

Defining and Assessing Wisdom: A Review of the Literature

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With increasing longevity and a growing focus on successful aging, there has been a recent growth of research designed to operationalize and assess wisdom. We aimed to (1) investigate the degree of overlap among empirical definitions of wisdom, (2) identify the most commonly cited wisdom subcomponents, (3) examine the psychometric properties of existing assessment instruments, and (4) investigate whether certain assessment procedures work particularly well in tapping the essence of subcomponents of the various empirical definitions. We searched PsychINFO-indexed articles published through May 2012 and their bibliographies. Studies were included if they were published in a peer-reviewed journal and (1) proposed a definition of wisdom or (2) discussed the development or validation of an instrument designed to assess wisdom. Thirty-one articles met inclusion criteria. Despite variability among the 24 reviewed definitions, there was significant overlap. Commonly cited subcomponents of wisdom included knowledge of life, prosocial values, self-understanding, acknowledgment of uncertainty, emotional homeostasis, tolerance, openness, spirituality, and sense of humor. Published reports describing the psychometric properties of nine instruments varied in comprehensiveness but most measures were examined for selected types of reliability and validity, which were generally acceptable. Given limitations of self-report procedures, an approach integrating multiple indices (e.g., self-report and performance-based measures) may better capture wisdom. Significant progress in the empirical study of wisdom has occurred over the past four decades; however, much needs to be done. Future studies with larger, more diverse samples are needed to determine the generalizability, usefulness, and clinical applicability of these definitions and assessment instruments. Such work will have relevance for the fields of geriatrics, psychiatry, psychology, sociology, education, and public health, among others. (Am J Geriatr Psychiatry 2013; ■:■—■)

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Over 700 years ago, Thomas Aquinas decreed, “of all the pursuits open to men, the search for wisdom is most perfect, more sublime, more profitable, and more full of joy.” Despite deep

historical roots in philosophy and religion,^{1,2} empirical studies of wisdom in psychology and gerontology did not begin until the 1970s. The long delay may be related in part to early gerontology’s emphasis on

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a deficit model, which characterizes the normative course of aging as a series of losses. Furthermore, psychology and neuroscience have generally tended to focus on elemental components or processes that can be relatively easily operationalized and measured. Given the complex nature of wisdom, there are challenges in defining, operationalizing, and assessing this construct.

Folk psychology suggests that individuals become wiser with increasing age, although published results from empirical studies have been inconsistent, with some demonstrating no age-related differences in wisdom³ whereas others report increases in wisdom with age.^{4–6} Evidence suggesting that wisdom is related to better physical health and improved quality of life among older adults^{7,8} in combination with the widespread belief that wisdom increases with age, the global trend of increasing longevity, and the growing interest in successful aging,^{9–11} have likely contributed to the notable increase in wisdom research over the past several decades.¹²

The word “wise” is used in everyday language and the intended or perceived meaning may differ somewhat depending on the context, but its scientific usage should be precise.¹³ Although there are somewhat different perspectives regarding the essential subcomponents of wisdom, in order for valid empirical research to grow, general agreement on the main characteristics of this complex construct and the optimal methods to assess it is important. Such consistency would be useful in comparing and integrating findings across studies, which is currently difficult given a lack of consensus regarding how to operationalize and measure wisdom. Despite the growth of scientific research and several excellent books on wisdom, to our knowledge this paper is the first to summarize articles published in peer-reviewed journals that describe the development of definitions of wisdom and instruments designed to assess wisdom. Unlike previously published review articles,^{13,14} we restricted our search to include only those articles that were published in peer-reviewed journals so as to focus on those definitions and instruments that were developed through empirical methods.

In reviewing the literature, we aimed to (1) investigate the degree of overlap among empirical definitions of wisdom, (2) identify the most commonly cited wisdom subcomponents, (3) examine the psychometric properties of existing assessment instruments,

and (4) investigate whether certain assessment procedures work particularly well in tapping the essence of subcomponents of the various empirical definitions. Summarizing the current literature and addressing these questions will inform future empirical research on wisdom to facilitate further elucidation of its conceptualization, assessment, and application to clinical interventions.

DESIGN AND METHODS

To identify articles for review, we surveyed the PsychINFO online database through May 2012 with the following criteria: (1) included the term *wisdom* in the title, (2) published in English, and (3) published in a peer-reviewed journal. This search yielded 571 articles of potential interest, of which 105 were deemed relevant (i.e., involved the study of the construct of wisdom) based upon a review of the abstract. References cited in these 105 articles were also reviewed. To be included in this review, articles either (1) proposed a definition of wisdom or (2) discussed the development, validation, and/or psychometric properties of an instrument designed to assess wisdom. Thirty-one articles met these criteria. At least two authors examined each journal article and then extracted information related to the proposed definition and/or assessment instrument.

Given our focus on empirically based definitions and measures of wisdom published in peer-reviewed journals, we did not include definitions and measures published in books.^{15–18} In addition, as we are interested in the construct of wisdom, we did not include work by researchers who have focused on subcomponents of this construct rather than wisdom per se. Such work includes Happé et al.’s work on theory of mind among older adults⁴; Levenson et al.’s research on self-transcendence¹⁹; conceptualizations emphasizing dialectical thinking and viewing wisdom as post-formal reasoning thereby extending beyond Piaget’s stages of cognitive development²⁰; and Kitchener et al.’s²¹ work on the reflective judgment theory.

RESULTS

Table 1 summarizes the key theories and definitions published since the early 1980s, when the

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