self-critical style of thought, involving the ability and motivation to recognize one's own emotions and regulate these in response to novel problems

rather than being exclusively guided by them in making decisions, and to consider multiple perspectives on a problem. Concern for others involves feelings of warmth, compassion and respect for others and the transcendence of egoistic motives in making decisions. The real-world skills subcomponent refers primarily to the manifest behaviors of wise people, for example, giving good advice and acting sensibly with forethought. It has been proposed that these characteristics are transmitted culturally across generations, for example through characters in fables and fairy tales.

These characteristics are seen as prototypically constelling in older people despite laypeople recognizing that wisdom does not exclusively or inherently belong to older people. This association appears to hold across cultures, as do most of the core components outlined above. Despite the similarity of conceptions of wisdom across cultures, cultural transmission of such perceptions may account for some of the differences, such as the idea that wisdom can be attained through conscious effort. Takahashi and Overton (2005) outlined a general preference in Western cultures to view wisdom as a cognitive attribute broadly related to intelligence and knowledge, while Eastern cultures tend towards a concept integrating cognition and affect. Glück and Bluck (2011), however, found that the integration of cognition and affect is also a critical feature of lay views in Western samples.

From this research on implicit theories of wisdom and wise persons, it is evident that people hold fairly clear-cut images of the nature of wisdom. Four findings are especially noteworthy. First, in the minds of people, wisdom seems to be closely related to wise persons as 'carriers' of wisdom. Second, wise people are expected to combine features of intellect and character. Third, wisdom carries a very strong interpersonal and social aspect with regard to both its application (advice) and the consensual recognition of its occurrence. Fourth, wisdom exhibits overlap with other related concepts such as intelligence, but in aspects of sagacity, prudence, and the integration of cognition, emotion and motivation, it also carries unique variance.

Explicit Theories and Assessment of Wisdom

Another line of empirical psychological inquiry into wisdom addresses the question of how to define wisdom based on theory and how to measure it accordingly. Although early work focused on measuring in personality or neo-Piagetian frameworks, there are now several tools designed specifically to measure wisdom, both personal and general. Key examples of each of these are outlined below.

General Wisdom

Central to neo-Piagetian theories of adult thought is the transcendence of the universal truth criterion that characterizes formal logic. This transcendence is common to conceptions such as dialectical, complementary, and relativistic thinking. The tolerance of multiple truths, that is, of ambiguity, has also been mentioned as a crucial feature of wisdom. Empirical studies in this tradition have found that at least up to middle adulthood, performances on such measures of adult thought evince increases.

Another approach focuses on wisdom-related performance in tasks dealing with the interpretation, conduct, and management of life. The conceptual approach taken by the Berlin Max Planck Institute group is based on lifespan theory, the developmental study of the aging mind and aging personality, research on expert systems, and cultural–historical definitions of wisdom (Baltes et al., 1992). By integrating these perspectives, general wisdom is defined as an expert system in the fundamental pragmatics of life permitting exceptional insight, judgment and advice involving complex and uncertain matters of the human condition.

The body of knowledge and skills associated with wisdom as expertise in the fundamental pragmatics of life contains insights into the quintessential aspects of the human condition, including its biological finitude and cultural conditioning. At the center are questions about the conduct, interpretation, and meaning of life. Furthermore, wisdom includes a fine-tuned coordination of cognition, motivation, and emotion. More specifically, wisdom-related knowledge and skills are characterized by a family of five criteria (see Table 1).

To elicit and measure wisdom-related performance, participants are presented with difficult life dilemmas such as the following: "Imagine a good friend of yours calls you up and tells you that she can't go on anymore and has decided to commit suicide. What would you be thinking about, how would you deal with this situation?" Participants are then asked to "think aloud" about such dilemmas. These protocols are then rated in terms of the five criteria in Table 1. The obtained scores are reliable and provide an approximation of the quantity and quality of wisdom-related knowledge and skills of a given person. When using this wisdom paradigm to study people who were nominated as wise according to nominators' subjective beliefs about wisdom, wisdom nominees received higher wisdom scores than comparable control samples of various ages and professional background (Baltes and Staudinger, 2000).

Grossmann's wise reasoning approach (e.g. Grossmann et al., 2010; Grossmann et al., 2013) uses a performance measure similar to the Berlin paradigm in terms of its use of a prompt to elicit verbal responses from participants that are then coded by trained raters. It differs in that the prompts are scenarios involving intergroup conflict, and in terms of some of the criteria against which responses are rated: (1) perspective shifting from one's own point of view to the point of view of people involved in the conflict; (2) recognition of the likelihood of change; (3) prediction flexibility, as indicated by multiple possible predictions of how the conflict might unfold; (4) recognition of uncertainty and the limits of knowledge; (5) search for conflict resolution; and (6) search for a compromise. Further work may indicate whether intergroup conflict scenarios can sufficiently elicit evidence of the broader spectrum of general wisdom carried by individuals.

