

using a wisdom diary: background

(This handout with hyperlinked research was published on the Good Medicine website on 5.04.21)

"Wisdom, compassion, and courage are the three universally recognized moral qualities of men." Confucius

"Every man is a damn fool for at least five minutes every day; wisdom consists in not exceeding the limit."
Elbert Hubbard

"No man was ever wise by chance." Seneca

(The language is a bit archaic, but the underlying message of these quotations is still very relevant today).

What is wisdom? This sounds like the kind of question Socrates would have debated in Athens nearly 2,500 years ago. In 2019, many of the key wisdom researchers met to try to put together 'a common wisdom model' (Grossmann et al, 2020). As Judith Gluck subsequently wrote *"being aware of the relativity of one's own perspectives and beliefs and being motivated to achieve some common good for a larger group ... are undisputable and central aspects of wisdom"*, although she and Robert Sternberg (Gluck, 2020; Sternberg 2020) went on to argue for greater emphasis in wisdom models on the additional importance of emotional intelligence & stability (Grossmann, Oakes et al. 2019) and an even greater focus on commitment to the common good.

Wisdom is important both for personal wellbeing and for the wellbeing of our families, our friendships, the groups and organisations we are involved with, and for society and the future of our planet. As has already been reported (Grossmann et al, 2013) *"Wise reasoning is associated with greater life satisfaction, less negative affect, better social relationships, less depressive rumination ... and greater longevity. The relationship between wise reasoning and wellbeing held even when controlling for socioeconomic factors, verbal abilities, and several personality traits."* In contrast researchers found no correlation between high analytic thinking ability (IQ) and wellbeing. Wisdom seems to come into its own in more 'fuzzy' situations – such as interpersonal conflicts & debates – where trying to 'analyse' one's way through to a solution tends to unsuccessfully oversimplify the multi-faceted, multi-layered challenges involved. See the linked questionnaire – the *"Situated Wise Reasoning Scale"* for more details on this (Brienza, Kung et al. 2017). I personally use this questionnaire as a self-test and a reminder when I'm trying to navigate as best I can through a significant interpersonal conflict. Conflicts are common and they really are a major opportunity to develop further emotional intelligence & wisdom.

In some ways, wisdom is like being a theatre director who can walk around the stage and get a sense of each actor's viewpoint, as well as being able to move out into the auditorium to look back and see the overall picture. In fact, this 'wise director' can even go out to the ticket office and programme planning departments to see how their particular production is developing over time and how it fits into the theatre season more generally. This ability to access a broader, more selfless perspective that acknowledges different viewpoints and can see the context evolving over time makes it more likely that responses will be wiser, honouring & helping all those involved.

Clearly people can learn and become wiser, although difficult life experiences and increasing age are no guarantees of increasing wisdom. Understanding wisdom's importance both for ourselves and for those around us is a good start. Then working to develop wiser responses seems crucial if we are going to be part of the solution more regularly rather than remain part of the problem in this deeply divided, struggling, immensely beautiful world that we live in. The handout *"A startlingly effective way to reduce interpersonal conflict and distress"* has already highlighted how valuable reappraisal practices can be for conflict in couple relationships. The linked *"Wisdom diary form"* describes the nuts & bolts of a very interesting method that can be applied even more broadly ... and build our own wellbeing at the same time (Santos and Grossmann 2020). When

you first explore the diary practice, please try to use it most days of the week for three weeks (Dorfman, Oakes et al. 2021). If you find it useful, consider topping up the practice by continuing to use the method for a week each month ... and after (or even before!) any significant interpersonal conflicts. (Grossmann, Dorfman et al. 2021). Good luck! This "*Wisdom diary*" joins other writing practices that I typically use for a few days each month to keep them fresh. For example, the "*Gratitude & appreciation record*" and the "*Emotional colouring in exercise*" (and its sister "*Affect dyad conversation*") are all complementary practices that can help us lead lives that are happier, more grateful & emotionally intelligent ... and wiser too!

Please don't feel you need to read through all these research abstracts. I have included them to give a bit more background about the various comments & suggestions I've made for those who would like this.

Brienza, J. P., et al. (2017). "*Wisdom, bias, and balance: Toward a process-sensitive measurement of wisdom-related cognition.*" *J Pers Soc Psychol*.

