

# The Need to Distinguish Personal from General Wisdom: A Short History and Empirical Evidence

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The quest for wisdom is as old as humankind. Even though theoretical and empirical work on the psychological study of wisdom has increased tremendously over the last decades, this research in comparison is still in its infancy. It was not before the 1970s that empirical wisdom research began (Clayton, 1975). Since then, psychological wisdom research has covered a series of different topics such as lay definitions of wisdom (e.g., Bluck & Glück, 2005), defining and measuring wisdom (e.g., Brugman, 2006), understanding the development of wisdom (e.g., Sternberg & Jordan, 2005), investigating the plasticity of wisdom (e.g., Baltes & Staudinger, 2000), and also exploring the applicability of psychological knowledge about wisdom in life contexts (e.g., Sternberg, Jarvin, & Grigorenko, 2009; for a general review of wisdom research see: Staudinger & Glück, 2011). In this chapter, I would like to demonstrate the usefulness of a rather recent addition to the conceptualization and measurement of wisdom, and that is the notion of “personal or self-related wisdom,” which was first introduced as a concept in the late 1990s (Staudinger, 1999a, pp. 366). The need for a distinction between general and personal wisdom emerged from my attempt to integrate research from the fields of self- and developmental regulation, personality development, and wisdom so as to derive the components of a psychological approach to the art of living.

The introduction of the actual term “personal wisdom,” however, is not to be confused with the availability of research that can be subsumed under that label (Staudinger & Glück, 2011, Table 1, suggest a categorization of extant approaches into those focussing primarily on personal or general wisdom, respectively). From Erik Erikson’s early work on personality maturation to the work by Ravenna Helson and Paul Wink, Jane Loevinger, Gisela Labouvie-Vief, or Carolyn Aldwin and Monika Ardelt, to name just a few, research pertaining to personal wisdom has been conducted—but either without referring to the wisdom literature at all, or without acknowledging the need for a distinction between general and personal wisdom.

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**Table 1** Categorization of extant approaches into those emphasizing personal or general wisdom

Level of performance	Life experience: Self-related		Life experience: General	
	<i>Judgment</i>	<i>Action</i>	<i>Judgment</i>	<i>Action</i>
Average	Self-insight	Life management/ coping behavior	Life insight	Advice-giving/ supporting others
Very high	Personal wisdom		General wisdom	

## The Distinction Between Personal and General Wisdom

More and more evidence accumulating in psychological wisdom research stemming from different research traditions (Staudinger & Glück, 2011) has created a need to introduce additional conceptual dimensions ordering the field. The distinction between *personal* wisdom, on the one hand, and *general* wisdom, on the other, can be considered one of these (cf. Staudinger, 1999a; Staudinger, Dörner, & Mickler, 2005). G. Stanley Hall (1922), in his pioneering conceptual piece on senescence, was probably the first psychologist to mention the concept of wisdom. He associated the development of wisdom in a person with the emergence of a meditative attitude, philosophic calmness, impartiality, and the desire to draw moral lessons that emerge in later adulthood. As in G. Stanley Hall's description of a wise person, most psychological conceptions of wisdom have not explicitly distinguished between personal and general wisdom. Implicitly, however, they do place relative emphasis on either one or the other form of wisdom.

Approaches primarily geared toward personal wisdom are usually based in the tradition of personality research and personality development. Wisdom in this perspective describes the mature personality or the endpoint of personality growth (e.g., Ardel, 2003; Erikson, 1959; Helson & Wink, 1987; Helson & Srivastava, 2001; Ryff & Singer, 1998). When thinking about wisdom from this vantage point, clearly, there are close links to research on coping and learning from traumatic events (e.g., stress-related growth, Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996; posttraumatic growth, Tedeschi & Calhoun 2004; see also Aldwin & Levenson, 2001; Vaillant, 1993). Approaches primarily oriented toward investigating general wisdom typically have a stronger connection with the historical wisdom literature and an expertise approach to the study of wisdom (e.g., Baltes, Smith, & Staudinger, 1992; Sternberg, 1998).

