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Wisdom in Contemporary Society: The Role of Psychological Interventions

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Abstract

Objective: Wisdom has been a subject of interest in psychology for many years. Rooted in philosophy, the concept of wisdom has become central to numerous psychological theories. Research on the consequences of wisdom has demonstrated its importance for individual and social functioning and highlighted the potential for psychological interventions aimed at promoting well-being. The aim of this article is to present the Integrative Wisdom Model and to highlight the role of psychological interventions in fostering wisdom development.

Thesis: The Integrative Wisdom Model is dynamic and context-dependent, and its assumptions allow wisdom to be conceptualized as a competence that can be assessed and developed through appropriately targeted psychological interventions. The article presents research tools that enable the assessment of wisdom and provides a theoretical analysis of its correlates, among which the ability to balance abstract and concrete thinking and the ability to balance cooperative goals with self-protective goals are of particular importance. Particular emphasis is placed on psychological interventions conducted within various social contexts. One possible form of intervention is training in self-distancing and reflective self-awareness, the effectiveness of which has been demonstrated in research on wisdom.

Conclusion: Contemporary psychological conceptualizations of wisdom provide a basis for designing interventions aimed at fostering its development and may therefore constitute an important area of psychological practice. At the same time, the effectiveness and scope of such interventions depend on awareness of their potential limitations and of the conditions necessary for achieving the intended outcomes.

Keywords: wisdom, metacognition, perspective-taking, conflict resolution, psychological interventions

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Is it worth studying wisdom in contemporary society? Can the concept of wisdom be defined more precisely? Can wise reasoning provide a response to the challenges of the contemporary world? Does clarifying the concept of wisdom open up possibilities for using psychological tools to address individual and social problems? What limitations apply to psychological interventions based on the concept of wisdom?

Although wisdom may seem somewhat old-fashioned, contemporary research on its components—including perspective-taking, intellectual humility, openness to multiple possibilities, and a focus on solutions in situations of interpersonal conflict—demonstrates its particular relevance in an era of rapid civilizational and technological change (Grossmann & Johnson, 2025). The increasing fragmentation of society, the erosion of social bonds, political polarization, social inequalities, climate change, and the growing difficulty of distinguishing facts from interpretations amid an overwhelming flow of information and content that closely mimics real events, people, and stories underscore the need for psychological interventions that are both effective and responsive to the needs and capacities of contemporary individuals.

Glück and Brienza (2025), two leading researchers in the field of wisdom, argue that addressing social problems and crises requires the development of wisdom at both the individual and group levels. The observed flourishing of creative and intellectual abilities alone is not sufficient. The tools enabled by these abilities must be used wisely and with careful consideration of their long-term consequences. Particularly concerning, according to wisdom researchers, are the increasing rates of depression, anxiety, and a sense of loss of meaning in life (Shensa et al., 2018). In response to these challenges, research on wisdom has intensified, as wisdom is, in essence, a concept oriented toward addressing consequential problems of human life.

Recent publications provide evidence of the practical utility of the concept of wisdom. Brienza and colleagues (2021, 2024) have demonstrated that wisdom may contribute to alleviating intergroup tensions and to increasing men's recognition of gender-based pay inequalities. Namvar and colleagues (2023) propose ways in which machine learning can be used wisely within organizations. Puryear and Gray (2024), in turn, provide empirical support for the claim that political discussions grounded in wise reasoning are more substantive than those that lack the guidance of wisdom.

Psychologists conducting interventions in diverse social contexts can therefore draw both on the dynamic development of wisdom research and on its proposed applications. Consideration of possible psychological interventions and their limitations will be preceded by a presentation of the Integrative Wisdom Model, the correlates of wisdom, and tools for assessing wisdom.

