

1 Defining Wisdom

According to a social constructionist view, both lay persons' and scientists' definitions of psychological terms are the result of historically situated social construction processes (Gergen, 1985; Scarr, 1985). Wisdom is a term that has transformed its specific meaning across different historical times and contexts (Rice, 1958; Robinson, 1990). Some thoughts or actions might be considered to be wise at some point in time, but unwise at others (Assmann, 1994). Although the specific meaning of wisdom has changed, it was at all times seen as an ideal that involved both highest knowledge and virtuous behavior (Baltes, 2004; Rice, 1958). As such, wisdom can be defined in terms of global meta-orientations and perspectives rather than in terms of specific actions or behaviors (see Baltes & Smith, 1990). From this perspective, wisdom may be less susceptible to historical change than other forms of knowledge because it focuses on the understanding of self and others and as such is directed at universals in human nature (Baltes, 2004; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Clayton, 1982).

Beyond the historical dimensions, socially and psychologically defined constructs can be distinguished from each other (see Wiggins, 1973; Westmeyer, 1995). Whereas socially defined concepts are constructed by societal groups that claim and enact definitional power, psychologically defined constructs are constructed by individuals within the scientific community (*e.g.*, Westmeyer, 1998).

Psychological theories of wisdom reflect this distinction. *Explicit or scholarly* approaches define wisdom from a psychological theoretical point of view, whereas *implicit or lay theories* of wisdom use lay persons' conceptions to define and investigate the concept of wisdom.

1.1 Psychological Definitions of Wisdom: Explicit Theories

Scholarly approaches or explicit theories of wisdom use a-priori definitions of wisdom as a starting point for their research and attempt to define the *ideal case* of wisdom (Baltes, 2004; Smith & Baltes, 1990; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). Compared to lay-theoretical approaches, scholarly approaches to wisdom are usually more refined and elaborate (see Baltes, 2004).

Explicit theories of wisdom focus either on describing the structure and characteristics of *wisdom-related thinking and knowledge* (Baltes & Smith, 1990; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Horn & Masunaga, 2000; Kramer, 1983; 1990; Kramer & Woodruff, 1986; Labouvie-Vief, 1990; Sternberg, 1998) or define wisdom in terms of *personal characteristics* of wise persons (Achenbaum & Orwell, 1991; Ardelt, 1997; 2000; 2003; 2004a; Erikson, 1959; Helson & Srivastava, 2001; Orwoll & Perlmutter, 1990, Webster, 2003; Wink & Helson, 1997).

Within the cognitive or knowledge-based approaches to wisdom, three groups of theories can be distinguished: (1) Theories that focus on very *specific characteristics*, such as the ability to recognize the limits of one's knowledge

(Meacham, 1990; McKee & Barber, 1999) or the ability to identify problems (Arlin, 1990); (2) *Neo-Piagetian* theories that take a developmental perspective on advanced cognitive functioning and address the development of integrative and relativistic modes of thinking (see Kramer & Woodruff, 1986; Kramer, 2000; Labouvie-Vief, 1990); and (3) *knowledge-based* theories that emphasize the structured organization of wisdom-related knowledge within an expert knowledge system (see Baltes & Smith, 1990; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Baltes & Kunzmann, 2004; Sternberg, 1998).

A second line of explicit theories describes wisdom as a result of mature personality development (Achenbaum & Orwell, 1991; Ardelt, 2000; Erikson, 1959; Helson & Srivastava, 2001; Orwoll & Perlmutter, 1990, Wink & Helson, 1997; Vaillant, 1993). *Psycho-dynamic theories* focus on the development of ego-strength through the mastery of developmental tasks (see Erikson, 1959; 1982; Vaillant, 1977; 1993). *Personality theories*, on the other hand, describe wisdom in terms of personal characteristics of wise persons and emphasize the integration of affective, cognitive, reflective, and social characteristics (Achenbaum & Orwell, 1991; Ardelt, 2000; Helson & Srivastava, 2001; Orwoll & Perlmutter, 1990, Webster, 2003; Wink & Helson, 1997).

Altogether, these definitions are not mutually exclusive but rather emphasize different aspects of wisdom. While cognitive or knowledge-based theories focus on the description of wisdom-related thinking and knowledge, personality approaches

focus on the description of personal characteristics of wise persons (see Baltes & Kunzmann, 2004).

Together, these scholarly definitions of wisdom suggest that wisdom is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that involves cognitive as well as behavioral aspects. They converge in the notion of wisdom as excellence in cognitive, social, and affective domains, also referred to as the integration of *mind* and *virtue* (see Baltes & Smith, 1990; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000).