But before I continue, let me reiterate how exactly I defined the difference between personal and general wisdom (Staudinger, 1999a). This distinction is

loosely related to the philosophical separation between first- and third-person ontology (Searle, 1992). First-person ontology indicates insight into life based on personal experience. In contrast, third-person ontology refers to the view on life that is based on an observer's perspective. In loose analogy to Searle's first-person perspective, *personal wisdom* refers to individuals' insight into their selves, their own life. Analogous to the third-person perspective, *general wisdom* is concerned with individuals' insights into life in general, into life from an observer's point of view, that is, when their own life is not directly concerned.<sup>1</sup> The notion of personal wisdom does not imply that the fundamental social nature of human existence and its consequences for life management, life planning, and life review are ignored rather it is part and parcel of both personal and general wisdom (cf. Staudinger, 1996). The difference lies in the relevance of a given problem for a person's life. Do I ponder about the loss of my own parent, or do I give advice to another person for this life experience. Most likely, the advice for the other person also includes personal experiences with losing a parent if they exist. Therefore, personal and general wisdom are closely linked with each other but nevertheless distinct.

Of course, these two types of wisdom are related and essential components of the overall construct of wisdom. However, they will not necessarily coincide to the same degree in one person: A person can be wise with regard to the life and problems of other people or life in general and can be sought out for advice from others because of her wisdom, but the very same person does not necessarily have to be wise about her own life and her own problems. Likewise, it is conceivable that individuals, who have attained some self-insight or even personal wisdom, do not have the ability and/or the motivation to think about life problems beyond their own specific circumstances or are lacking the advice-giving ability. As a consequence, we expect that individuals high on both types of wisdom will very rarely be found.

For heuristic purposes only, Table 1 illustrates the extreme case of an orthogonal relationship between the two types of wisdom, hardly ever be found in reality. In order to establish the empirical relationship between the two types, however, they first need to be conceptualized and measured independently of each other (see below). Table 1 also highlights another important aspect of research on personal and general wisdom and that is that, empirically, we are mostly dealing with various degrees of self- or life insight, and not with wisdom as such. Whether degrees of insight and (personal or general) wisdom are to be placed on a continuum or constitute qualitatively different phenomena has yet to be empirically decided. As of now, wisdom research is conducted under the premise that indeed they do form a continuum. And for the sake of simplicity, we speak, for instance, about differences in wisdom when in fact we mean different degrees of insight. We should not forget,

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<sup>1</sup> Note that I use the distinction between the first-person and third-person perspective only in *loose analogy* to the distinction originally introduced by Searle. For my purposes, the major difference concerns the question whether certain life circumstances with relevance to one's own life have been experienced by oneself or not (i.e., first person). In that sense, my notion of "third person" encompasses all other life experiences including what Varela and others have called the second-person perspective (e.g., Varela & Shear, 1999).

however, that this is indeed a shorthand solution. To avoid one more possible misunderstanding, still another distinction has been added to Table 1, the distinction between wisdom-related judgment and action. The distinction between personal and general wisdom is not to be mistaken with addressing the difference between wisdom as judgment and wisdom as action. Wisdom research has mostly focussed on judgment; only few studies have started to examine action side of wisdom (e.g., Bluck & Glück, 2004; Oser, Schenker, & Spychinger, 1999). Certainly, one kind of wise action in the realm of general wisdom is advice-giving. With regard to personal wisdom, wise action includes, for instance, life management or coping (see also Staudinger, Kessler, & Dörner, 2006). It is not the case that personal wisdom addresses the application in terms of wisdom-related action whereas general wisdom refers to wisdom as judgment. For both personal and general wisdom, the respective judgment and/or the action related to the judgment can be investigated. In this chapter, however, I would like to confine my considerations to wise judgment.

## **The Distinction of Personal and General Wisdom as Reflected in Their Ontogenesis**

The distinction between personal and general wisdom unfolds even more clearly when exploring the processes involved in their ontogenesis. Even though we do not yet have a great amount of evidence available addressing the development of wisdom, some issues relevant to the distinction between general and personal wisdom can be raised. For instance, life reflection has been identified as one of the key social-cognitive processes to promote the development of general as well as personal wisdom (cf. Staudinger, 2001). Extending work about life review (e.g., Butler, 1963), life reflection has been defined as the reconstruction of life events from memory and their further analysis, with the aim of gaining more insight into one's own life or into life in general. Unlike life review, life reflection is not confined to old age but is a lifelong process starting in adolescence (cf. Habermas & Bluck, 2000).

