Wisdom, a possibility for development

Sabiduría, una posibilidad en el desarrollo

Sabedoria, uma possibilidade de desenvolvimento

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ABSTRACT: Wisdom is associated with old age from common sense. This is based on ancient traditions linked to sacred texts, key principles and narratives since the beginnings of civilizations. From a psycho-gerontological point of view, the hypothesis holds that skills would not decline with age; in fact, they would develop throughout the course of life and reach its peak in late adulthood and old age, leading to higher forms of knowledge. In the last decades of the twentieth century, psychology has become interested in wisdom in line with the principles of Positive Psychology and Psycho-gerontology. Wisdom can be considered as a degree of human development in its higher forms, both in its cognitive and affective-emotional side, or even as a higher degree of integration of both aspects. The importance of each component has generated debates among theorists. Several authors have characterized wisdom considering it as a skill linked to solving problems of human life; a sort of pragmatics of life. Since then, its own attributes have been set such as having access to high cognitive levels or more integrated and mature personality types.

Keywords: Wisdom; Old age; Development.

RESUMEN: *La sabiduría se asocia a la vejez desde el sentido común. Esto se apoya en tradiciones ancestrales vinculadas a textos sagrados, máximas y narraciones desde los orígenes de la civilización. Desde una mirada psico-gerontológica la hipótesis es que existen habilidades que no declinarían con la edad, que por el contrario se desarrollarían a lo largo del curso de vida y alcanzarían su punto máximo en la adultez tardía y vejez, dando lugar a formas superiores de conocimiento. La psicología ha comenzado a interesarse en la sabiduría en las últimas décadas de siglo XX en línea con los postulados de la Psicología Positiva y la Psicogerontología. Se la puede considerar un grado desarrollo humano en sus formas superiores, tanto en su faceta cognitiva como afectivo-emocional, incluso como un grado superior de integración de ambos aspectos. El peso que cada componente tiene ha generado debates entre teóricos. Distintos autores han ido caracterizando la sabiduría a partir de considerarla una habilidad vinculada a la resolución de problemas propios de la vida humana. Una especie de pragmática de la vida. Y de allí se han ido configurando aquellos atributos que le son propios como el acceso a altos niveles cognitivos o formas más integradas y maduras de la personalidad.*
Palabras clave: *Sabiduría; Vejez; Desarrollo.*

RESUMO: *A sabedoria associada à idade avançada é senso comum. Isso é baseado em antigas tradições ligadas aos textos sagrados, princípios fundamentais e narrativas desde os primórdios da civilização. De um ponto de vista psico-gerontológico, a hipótese mantém as habilidades dos idosos que não diminuem com a idade. Na verdade, elas se mantêm durante todo o curso de desenvolvimento da vida e atinge o pico no final da ITS idade adulta e velhice, levando a formas mais elevadas de conhecimento. Nas últimas décadas do século XX, a psicologia passou a se interesar pela questão da sabedoria, em conformidade com os princípios da Psicologia Positiva e Psico-gerontologia. A sabedoria pode ser considerada como um grau de desenvolvimento humano em suas formas mais elevadas, tanto no seu lado cognitivo e afetivo-emocional, ou mesmo como um maior grau de integração de ambos os aspectos. A importância de cada componente tem gerado debates entre os teóricos. Vários autores que pensam a sabedoria caracterizam-na como uma habilidade considerando-na ligada à solução de problemas da vida humana; uma espécie de pragmática de vida. Desde então, os atributos que lhe são muito próprios, permitem-lhe acesso aos níveis cognitivos elevados ou aos tipos mais integrados e maduros de personalidade.*

Approaches to the concept

When we think of an old man or woman, wisdom is one of the words that most frequently comes to mind. From our social representations, life experience and increasing age, almost necessarily generate this condition. Traditions, prejudices and ideals are the foundation of these images. The psychology of aging has taken up the gauntlet becoming interested in this idea from the last decades of the twentieth century, in line with the principles of positive psychology or human potential.

