

Chapter 8

Positive Psychology Across the Lifespan

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*Human development is dominated by dramatic shifts
in emphasis.*

Erik Erikson (1982)

Social scientists recognize that age, like gender, race, and class, constitutes a basic source of difference for individuals and societies (Settersten and Mayer 1997). This is so in two senses. First, and perhaps most familiar from a multicultural perspective, age is a component of identity. One's age group (e.g., youth) and birth cohort (e.g., "Baby Boomer") are components of one's representation of self, and how one perceives other people. Age identity is influenced by societal culture: the age-related beliefs, norms of conduct, and expectations of a society affect its members' self-experience and their attitudes and behaviors toward one another. Second, biopsychosocial functioning varies with age. Psychobiological capacities and processes vary; age differences in cognitive ability are an obvious example. Opportunities for action and patterns of interaction with the environment also vary; age-graded social contexts (e.g., school) and social roles (e.g., elder) create distinct life-worlds. Like age identity, biopsychosocial age differences are influenced by societal culture.

For these two reasons, individuals of different ages (and the same individual at different ages) to some extent occupy different cultures. The extent to which this is true varies depending on their place in the life course and the degree to which their society is age-graded. Life periods are social constructions whose borders are malleable.

The first four authors listed were respectively the lead authors on the chapter's four main sections.

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of the relationship. As one ages and perceived time on earth shortens, one reassesses priorities and determines how best to spend the remaining time. Socioemotional selectivity theory (Charles et al. 2003) explains why older adults prefer to spend more time with their long-term romantic partners and less time with acquaintances or seeking new experiences. Erikson (1950) and Butler (1963) suggested that at this stage romantic relationships and well-being are strengthened by couples sharing reminiscences of their life and time together. Research has shown that shared memories strengthen romantic ties and add cohesion to one's life story, further enhancing EWB (Bazzini et al. 2007). Erikson (1982) theorized that at this life stage of ego integrity, the reflection on the development of the romantic relationship and the commitment to the romantic partner give meaning and purpose to life. Interestingly, in contrast to Erikson's thesis that older couples resolved their need for intimacy at the earlier adult stage, research has shown that older persons still maintain strivings for intimacy, suggesting that this type of striving is equally salient across the lifespan (Sheldon and Kasser 2001).

Romantic relationships throughout the lifespan are a valuable criterial good, offering the opportunity for positive development, growth, commitment, and support. While the form and function of the relationship are distinctive at each period of life, the underlying benefits to well-being are apparent throughout.

8.4 Wisdom Across the Lifespan

Throughout time and cultural traditions, the wise elder has been an archetype, indicating the old are thought to differ from the young in having greater wisdom. Nonetheless, compared with the definition of wisdom in the West, Eastern literatures have a more inclusive view that encompass the cognitive, affective, and interpersonal domains of wisdom (Takahashi 2000). In addition, not all empirical studies have supported the positive relationship between age and wisdom development (e.g., Baltes and Staudinger 2000a). Being young does not necessarily exclude people from being wise, and growing old does not automatically yield credits of wisdom (Erikson 1959). However, unlike most cognitive abilities, wisdom does not appear to decline as people age.

Since wisdom is a product of individual experiences and cultural context, the definition of wisdom varies across studies. Most paradigms recognize the cognitive component of wisdom that requires an expert knowledge system about important matters in life, which is the pragmatics of life (Baltes and Staudinger 2000b). However, Baltes and Staudinger also mentioned dealing with complex and uncertain human conditions as part of being a wise person. Ardel (2000) referred to wisdom as overcoming self-centeredness, and developing feelings of compassion for others. Sternberg (1998) stated that wisdom involves the balance of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal (such as environmental or organizational) interests. Strengths of wisdom and knowledge in the Values in Action Inventory of

Strengths (VIA-IS; Peterson and Seligman 2004) include open-mindedness, perspective, and creativity as characteristics of wisdom. Lastly, Schwartz and Sharpe (2006) discussed wisdom in the Aristotelian tradition, and asserted that the moral skills and moral will to do the right thing, also called practical wisdom, is the core of all virtues. Cultural and societal groups affect the definition of wisdom as well. Among Alaska Natives, wisdom involves unspoken rules of individual contribution to the community and life experiences in each village (Lewis 2010). For Taiwanese, remaining modest and unobtrusive in social interactions is one of the factors for being wise (Yang 2001).