The Integrative Wisdom Model and Its Sources

In classical approaches to wisdom, reflected, among others, in the thought of Aristotle and in Buddhist and Confucian texts, wisdom is regarded as a fundamental

capacity for coping with difficult experiences, uncertainty, and challenges associated with the pursuit of goals (Grossmann & Johnson, 2025). According to Aristotle (2007), the virtue of wisdom is developed through practice and engagement with life challenges, thereby building the capacity to choose the most effective course of action under particular circumstances. In this vein, common conceptions of wisdom have traditionally been framed in terms of age: older people are generally perceived as wiser than younger people, but also in terms of gender, with men perceived as wiser than women (Weststrate et al., 2019). Wisdom is thus thought to come with age as a result of the difficulties people experience and the need to cope with them. However, research does not support this view of wisdom and even points to declines in metacognitive capacities following serious health problems (Dorfman et al., 2022). Contemporary psychological research on wise reasoning is moving toward identifying cognitive competencies and the associated moral virtues, with relatively little emphasis on the roles of age and gender. These approaches include Pietrasiński's (2001) conception of wisdom, which equates wisdom with cognitive culture, and Sternberg's (2001) conception, which regards wisdom as a form of practical intelligence used to achieve a balance between one's own interests and the well-being of others. According to another contemporary theoretical proposal, wisdom is knowledge that enables individuals to formulate existential problems and develop strategies for solving them (Baltes & Smith, 2008).

Igor Grossmann and colleagues (Grossmann et al., 2020) sought to integrate diverse approaches to wisdom, initiating a project that resulted in the development of the Integrative Wisdom Model (also known as Common Wisdom Model). The model was developed through an adversarial collaboration—a form of collaboration involving the confrontation of competing theories. Researchers including Nic M. Weststrate, Monika Ardelt, Judith Glück, and Valerie Tiberius joined forces to develop a coherent conceptual framework (Center for Practical Wisdom, 2020). In the model proposed by Grossmann and colleagues, wisdom lies at the intersection of two major pillars: metacognition and moral aspirations. The model defines wisdom as a process of wise reasoning in which individuals use advanced metacognitive skills to balance different interests and pursue the common good under conditions of uncertainty and conflict. This conceptualization differs to some extent from other models in which prosocial motivation is treated independently of metacognitive capacities (e.g., Glück & Weststrate, 2022). However, in the traditions of philosophical thought (Kotarbiński, 1967) and education (Freire, 2000), as well as in research on effective conflict resolution (Bazerman & Neal, 1997), individuals' moral and metacognitive competencies have been regarded as inseparable.

The model is based on four metacognitive competencies.

1. Intellectual humility refers to the ability to recognize the limitations of one's own knowledge, arising, among other things, from the uncertainty inherent in complex situations. Intellectual humility protects against excessive self-confidence and underlies a willingness to revise one's views in light of newly acquired information. In other words, intellectual humility involves understanding what one does not know and recognizing that one

may be mistaken (Porter et al., 2021). Notably, social contexts in which intellectual abilities are emphasized as important for achieving success may discourage the expression and practice of intellectual humility (Porter & Cimpian, 2023).

2. Recognition of uncertainty and change involves acknowledging that events and perspectives may change and that the future cannot always be inferred from the past. Emphasizing the importance of perceiving the future as uncertain contrasts with an "essentialist" view of wisdom as a stable trait and instead conceptualizes wisdom as a malleable, context-dependent process (Grossmann, 2017).
3. Perspective-taking involves openness to different points of view, thereby facilitating a more holistic approach to problems that do not have unambiguous solutions.
4. Balancing conflicting interests involves integrating divergent goals, principles, and interests in ways that make it possible to identify practical and feasible solutions.

According to Grossmann and Johnson (2025), these four components of wisdom are both intuitive and rational in nature. Thus, the researchers reject a dual-process model of information processing, and their approach comes close to the conception of automaticity proposed by Bargh and colleagues (2012), according to which intuition and rationality rely on the same underlying rules, while the choice of a particular rule depends on cognitive, motivational, and environmental constraints. The authors also reject a clear-cut distinction between affect and cognition, drawing on arguments advanced by other researchers concerning the informational role of emotions in decision-making (Clore & Huntsinger, 2007; Bechara & Damasio, 2005; Schwarz, 2012). Within this approach, metacognition constitutes a comprehensive competence that enables the regulation of both rational thought processes and emotions.