Philosophers and behavioral scientists refer to wisdom as unbiased reasoning that guides one toward a balance of interests and promotes a good life. However, major instruments developed to test wisdom appear biased, and it is unclear whether they capture balance-related tendencies. We examined whether shifting from global, de-contextualized reports to state-level reports about concrete situations provides a less biased method to assess wise reasoning (e.g., intellectual humility, recognition of uncertainty and change, consideration of the broader context at hand and perspectives of others, integration of these perspectives or compromise), which may be aligned with the notion of balancing interests. Results of a large-scale psychometric investigation (N = 4,463) revealed that the novel Situated WISE Reasoning Scale (SWIS) is reliable and appears independent of psychological biases (attribution bias, bias blind spot, self-deception, and impression management), whereas global wisdom reports are subject to such biases. Moreover, SWIS scores were positively related to indices of living well (e.g., adaptive emotion regulation, mindfulness), and balancing of cooperative and self-protective interests, goals (influence-vs.-adjustment), and causal inferences about conflict (attribution to the self-vs.-other party). In contrast, global wisdom reports were unrelated or negatively related to balance-related measures. Notably, people showed modest within-person consistency in wise reasoning across situations or over time, suggesting that a single-shot measurement may be insufficient for whole understanding of trait-level wisdom. We discuss theoretical and practical implications for research on wisdom, judgment and decision making, well-being, and prosociality.

Dorfman, A., et al. (2021). "*Self-distancing promotes positive emotional change after adversity: Evidence from a micro-longitudinal field experiment.*" *J Pers* 89(1): 132-144.

Abstract Objective This research examines changes in emotionality following adverse experiences in daily life. We tested whether daily self-distancing (vs. self-immersing) in reflections on adversity results in positive change in emotionality. Additionally, we probed the "dosage" effect of repeated self-distancing. **Method** A micro-longitudinal field experiment combined 4-week daily diary and experimental manipulation of perspective during diary-based reflections on adverse experiences to explore the trajectory of change in emotionality. Each day, participants (N = 149) described and reflected on one significant event from that day and rated emotionality. We randomly assigned participants to reflect from a self-immersed or self-distanced perspective. **Results** Self-distanced participants showed a change toward positive emotionality while maintaining the same level of negative emotionality, whereas self-immersed participants did not show changes in positive or negative emotionality. We also observed that self-distancing reached its maximum effect ("dosage") for positive emotionality in the third week of the diary. **Conclusions** Repeated self-distanced reflections can promote positive change in emotionality in the face of everyday adversity. Notably, repeated self-distancing effectiveness has a saturation point. In contrast, self-immersed reflections on adversity do not promote positive emotional change. Together, these observations raise the question how the default self-immersed reflection on traumatic experiences impacts personal growth.

Glück, J. (2020). "*The important difference between psychologists' labs and real life: Evaluating the validity of models of wisdom.*" *Psychological Inquiry* 31(2): 144-150.

(Available in free full text) Having studied wisdom for over twenty years now, I think I have learned quite a bit from my own research. If someone describes a difficult life problem to me, I can produce a

response that would probably be scored as wise. I consider myself as rather morally grounded, and I have become quite skilled at considering different perspectives, balancing interests, appreciating broader contexts, and knowing the limits of my knowledge. Yet there are moments in my life – family conflicts, endless and useless meetings, interactions with difficult students – where I yell, slam doors, and curse (or at least would like to do so) and where I am neither wise nor act wisely. How is that possible, according to the common model of wisdom proposed by Grossmann et al. (2020)? In the following, I want to argue that the common model of wisdom is a highly convincing model of wise reasoning, especially under laboratory conditions, but may not cover all that is needed for wise behavior in real life. In the second part of this paper, I discuss the more general question of how we can test whether a model of wisdom is valid. First, however, I would like to emphasize that I very much agree with Grossmann et al.'s main point that perspectival metacognitive thinking with a moral grounding is at the core of wisdom. As Igor Grossmann and others have shown in many studies, being aware of the relativity of one's own perspectives and beliefs and being motivated to achieve some common good for a larger group – be it one's family, an institution, or a whole nation – are undisputable and central aspects of wisdom (see also Sternberg, 1998, 2019). The model proposed by Grossmann and colleagues is an excellent descriptive model of the commonalities of wise solutions to a range of wisdom-requiring problems. An explanatory model that also accounts for how individuals arrive at such solutions would seem to be an important next step, and as I am going to argue in the following, such a model would need to include emotional aspects.

Grossmann, I., et al. (2021). *"Training for wisdom: The distanced-self-reflection diary method."* Psychological Science 0(0): 0956797620969170.