Culture only delineates part of the story about wisdom. As developmental tasks change across the lifespan, facets of wisdom differ among age groups, because different age groups weigh components of wisdom differently. Western research concluded that younger adults regard the cognitive component to be more central, emphasizing the learning of knowledge. Older adults are more likely to state that experience with life challenges is equally important, expressing a more complex view of wisdom (Glück and Bluck 2011). The following discussion describes the development of wisdom across the lifespan.

8.4.1 Antecedents of Wisdom

Formal knowledge taught in school does not directly lead to wisdom, but the acquisition of wisdom can be scaffolded in school and at home (e.g., Sternberg 2001). For example, moral reasoning, perspective taking, and compassion have been central developmental topics related to the acquisition of wisdom (e.g., Pasupathi and Staudinger 2001). Moral reasoning fosters the understanding of fairness and justice. Moral dilemmas involve concerns for human problems, and often require complex reasoning to provide a solution. In addition, perspective taking emerges in childhood, and recognizing others' perspective facilitates resolution of interpersonal conflicts. The development of compassion also helps overcome conflicts, since feeling compassionate connects people and leads to acknowledging others' point of view (Ardelt 2000).

Although across cultures, people do not usually relate wisdom to youth, Western studies support that adolescence and young adulthood are stages for building blocks of wisdom to develop. Pasupathi et al. (2001) argued that controlling for intelligence, wisdom-related knowledge emerges between 14 and 25. Examples of wisdom precursors include intellectual capacity and personality characteristics (Richardson and Pasupathi 2005). Cognitive capacity such as problem solving strategies increases rapidly in adolescence, and it is one of the prerequisites for higher-level thinking associated with wisdom. In addition, level of openness increases in Western adolescents, and stabilizes at around the age of 30. Since participants with the personality characteristic demonstrated a higher level of wisdom-related knowledge, wisdom can potentially be cultivated at a young age (Pasupathi et al. 2001).

8.4.2 Wisdom in Middle and Older Adulthood

Mastering bodies of knowledge is one of the conditions for being wise. Because acquiring an expert-level knowledge system in any field requires time for most people, it is reasonable to assume that wisdom increases as people grow old. Although the ability to operate large amounts of knowledge, which is related to fluid intelligence, declines in advanced age, crystallized intelligence, which is the knowledge of the world, does not decrease as people enter old age. As the fundamental pragmatics of life are part of the cognitive facet of wisdom, unlike most cognitive functions across the lifespan that decline, wisdom, once acquired, is a strength that does not wane.

Although relevant gains during the early years are cognitive, knowledge is only one facet of wisdom. In particular, corresponding to the affective facet of wisdom, middle-age and older adults have motivational goals to regulate emotions (e.g., Charles et al. 2003). When facing social dilemmas or interpersonal conflicts, older adults are more likely to provide wise solutions to minimize negative emotions resulting from interpersonal conflicts. A recent study supported the argument by demonstrating more advanced social reasoning skills in older adults compared to younger and middle-age adults (Grossmann et al. 2010). Similar results were presented in cross-cultural studies, but age differences in maintaining interpersonal harmony were more evident among a U.S. sample than among a sample of Japanese individuals (e.g., Grossmann et al. 2012). Additionally, studies with Western populations showed that being a wise exemplar who provides good advice benefits others' lives, and interactions with the wise foster the development of wisdom (Baltes and Smith 2008). In addition to age, non-normative events such as personal adversity and professional training can also contribute to the development of wisdom.

In sum, wisdom is certainly not a natural product of longevity. Nonetheless, if building blocks are established at a young age, wisdom is one of the virtues most likely to continue increasing during adulthood. Cognitive and physical constraints could prevent older adults from acquiring large amounts of knowledge, but when these factors are controlled for, older adults demonstrate an advantage due to greater life experience. Studies on emotional and social cognition also bolster the view that wisdom grows, such that older adults perform better when facing social conflicts.

8.5 Conclusion

Age, and relatedly birth cohort, affect each person's experience and identity. In this chapter, the cultures of different age groups were viewed from a positive lifespan-developmental perspective. Three important areas in positive psychology were highlighted: well-being, romantic relationships, and wisdom. Many directions for future research are evident, particularly with regard to studies of non-White populations within the U.S. The cultures associated with different life periods, and indeed the very definition of these periods, may differ multiculturally and evolve across

historical time. Moreover, age interacts with other facets of culture discussed in this volume, including gender, ethnicity, and class. More research should address the diverse ways that age, and individual life periods, are experienced and valued in different cultures.

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