The level of wisdom supported by metacognitive competencies varies depending on the content and characteristics of a difficult experience (Glück et al., 2015). At the same time, higher levels of these competencies are more likely to be demonstrated when individuals focus on a friend's problem rather than their own (Grossmann & Kross, 2014). Building on these findings, Smith and colleagues (2025) conducted a longitudinal study involving 499 participants, using event-reconstruction sampling to examine events that had been sources of negative experiences. Participants rated the extent to which they had drawn on four core metacognitive characteristics of wisdom: intellectual humility, recognition of uncertainty and change, perspective-taking, and the search for compromise. The findings showed that the components of wisdom form a dynamic network of interrelationships that is highly sensitive to the context of experience and remain distinct in the sense that they do not constitute a single overarching wisdom factor. At the same time, adopting a third-person perspective, which involves gaining psychological distance from one's own experiences and viewing them in a more objective manner, was associated with a greater tendency to demonstrate intellectual humility and recognize uncertainty and change in subsequent difficult situations. Self-reflection creates the conditions for developing wisdom

through difficult life experiences, which in themselves may not be sufficient for self-development (Weststrate et al., 2018). Glück and Bluck (2013) emphasize that developing wisdom from experience is possible when it is supported by personal characteristics such as a sense of mastery, openness, and emotion regulation.

Correlates of Wisdom

Research that contributed to the development of the Integrative Wisdom Model, as well as research inspired by the model, has focused on adaptive emotion regulation, mindfulness, the ability to balance cooperative and self-protective goals, causal attributions in conflict situations (self vs. other), improvements in leadership quality, the reduction of social inequalities, the promotion of cooperation in public goods games, and the reduction of polarization-based politics and intergroup hostility (Grossmann & Brienza, 2018). The components of wisdom have been found to co-occur with a stronger orientation toward self-actualization and living in accordance with one's own values and goals (Huynh et al., 2017). Research on the relationship between wisdom and well-being has shown that wisdom is associated with greater life satisfaction, less rumination, lower levels of negative affect, better social relationships, and a greater tendency to use positive rather than negative words (Grossmann et al., 2013). Moreover, the association between wise reasoning and well-being remained significant after socioeconomic factors, verbal ability, and selected personality traits were taken into account. The same studies also replicated earlier findings indicating no significant association between intelligence and well-being.

Of particular interest from the perspective of potential psychological interventions is research on the relationship between wisdom and information processing. A wisdom-oriented mindset—that is, a cognitive and emotional orientation characterized by open-mindedness, perspective-taking, intellectual humility, compassion, tolerance of uncertainty, and the ability to reflect on the complexity of a situation—enhances the processing of both concrete and abstract information by integrating them in an adaptive manner (Brienza et al., 2018). Processing concrete information helps individuals remain grounded in reality, whereas processing abstract information enables them to understand complexity, uncertainty, and the long-term consequences of their decisions (Trope & Liberman, 2012). Balancing abstract and concrete modes of information processing in a manner that is sensitive to the context of experienced events supports wise reasoning, particularly in socially challenging situations, moral dilemmas, and encounters with life challenges. One explanation for this effect lies in the relationship between the level of information processing and four types of psychological distance: temporal, spatial, social, and hypothetical distance (counterfactual thinking; real vs. imagined, possible vs. impossible, expected vs. unexpected) (Trope & Liberman, 2010).