Wisdom is a concept that dates back to the beginnings of civilization. Since ancient times it has served to designate higher forms of knowledge about the human condition and the ultimate meaning of life. In fact, it was a present idea in antiquity: "Happy is the man who finds wisdom," says a proverb in the Old Testament. Plato (427-347 a.C.) called it "the highest of human condition" and considered it a supreme virtue. On his part, Aristotle formulated the scale of knowledge or degrees of knowledge: feeling, memory and experience are the three ways of particular knowledge; art, science, wisdom are three forms of universal knowledge. In the Aristotelian model, wisdom or philosophy is the final and highest degree.

Traditionally wisdom was strongly associated with texts, proverbs or other bodies of knowledge, and it was inapprehensible for an isolated individual. This raises the dichotomy between philosophical or pragmatic definition and also between divine and human quality. Religious texts have been full of proverbs, characters and anecdotes related to wisdom; it is found in them representing some transcendental and universal values. Wisdom would then be a divine gift, a legacy of a deity, not a human quality itself, but transmitted by God. Another feature that emerges from these texts is that wisdom's different meanings transcended time and could be understood at any time. A classic text of wisdom says: "The legend said that on one occasion in which two mothers fought for a baby, they spoke before King Solomon, fighting for custody of the living child. Solomon then drew his sharp, gleaming sword and advanced toward the woman who owned the child. Suddenly the true mother kneeled to the king's feet and begged him: 'No! No Please!' she cried. 'Oh, my Lord! Give my baby to this woman, but alive, by no means kill him'. The other woman said without sympathy: 'He shall be neither mine nor yours; divide *him*!'

Solomon knew with no doubt who the real the mother was. All Israel knew about the judgment the king had handed down, and all admired him, for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him to administer justice." Also in ancient Greece, there are examples of key principles and advice of the wise men. Chilo of Sparta, who said, "avoid extremes", or Solon of Athens' "know thyself", are clear examples of wisdom.

In encyclopedic dictionaries, wisdom is defined as the good knowledge of the world and oneself, good judgment and ability to counsel. A wise person is one who can transfer his wisdom and good judgment to others.

Philosophy, defined as the love of wisdom, consisted of a non-religious treatment that included recognition of some necessary conditions to achieve that degree of knowledge, such as moral or spiritual virtue, and even the fact of reaching old age. For philosophy, wisdom is a human virtue, not derived from a superior or transcendent order.

In the academic and scientific fields, far from having one definition, they recognize the complexity of this concept and prefer to speak of "wisdoms" rather than of a particular wisdom (Assmann, 1994).

Psychological approaches

Wisdom's psychological approaches originated in studies on aging, its characteristics, performance and potential. The hypothesis is that those aspects or skills would not decline with age, but would instead develop over the life course, and would peak in late adulthood and old age, leading to higher forms of knowledge.

In this sense, research topics on life experience, professional expertise, the ability to solve daily life problems, or pragmatic intelligence were selected since the 80s (Sternberg, Jordan, 2005). Some aspects to consider when defining wisdom are, firstly, bonding and social commitment; secondly, that every culture assigns its own essential components, in spite of its recognized universal components.

Currently there is no agreement on how to define this concept, although there are different proposals on ways to approach it. Initially, psychology took wisdom as a way of thinking and problem solving (Baltes, 2004; Wolman, 1973).

This allowed linking this concept to situations in which the developments of creative and harmonic strategies to address dilemmas or problems of the human condition are revealed. From this approach, a model of an individual with multiple cognitive, emotional and social resources, who is able to find new and functional solutions to everyday problems, is shaped.

When addressing the concept of wisdom in different cultures, Bordia and Takahashi (2000) studied its peculiarities in different countries (USA, Australia, India and Japan); among other differences they found that in East Asia, the experience of life and becoming old are important conditions to **becoming** a wise man. On the contrary, in the West wisdom is more associated with the achievement of certain developments of intellectual capacity and experience in the field of scientific knowledge. Takahashi and Overton (2002) summarize these differences in two forms of wisdom, one analytical, which emphasizes knowledge and cognitive complexity -common to the West-, and the other synthetic, that integrates cognition, reflection and affection.

