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ABSTRACT

Features of everyday conceptions of a "wise person" were examined, based on a model of wisdom-related knowledge (Baltes & Smith, 1990). The goal was to examine whether the psychological theory underlying this model is consistent with lay conceptions of wisdom, and whether everyday conceptions contain additional features not contained in the theory. The model advanced treats wisdom as a body of expert knowledge in the fundamental pragmatics of life. A major question is whether such a knowledge-based approach ignores other facets more closely tied to personality, interpersonal skills, and emotional maturity. One hundred women professionals recruited through a newspaper advertisement who were young, middle-aged, or older, rated 131 descriptive characteristics on a 7-point Likert-type scale on the degree to which each represented their notion of an ideally wise person. Three interrelated sets of findings were obtained. First, characteristics consistent with the psychological theory of wisdom as expert knowledge were seen as highly typical attributes of a wise person. In addition, social-personality-type characteristics emerged as highly typical. Thus, the lay conception of a wise person contains both knowledge and social-personality components. Second, the lay conception of a wise person enjoys a good deal of social consensus. Third, while there were no structural differences among profiles associated with age/cohort, some mean differences in typicality ratings were found. Older women, in comparison to middle-aged and younger adults, rated more peripheral social-personality characteristics as more typical. Ratings of typicality for core features did not show age/cohort effects.  
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## Features of Wisdom: Prototypical Attributes of Wise People

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## Abstract

Features of everyday conceptions of a "wise person" were examined, based on a model of wisdom-related knowledge (Baltes & Smith, 1990). The goal was to examine whether the psychological theory underlying this model is consistent with lay conceptions of wisdom, and whether everyday conceptions contain additional features not contained in the theory. The model advanced treats wisdom as a body of expert knowledge in the fundamental pragmatics of life. A major question is whether such a knowledge-based approach ignores other facets more closely tied to personality, interpersonal skills, and emotional maturity. One hundred women subjects (young, middle-aged, and older) rated 131 descriptive characteristics on a 7-point Likert-type scale on the degree to which each represented their notion of an ideally wise person. Three interrelated sets of findings were obtained. First, characteristics consistent with the psychological theory of wisdom as expert knowledge were seen as highly typical attributes of a wise person. In addition, social-personality-type characteristics emerged as highly typical. Thus, the lay conception of a wise person contains both knowledge and social-personality components. Second, the lay conception of a wise person enjoys a good deal of social consensus. Third, while there were no structural differences among profiles associated with age/cohort, some mean differences in typicality ratings were found. Older women, in comparison to middle-aged and younger adults, rated more peripheral social-personality characteristics as more typical. Ratings of typicality for core features did not show age/ cohort effects.

## Introduction

Psychological approaches to wisdom have taken several avenues. One has focussed on the development of wisdom within life-span developmental theory and on building a theoretical model of wisdom as "expert knowledge involving good judgment and advice in the domain fundamental pragmatics of life (Baltes & Smith, 1990, p. 95)." Another has examined folk taxonomies of the concept "wise person" (e.g., Holliday & Chandler, 1986), and explored characteristic features associated with wisdom, vis-à-vis related concepts such as intelligence or creativity (e.g., Sternberg, 1986). Third, it has been argued that wisdom comprises, for example, social competence, mature personality functioning (e.g., Orwoll & Perlmutter, 1990), and forms of exceptional social intelligence (e.g., Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1985).

The present study was a first attempt to examine the theoretical model of wisdom-related knowledge (Baltes & Smith, 1990) in an investigation of lay concept. The model espoused by Baltes and Smith is essentially knowledge-based, suggesting that expert knowledge in the fundamental pragmatics of life is comprised of a family of five criteria, two of which (i.e., rich factual and procedural knowledge) are assumed to be common to any expert knowledge system, and three of which (i.e., value relativism, life-span contextualism, and recognition and management of uncertainty) are assumed to be specific to the domain fundamental pragmatics of life.

We continue to think that a knowledge-based conception of wisdom is useful. However, we also assume that when the focus is on people who embody this knowledge, additional features may emerge. A model of expert knowledge is easily seen as neglecting social-personality and emotional aspects of functioning, especially when the focus is not on the study of a knowledge system but on actual people. In our own work, this possibility is contained in the definition of wisdom-related knowledge relevant for "advice-giving situations." In order to examine this notion empirically and also to construct a "representative" set of descriptive items, three sources were utilized: the theoretical model of wisdom-related knowledge, previous empirical studies on lay theory, and prior work on wisdom in social, interpersonal, and personality domains.