As outlined earlier, scholarly approaches provide elaborate and in-depths definitions of wisdom and explicate the specific features of wisdom-related knowledge more precisely than lay-theoretical approaches (see Baltes, 2004). In this sense, the explicit theoretical approaches reviewed above provide a general background for the selection of relevant personal characteristics of a wise advisor. Specifically, the criteria for wisdom-related knowledge outlined within the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm (Baltes et al., 1984; Baltes & Smith, 1990; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Dittmann-Kohli & Baltes, 1990; Dixon & Baltes, 1986; Staudinger & Baltes, 1994; Sowarka, 1989) will be used in the context of the present study to investigate to which extent these criteria are relevant to lay persons' perceptions of wisdom. The next section introduces different definitional and methodological approaches of wisdom from a lay theoretical or implicit perspective on wisdom.

1.2 Lay-Theoretical Definitions of Wisdom: Implicit Approaches

1.2.1 Lexical Studies: Defining the Ideal Case of a Wise Person

Lexical studies on implicit theories of wisdom have focused on mapping the characteristics that define a wise person and distinguish wisdom from other positive semantic categories, such as creativity or intelligence (see Clayton & Birren, 1980; Hershey & Farrell, 1997; Holliday & Chandler, 1986; Staudinger, Lopez, & Baltes, 1997; Sternberg, 1985; Takahashi & Bordia, 2000).

In these studies, participants have been asked to rate the typicality of multiple verbal descriptors for a wise person or wisdom (e.g., caring, smart, knowledgeable). Although past studies have revealed different numbers of factors depending on the items they investigated, all of these studies have demonstrated the importance of (a) cognition or knowledge, (b) certain expressive behaviors indicating exceptional interpersonal skills, and (c) experience or age as typical characteristics of ideally wise persons (Clayton & Birren, 1980; Hershey & Farrell, 1997; Holliday & Chandler, 1986; Sowarka, 1989; Staudinger et al., 1998; Sternberg, 1985). Table 1 provides an overview of typical descriptions of wise persons. These studies support the notion of wisdom as a multi-dimensional phenomenon.

Table 1

Wisdom Definitions in Lexical Studies: Examples of Typical Characteristics of Wise Persons

	Clayton & Birren (1980)	Hershey & Farrell (1997)	Holliday & Chandler (1986)	Staudinger et al. (1998)	Sternberg (1985)
Cognition/ Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Intelligent – knowledgeable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – intelligent – reflective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – sees the essence of situations – says things that are worth listening to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – thinks carefully before making decisions – shows knowledge about the human nature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – is able to take the long view – has a logical mind
Expressive behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – gentle – empathetic – peaceful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – quiet – withdrawn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – a good listener – empathic – advisor or mentor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – is a good listener – knows when to give/ withhold advice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – is a good listener – displays concern for others
Age/ Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – aged – experienced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – experienced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – has learned from experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – has learned from experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – experienced – has age, maturity, or long-term experience

Lexical studies have provided important insights into the nature of implicit theories of wisdom, however, they also have limitations. One limitation of lexical studies is that they use verbal descriptors of relatively general behavioral tendencies (e.g., being a good listener) as potential elements of wisdom and characteristics of wise persons. However, some behavioral indicators of wisdom, such as nonverbal behaviors, may not be well represented in the verbal descriptions used in these studies because they may be used as cues for the inference of wisdom without the perceiver's awareness of their importance.

In addition, because they attempt to study the *ideal* case of wisdom or wise persons in general, prototypicality ratings do not convey any information as to whether certain attributes are important in the judgment of a *specific* person as being wise or not. It should be noted that it is a debated issue within the field of wisdom whether any specific person can be an *ideally* wise person (see Ardel, 2004a; 2004b; Baltes & Kunzmann, 2004). Nomination and experimental person perception studies, however, investigate the characteristics of specific „wise“ individuals.

1.2.2 Nomination Studies: Finding Wisdom in Everyday Life

In *nomination* studies, participants are asked to nominate persons they consider to be wise (Defilippo, 1996; Denney et al., 1995; Farrell, 1999; Perlmutter, Adams, Nyquist, & Kaplan, as cited in Orwoll & Perlmutter, 1990; Sowarka, 1989). Nomination studies revealed two important findings: (1) They showed that

demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, and educational level, are important in the nomination of persons as being wise (Denney et al., 1995; Hira & Faulkender, 1997; Knight & Parr, 1999; Perlmutter et al., 1988); (2) Nomination studies also show that reasons to nominate a person as being wise include personal characteristics such as a nominee's experience, knowledge, and interpersonal skills. Nomination studies are relevant for the present study because they demonstrate that – although wisdom is an ideal concept – it is ascribed to *specific* persons on the basis of demographic, cognitive, as well as behavioral characteristics.