The further analysis of recalled events and sequences of events typical of life reflection includes their thorough explanation and evaluation: "How did the event come about?" "How does it fit my life plans?" "How did I feel about it and why?" "How can I avoid it in the future?" "How can I make those events happen more frequently in the future?" This analysis involves a mixture of cognitive, motivational, and emotional elements. At the next lower level of analysis, explanation and evaluation may involve social-cognitive process elements, such as grouping events into categories (e.g., success/failure, friendship, work, family, relations to authorities, intimate relationships) or along a time dimension. Such groupings then may provide a basis for abstracting and identifying overarching themes and characteristics that generalize across concrete events and behaviors. Those general

themes and characteristics in turn are an important precondition for gaining further insight into self and life in general. Comparison processes are another central process element at this level of analysis. Both social and temporal comparisons apply: “How does my life course compare with those of others or the normative life course?” or “How have others, including religious and philosophical writers, handled a given life situation?” or “How does my present condition compare with that ten years ago?” or “Have I achieved the goals that I set for myself?” Processes of emotion and motivation regulation are a constituent part of these explanatory and evaluative processes. Without the ability to step back from one’s own behavior or one’s own life priorities and without the ability to monitor feelings such as shame, anxiety, anger, pride, or greed, it is very difficult to increase self-understanding. Thus, conducting such review processes together with another person may increase the amount of insight that is accomplished (Staudinger, 1996). This increase is because the other person may support these processes of emotion and motivation regulation and may point to the so-called blind spots of self-perception and the self-serving biases of autobiographical reconstruction that Greenwald (1980) has described so eloquently. We will return to this hypothesis below.

Decades of research on self-regulation (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998; Karoly, 1993) as well as research on the therapeutical process have demonstrated that it is much more difficult to obtain insight into one’s own life than into the difficulties and problems of others. Thus, we propose that ultimately it is less difficult and therefore may be ontogenetically earlier that general wisdom is attained as compared to personal wisdom. Certainly, in the course of ontogeny (i.e., in working toward general and/or personal wisdom), both types may alternate in taking the lead. From research on the early development of the self-concept, we know that infants appropriate general knowledge about the world before being able to acknowledge the self (e.g., Harter, 1999). From research on the self later on in ontogeny, we know that self-relevant information seems to be processed differently than general information. Some have used the distinction between hot and cold knowledge to highlight this difference (cf. Greenwald, 1980). On the one hand, under certain conditions, we have better memory for self-relevant information. On the other hand, it has also been found that threatening or inconsistent self-relevant information is suppressed or modified (e.g., Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984) which indeed may hinder the development of personal wisdom.

## **Measuring General and Personal Wisdom Independently Yet Comparably**

If the goal is to find out whether it is useful to distinguish general from personal wisdom, a first step is to establish a comparable measurement procedure for both constructs. At first glance, it seems that personal wisdom is most often measured by self-report scales (e.g., Ryff, Aldwin, Ardel, Webster; but see also Loevinger,

Labouvie-Vief), whereas general wisdom most often is assessed using performance-based measures (e.g., Baltes et al., Sternberg; but see also examples of scales by Ardelt, or Helson & Wink). This observation, however, is a natural consequence of the research areas within which personal and general wisdom approaches have developed rather than a methodological one. In order to be in a position to establish the empirical relationship between general and personal wisdom, it is critical that both types of wisdom are measured using the same paradigm. Otherwise, the ascertained relationship is confounded by the type of assessment used to obtain it. In order to avoid the social desirability bias involved in self-report assessments of wisdom, we developed a performance-based assessment of personal wisdom in the tradition of the Berlin (general) wisdom paradigm and compared it to the level of general wisdom of the same participants, as measured with the same basic paradigm.