How can people wisely navigate social conflict? Two preregistered longitudinal experiments (Study 1: Canadian adults; Study 2: American and Canadian adults; total N = 555) tested whether encouraging distanced (i.e., third-person) self-reflection would help promote wisdom. Both experiments measured wise reasoning (i.e., intellectual humility, open-mindedness about how situations could unfold, consideration of and attempts to integrate diverse viewpoints) about challenging interpersonal events. In a month-long experiment (Study 1), participants used either a third- or first-person perspective in diary reflections on each day's most significant experience. Compared with preintervention assessments, assessments made after the intervention revealed that participants reflecting in the third person showed a significant increase in wise reasoning about interpersonal challenges. These effects were statistically accounted for by shifts in diary-based reflections toward a broader self-focus. A week-long experiment (Study 2) replicated the third-person self-reflection effect on wise reasoning (vs. first-person and no-pronoun control conditions). These findings suggest an efficient and evidence-based method for fostering wise reasoning. [See www.psychologicalscience.org/news/releases/2021-feb-training-wisdom.html for an excellent written and interview-based discussion of this work].

Grossmann, I., et al. (2020). *"The science of wisdom in a polarized world: Knowns and unknowns."* Psychological Inquiry 31(2): 103-133.

Abstract Interest in wisdom in the cognitive sciences, psychology, and education has been paralleled by conceptual confusions about its nature and assessment. To clarify these issues and promote consensus in the field, wisdom researchers met in Toronto in July of 2019, resolving disputes through discussion. Guided by a survey of scientists who study wisdom-related constructs, we established a common wisdom model, observing that empirical approaches to wisdom converge on the morally-grounded application of metacognition to reasoning and problem-solving. After outlining the function of relevant metacognitive and moral processes, we critically evaluate existing empirical approaches to measurement and offer recommendations for best practices. In the subsequent sections, we use the common wisdom model to selectively review evidence about the role of individual differences for development and manifestation of wisdom, approaches to wisdom development and training, as well as cultural, subcultural, and social-contextual differences. We conclude by discussing wisdom's conceptual overlap with a host of other constructs and outline unresolved conceptual and methodological challenges.

Grossmann, I., et al. (2019). *"Wise reasoning benefits from emotion diversity, irrespective of emotional intensity."* Journal of Experimental Psychology: General.

The role of emotions in wise reasoning is not well understood. On the one hand, work on emotional regulation suggests that downregulating intense emotions may lead to wiser reasoning. On the other hand, emerging work suggests that recognizing and balancing emotions provides critical insights into life experiences, suggesting an alternative path to wiser reasoning. We present a series of observational, diary, and experimental studies (N = 3,678 participants) addressing these possibilities, examining how wisdom-

related characteristics of reasoning—epistemic humility, recognition of a world in flux, self-transcendence, recognition of diverse perspectives on an issue, and search for integration of diverse perspectives/compromise—relate to emotional intensity and to emodiversity (i.e., emotional richness and evenness) in a given situation. Across 5 studies, testing wisdom nominees and examining individual differences and manipulated wise reasoning, wisdom-related characteristics appeared in conjunction with emodiversity, independent of downregulated emotional intensity. The positive association between emodiversity and wisdom-related characteristics occurred consistently for daily challenges, unresolved interpersonal conflicts, as well as political conflicts. The relationship between emotional intensity and wisdom-related characteristics was less systematic, with some studies showing a positive (rather than negative) association between emotional intensity and wisdom. Together, these results demonstrate that wise reasoning does not necessarily require uniform emotional downregulation. Instead, wise reasoning can also benefit from a rich and balanced emotional life.

Santos, H. C. and I. Grossmann (2020). *"Cross-temporal exploration of the relationship between wisdom-related cognitive broadening and subjective well-being: Evidence from a cross-validated national longitudinal study."* *Social Psychological and Personality Science* **0**(0): 1948550620921619.

How do intraindividual changes in wisdom-related characteristics of cognitive broadening—open-minded reflection on challenging situations, consideration of change, and epistemic humility—relate to subjective well-being over time? To test this relationship, we performed cross-lagged panel analyses from three waves of the national U.S. sample taken across 20 years, utilizing a cross-validation approach: (i) conduct exploratory analyses on a random subset of data, (ii) preregister hypotheses and methods, and (iii) cross-validate preregistered hypotheses on the other random subset of the data. We found that broadening attitudes predicted greater affect balance and life satisfaction in later years, but not vice-versa. The effect was robust when controlling for trait-level broadening well-being associations, as well as sociodemographic characteristics, openness, and general cognitive abilities. The direction of the positive longitudinal relationship between broadening attitudes and subjective well-being has implications for major existing theories of adult development and subjective well-being.

Sternberg, R. J. (2020). *"The missing links: Comments on "The science of wisdom in a polarized world"*. *Psychological Inquiry* 31(2): 153-159.

Sternberg here argues that Grossmann et al's common wisdom model doesn't emphasise enough wisdom's focus on the common good.