A number of related questions were addressed. First, we expected the knowledge-based model to cover a large set of characteristics attributed to wise people, but in addi-

tion, personality, interpersonal, and emotional aspects should emerge when wisdom is studied as an attribute of people. Second, we expected there to be considerable social consensus about wise people. Third, we wanted to address age effects which might be relevant to the lay conception of a wise person. These questions were translated into the following hypotheses.

## Hypotheses

1. The knowledge-based model of wisdom developed by Baltes and Smith (1990) is expected to cover a large set of the characteristics people attribute to wise persons.
2. When characteristics of wise persons are investigated additional attributes may become more prominent, such as personality, interpersonal skills, and emotional maturity.
3. In general, we think wisdom is a conceptual category which enjoys much social consensus. Therefore, we expect the organization of the conceptual domain "wise person" to be consistent across a heterogeneous group of observers.
4. There may be age differences in the structural composition of the attributes, with older persons reporting a more differentiated and focussed structure.

## Method

### Subjects

One hundred women subjects were recruited through a newspaper advertisement. Thirty-two young ( $M = 32.8$ , range 28–37 years), 33 middle-aged ( $M = 49.2$ , range 43–58 years), and 35 older professionals ( $M = 70.0$ , range 62–82 years) from a variety of academic fields were paid DM 50 (approx. \$30–35) for their participation in the study.

### The Catalogue of Descriptive Features

The literature on implicit theories of wisdom and wise persons was screened for an initial pool of characteristics (e.g., Holliday & Chandler, 1986; Sternberg, 1986), and 40 statements were included verbatim (i.e., in a German language translation) into the questionnaire. Five members of the Berlin wisdom project research team generated an additional set of items, based on theoretical notions in the literature (e.g., on social intelligence, social competence, personality) and the model of wisdom-related knowledge. In a second round, the team conceptually grouped 61 items into the five wisdom-related knowledge dimensions (i.e., rich factual knowledge, rich procedural knowledge, value relativism, life-span contextualism, and recognition and management of uncertainty), and 60 items into social-personality domains (i.e., personality, social intelligence, and intelligence). In order to have a validity check for ratings, 9 anti-type items and a dictionary definition of a wise person were also included. The catalogue thus contained 131 descriptive statements.

### Procedure

Subjects were tested in small groups of six to eight in a testing session which lasted approximately two hours. They completed the present inventory along with a number of other procedures.

After an introduction to the purpose of the study, each characteristic was rated, on a 7-point Likert-type scale (most to least typical), with respect to how well it described an ideally wise person. Thus, the closer a rating was to a value of one, the higher its typicality rating for the notion of a wise person. Conversely, the closer a rating was to a value of seven, the lower its typicality rating.

## Analyses

**1. Characteristic attributes of a wise person.** Descriptive statistics were computed to identify those items with the highest typicality ratings. Conceptual components of the wise person concept were examined by means of a factor analysis performed on the subset of highly typical characteristics.

**2. Social consensus about a wise person.** Degree of consensus was investigated by means of a Q-type principle component analysis, and the pattern of factor loadings of this analysis was examined for age effects.

**3. Age/cohort effects.** The degree to which typicality ratings were a function of age/cohort group membership was assessed in the context of analyses of variance.

## Results

### Characteristic Attributes of a Wise Person

Descriptive statistics were computed for each item and those items were selected which obtained the highest typicality ratings as shown in Table 1. An arbitrary cut-off was chosen such that items with mean ratings between 1 and 2 were termed highly typical. There were 31 such items. In a visual representation of item means, Figure 1 shows typicality ratings in a concentric arrangement. The innermost circle represents items with mean ratings between 1 and 2, followed by the next level of ratings between 2 and 3, and so on. Items consistent with the Berlin model of wisdom-related knowledge are presented in the top half of the circle (Figure 1), and items associated with the social-personality sphere are represented in the bottom half, which also shows the mean placement of anti-type items.

The top 31 items were entered by mean rank order into a factor analysis, using the maximum likelihood estimation procedure with oblique rotation. We chose this method because we wanted to maximize canonical correlations between variables, and because theoretically factors were not assumed to be orthogonal to each other. Four factors were extracted on the basis of the scree test. The first factor

accounted for 8.9%, the second for 7.8%, the third for 4.9%, and the fourth for 5.4% of the variance among items. Inter-factor correlations ranged from  $r = .62$  (i.e., factors I and II) to  $r = .28$  (i.e., factors II and III). The three items with the largest factor loadings for each factor are shown in Table 2.