**The Berlin (General) Wisdom Paradigm.** The Berlin wisdom paradigm defines wisdom as expertise in the fundamental pragmatics of life (e.g., Baltes & Smith, 1990; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). The fundamental pragmatics of life refer to deep insight and sound judgment about the essence of the human condition and the ways and means of planning, managing, and understanding a good life. The term “expertise” implies that wisdom is a highly differentiated body of insights and skills usually acquired through experience and practice. Expertise in the fundamental pragmatics of life is described according to five criteria (two basic and three meta-criteria). The first criterion, *rich factual knowledge*, concerns knowledge about such topics as human nature, lifespan development, variations in developmental processes and outcomes, interpersonal relations, and social norms. The second criterion, *rich procedural knowledge*, involves strategies and heuristics for dealing with the meaning and conduct of life, for example, heuristics for giving advice, or ways to handle life conflicts. Wisdom also entails *lifespan contextualism*, that is, to consider life problems in relation to the domains of life (e.g., education, family, work, friends, leisure, the public good of society), and their interrelations within a lifetime perspective (i.e., past, present, future). *Relativism of values and life priorities*, another criterion of wisdom, means to acknowledge and tolerate interindividual differences in values, while at the same time aiming to optimize and balance the individual and the common good. The last criterion, *recognition and management of uncertainty*, is based on the idea that human beings can never know everything that is necessary to determine the best present decision, to perfectly predict the future, or to be 100 % sure about why things happened the way they did in the past. A wise person is aware of this uncertainty and has developed ways to manage it. Uncertainty, as well as the dialectic between knowledge and doubt, is a feature of wisdom that plays an important role in ancient (Socrates: the only real wisdom is knowing you know nothing) as well as contemporaneous conceptions of wisdom (e.g., Brugman, 2006; Meacham, 1990).

To elicit and measure general wisdom-related performance, participants are presented with difficult and existential life problems such as the following: “Imagine someone sits down and thinks about his/her life and realizes that he/she has not achieved what he/she once set out for. What could one/you be thinking about, how

could one/you deal with this situation?” Participants are then asked to “think aloud” about the problem. Their responses are recorded and later transcribed. To quantify performance quality, a select panel of judges, who are extensively trained and calibrated, evaluate respondents’ protocols according to the five wisdom criteria, using a 7-point scale. The scores obtained across the five criteria and across different tasks are reliable (Cronbach’s alpha around .9; e.g., Staudinger, 1999b) and measure the quantity and quality of wisdom-related knowledge and skills of a given person. Responses to such fictitious problems primarily tap knowledge and heuristics about life problems in general and therefore probably are emotionally less challenging than solving existential and difficult personal life problems (see below the section on “Personal Wisdom”). Just to make sure: This does not imply that respondents do not draw from personal experiences when responding. But the problem does not put themselves at stake.

Indication of the external validity of this paradigm was obtained by studying people who were nominated as wise according to nominators’ subjective beliefs about wisdom: Wisdom nominees received higher wisdom scores than comparable control samples matched for age and education (Baltes, Staudinger, Maercker, & Smith, 1995). Information about the correlates in the realm of cognitive and personality functioning is discussed below in the section on the ontogenesis of wisdom.

**The Bremen Measure of Personal Wisdom.** To match this Berlin wisdom paradigm, the Bremen measure of personal wisdom uses the same general methodological approach but adapts it to reflect personality growth or personality maturity (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008). As pointed out earlier, the major reason for this close alignment was to minimize method variance when establishing the relationship between general and personal wisdom. Both approaches to general and personal wisdom share the core assumption that the dialectic between assimilation and accommodation promotes growth (cf. Piaget). In other words, our expectations need to repeatedly be challenged by new experiences, to emancipate ourselves in thinking and feeling, and to transcend the structures within which we have been socialized in order to progress on the path toward (personal and/or general) wisdom (e.g., Chandler & Holliday, 1990).