The *Adolescent Wisdom Scale* proposed by Perry and colleagues (2002) proved effective in predicting tendencies toward alcohol misuse and cigarette smoking, aggressive behavior, susceptibility to peer influence, self-efficacy, and scores

on the MMPI-A scales. The studies also showed that wisdom scores among women were associated with less frequent marijuana use. Based on these findings, the authors concluded that self-reported wisdom among adolescents may have a protective function with regard to psychoactive substance use and problematic behaviors. This provides another example of research demonstrating associations between wisdom and desirable personal characteristics and behaviors. However, the strength of these associations may be constrained by social class. Research has shown that wise reasoning is negatively associated with social class, in contrast to the established advantage of higher social class in abstract cognition (Brienza & Grossmann, 2017). This may be explained by research indicating that high-status individuals focus more on their emotions and motivations than low-status individuals do (Conway & Vartanian, 2000; Krauss et al., 2012; Piff & Moskowitz, 2018; Stephens et al., 2007, 2014) and are less prosocial than their lower-status counterparts (Piff et al., 2010). They also tend to place greater priority on material wealth (Piff et al., 2012).

Tools for Assessing Wisdom

In their article calling for the development of wisdom theory, Glück and Brienza (2025) report the availability of a free database of the most widely used measures of wisdom (https://osf.io/jk5xe/). Most of these measures are based on specific models and definitions of wisdom. The classification proposed by the authors distinguishes measures according to: (1) their content, which may refer, among other things, to cognitive aspects of wisdom (e.g., Baltes & Staudinger, 2000); (2) personality (e.g., Ardelt, 2003); and (3) personal development (e.g., Webster, 2007). The researchers also distinguish between measures of wisdom as a trait and measures of wisdom as a state associated with specific life problems. Many trait measures focus on noncognitive personality characteristics associated with wisdom, such as openness or self-transcendence (Webster, 2019). An example of a state measure is the *Situated Wise Reasoning Scale* (SWIS) developed by Brienza and colleagues (2018), in which participants are asked to describe how they reasoned in a specific situation. It is used to assess wise reasoning both in real-life situations and in hypothetical situations and is suitable, among other purposes, for evaluating the effects of wisdom-related interventions.

A third way of classifying measures of wisdom proposed by Glück and Brienza (2025) concerns the method of assessment and distinguishes among self-report scales, open-ended interview questions, and open-ended questions with written responses. Open-ended questions concerning life wisdom (Glück et al., 2019) require written or oral reactions to problems as well as the establishment of criteria for evaluating those reactions. They provide rich, content-based responses but are time-consuming, in contrast to self-report measures of wisdom, which are economical and allow for faster and more easily replicable research. However, self-report measures are susceptible to bias, largely because of people's limited ability to accurately assess their own cognitive competencies (e.g., intellectual humility), which may result from the desire to present oneself in

a more favorable light. The *Situated Wise Reasoning Scale* (SWIS) attempts to address this problem by incorporating event-reconstruction procedures into the assessment and focusing on behaviors rather than general traits. The analysis found no effect of social desirability on the results obtained (Brienza et al., 2018).

Applications in Psychological Interventions

One area in which effective psychological interventions are needed is intergroup relations, including the reduction of prejudice and discriminatory behavior. According to Yang and colleagues (2024), counteracting hostility and improving intergroup relations are crucial for social cohesion. In response to this need, a growing body of research on wisdom has begun to offer tools that can be useful in conflict resolution. This includes research by Brienza and colleagues (2021), who hypothesized that wise reasoning is associated with overcoming intergroup prejudice and reducing attitudinal polarization in social conflicts. Across seven studies, participants were recruited who self-identified as members of groups involved in ongoing intergroup conflicts. Wise reasoning was significantly associated with reduced attitudinal polarization and greater acceptance of members of the outgroup. Such studies provide practical recommendations with the potential to foster more positive attitudes and interactions during ongoing intergroup conflicts. Even a simple reflection on how to reason more wisely about intergroup conflicts—by, among other things, integrating the perspectives of different groups and seeking solutions that incorporate these perspectives—may elicit more balanced thoughts and behaviors, leading to immediate positive outcomes (Brienza et al., 2021; Puryear & Gray, 2024). A pragmatic approach to conflict is associated with greater mutual favorability in perceptions of the parties involved.