Personal Wisdom

Personality theorists usually conceptualized (personal) wisdom as an advanced, if not the final, stage of personality development. Wisdom in this context is comparable to "optimal maturity." A personally wise person is characterized, for instance, as integrating rather than ignoring or repressing

Table 1 A Family of five criteria characterizing wisdom and wisdom-related products

Criteria	Description
Basic criteria	
Factual knowledge	To what extent does this product show general (conditio humana) and specific knowledge about matters of life (e.g., life events and institutions) and the human condition, as well as demonstrate scope and depth in the consideration of issues?
Procedural knowledge	To what extent does this product consider decision and advice-giving strategies, whom to consult, how to define goals and identify means to achieve them?
Metalevel criteria	
Lifespan contextualism	To what extent does this product consider the past, current, and possible future contexts of life and the many circumstances in which a person's life is embedded?
Value relativism	To what extent does this product consider variations in values and life priorities and recognize the importance of viewing each person within his or her own framework despite a small set of universal values?
Awareness and management of uncertainty	To what extent does this product consider the inherent uncertainty of life (in terms of interpreting the past and predicting the future) and effective strategies for dealing with this uncertainty?

Source: Modified from Baltes, P.B., Smith, J., Staudinger, U.M., 1992. Wisdom and successful aging. In: Sonderegger, T.B. (Ed.), Psychology and Aging. Nebraska Symposium on Motivation 1991, Vol. 39. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, pp. 123–167.

self-related information, by having coordinated opposites, and by having transcended personal agendas and turned to collective or universal issues. Whitbourne and colleagues (e.g., Walaskay et al., 1983) and Ryff (1989), for example, developed self-report questionnaires, to assess the traits of integrity and wisdom. Other self-report inventories assessing personal wisdom include the Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale (SAWS; Webster, 2003), the Adult Self-Transcendence Inventory (ASTI, Levenson et al., 2005), and the Three Dimensional Wisdom Scale (3DWS; Ardelt, 2003). The SAWS measures five dimensions: critical life experience, emotional regulation, reminiscence and reflectiveness, openness, and humor. The ASTI focuses on the self-transcendence aspect of wisdom. The 3DWS was created to measure wisdom in terms of the three dimensions identified by Clayton (see above) in lay conceptions of wisdom: cognitive, reflective, and affective. Although self-report measures, which are inexpensive and easy to apply, have been found to attain good reliability, the chief concern with their use is related to a problem of social desirability, especially where the face validity of items is high: face valid items may encourage wise persons to underestimate and others to overestimate. Indeed, this possibility has been offered as explanation for the weak relationships found between self-report wisdom scales and both self and peer ratings of wisdom. Along these lines, such measures usually find positive associations with subjective well-being and with age.

Work by Helson and Wink (1987) on personal wisdom has investigated a distinction between practical wisdom and transcendent wisdom, the former referring to an interpersonal domain where empathy and social maturity are important, and the latter referring to a transpersonal domain where philosophical commitments and recognition of the limits of knowledge are important. Practical wisdom was measured based on adjective check list data, with adjectives like reflective, mature, and tolerant being indicative. Transcendent wisdom was measured based on ratings of open-ended responses to a question about an example of wisdom from participants' own lives. Both forms of wisdom have been found to correlate with California Psychological Inventory (CPI) subscales: Transcendent wisdom is related to the Flexibility scale, and practical wisdom is related to the CPI Dominance and Empathy scales, with the CPI Psychological Mindedness scale related to both forms.

To date, two performance-based measures of personal wisdom exist. (1) Loevinger developed a widely used sentence completion technique to measure theoretically postulated stages of ego development, the last stage of which being 'ego integrity' (see Loevinger, 1976). This measure has been found to positively relate to other indicators of personality maturity but not with subjective well-being and even negatively with age. (2) The Bremen paradigm of personal wisdom (Mickler and Staudinger, 2008) was developed following the conceptual approach of the only validated measure of general wisdom, the Berlin Paradigm. The Bremen measure of personal wisdom also shows no association with subjective well-being and a small negative relationship with age. It is positively related with the Loevinger measure as well as with Openness to New Experience.

Researchers of wisdom are usually quite aware that it is a courageous undertaking to try to study wisdom empirically. Wisdom is a complex and content-rich phenomenon, and, as many scholars have claimed, it defies attempts at scientific identification. However, research on explicit theories of wisdom has shown that it is possible to measure wisdom in terms of personality characteristics (standardized or open-ended), characteristics of adult thought, and performance (judgment and advice) on difficult life tasks.