The Bremen paradigm also defines five criteria (2 basic and 3 meta-criteria) to index personal wisdom based on the literature about personality development and maturity. The first basic criterion is *rich self-knowledge*, that is, deep insight into oneself. A self-wise person should be aware of his or her own competencies, emotions, and goals and have a sense of meaning in life. The second basic criterion requires a self-wise person to have available *heuristics for growth and self-regulation* (e.g., how to express and regulate emotions or how to develop and maintain deep social relations). Humor is an example of an important heuristic that helps to cope with various difficult and challenging situations. *Interrelating the self*, the first meta-criterion, refers to the ability to reflect on and have insight into the possible causes of one’s behavior and/or feelings. Such causes can be age-related or situational or linked to personal characteristics. Interrelating the self also implies that there is an awareness about one’s own dependency on others. The second meta-



criterion is *self-relativism*. People high in self-relativism are able to evaluate themselves as well as others with a distanced view. They critically appraise their own behavior but still display a basic acceptance of themselves. They also show tolerance for others' values and lifestyles—as long as they are not damaging to self or others. Finally, the third meta-criterion is *tolerance of ambiguity*, which involves the ability to recognize and manage the uncertainties in one's own life and development; it is reflected in the awareness that life is full of uncontrollable and unpredictable events, including death and illness. At the same time, tolerance for ambiguity includes available strategies to manage this uncertainty through openness to experience, basic trust, and the development of flexible solutions.

Analogous to the Berlin general wisdom paradigm, personal wisdom is measured by a thinking-aloud procedure, while solving a difficult and existential personal life problem, and subsequent rating of the response transcripts (see Mickler & Staudinger, 2008 for details; also a manual describing the assessment and rating procedure can be obtained upon request). However, the Berlin wisdom paradigm uses life problems of fictitious persons, which is not useful for eliciting personal wisdom, so a new personal wisdom task was developed. Pilot studies showed that using a self-related dilemma, such as talking about a past personal problem was not ideal. Apart from the problem of comparability between individuals, participants tended to describe the circumstances of such problem situations, rather than focus on their own characteristics and strategies—possibly due to an actor-observer bias or to the highly self-threatening character of such a problem. Therefore, we decided to ask all participants about the same, generally nonthreatening, but still central and rather age-neutral area of the self: friendship. A pilot study showed that the friendship domain best fulfilled these requirements: For young and old adults, friendship ranked third among important life areas, after family and partnership, and before occupation and hobbies (see Mickler & Staudinger, 2008 for details). The personal wisdom task asks, “Please think aloud about yourself as a friend. What are your typical behaviors? How do you act in difficult situations? Can you think of examples? Can you think of reasons for your behavior? What are your strengths and weaknesses, what would you like to change?”

In a first study, the new performance measure of personal wisdom showed good convergent validity (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008). It was positively correlated with other measures of personality growth, such as Ryff's personal growth and purpose in life and Loewinger's ego development, as well as with benevolent personal values and psychological mindedness (California Personality Inventory CPI; Gough, 1964), a concept measuring interest in thoughts and feelings of other people. With regard to discriminant validity, personal wisdom showed—as expected—substantial overlap with measures of general wisdom but also significant unique variance.

Personal wisdom was uncorrelated with indicators of subjective well-being, such as life satisfaction, negative or positive emotions, and adaptive motives such as power, achievement, and hedonism. This is not surprising when interpreted within the theoretical framework of distinguishing two types of positive personality development, that is, personal maturity and adjustment (cf. Staudinger & Kessler, 2009). As will be discussed in more detail below, the pursuit of personal wisdom



does not imply the optimization of positive emotions but rather seeking to unlock the potential contained in the dialectics of positive and negative emotions.

In addition, we found that personal wisdom is not preempted by knowing a person's intelligence. Interestingly, while controlling for age, the relationship between personal wisdom and fluid intelligence followed an inverted U shape, implying that among highly intelligent persons, there is a significant negative correlation of fluid intelligence with personal wisdom. Follow-up analyses suggested that this may be due to differences in values, in particular, the value domain of "universalism" (as measured by the Schwartz Value Survey, Schwartz, 1992). Extremely intelligent people may tend to be rather egotistical and focused on achievement, as opposed to interpersonal or social issues. Concerning personality variables, openness to experience was the most important predictor—the other Big Five variables were uncorrelated with personal wisdom.

## **Antecedents and Correlates of Personal and General Wisdom in Comparison**

The distinction between personal and general wisdom may be especially relevant when exploring the ontogenesis of wisdom. There is reason to assume that a dynamic interplay between self-insight and life insight is at the heart of eventually attaining wisdom. Individuals most likely are not following either a personal or a general wisdom trajectory but rather fluctuate between the two depending on life phase and possibly even life situation.