A complementary approach to this process, as well as an effective way of coping with life's difficulties, is to develop the ability to gain psychological distance from oneself and thereby reduce excessive self-focus. This ability can be strengthened by using third-person language (e.g., he/she) rather than first-person language (e.g., I/me) when reflecting on one's own experiences. Research confirms that this type of linguistic manipulation increases the tendency to engage in wise reasoning in relation to personal conflicts (Grossmann et al., 2021; Grossmann & Kross, 2014). Another intervention that may facilitate conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships is focusing on the future, thereby counterbalancing excessive attention to the present and promoting consideration of multiple perspectives (Huynh et al., 2016). Additional type of intervention that may reduce self-focus and thereby facilitate coping with difficult situations in relationships with others through wise reasoning involves strengthening eudaimonic motives, centered on striving to realize personal ideals and contributing positively to the lives of others (Huynh et al., 2017).

The educational system appears to be an excellent setting for designing interventions that could support the development of wisdom among both students and educators. Students could benefit from educational materials containing

examples and stories conveying lessons about wisdom, as well as exercises focused on recognizing and making use of situations that strengthen the capacity for wise reasoning (Huynh & Grossmann, 2020). At the same time, those who deliver these materials and instructions may themselves potentially develop wisdom through their educational activities. Research has shown that adopting an advisory role increases psychological distance (Trope & Liberman, 2010), thereby creating a pathway to wise reasoning. A key principle in developing wisdom in schools is teaching students how to think rather than what to think (Grossmann, 2017), while taking into account the dynamic aspects of experience and the importance of context. Thus, rather than asking about the characteristics of a wise person, educators can explore how a particular situation supported or constrained an individual's capacity to act wisely. Curricula can include explicit references to metacognitive techniques, such as the third-person reflection described above (Grossmann & Jones, 2025).

In theories of democratic pedagogy, elements of wisdom are regarded as fundamental. These approaches assume that education should not be limited to the transmission of knowledge but should also cultivate attitudes conducive to mature decision-making that benefits both individuals and society (Sternberg et al., 2007). Adolescence is a critical developmental period during which identity formation, moral reasoning, and abstract thinking evolve rapidly (Moshman, 2011). Supporting young people in understanding wisdom and regulating their thought processes in order to make better decisions can substantially contribute to the development of emotional resilience, ethical maturity, and responsibility (Jeste & Lee, 2019).

Limitations of the Effectiveness of Psychological Interventions

Stephen Hawking, the physicist, stated that the greatest enemy of knowledge is not ignorance, but the illusion of knowledge, and Joseph LeDoux, a neuroscientist, argues that we have hit an epistemological wall—that ideas such as the "Self" constitute an increasing obstacle to discovering and understanding individuals and their relationships with other people. Taking these kinds of statements seriously necessitates a critical approach to knowledge in general, and to psychological knowledge in particular, due to the growing social role of psychology and the interventions undertaken in its name aimed at supporting problem-solving processes of individuals and social groups. Research on wise reasoning provides a basis for designing interventions and, at the same time, points to their possible limitations. At least three types of such limitations can be distinguished:

1. the attitudes or behaviors targeted for change are strictly dependent on the environment, which the psychologist may have no control over;
2. the theoretical assumptions upon which the intervention is based are outdated (the development of the concept of the self, the normative model of rationality as a basis for analyzing social cognition processes), and the direct transfer of theoretical concepts supported by research findings may

overlook the fact that people, in their decisions, do not operate on averages but on values (Cowles & Knobe, 2023);
3. interpretations of research findings may be biased due to the vision of human nature that dominates the literature, such as that of the "cognitive miser" who is susceptible to manipulation (Kruger & Funder, 2001).

An example of the changing ways of shaping a universal image of human nature is social cognition psychology, in the development of which at least four phases can be noted: a focus on cognitive limitations, on motivated action, on emotions mediating between cognition and action, and finally, on social inequalities (Fiske & Taylor, 2020). Thus, basing an intervention design on knowledge—which is a prerequisite for its effectiveness—requires tracking its development.

