

The Factors That Foster Wise Reasoning

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Across cultures, wisdom has been considered one of the most revered human qualities. Although the truly wise may seem few and far between, empirical research examining wisdom suggests that it isn't an exceptional trait possessed by a small handful of bearded philosophers — most of us have the ability to make wise decisions, given the right context.

“It appears that experiential, situational, and cultural factors are even more powerful in shaping wisdom than previously imagined,” University of Waterloo researcher Igor Grossmann writes in [*Perspectives on Psychological Science*](#). “Recent empirical findings from cognitive, developmental, social, and personality psychology cumulatively suggest that people’s ability to reason wisely varies dramatically across experiential and situational contexts. Understanding the role of such contextual factors offers unique insights into understanding how wisdom unfolds in daily life as well as how it can be enhanced and taught.”

In other words, it's not so much that some people simply possess wisdom and others lack it, but that our ability to reason wisely depends on a variety of external factors.

“It is impossible to characterize thought processes attributed to wisdom without considering the role of

contextual factors,” Grossmann said. “In other words, wisdom is not solely an ‘inner quality’ but rather unfolds as a function of situations people happen to be in. Some situations are more likely to promote wisdom than others.”

Coming up with a definition of wisdom is challenging, but Grossmann and colleagues have identified four key characteristics as part of a framework of wise reasoning:

- (a) intellectual humility or recognition of limits of own knowledge,
- (b) appreciation of perspectives broader than the issue at hand,
- (c) sensitivity to the possibility of change in social relations, and
- (d) compromise or integration of different opinions.

Grossmann and colleagues have also found that one of the most reliable ways to support wisdom in our own day-to-day decisions is to look at scenarios from a third-party perspective, as though giving advice to a friend. Research suggests that when adopting a first-person viewpoint we focus on “the focal features of the environment,” and when we adopt a third-person, “observer” viewpoint we reason more broadly and focus more on the interpersonal and moral ideals such as fairness. Looking at problems from this more expansive viewpoint appears to foster cognitive processes related to wise decisions.

What are we to do, then, when confronted with situations, like a disagreement with a spouse or negotiating a contract at work, that require us to take a personal stake? Grossmann argues that even when we aren’t able to change the situation, we can still evaluate these experiences from different perspectives.

For example, in one experiment that took place during the peak of the recent economic recession, graduating college seniors were asked to reflect on their job prospects. The students were asked to imagine either their career unfolding “as if you were a distant observer” or “before your own eyes as if you were right there.” Participants in the “distant observer” condition displayed more wisdom-related reasoning (intellectual humility and recognition of change) than did participants in the control condition.

In another study, couples in long-term romantic relationships were instructed to visualize an unresolved relationship conflict either through the eyes of an outsider or from their own perspective. Participants then discussed an incident with their partner for 10 minutes, after which they wrote down their thoughts about it. Couples in the “other’s eyes” condition were significantly more likely to rely on wise reasoning – recognizing others’ perspectives and searching for a compromise – in their essay compared to the couples in the egocentric condition.

“Ego-decentering promotes greater focus on others and enables a bigger picture, conceptual view of the experience, affording recognition of intellectual humility and change,” Grossmann writes.

We might associate wisdom with intelligence or particular personality traits, but research shows only a small positive relationship between wise thinking and crystallized intelligence and the personality traits of openness and agreeableness.

“It is remarkable how much people can vary in their wisdom from one situation to the next and how much stronger such contextual effects are for understanding the relationship between wise judgment and its social and affective outcomes as compared to the generalized ‘traits,’” Grossmann explains. “That is, knowing how wise a person behaves in a given situation is *more* informative for understanding their emotions or likelihood to forgive [or] retaliate as compared to knowing whether the person may be wise ‘in general.’”

Reference

Grossmann, I. (2017). Wisdom in context. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 12(2), 233-257. doi: 10.1177/1745691616672066