However, nomination studies have also some disadvantages: Wisdom is usually regarded as an exceptional, rare, and ideal characteristic. Nomination studies ask participants to nominate persons in their own life as wise. It remains an open question whether the nominees are perceived as being ideally wise and whether nominees of different lay persons are comparable regarding their perceived level of wisdom. Moreover, because complex and rich information about a familiar person is available to nominators, they may be unaware of the relative importance of different cues as reasons for the nomination of a person as being wise (see Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Some personal characteristics, such as age, may be perceived as constituting wisdom only in combination with other characteristics, such as rich knowledge and good interpersonal skills. Nomination studies have not systematically tested the influence of single factors and multiple factor combinations

on attributions of wisdom. They also do not convey any information about the relative importance of certain characteristics in attributions of wisdom.

1.2.3 Experimental Person Perception Studies: Testing the Influence of Personal Characteristics on Attributions of Wisdom

The impact of specific personal characteristics and combinations of characteristics on attributions of wisdom to specific target persons has been investigated in experimental person perception studies (Defilippo, 1996; Farrell, 1999; Hira & Faulkender, 1997; Knight & Parr, 1999). Experimental person perception studies differ in the methods that they apply, for instance verbal descriptions of fictitious targets (vignettes) versus non-verbal and more complex material, such as videos.

In vignette studies, certain characteristics of a person, such as gender or age, are manipulated through short verbal descriptions (see Chapter 2.3.2 for a detailed description). Essentially, the same text can be presented to participants for rating with a simple alteration of the facet of interest. Target characteristics, such as attractiveness or personality, that are not of central interest to the researcher can be kept constant. Most vignette studies that have been conducted within the field of wisdom have investigated the role of demographic characteristics such as age on attributions of wisdom (Defilippo, 1996; Farrell, 1999; Knight & Parr, 1999).

These vignette studies have shown that wisdom is ascribed not only on the basis of wisdom-typical features, such as „has the unique ability to look at a problem and solve it“, but also based on demographic features such as a target person’s age (Knight & Parr, 1999). However, the findings are inconsistent across different studies regarding the influence of age, for instance. The studies have demonstrated, however, that characteristics such as age or gender alter the meaning of other wisdom-related characteristics.

Vignette studies have some methodological limitations. Similar to lexical studies, they use only general verbal description of behaviors and demographic characteristics, which may not be representative of attributions of wisdom in real-life contexts. As social-cognitive studies have shown, visible cues, such as a person’s age or gender, are used by perceivers to infer certain characteristics that are not directly visible (see Brewer, 1988; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). For instance, when asked to describe a target person’s personality, different perceivers tend to agree with each other and moreover, perceivers’ ratings tend to correspond to the target persons’ self-reports of personality (Albright, Kenny, & Malloy, 1988; Ambady, Hallahan, & Rosenthal, 1995; Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992; Borkenau & Liebler, 1992; Funder & Dobroth, 1987). Because they are expressed nonverbally, expressive behaviors may not be well represented in verbal descriptions.

Video-based approaches present an interesting avenue to investigate the importance of a target's *behavioral characteristics* in perceptions of wisdom. The one study that has used a video-based experimental approach was conducted by Hira and Faulkender (1997). They have focused not on behavioral characteristics, but on demographic characteristics, such as age and gender. This study will be described later in more detail (see Chapter 2.3).

1.2.4 Summary and Critique of Implicit Approaches of Wisdom

Research on implicit theories has investigated lay persons' perceptions of the characteristics of both ideally wise persons (prototype) and specific persons. As Baltes and Staudinger (2000) summarize, the results from studies on implicit theories of wisdom converge in the idea of wisdom as (a) possessing a specific, culturally-shared meaning, (b) reflecting an exceptional level of human functioning, (c) including cognitive, affective, and motivational aspects that are well-integrated, (d) reflecting high personal and interpersonal competence, and (e) involving good intentions.

Studies conducted within the implicit tradition have mainly used *verbal descriptions* of personal characteristics such as age or gender. The present study extends this past research by experimentally manipulating both demographic characteristics, such as a target person's age, as well as behavioral characteristics such as a target person's interpersonal behavior and cognitive characteristics, such

as the level of wisdom-related knowledge expressed in an advice using a video-based experimental approach. This study tries to address the multi-dimensional nature of the concept within an experimental person perception context. Moreover, the study tries to address the relative importance of single cues (wisdom-related knowledge, empathic listening behavior, and age) and the configuration of cues in the perception of a person as being wise.