Psychological interventions can be directed at individuals or groups. Contemporary psychological knowledge suggests that the latter form can often be more effective than the former. An example of this can be found in interventions aimed at reducing prejudice as measured by the implicit association test. Implicit beliefs, interpreted as a manifestation of unconscious attitudes, inspired various interventions targeted at individuals. However, these proved to be largely ineffective. Shifting the interpretation of implicit attitudes toward those that are unintended but not unconscious redirected researchers' attention to the group-level relationship between implicit and explicit attitudes. This relationship proved to be strong and opposite to the one obtained at the individual level—which had provided the impetus for the assumption regarding the unconscious nature of attitudes—thereby indicating a new direction for action (Gawronski, 2026). The lesson learned from this example can be transferred to the design of interventions aimed at activating wise reasoning so that they address a broader group and the beliefs shared by its members regarding how one ought to behave in specific social situations.

Summary

In evaluating the Integrative Wisdom Model, it is essential to emphasize the nature of wisdom: it is a state that is situationally variable. The same individual may demonstrate wisdom when facing a professional crisis yet fail to do so in the realm of personal relationships. This is linked to the limitations inherent in objectively assessing one's own wisdom; thus, applying this model is tantamount to weakening the reliance on traditional questionnaires. The wisdom measure proposed by Brienza et al. (2018), which analyzes specific reactions to events, represents an attempt to objectify the assessment of this phenomenon. The manner in which emotions are incorporated into the model is also noteworthy. A component of wisdom is the ability to regulate and quieten emotions (distancing oneself), rather than the mere experience of deep sympathy. The Integrative Wisdom Model should be understood in terms of operationalizing the thought expressed by William James (2012): thinking is for doing. Wisdom is therefore a tool used to navigate complex relational and interpersonal problems—a tool for decision-making in a highly polarized world.

Although the model successfully integrates wisdom as a moral trait with metacognition (intellectual humility, perspective-taking, compromise-seeking), it possesses several significant methodological and theoretical limitations. Wisdom is viewed through the prism of its context-sensitivity, which presents a major limitation of the model for psychologists seeking to answer the question of "who is wise". Furthermore, studying wisdom according to this model requires complex and costly methods, such as daily diary analysis and narrative coding by independent judges. Other limitations include the fact that the model is not free from cultural influences. The majority of studies have been conducted in countries with individualistic cultures and may less accurately capture the specific nature of wisdom in Eastern or indigenous cultures, where wisdom is more strongly intertwined with intuition, tradition, spirituality, or harmony within the community.

The Integrative Wisdom Model presented here serves as a response to the need to understand what enables individuals to better cope with life difficulties, map out courses of action that lead to intended goals, and utilize the opportunities available in the environment to solve life problems. As research on wisdom demonstrates, creativity and innovativeness do not explain this phenomenon. Instead, metacognitive competences are required, which represent an achievement of cultural evolution (Henrich, 2016). Rooted in mentalization, the capacity for hypothetical thinking and perspective-taking—combined with the conviction that one's own knowledge is limited and the future is uncertain—creates a network linking cognition with morality. This network is sensitive to changes in situations, and its activity can be reinforced at both individual and group levels. Contemporary wisdom study redirects researchers' attention to the relationships between the availability of this dynamic network and environmental characteristics; consequently, the primal question regarding individual differences in manifesting wisdom shifts toward asking what factors facilitate its activation. Psychological interventions based on this approach require a recognition of their limitations and undertaking them holds potential for the development of the individuals involved in the process.

Declarations

Declaration of conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article. The author has no significant financial or non-financial interests that require disclosure, nor any competing interests related to the content of this article. The author also confirms no affiliation or involvement with any organization or entity that could have a financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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During the preparation of this article, the author utilized artificial intelligence-based tools for text translation into English (ChatGPT). The author bears full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

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Krystyna Adamska: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing.

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