Conceptually, an ontogenetic model has been postulated that requires a set of factors and processes to "cooperate" for general as well as personal wisdom to develop (e.g., Staudinger, Mickler, & Dörner, 2005). First, there are personality characteristics such as crystallized and fluid intelligence (as necessary but not sufficient conditions), creativity, openness to new experience, social competence, emotion-regulation competence (exploiting the dialectics of positive and negative emotions), an ethical value orientation, as well as an intermediate level of self-esteem and agency that provide the necessary basis for challenging oneself and the world around one.

Second, the model presumes that the development of wisdom is advanced by certain expertise-specific factors, such as a strong motivation to learn about life (general wisdom) or oneself (personal wisdom), practice with difficult (personal and/or general) life situations, and being guided by a mentor. Third, the model assumes the operation of macro-level facilitative experiential contexts. For example, certain professions and historical periods are more conducive to the development of wisdom than others, and age also facilitates as well as constrains the range of experiences.

These three sets of factors influence which kinds of experiences one has but also how experiences are subsequently analyzed to form insights. Social-cognitive processes of life reflection (i.e., life planning, life management, and life review; Staudinger, 2001) are assumed to be critical for the development of wisdom-related knowledge and skills. If these processes are applied to autobiographical experiences, they contribute primarily to creating personal wisdom (cf. Erikson's model of personality growth), and if they are applied to general knowledge and experiences with life in general, they primarily contribute to creating general wisdom. Based on the assumptions of this model, age is not necessarily related to higher levels of wisdom-related performance, as many other variables need to come together for progress to occur.

Turning to empirical evidence about the development of (personal or general) wisdom, to date, we primarily have cross-sectional data and evidence on general wisdom, measured according to the Berlin wisdom paradigm, with only one study of personal wisdom. Given this limitation, the empirical work on the ontogenesis of wisdom-related performance has produced outcomes consistent with expectations. Contrary to work on the fluid mechanics of cognitive aging, older adults perform as well as younger adults (i.e., older than 25 years) on general wisdom tasks (for overview in Staudinger, 1999b). It seems that general wisdom-related knowledge and skills emerge between the ages of 14 and 25 years, when controlling for intelligence during that period (Pasupathi, Staudinger, & Baltes, 2001). But, as expected, after that point growing older is not enough to become wiser. Rather, we found that older adults performed better on typical dilemmas of old age and young adults performed better on typical dilemmas of young adulthood (Staudinger, Smith, & Baltes, 1992). However, when age has been combined with wisdom-related experiential contexts, such as professional training and experience in matters of life (e.g., clinical psychology), higher levels of general wisdom-related performance were observed at higher ages (Smith, Staudinger, & Baltes, 1994; Staudinger et al., 1992).

In line with the historical wisdom literature, which portrays wisdom as the ideal combination of mind and virtue, it was found that general wisdom-related performance is best predicted by measures located at the interface of cognition and personality, such as a judicial cognitive style (i.e., "seeking to understand why and what it means that people think what they think, say what they say, and do what they do"; Sternberg, 1990, p. 154), creativity, and moral reasoning (Staudinger, Lopez, & Baltes, 1997). Neither fluid and crystallized intelligence nor personality (Big Five) made a significant contribution to general wisdom-related knowledge and skills independently of each other. Interestingly, a very different predictive pattern is found when general wisdom-related performance is considered in adolescence, where cognitive development seems to be a crucial basis for the emergence of wisdom-related knowledge (Staudinger & Pasupathi, 2003). General wisdom-related performance has also been found to be substantially correlated with moral reasoning (assessed in the Kohlbergian tradition), a relationship that is mediated by personality characteristics and intelligence (Pasupathi & Staudinger, 2001).

Consistent with a threshold model, high levels of general wisdom-related performance are unlikely to be found among those with low scores in moral reasoning.

General wisdom as measured according to the Berlin wisdom paradigm is unrelated or only weakly related to subjective well-being (Kunzmann & Baltes, 2003). Wise individuals reported experiencing both positive affect (e.g., happy, cheerful) and negative affect (e.g., angry, afraid) less frequently than other individuals, but they reported a higher degree of affective involvement (e.g., being interested, inspired) than the rest of the sample. This pattern suggests that wisdom might go along with a more realistic, less self-enhancing, and less positively biased view on life but at the same time with better emotion-regulating skills. Also, individuals with higher wisdom-related scores tended to endorse values referring to personal growth, life insight, societal engagement, the well-being of friends, and ecological protection more than other individuals did.