A canonical classification of the theories of wisdom is the difference between implicit theories, - or subjective - based on what a layperson thinks and says about what wisdom is; and those based on theoretical concepts or researchers and experts agreements on the subject, called explicit studies. Implicit theories analyze the terms used to describe both wisdom and what is being said; wisdom can be found in a text, in behavior, a judgment or advice. In this sense, it studies the most common indicators used to define wisdom. Such theories are characterized by representations derived from personal experiences related in part to cultural meanings. It not only comprises a cognitive function that facilitates causal explanations to problems and question-making, but also the interpretation of situations and its adjustment to make inferences about events, to plan and adjust behavior.

Wisdom, is it cognitive complexity and/or emotional affective maturity?

Wisdom is a way of thinking human development to its higher forms, both in its cognitive and affective-emotional side, even as a higher degree of integration of both aspects. The importance of each component has generated debates among theorists.

Authors like Staudinger, and Baltes (1993) suggest that a certain level of complexity is necessary in intellectual functioning for transforming accumulated experiences as a condition for access to check wise answers. Staudinger (1999) presented a model of quantitative and qualitative evaluation of knowledge concerning wisdom seen from performance or achievement, considering verbal responses of people facing difficult life situations (Staudinger, Lopez, & Baltes, 1997; Staudinger, Maciel, Smith, & Baltes, 1998). In Staudinger's model (1999), five limiting criteria of cognitive functioning are distinguished. Two of them are necessary but not sufficient to refer to wisdom: factual and procedural knowledge. The three remaining criteria, or meta-criteria, specifically describe wisdom: contextualism, redefinition and managing of uncertainty. These criteria relate to the literature on wisdom, the neo-Piagetian ideas of post-formal thought (Commons, Richards, & Armon 1984) or the dialectical thinking (Kramer, 1990; Riegl, 1973). Staudinger (1999) found similarities between indicators of relativistic dialectical thought, reflective judgment that characterizes the post-formal thoughts and wisdom indicators. This author proposes an ontogenesis of wisdom from three main sources: background, consequent and/or correlated factors, among which are: a) personal aspects, including cognitive skills - fluid and crystallized intelligence - and personality characteristics, b) expertise factors, c) experiential contexts facilitators.

The so-called "Berlin Wisdom Paradigm" sees wisdom as "expert knowledge and judgment about the fundamental pragmatics of life" (Staudinger, 1999, p. 643). There is agreement that the term refers to high levels of cognitive functioning and excellence in the concerns about key aspects of the human condition. At the same time, it implies the use of knowledge concerning performance, interpretation and significance of life (Baltes, Smith, & Staudinger, 1992; Staudinger, 1999). Wisdom as high cognitive functioning is present only in a small proportion of this population.

Clayton, and Birren (1980), Holliday, and Chandler (1986), Sternberg (1985,1987) identified as very important indicators of cognitive components, the exceptional understanding and communication skills, as well as a more general and more specifically social competence. Sternberg, and colleagues (1985, 1990) incorporated new indicators, which were integrated to those already mentioned: higher forms of reasoning and wisdom; the superior ability to learn through brainstorming or through interactions with the environment;

exceptional judgment and the effective use of information and insight. Sagacity was considered the most specific indicator of wisdom.

Among the features of personality, some seem to be associated to the development of knowledge in adulthood and old age; such as the absence of emotional liability, the presence of openness to experience and sociability (Clayton, & Birren, 1980; Holliday, & Chandler, 1986). Other characterizations extend the concept to include, in addition to personality traits, ways of thinking. Some argue, for example, that reflexivity and skepticism are essential for wisdom, you could even invoke the concept of "constructive melancholy" (Baltes, 2004).

Meanwhile, Labouvie-Vief (2000) makes a characterization of wisdom linking it to maturity and organization of the ego, and emotional self-knowledge, good defense mechanisms and post-formal way of thinking.

In the Clayton, and Birren (1980) studies - through the comparison of answers to questions, situation definition or vignettes between experts and laypeople - they come to the conclusion that the prototype of a wise person comes in terms of three dimensions: 1) affective characteristics such as empathy and compassion; 2) reflective process, as intuition and insight; 3) cognitive skills, such as experience and intelligence (Ardelt, 2003).

Recently, new dimensions and features have been incorporated. Bluck, and Glück (2005) give greater importance to the distinction between the real world skills and fundamentally interpersonal skills, as opposed to other, less interactive and social abilities such as cognitive skills, insight and reflective attitude. Another study includes items such as environment protection, religion (Jason, *et al*., 2001), metaphysics and transcendence.