The first factor was marked by procedural knowledge items including the top item from that domain, and suggested that exceptional advice giving is an important component. The second factor included almost all items whose content focussed on exceptional knowledge about life-span contextualism, the three strongest items of which are shown in Table 2. Factor number three comprised social-personality items, including the top item in that category. The fourth factor included the top item in the domain rich factual knowledge, and suggests that exceptional knowledge about human nature as well as genuine personal experience are seen as important aspects of an ideally wise person.

#### **Social Consensus About a Wise Person**

Consensus among subjects would be demonstrated if in a Q-type factoring procedure a large first person factor emerged. We chose principle component analysis in order to examine the size and number of components which would account for variability among subjects. As expected, the first component explained 47.4% of the variance, indicating that indeed the profile of item ratings was largely consistent across subjects. Three much smaller components accounted for 4.5%, 3.7%, and 2.5% of the variance after the first. Examining the age/cohort distribution of subjects over factors, we found that all but three subjects had their highest factor loadings on the first component. Reliability analyses performed over subjects yielded a standardized coefficient alpha of  $r = .99$  for the entire sample, and coefficients of  $r = .96$ ,  $r = .97$ , and  $r = .97$  for young, middle-aged, and older women, respectively. Thus, the profile of ratings was consistent despite age/cohort heterogeneity.

### Age/Cohort Effects

In order to test age/cohort effects two one-way analyses of variance were carried out by age. Results are summarized in Table 3. The first analysis involved the top 31 items which had been rated as most typical and no age/cohort effect was found ( $F(2,3099) = 1.75$ , NS). The second ANOVA was carried out on the set of 53 more peripheral items which had mean ratings between 2 and 3 (shown in Figure 1 in the second innermost circle). A significant age/cohort effect was found,  $F(2,5199) = 10.32$ ,  $p < .0001$ . Follow-up individual contrasts for this effect showed that young and middle-aged adults did not differ, but that older adults' ratings were different from both younger age groups (contrast old vs. young/middle-aged:  $F = 21.55$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). Thus, the core items did not differ by age, but the more peripheral items were rated as more typical by older adults compared to the younger age/cohort groups.

This age effect was followed up in an additional analysis on the 53 peripheral items (i.e., mean typicality ratings between 2 and 3), where content of items was coded in addition. The 31 peripheral items in the top half of Figure 1 were coded as knowledge items (i.e., domain 1) and the 22 peripheral items in the bottom half were coded as social-personality items (i.e., domain 2). Results of this analysis are shown in Table 4. A 2 (domain) by 3 (age/cohort) ANOVA yielded a main effect for domain ( $F(1,5194) = 6.01$ ,  $p < .01$ ), a main effect for age ( $F(2,5194) = 10.84$ ,  $p < .0001$ ), and a significant Domain  $\times$  Age interaction effect ( $F(2,5194) = 5.00$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Inspection of means associated with the main effect for domain showed that peripheral social-personality items were rated as more typical than knowledge items. Figure 2 shows a plot of the interaction effect. A computation of contrasts revealed that older adults rated peripheral social-personality items as more typical than did middle-aged and younger adults (contrast old vs. young/middle-aged for social-personality items:  $F = 12.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ). There was only a nonsignificant trend in the same direction for this contrast computed for knowledge items (contrast old vs. young/middle-aged for knowledge items:  $F = 4.05$ ,  $p < .07$ ). Thus, older adults selectively emphasized interpersonal and social-personality characteristics.

**Table 1**  
**Essential Features of a Wise Person**

Item No.	Mean	SD	
14	1.26	0.64	is a person whose advice one would solicit for difficult life problems (Dictionary Definition)
59	1.31	0.90	thinks independently and is able to form his/her own opinion (I)
16	1.45	1.07	knows that the importance of difficult life domains changes during the life span (C)
61	1.49	1.30	comprehends the nature of human existence (e.g., mortality, vulnerability, emotionality) (FK)
69	1.51	1.33	recognizes the limits of his/her own knowledge (U)
9	1.51	1.05	recognizes and considers those life domains which are particularly important for a specific life problem (C)
84	1.51	0.90	is a good listener (P)
57	1.56	1.05	is capable of empathy in difficult life problems (SI)
34	1.59	1.26	sees things within larger context (C)
55	1.64	1.21	knows about the interrelation of his/her individual existence with past, present, and future generations (C)
3	1.65	1.25	knows when to give/withhold advice (PK)
10	1.75	1.32	thinks carefully before making decisions (PK)
20	1.72	1.16	appreciates the strength and weakness of others (FK)
56	1.74	1.27	realizes that the currently living generations may have different life goals and values (PK)
127	1.77	1.31	has learned from experience (PK)