When comparing these findings on general wisdom with the first evidence ascertained on correlates of personal wisdom, similarities and differences emerge. First, neither general nor personal wisdom have a positive linear relationship to *age*. For example, a recent study presented evidence from a 34-year longitudinal study on self-reported personal wisdom in an Eriksonian sense (Sneed & Whitbourne, 2003). Despite considerable interindividual differences, integrity scores increased in young adulthood, dropped somewhat around age 40, and then began to increase again. Many aging adults may focus on stabilizing previous self-perceptions in order to maintain well-being, rather than engaging in deep life reflection (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008; Sneed & Whitbourne, 2003). Research with the Bremen measure of personal wisdom found that age is not only unrelated to personal wisdom (as is the case for general wisdom), but even negatively related to the three meta-criteria of self-relativism, interrelating the self, and tolerance of ambiguity (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008). Declining cognitive resources may make abstract thinking—which is required more to satisfy the meta than to satisfy the basic wisdom criteria—more difficult for older adults. Also, control analyses were able to demonstrate that younger adults' higher levels of openness to experience are an added advantage when it comes to testing established self-related insights against new evidence, which is a prerequisite to developing further self-insight. In addition, self-criticism is less crucial for general wisdom-related performance than for personal wisdom. Similarly, personal growth is generally negatively related to age (Ryff & Keyes 1995), and ego development peaks in early midlife and declines thereafter (Cohn & Westenberg, 2004). When interpreting such findings, we need to be careful, however, to not causally attribute them to age. Rather contemporaneous societal restrictions of growth opportunities in old age also need to be taken into account (e.g., Ryff & Singer, 2006; Staudinger & Kessler, 2009).

Furthermore, we were able to demonstrate that the developmental task of later life, including the psychosocial crises of old age, integrity vs. despair—that is, coming to terms with one's own life as lived (Erikson, 1959)—may prejudice older adults' life reflection toward a positive evaluation of their own life (Kennedy, Mather, & Carstensen, 2004). In terms of the mastery of this developmental task, a positive self-evaluation is highly functional—but at the same time, it is

detrimental to developing personal wisdom, because it avoids confronting one's own limitations and weaknesses. Coming to terms with one's life as lived is easier given a positive evaluation of one's life, but the personal wisdom criterion of self-relativism requires that one pays attention to the negative aspects in one's life. This interpretation is supported by the larger negative age effects for personal wisdom as compared to general wisdom. General wisdom-related performance is less dependent on self-criticism than is personal wisdom-related performance.

Second, personal wisdom shows a significantly smaller relationship than general wisdom with indicators of *subjective well-being* (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008). It is not enough to master the tasks of everyday life (and thereby increase subjective well-being) in order to gain in personal wisdom. Again, this finding underscores the importance of distinguishing between different types of positive development during adulthood and into old age (Staudinger & Kessler, 2009). Sincere self-reflection and self-criticism, as well as facing negative emotional states—all of which are necessary steps on the road to personal wisdom—are not likely to increase subjective well-being (in the sense of hedonic well-being, as captured by measures of life satisfaction or positive and negative affect). It is, however, likely to increase eudaimonic well-being, as captured by measures of personal wisdom (cf. Waterman, 1993). When interpreting the relationship between indicators of wisdom and of subjective well-being, we also need to consider that usually participants have not yet come very far on their journey to wisdom, and therefore hardship and pain might still outweigh the positive aspects of progress toward wisdom. In samples of individuals who are closer to attaining wisdom, the relationship between wisdom and well-being is most likely of a different kind.