1.3 A Social Constructionist Definition of Wisdom

A social constructionist view on wisdom claims that the concept of wisdom is socially constructed. As outlined earlier, the psychological wisdom literature has distinguished implicit (or socially defined) from explicit (or psychologically defined) theoretical approaches of wisdom. Both approaches have particular advantages: Because implicit approaches of wisdom focus on the representation of wisdom in everyday language and on everyday instantiations of wisdom they may be useful to predict lay persons' everyday behavior, such as the selection of a particular person as an advice-giver.

Explicit theoretical approaches, on the other hand, focus on the abstract, analytical, ideal concept of wisdom. Baltes (2004) suggest that implicit approaches have several theoretical limitations when compared with scholarly approaches because they are often less differentiated and complex, less comprehensive, and less abstract than scholarly approaches of wisdom. However, because both implicit and

explicit theories address essentially the same concept, these theories should show some overlap. The present study specifically asks whether elements of explicit theories are considered as important by lay persons and how different behavioral manifestations of wisdom are perceived in different configurations with other wisdom characteristics. Scholarly definitions of wisdom-related characteristics can be used to specify and operationalize wisdom-related characteristics that may be relevant to lay-persons' perceptions of wisdom in others.

Westmeyer (1998) uses the sample case of creativity to illustrate the implications of social and psychological definitional approaches. Depending on the theoretical approach chosen, different products could be judged as being creative or not creative by different raters and/or theorists. Westmeyer proposes the reconciliation of these two perspectives by suggesting a social constructionist view on creativity that claims that creativity is ascribed to the product of a person in a specific domain at a specific time in a specific social context by an „authorized“ rater. This definition can be applied to both socially and a psychologically defined concepts of creativity. In the case of psychologically defined concepts, the theorist would have the definitional power to judge the product of a person as creative, whereas for socially defined concepts other institutionalized groups (e.g. experts in the field) would have the definitional power.

This thesis suggests that the social constructionist perspective can be applied to the domain of wisdom. Wisdom according to this view is an ascribed characteristic that would be inferred if the *product* of a person is evaluated by a *rater* in a *specific context*, at a *specific time* as wise. Explicit theories can be used to describe the characteristics of this product whereas research based on implicit theories of wisdom can investigate whether these characteristics are relevant to lay persons' attributions of wisdom.

Which „*product of a person*“ is central for the attribution of wisdom? Within the Berlin Wisdom Model (Baltes et al., 1984; Baltes & Smith, 1990; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Dittmann-Kohli & Baltes, 1990; Dixon & Baltes, 1986; Staudinger & Baltes, 1994; Sowarka, 1989), wisdom-related knowledge has been assessed on the basis of a verbal product of a person. This product is a transcribed think-aloud protocol of a response to a fundamental and difficult life-situation. Baltes and colleagues suggested that this product provided an indicator of a person's general level of wisdom-related knowledge. However, they also argue that wisdom-related knowledge can also be found in other products such as legal texts, for instance, or constitutions.

Wisdom-related knowledge is one indicator of wisdom, but is not fully identical with wisdom. Many theorists emphasize that wisdom includes emotional and motivational attributes, for instance the recognition of the common good. As

such wisdom involves the orchestrated integration of *mind* and *virtue* (Baltes & Smith, 1990; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). The notion of the multidimensional nature of the concept of wisdom (see Clayton & Birren, 1980; Holliday & Chandler, 1986; Sternberg, 1985) suggests that wisdom will be ascribed to a person because of this person's observable wisdom-relevant characteristics: Wisdom-related knowledge is but one of such characteristics. As outlined earlier, characteristics of a wise person include affective and behavioral aspects that can be directly observed or that are inferred based on a person's observable characteristics (e.g., good listening behavior as an indicator of exceptional interpersonal skills or visible age as a proxy for experience). The basis for the ascription of wisdom will therefore involve more than just the „product“ that reflects wisdom-related knowledge. The present study argues that because wisdom is a multidimensional phenomenon, ascriptions of wisdom will also be based on a target person's interpersonal behavior and age/ experience (see Chapter 2).