83	1.78	1.25	shows knowledge about human nature (FK)
58	1.78	1.05	recognizes the interrelation of different life domains during the life span and its influence on the current life situation (C)
11	1.79	1.14	expresses valuable insight into difficult life questions (FK)
78	1.80	1.27	knows his/her own strong and weak points (FK)
118	1.80	1.37	is trustworthy (P)
70	1.82	1.56	tries to learn from his/her own mistakes (PK)
94	1.82	1.23	knows that individual life goals and values may change during the life course (C)
114	1.83	1.23	is socially mature (SI)
25	1.85	1.93	has extensive knowledge about the vicissitudes of life (FK)
53	1.86	1.46	knows about possible conflicts between different life domains (C)
99	1.89	1.69	is tolerant (P)
5	1.90	1.20	can deal effectively in "difficult to handle" (uncomfortable) interpersonal situations (SI)
115	1.90	1.10	can judge correctly the feelings, moods, and motivations of others (SI)
19	1.91	1.18	understands other's life (FK)
2	1.95	1.49	makes good life decisions, taking into account possible uncertainties (U)
97	1.96	1.58	is a very humane person (P)

Category codes: PK - Procedural Knowledge, FK - Factual Knowledge, C - Contextualism, U - Uncertainty, SI - Social Intelligence, I - Intelligence, P - Personality.

**Table 2**  
**Factor Analysis of Top 31 Items: Three Largest Factor**  
**Loadings for Each Factor (Maximum Likelihood)**

Factor I Exceptional Advice Giving (Procedural Knowledge)				
Item Number	Item Content	Factor Loading	Typicality Mean	SD
3	knows when to give/withhold advice (Procedural Knowledge-top item)	.763	1.65	1.25
14	is a person whose advice one would solicit for difficult life problems (Dictionary Definition)	.710	1.26	0.64
10	thinks carefully before making decisions (Procedural Knowledge)	.702	1.75	1.32
Factor II Exceptional Knowledge (Life-Span Contextualism)				
94	knows that individual life goals and values may change during the life course (Contextualism)	.888	1.82	1.23
53	knows about possible conflicts between different life domains (Contextualism)	.813	1.86	1.46
16	knows that the importance of difficult life domains changes during the life span (Contextualism-top item)	.774	1.45	1.07

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**Factor III**  
**Exceptional Personality Functioning**

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Item Number	Item Content	Factor Loading	Typicality Mean	SD
84	is a good listener (Personality-top item)	.641	1.51	0.91
97	is a very humane person (Personality)	.632	1.96	1.58
83	shows knowledge about human nature (Factual Knowledge)	.613	1.78	1.25

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**Factor IV**  
**Exceptional Factual Knowledge and Experience**

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61	comprehends the nature of human existence (e.g., mortality, vulnerability, emotionality) (Factual Knowledge-top item)	.774	1.49	1.30
70	tries to learn from his/her own mistakes (Procedural Knowledge)	.766	1.82	1.56
127	has learned from experience (Procedural Knowledge)	.745	1.77	1.31

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**Table 3**  
**Analyses of Variance by Age (3)**

**I Core Items\***

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Age	16.28	2	8.14	1.75	NS
Error	14,406.82	3099	4.66		

\* The top 31 items presented in Table 1 and in the inner circle of Figure 1.

**II Peripheral Items\*\***

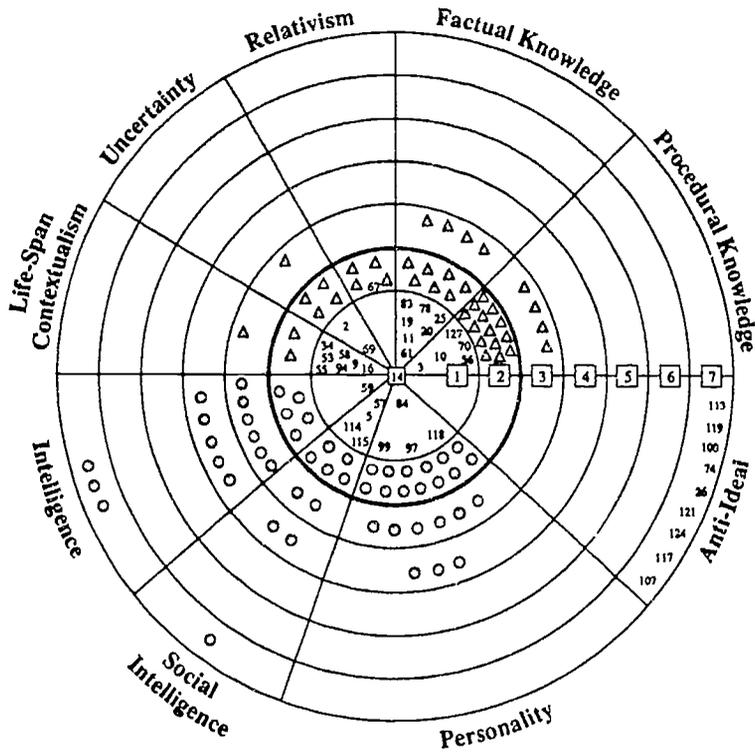
Source	SS	df	MS	F	P
Age	117.35	2	58.67	10.32	.0001
Error	29,540.31	5199	5.69		

\*\* The 53 more peripheral items shown in the second inner circle of Figure 1.