Other investigations are based on the report of subjects who have many wise men features. These studies generally are performed in elderly of about sixty years old. The studies include questions such as "What is the function of wisdom in everyday life?", or the request of autobiographical notes of events in which the subjects see themselves as wise men. Thus, empathy and social support, self-determination or autonomy, knowledge and flexibility were identified (Glück, Bluck, Baron, and McAdams, 2005).

According to the studies of Oser (1999) and colleagues, wise acts seem to have at least seven characteristics: 1) paradoxical tolerance and a certain degree of unpredictability as characteristics of reality; 2) moral integrity; 3) altruism; 4) overcoming internal and external mandates; 5) search for balance; 6) acceptance of risk; 7) search for an improvement of the human condition.

Explicit theories such as Erikson's (1988) emphasize the non-cognitive aspects of wisdom, without acknowledging them, understanding it as a construct in which affective and cognitive interrelationship is necessary, since both are interdependent dimensions. The author establishes certain conditions for the individual to make wise decisions. Besides knowing, being open to change and learning, one should also take into account the context in which decisions occur, requiring at the same time, certain skills that would foster effective interpersonal relationships and, therefore, entail proper decision-making.

Explicit theories such as Erikson's (1988) emphasize the non-cognitive aspects of wisdom, without disowning them, understanding it as a construct in which affective and cognitive interrelationship is necessary, since both are interdependent dimensions. The author establishes certain conditions for the individual to make wise decisions. Besides knowing, being open to change and learning, one should also take into account the context in which decisions occur, requiring at the same time, certain skills that would foster effective interpersonal relationships and, therefore, entail proper decision-making.

Based on Erikson's proposal, Ryff (1989) formulates a personal development model that is closer to the idea of integration, and its correlative wisdom. He defines six dimensions of what he characterizes as personal well-being. The first five - acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery and purpose in life - represent the ideal state of a fully functioning person and are goals to full development. The last one, personal growth is a quality that influences the others, since optimal development requires not only to achieve these qualities, but also to continue developing one's potential, growing and expanding as a person. Thus, we can distinguish certain dimensions of personality and wellness: generativity, integrity, mastery of the environment, and to a lesser extent, self-acceptance and autonomy. So, one could think of a possible relationship between wisdom and personal satisfaction.

To Ardelt (2000) the reflexive dimension of wisdom is the essential component, as it fosters the development of cognitive and affective aspects; a deeper understanding of life and human nature arises when considering multiple viewpoints and an overcoming of egocentrism. This is possible from the practice of self-reflection, learning not to react to unpleasant feelings and accepting the reality of the present moment to recognize and understand the limitations.

Ardelt's operationalization model is a tool called "Three-dimensional wisdom scale" (3D-WS), which is a questionnaire designed for older adults. The 3D-WS is a measure that evaluates wisdom in three components: cognitive, reflective and affective. The structure of the questionnaire corresponds to the theoretical and methodological model of expert judgment.

Kramer (1989, 2000) presents a model of wisdom in which he integrates the cognitive and affective aspects that allow the subject to act (make decisions, counsel, etc.) wisely. Therefore, it implies a continuous development along life. Based on epistemological models, he suggests that a relativistic and dialectical thought would correspond to wisdom. Relativism allows taking into account individual needs and priorities - even when they clash with one's own - and consider the circumstances surrounding the problematic fact, all of which allows the multiplicity of views. Following Riegl (1973), Kramer holds that dialectical thinking replaces the relativistic thinking - which requires being conscious of the integrity of all knowledge - and the evolution through integrated ways by the interchange of conflict and resolution. Dialectical thinking is positively associated with age and this only occurs, according to the author, among people who have a rich emotional life. Therefore, development of dialectical thinking capacity may be necessary to respond emotionally to the experiences of adult life. For Kramer (1990), these two types of thinking facilitate the five functions of wisdom. The first one is called "life planning" and enables the individual to solve dilemmas. The second one is giving advice to others. The third one is management, social guidance and moral leadership. The fourth task is life review that allows the individual to assess his life and find meaning. Finally, the fifth is questioning the meaning of one's own life. All these functions are closely related, that is why the development of one of them, generates changes in the other ones.