Wisdom and Mental Health

In almost any of the many different conceptions of mental health that also encompass positive features, there is one component that relates to ideals of positive functioning. Jahoda's conception, which exclusively focuses on the positive pole of mental health, even lists characteristics such as growth and self-actualization, or integration of personality. Therefore, when exploring links between the constructs of wisdom, personal wisdom in particular, and mental health, historically and theoretically, the work of Erikson and also of Jung are critical.

Erikson, in his epigenetic theory of personality development, identified the achievement of integrity and wisdom as the last and highest form of personality functioning. Achieving this last stage requires, however, successful mastery of the previous life tasks and, on the other hand, accelerative and supportive conditions associated with the social environment. Personal wisdom, in the Eriksonian sense, necessitates the full expression of mature identity, including the transcendence of personal interests, mastering one's own finitude, and attention to collective and universal issues.

Empirical research on these Eriksonian notions is still scarce. Ryff and Heincke (1983) compared people of different ages on self-report measures based on the Eriksonian notions of personality development. The oldest group (average age: 70 years) reported higher levels of integrity than the middle-aged and young participants. In a longitudinal study with a sample of young and middle-aged adults, Whitbourne et al. (1992) found evidence that there was a historical trend toward declining levels of integrity in the population. The authors related this finding to the increasing materialism and individualism in Western societies which, in their view, was characteristic of the 1980s.

Recently a distinction has been made between two forms of positive personality development: growth and adjustment (Staudinger and Kunzmann, 2005). Adjustment refers to the absorption of skills necessary to become a well-functioning member in society and a subsequent tendency toward the maintenance of subjective well-being and everyday competence and thus seems closely linked with mental health. In the face of threats to well-being, such as social or environmental restrictions or the increasing losses in functioning in older age, adaptation is a typical adjustment strategy. As such, it has been found to be related to the so-called 'Big Five' personality dimensions of emotional stability (the absence of neuroticism) and agreeableness, and to Ryff's dimensions of psychological well-being 'environmental mastery' and 'self-acceptance.' The growth trajectory, however, is related to concepts of personal maturity, self-concept maturity, or ego level, associated with the Big Five dimension of openness to experience and the psychological well-being dimensions of autonomy, personal growth, and purpose in life.

Wisdom, as an ideal end-point of human development, is unlikely to be attained through adjustment alone. Preliminary evidence suggests that wisdom needs a basic level of adjustment to develop, but further development is driven by an interaction between a growth orientation and life experience. Individuals experiencing growth may report a full range of scores on subjective well-being measures and yet clearly their growth should still be considered a sign of positive mental health (see Staudinger and Kunzmann, 2005). Indeed, work measuring wisdom in terms of self-transcendence with the ASTI has shown that this facet of wisdom may be one manifestation of posttraumatic growth. For example, Aldwin and Levenson have found that some level of stress or trauma, such as combat experience or the loss of a family member, appears to be facilitative in the development of wisdom (e.g., Jennings et al., 2006). Thus their work expands the large body of work on coping as a vital process following life challenges, indicating that not only is mental health contingent on successful adjustment following trauma, but also that such events can be a catalyst for positive growth for some individuals.

The Ontogeny and Plasticity of Wisdom

The Berlin and Bremen wisdom paradigms both have been working with a model that outlines the conditions for the development of wisdom as expert-level insight in the fundamental pragmatics of life. The model (see Figure 1) presents a set of factors and processes that need to 'cooperate' for wisdom to develop. Certain cognitive and emotional-motivational processes, as well as certain experiential factors associated with the interpretation, conduct, and management of life, are important antecedents of (general and personal) wisdom (e.g., Staudinger et al., 1997).

First, as shown on the left-hand side of Figure 1, there are general individual characteristics related to adaptive human functioning such as intelligence and personality. Mental health or level of ego development is listed under this category as well. Second, the model presumes that the development of wisdom is advanced by certain expertise-specific factors, such as practice and being guided by a mentor. Third, the model implies the operation of macro-level, facilitative experiential contexts. For instance, certain professions and historical periods are more facilitative than others. In the center of Figure 1, some of the organizing processes (life planning, life management, and life review) that may be critical for the development of wisdom-related knowledge are identified. Finally, on the right-hand side, certain theoretical assumptions about where the five criteria fall in the course of the development of wisdom are depicted.

The empirical work based on this ontogenetic model produced outcomes consistent with the expectations. For instance, contrary to work on the fluid mechanics of cognitive aging, older adults performed as well as younger adults. Furthermore, when age was combined with wisdom-related experiential contexts, such as professional specializations that specifically involve training and experience in matters of life (e.g., clinical psychology), even higher levels of performance were observed. Explorations into the location of wisdom-related performance in the psychometric space between intelligence, personality, and the intelligence–personality interface suggested that neither personality nor intelligence measures by themselves predicted as much variance as did measures of the personality–intelligence interface such as creativity and cognitive style. In addition, the Berlin as well as the Bremen measure of wisdom-related performance retained a sizable amount of uniqueness when projected into a measurement space defined by 30 indicators of personality and intellectual functioning.