Third, *personal life events* did not contribute to the prediction of general wisdom-related performance, but they played an important role when predicting personal wisdom scores (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008). This is in line with the finding that traumatic life experiences can be conducive to the development of (personal) wisdom (e.g., Baltes et al., 1995; Kinnier, Tribbensee, Rose, & Vaughan, 2001), a notion prominent in concepts such as posttraumatic growth (e.g., Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006), stress-related growth (Aldwin & Levenson, 2001; Park et al., 1996), or growth through adversity (e.g., Joseph & Linley, 2006; King, 2001). After negative experiences such as accidents, life-threatening illness, or the death of a close other person, many people report self-perceived increases in aspects of personal life such as compassion, affect regulation, self-understanding, honesty and reliability, spirituality, and self-reported wisdom itself (cf. Park, 2004). While such self-perceptions of growth may be delusional (Maercker & Zoellner, 2004), it seems plausible that personal wisdom is fostered by the experience of fundamental changes that “force” individuals to grow (Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999) by challenging them to transform and reorganize their conceptions of the self and their life, but not completely destroying them. Against our expectations, other indicators of personality maturity were not more strongly associated with personal as compared to general wisdom.

## Modifying Personal and General Wisdom: Similarities and Differences

In previous studies of wisdom-related performance, be it general or personal, the average levels observed in unselected samples were rather low, leaving a lot of space for improvement. And indeed, empirical studies have found support for the positive plasticity of general wisdom. In two intervention studies, we found that by either providing for a certain type of social performance context, that is, discussing the difficult life problem with a real or imaginary confidant (Staudinger & Baltes, 1996), or by teaching a certain knowledge-search strategy (Böhmig-Krumhaar, Staudinger, & Baltes, 2002), general wisdom-related performance was significantly increased. Thus, interventions that help to activate individuals' actual wisdom-related reserves can enhance wisdom-related performance. However, activation of abstract conceptions of wisdom (by means of the instruction to "try to give a wise response") did not lead to increases in performance (Glück & Baltes, 2006).

Similarly, a first intervention study using the Bremen measure of personal wisdom was successful but once more showed a differential effect as compared to general wisdom. In contrast to the finding for general wisdom (Staudinger & Baltes, 1996), personal wisdom was *not* facilitated by the opportunity to exchange ideas with a familiar person before responding to a personal wisdom task. Rather, it was found that instruction about how to infer insight from personal experiences (cf. life reflection; Staudinger, 2001) significantly increased personal wisdom scores (cf. Staudinger et al., 2006). The authors interpreted this finding such that in the case of personal wisdom, the exchange with a well-known other person may be less helpful, as relationships tend to develop such that partners learn to avoid sensitive issues unless urgently necessary. Thus, for personal wisdom to be facilitated, it seems more useful to seek support from someone unknown and trained to support the life-reflection process, such as a psychotherapist, or from some form of educational intervention. This first evidence available on the plasticity of general as compared to personal wisdom underscores the importance of the differentiation between the two wisdom types. It seems that different interventions are prone to further either one or the other form of wisdom.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, a short history of the concept "personal wisdom" has been presented, and a theoretical as well as empirical argument has been proposed that supports the usefulness of the distinction between general and personal wisdom. One measurement approach to personal wisdom, the Bremen personal wisdom measure, has been described, and evidence on differential patterns of convergent and discriminant validity has been presented. Furthermore, evidence from intervention work has shown that interventions have different effects on general as

compared to personal wisdom. Research on personal and general wisdom is in need of longitudinal data in order to increase our understanding about the developmental dynamics between the two types of wisdom.

Why do some individuals develop further on the road to personal wisdom in the course of their life, while most of us do not? Is it possible to distinguish societies according to how much they facilitate the development of wisdom? Wisdom theorists agree that the development of wisdom is a complex interaction of intraindividual, interindividual, and external factors that dynamically interact over the course of an individual life (e.g., Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Brugman, 2006; Kramer, 2000; Sternberg, 1998). To date, however, very few longitudinal data are available to help trace these interactions and possibly identify different types of developmental trajectories toward wisdom (e.g., Helson & Roberts, 1994).

To gain further insight into the development of different types of wisdom, it will also be important to start applying neuropsychological work on the social-cognitive processes involved in wisdom-related performance. Neurophysiology may help to illuminate to which degree emotions, motivations, and “hot” and “cold” cognitions play a role in general and personal wisdom-related performance. Finally, learning more about the different ways in which we may positively influence the development of personal and of general wisdom seems an important goal in times that need more insight or even wisdom (e.g., Ferrari & Potworowski, 2008; Sternberg, 2004).

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