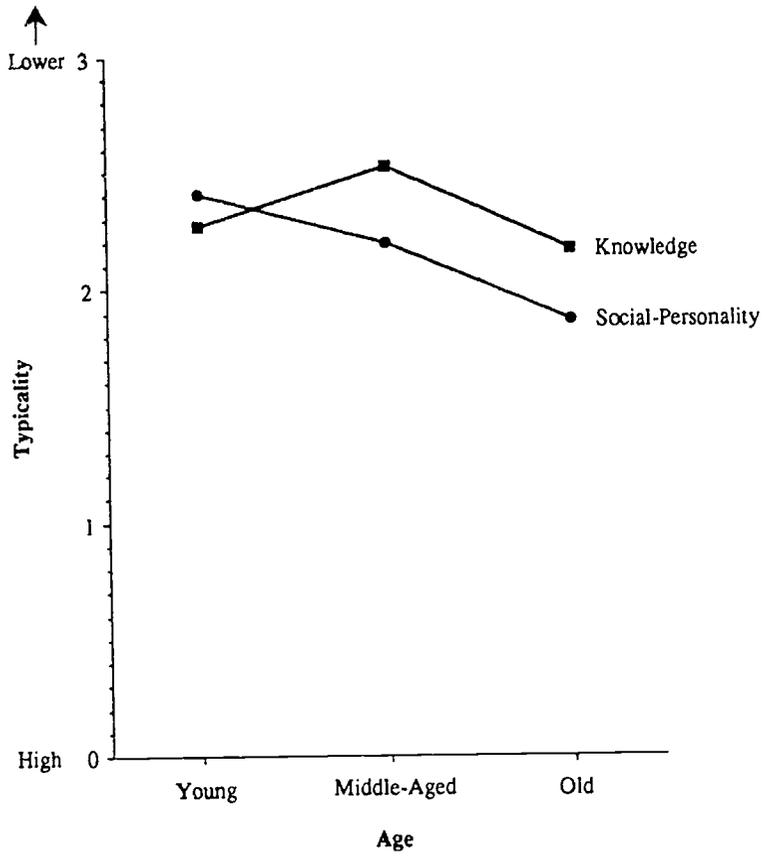
**Table 4**  
**Analysis of Variance on 53 Peripheral Items:**  
**Domain (2: Knowledge vs. Social-Personality) by Age**  
**(3: Young, Middle, Old Age)**

Source	SS	df	MS	F	P
Domain	34.16	1	34.16	6.01	.01
Age	123.34	2	61.67	10.84	.0001
Domain × Age	56.87	2	28.44	5.00	.01
Model	210.88	5	42.18	7.42	.0001
Error	29,540.31	5194	5.69		

**Figure 1**  
**Characteristics of an Ideal Wise Person: A Coalition**  
**Between Knowledge and Personality**



**Figure 2**  
**Peripheral Items Only: Domain by Age Interaction**



## Summary

This study shows that the theoretical model of wisdom as expert knowledge in fundamental life matters as conceived by Baltes and Smith (1990) is largely consistent with lay conceptions about the attributes of a wise person. When the focus is on people who embody this knowledge, additional components of interpersonal skill, emotional maturity, and social-personality aspects emerge. Of the family of five hypothesized criteria, especially rich procedural knowledge, exceptional knowledge about life-span contextualism, and to some degree rich factual knowledge appear to be distinct components. The presence of a social-personality component suggests that a wise person in addition to exceptional knowledge is assumed to possess exceptional character as well. Second, the concept of a wise person enjoys a good deal of social consensus, and is consistent across a group of observers despite age/cohort heterogeneity. Third, the composition of the profile of characteristics shows no age-related differences and no age effects are associated with ratings of highly typical items (the core features). However, at a more peripheral level of the concept, older people differ from younger and middle-aged people in their assessment of the typicality of some features. In particular, social-personality characteristics at the periphery of the wise person concept appear to be important for the older age/cohort group. Future work would have to examine whether it is development-related concerns specific to this group which find expression in notions about wisdom.

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