In a series of studies, the plasticity of wisdom-related performance has been demonstrated (for review see Staudinger and Glück, 2011). It was found that two heads were wiser than one given certain circumstances, and that a thought strategy that focused on perspective taking improved the value relativism displayed in subsequent responses. For personal wisdom, it was shown that learning about a certain way to review one's life increased the personal wisdom performance.

Summary and Future Directions

The concept of wisdom represents a fruitful topic for psychological research and specifically for research on mental health in various respects: (1) the study of wisdom emphasizes the
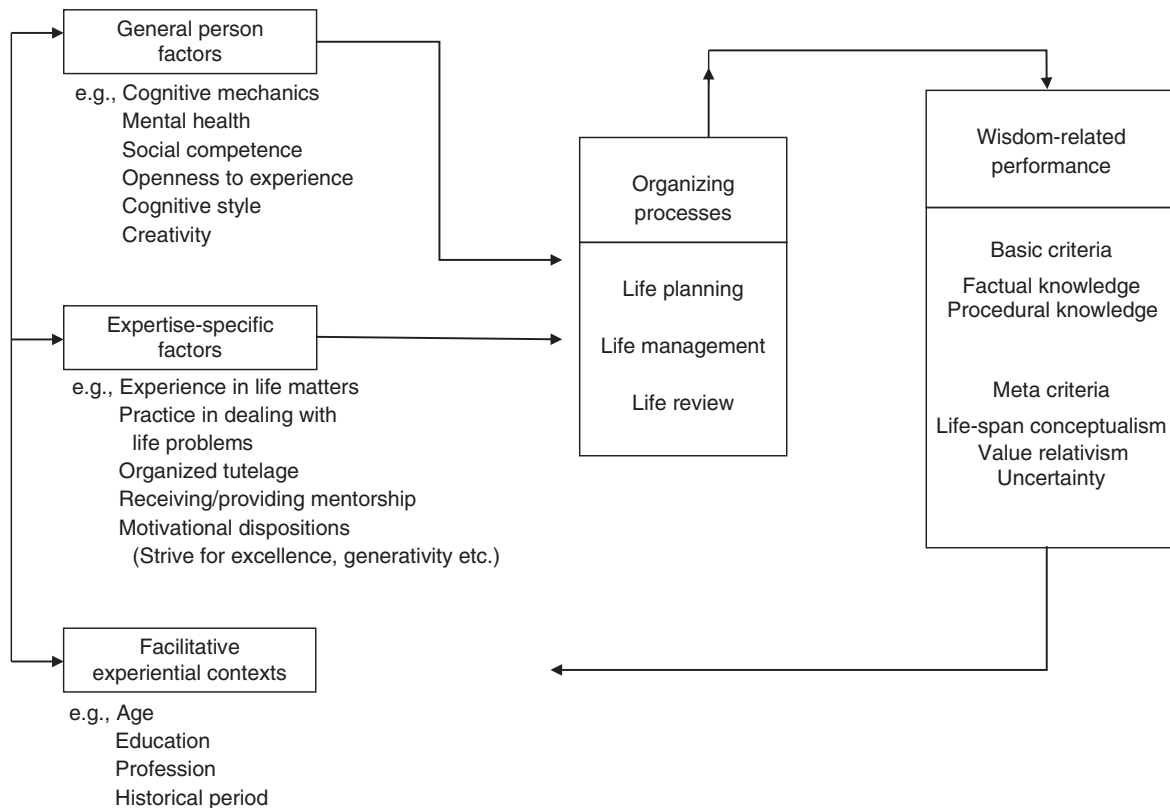
Figure 1 A research framework indicating factors that contribute to the development and maintenance of wisdom-related knowledge and judgment. Modified from Baltes, P.B., Smith, J., Staudinger, U.M., 1992. Wisdom and successful aging. In: Sonderegger, T.B. (Ed.), Psychology and Aging. Nebraska Symposium on Motivation 1991, Vol. 39. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, pp. 123–167.

search for continued optimization and the further evolution of the human condition and (2) in a prototypical manner, it allows for the study of collaboration of cognitive, emotional, and motivational processes.

Considerable progress has already been made in wisdom research, and we expect future research to focus on at least three areas: (1) further differentiation between personal and general wisdom and improvements in their measurement, (2) exploration of the relevance and applicability of research findings in various life contexts and subgroups of the wider population, for example at work, and among adolescents, and (3) longitudinal investigations to further test the premises of the ontogenetic model for the development of wisdom.

See also: Adult Lifespan Development and Optimal Mental Health. Coping. Happiness and Subjective Well-Being. Intelligence and Mental Health. Positive Psychology. Resilience. Stress-Related Growth

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