Wisdom and age

While most authors suggest that chronological age is a determinant factor to reach wisdom, some studies question this or mitigate this factor (Staudinger, 1999). The first psychologist to associate the concept of wisdom with old age psychology was Erikson (1982).

The author divides lifetime in eight phases in which the subject has to overcome certain conflicts in a healthy manner. The last one is the stage of the conflict between integrity vs. despair and in this stage not only maturation and aging but also the development of wisdom are implied. In the last stage of life only the person who has taken care of things and people, who has adapted to his/her triumphs and disappointments, will be able to resolve it successfully. Integrity implies the acceptance of one's own story, the gains and losses and what one had and lost. On the other hand, it implies self-compassion; everyone has chosen a way of life, beyond the different factors included in the final product that is the life story. This process allows us to face death as the finale of a life.

On the contrary, despair expresses the feeling that the time left is too short to try to solve those pendant issues. The person who fails to achieve integrity feels anguish and despair at the approach of death because he cannot make a good balance in his/her life. Therefore, from Erikson's perspective (1988), the person who has achieved integrity is the one who accepts responsibly life as he/she has lived it. This "generating" and "integrated" personality is the way to one of the most positive attributes and likely to be achieved at this late stage of life: wisdom. For Erikson (1988) wisdom is the acceptance of life, the perception that one has lived with "good intentions" and concerned for the common interests rather than for oneself.

Baltes and colleagues (Baltes & Smith, 1990; Smith, Staudinger, & Baltes, 1994) suggest that the factors for the development of wisdom are chronological age, a deep expertise in a wide range of human conditions, the experience of being a tutor or mentor, and a particular motivational disposition, as generativity. Results of a study (Smith, Staudinger, & Baltes, 1994; Staudinger, Smith, & Baltes, 1992) about the influence of chronological factors - youth or old age - and professional expertise – clinical psychologist/other professions- in reviewing and planning life tasks show that few subjects found wisdom in their responses. The old and young people had similar results and clinical psychologists have better performance than subjects do in other professions. A study by Marchand (1998), in which Baltes' methodology - hypothetical crisis situations - was used, compared the performance of young, middle-aged and old people from different professions – teachers and other professions - gave partially consistent results with Baltes's study above. They showed that there were few answers in higher levels in all groups in *Wisdom-Related Knowledge.* The

middle-aged subjects outperformed the other groups; finally, teachers did not exceed the control group.

We can say that the relationship of this set of influences becomes more complex as age advances, which also complicates the understanding of the ontogeny of wisdom. It seems that the dynamic between the old age relating to gains and losses relegate the age variable, whereas personality characteristics, cognitive structure, life experiences and contextual factors are at the forefront of the ontogenetic explanation of high cognitive performance level. Precisely, in Staudinger and Baltes' empirical studies (Baltes, & Staudinger, 1996; Staudinger, 1999) performed in middle-aged adults and elderly subjects, show no significant relationships between wisdom and chronological age.

As people age, according to the socio-cultural changes and experienced life stages, the body of knowledge changes, as this is no longer adaptive or because it is not used much. At the same time, the elderly acquire new knowledge, updating this body of knowledge to their present lifetime. This view is consistent with the ontogenetic concept of the development of the *Life-Span Theory*. Thus, Simone de Beauvoir (1972) held that more elaborate processes of reflection and life review, which may clarify the resolution of problems, might take longer for seniors to achieve.

Among the empirical studies based on these ideas, Takahashi, and Overton (2002) researched into wisdom, in its analytical and synthetic aspects. Senior participants of different cultures and ages -regardless of cultural variables-, performed significantly better than young people did in four of the five-operational criteria of the above-mentioned construct. The superior performance of older adults was recorded in traditional analytical tasks, such as vocabulary and abstraction, as well as in synthetic tasks that evaluated the flexible, inclusive and dialectical thinking, as tendency to change, updating and emotional empathy. These results are consistent with previous studies (Baltes & Smith, 1990; Kramer, Kahlbaugh, & Goldston, 1992).

While these findings do not determine the age factor as exclusive to the access to wisdom, we see it is as a psychological competence, which finds in late adulthood and old age more possibilities to appear than in other stages of life.

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