The second aspect of the social constructionist definition of a construct is the identification of a „*domain*“. In the most general sense, the domain of wisdom has been defined by Baltes and his colleagues as „the fundamental pragmatics of life“, namely important, difficult, and uncertain matters of the meaning and conduct of life, such as life-planning, life-management, and life-review (Baltes et al., 1984; Baltes & Smith, 1990; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). As such, wisdom covers a broader scope

than any expertise in other domains, such as academia or chess. It should, however, be noted that the issue of domain-generality versus domain-specificity of wisdom is not resolved within the literature. Some theorists, such as Baltes and colleagues argue for a domain-generality, whereas other scholars argue that wisdom is domain-specific because of the cultural dependence of wisdom and the importance of specific life experiences in the development of wisdom (see Aebli, 1989; Sternberg, 1998).

The present study can not resolve this issue, but addresses it by limiting itself to one specific context, namely the context of advice-giving. Advice-giving is one prototypical wisdom context (Baltes & Smith, 1990; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Kramer, 2000; Sowarka, 1989). Moreover, it is a context that reflects the social-interactive nature of wisdom. Wisdom is not only socially ascribed, but also expressed and applied within social situations („micro-genesis of wisdom“, see Staudinger, 1996). The characteristics of a wise person identified in the context of advice-giving, especially the observable behaviors may, however, not be of importance in other contexts.

The definition of the fundamental pragmatics of life as the domain of wisdom has implications for the „raters or judges“ that have the definitional power to ascribe wisdom. Whereas in the case of creativity, the groups authorized with definitional power refer to institutionalized groups, such as artistic institutions, the identification of such groups is more difficult in the case of wisdom. For instance, Sternberg (1985,

1990) interviewed professors of art, business, philosophy, and physics on wisdom and found that different characteristics were seen as characteristic for ideally wise individuals in each of these professions, with different behaviors seen as indicative of wisdom.

The identification of authorized institutions that can be assumed to possess the definitional power to distinguish between a relatively wise and a relatively unwise advice-giving behavior is difficult. Clinical psychologists might be one such group because their field of expertise is to provide assistance in dealing with difficult and uncertain fundamental life matters. However, if we assume that the domain of wisdom is „the fundamental pragmatics of life“, we have to acknowledge that this is part of every person’s life: It is a domain in which everyone can be assumed to have some experience and some expertise (see Bannister & Fransella, 1986: „inquiring man“). Many researchers interested in wisdom have used lay people’s construction of wisdom as a starting point for their inquiry of the concept of wisdom (Clayton & Birren, 1980; Holliday & Chandler, 1986), or experts who were nominated by lay persons to be able to speak about wisdom (Sowarka, 1989). The present study will focus on lay persons’ attributions of wisdom.

The last two facets that a social constructionist definition of wisdom explicitly considers are the identification of „*context*“ and „*time*“. Wisdom has been shown to have some culturally broad meaning (see Baltes, 2004; Takahashi & Bordia, 2000) as

well as culturally and historically specific meanings (Ardelt, 2003; Assmann, 1994; Birren & Fisher, 1990; Clayton & Birren, 1980; Takahashi & Bordia, 2000). It is beyond the scope of the present study to address historical and cultural differences in the perception of wisdom. In addition, the present study applies an experimental person perception paradigm and investigates the perception of wisdom within a standardized laboratory context. The results of the present study can therefore not necessarily be generalized across different populations, times, and cultural contexts.

In sum, a social constructionist view on wisdom can contribute to our understanding of the phenomenon of wisdom. It acknowledges the context- and time-dependence of the conceptualization of wisdom. It offers a framework for the empirical investigation of the product, the context, the domain and the judges of wisdom and the interrelationships between these factors.

A social constructionist conception advocates the conception of wisdom as a characteristic that is ascribed rather than „objectively present“ (see also Hira & Faulkender, 1997; Meacham, 1990).¹ Although psychological and philosophical conceptions of wisdom may be very helpful in defining the ideal case of wisdom, lay persons' perceptions may be more useful in the prediction of behavior in specific situations. Lay persons' conceptions of wisdom may be less elaborated than scholarly

¹ This aspect of the social ascription of wisdom is also emphasized by proponents of a definition of wisdom as the acknowledgement of the limitations of one's own knowledge (see McKee & Barber, 1999; Meacham, 1983), who claim that because of her/his awareness of her/his limited knowledge, a wise person would deny being wise.

approaches but at the same time they may influence behavior in systematic and meaningful ways. For instance, implicit theories of wisdom may have important implications for both the development and the maintenance of wisdom. If a person is perceived by others as being wise in an advice-giving context, this person has a higher chance of being selected as an advice-giver for this person and therefore may encounter structured life experiences that could facilitate the development of wisdom-related expertise (see Staudinger, 1996).