Practical Wisdom

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In the US: Smart decisions are important

- Smart decisions depend on knowledge and intelligence – IQ!
- Cognitive psychological processes
  - executive function
  - working memory
  - long term memory
  - reasoning and logic
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- This view is from cognitive psychology and economics: rational/optimal

- Decisions are independent of
  - emotion and affective response
  - social context
But... What is wisdom?

• Wisdom seems desirable, but unattainable
• Wisdom seems mythical, like a superpower
• In many cultures, wisdom is thought to come with age
  • But not everyone who is older is wiser
  • And some of the youth of today may be wise
• If not by age alone, what is the role of experience in developing wisdom?
• And how can wisdom be defined beyond common understanding...?
• What experiences can make us wiser?
Wisdom or Wise Decisions...

• Aristotle: Sophia and Phronesis

• Wisdom as an aspect of character or personality -- a predisposition towards a certain approach to situation responses – the WISE person

• Wisdom as phronesis, **practical decision making** that leads to human flourishing – an intellectual virtue organizing (or directed by?) moral virtues

• Moral virtues have been considered as social intelligence (Snow, 2009) or related to emotional intelligence

• For our purposes, WISDOM = WISE DECISIONS
Are smart decisions wise?

- Are we really “rational”? What does “rational” mean?
- Can we ignore emotional responses and attitudes in making decisions?
- How does social context change decisions?
- What is the role of social networks in decisions?
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- Decisions often “biased” – e.g., endowment effect
- Context has undue influence – e.g., using “I” vs. “we”
- Social groups affect decisions
Smart vs. wise decisions

- Smart decisions optimize on specific task-relevant dimensions (money, time, efficiency, etc) – often using one prominent dimension, good problem solving
- Wise decisions are relevant when:
  - Multiple dimensions are important that may conflict (time and personnel development, cost and quality)
  - There is uncertainty, ambiguity, risk, many unknowables, long & short term considerations
  - People are affected
- Wise decisions satisfice across dimensions
- Wise decisions use creativity & insight (reflection, perseverance, curiosity, intellectual struggle)
- Wise decisions use others’ perspective (epistemic humility, reflection, perspective taking)
Alfred Binet, the father of the modern IQ test defined Intelligence as:

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Smart vs. wise

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Aristotle defined practical wisdom or phronesis:

- decisions that lead to human flourishing
- an intellectual virtue organizing (or directed by?) moral virtues
- moral virtues (e.g., trust, honesty, generosity) described as social intelligence (Snow, 2009), emotional intelligence
Defining Wisdom Project (2011): Working Definition

• We distinguish wisdom from intelligence, cleverness, knowledge, and expertise. (vernacular)

• Wisdom requires moral grounding, but is not identical to it (i.e., wise decisions are moral but not all moral decisions are wise).

• Wisdom can be observed in individual or collective wise decisions or counsel. Decision or counsel is perceived as wise when a successful outcome is obtained in situations involving risk, uncertainty, and the welfare of the group…

• Wisdom flexibly integrates cognitive, affective, and social considerations, but can be studied profitably by understanding its constituent elements.
Conditions for Society to Attribute Wisdom

- **Risk**: No wisdom when stakes are low
- **Uncertainty**: No wisdom in a sure thing
- **Outcome**: No wisdom in being wrong
- **Opaqueness**: No wisdom in the obvious
- **Complexity**: No wisdom in simplicity
- **Prosocial**: Not just self serving
- **Perspective balance**: Long term view as context for short term maximization
Psychological Science of Wisdom

Wisdom is a property of people
◦ A form of expertise--expert knowledge (Baltes)
◦ An integration of cognitive, reflective and affective characteristics (Ardelt)

Wisdom emerges from an interaction of person, task and situation (Sternberg, 1998)
◦ Balance theory of wisdom: self, other, interpersonal interests balanced with situation constraints
◦ Reasoning, Sagacity (take advice), Learning, Judgment (limits known), Expeditious (expert), Perspicacity (intuition)
Components of Wisdom
Meeks and Jeste (2009)

I. Prosocial attitudes and behaviors
II. Social decision making/pragmatic life knowledge
III. Emotional homeostasis
IV. Reflection/self-understanding
V. Value relativism/tolerance
VI. Acknowledgment of and dealing effectively with uncertainty and ambiguity
Different types of content knowledge can be acquired from diverse experiences
Virtuous Foundations of Wiser Decisions

• Epistemic humility and Perspective taking
  • open to: learning, empathy, other’s values, need for reflection

• Reflection
  • insight, cognitive creativity

• Curiosity and Perseverance
  • to engage intellectual struggle, reflection

• Moral virtues – e.g., trust, honesty, generosity, gratitude, courage
  • positive drivers for prosociality
Measuring Wisdom

Moral, ethical, interpersonal conflict and policy decisions
Baltes, Grossmann -- hypothetical dilemmas, social reasoning problems
Ardelt, Gluck, etc -- self report
Sternberg/Clayton—folk psychology
Comparison populations (e.g., judges vs. prisoners, econ vs. divinity school, younger vs. older)
Peer nominations
Examples of responses (abbreviated)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low score</th>
<th>A 15-year-old girl wants to get married? No, no way. Marrying at age 15 would be utterly wrong. One has to tell the girl that marriage is not possible. [After further probing] It would be irresponsible to support such an idea. No, this is just a crazy idea.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High score</td>
<td>Well, on the surface, this seems like an easy problem. On average, marriage for 15-year-old girls is not a good thing. I guess many girls might think about it when they fall in love for the first time. And, then, there are situations where the average case does not fit. Perhaps in this instance, special life circumstances are involved, such that the girl has a terminal illness. Or this girl may not be from this country. Perhaps she lives in another culture and historical period. Before I offer a final evaluation I would need more information.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The example dilemma this table illustrates is the following: “A 15-year-old girl wants to get married right away. What should one/she do and consider?”
Reflective dimension (12 items, $\alpha = 0.77$) -- self reflection
Things often go wrong for me by no fault of my own. *(reversed)*
I always try to look at all sides of a problem.
Before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place.

Affective dimension (13 items, $\alpha = 0.61$) -- empathy
I am annoyed by unhappy people who just feel sorry for themselves. *(reversed)*
Sometimes I feel a real compassion for everyone.
I can be comfortable with all kinds of people.

Cognitive dimension (14 items, $\alpha = 0.74$) -- need for cognition
You can classify almost all people as either honest or crooked. *(reversed)*
I try to anticipate and avoid situations where there is a likely chance I will have to think in depth about something. *(reversed)*
It is better not to know too much about things that cannot be changed. *(reversed)*

Williams, et al. (PLOS ONE, 2016).
Research on Wisdom

- Exposure to specific language can change decision making:
  - Self-distancing language reduces egocentric decisions
  - Compassion language increases empathy for others
  - Foreign language effect to reduce affective biases
- Economic experience (e.g., trading) can reduce choice biases
- Mindfulness practice can increase attention control and information choice
- Meditation and ballet practice can increase measured wisdom, possibly through increased self control
Framing a theory of wise decisions

• Making wise decisions is a skill rather than ability

• Elements needed for wise decisions:
  • Epistemic humility – open to others & experience
  • Reflection – analytic consideration of experience
  • Engagement with experience through intellectual struggle/Curiosity
  • Virtues as value commitments – evaluative referents

• What kinds of experiences?
  • Increasing social knowledge – values, self awareness
  • Context sensitivities – perspective and motivations
  • Developing component skills – intellectual struggle, divergent thinking, cognitive control
  • Domain expertise
Acknowledgments

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