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Can the Wisdom of Aging be Activated and Make a Difference Societally?

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Abstract

The Experience Corps®, a community-based intergenerational program, was developed to promote the health of older adults, while simultaneously addressing unmet social and academic needs in public elementary schools. The model was designed to draw on, and potentially activate, the wisdom of older adults. This paper explores the nature of wisdom-related knowledge and how older adults may apply such knowledge when tutoring and mentoring young children, as well as the potential for the intergenerational transmission of wisdom from the older adult volunteers to the school children being mentored by them. Developing an understanding of these issues may provide a basis for the creation of more extensive wisdom-generating opportunities for both older and younger generations.

After centuries of trying to understand what it means to be wise, there is still considerable debate about the essential components of wisdom, how it is acquired, and how it is activated (Baltes & Smith, 2008). Despite differing views on the associated competencies and characteristics, wisdom is generally conceptualized as resulting from an accumulation of life experiences culminating in the highest form of human development (e.g., Baltes & Smith, 1990; Clayton & Birren, 1980; Erikson, 1982; Labouvie-Vief, 2003). The continued growth in intellectual, social, emotional, and moral development required to reach this ideal end stage suggests that wisdom continues to develop over the life span. Wisdom, further, is thought to lead to greater life satisfaction and well-being in adulthood (e.g., Ardelt, 1997; Baltes, Smith, & Staudinger, 1992). Beyond that, the wisdom of older adults is viewed as beneficial to others and can indicate a benefit to society. Unfortunately, relatively little attention has been paid to this aspect of aging, as well as possible ways to stimulate the development of wisdom over the lifecourse (see Sternberg, 2001).

In this paper, we first review the definitions of wisdom, as well as its components, correlates, and associations with important other factors. We then pose the questions as to whether wisdom can be “activated” and/or enhanced in adulthood, as well as how the wisdom of older adults can be tapped to potentially benefit the younger generation. These

questions are discussed within the context of the Experience Corps®, a community-based intergenerational program designed to draw on, and potentially activate, the wisdom of older adults (Fried et al. 2004).

What is (or is not) Wisdom?

Wisdom has been defined as expert level knowledge and judgment in the fundamental pragmatics of life, including factual knowledge, procedural knowledge, knowledge of life's contexts, relativism, and uncertainty (Baltes et al., 1992); an informed and detached concern with life itself in the face of death itself (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986); a balance between confidence in knowledge and understanding that knowledge is fallible (Meacham, 1990); a link between personal growth and cognitive processes (Labouvie-Vief, 2003); and/or an integration of cognitive, reflective, and affective dimensions (Ardelt, 2003). It is also thought that wisdom involves seeking out difficult or complex problems, applying prior knowledge, and making sound and executable judgments, often toward the goal of achieving a common good (Kitchener & Brenner, 1990; Sternberg, 1990).

Extending beyond Piaget's formal operational stage of cognitive development, theories of adult development have proposed a more advanced cognitive stage, the post-formal operational stage (Riegel, 1973). In this stage, an individual is better positioned to consider a problem from multiple viewpoints, think much more reflectively or dialectically than in the past, and communicate thoughtfully in complex and emotionally charged contexts (e.g., Kitchener & Brenner, 1990; Labouvie-Vief, 2003; Riegel, 1973). Accordingly, wise individuals are often conceptualized as knowledgeable, mature, tolerant, empathetic, experienced, intuitive, understanding, competent, and demonstrate exceptional judgment, interpersonal, and communication skills (Clayton & Birren, 1980; Holliday & Chandler, 1986).

Taken together these theories suggest that the emergence of wisdom is a developmental process, culminating in positive self-development and post-formal operational thinking in adulthood (e.g., Cook-Greuter, 2000; Labouvie-Vief, 1982; Riegel, 1973). During the earlier adult years, individuals may lack the maturity, cognitive complexity, and abstract thinking skills necessary to make well-considered actions and rational decisions (Piaget, 1954), thus limiting the ability to behave in a wise manner. Throughout the life course, however, further cognitive, emotional, and social development may move one towards the acquisition of wisdom.

Drawing from extant theories, we conceptualize wisdom as involving the integration of a constellation of factors, including cognitive, personality, affective, experiential, and social dimensions (e.g., Ardelt, 2003; Baltes & Smith, 1990, 2003; Labouvie-Vief, 2003; see Figure 1), highlighting the multidimensionality and complexity of this construct. Furthermore, the assumption that wisdom is modifiable suggests that there may be certain facilitative contexts that nurture the development of wisdom over the lifespan. We first discuss how these components are related to aging and then turn our discussion to how wisdom may be activated in adulthood and potentially facilitated over the lifespan.

Wisdom as a Prototype of Successful Aging

Although the attainment of wisdom in later adulthood is often thought of as the highest form of human development, wisdom is not automatically granted as a reward for growing older. In fact, age-related decline in fluid cognitive abilities, such as processing speed, working memory capacity, inductive reasoning, spatial orientation, and word fluency (Schaie, 2005) may hinder the ability to engage in problem solving and reasoning tasks, inherently working against the development of wisdom.

Despite these declines, several reasons exist as to why wisdom may be associated with growing older. As we age, there is a continued growth in crystallized pragmatics, including language and knowledge, resulting from life experiences (Baltes, 1997). This may partly explain why older adults tend to be more skilled than younger adults in some tasks of cognitive reasoning, especially those involving social and practical problem solving (e.g., life knowledge, coordination of life themes, future goals, life planning) (Baltes et al., 1992; Labouvie-Vief, 2003). To the extent that wisdom is related to crystallized ability through the accumulation of life experiences and expert levels of knowledge, wisdom may be expected to increase over time or operate as a compensatory mechanism to offset the losses due to biology (Baltes, 1997).

The accumulation of life experiences also does not automatically activate wisdom in adulthood. Instead, wisdom may depend on an individual's ability to integrate experiences across time and utilize these experiences in a reflective manner (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). Accordingly, experiences that result in the successful resolution of complex situations may act as a catalyst for personal growth, potentially representing one pathway for the development of wisdom (Ardelt, 2000; Arlin, 1990). Thus, the wise person realizes that possessing knowledge is not enough; they also realize how and when an application of such knowledge is necessary. This suggests that individuals must have both the cognitive capacity and personal insight to contextualize the circumstances surrounding a problem, appropriately integrate prior and current knowledge, as well as to understand how the application of such knowledge may potentially impact future outcomes.

As cognition may be tightly intertwined with emotion in adulthood (Carstensen, 2006; Labouvie-Vief, 2003), we cannot neglect the importance of socio-emotional factors in the acquisition and expression of wisdom. Wise individuals are thought to be more empathetic, more accurate in their perceptions of an individual's emotions or feelings, and more considerate of the welfare of others (Baltes & Kunzmann, 2003). In fact, empathy and understanding may be more closely related to wisdom than either age or experience (Clayton & Birren, 1980). Furthermore, emotional intelligence, which is the ability to perceive, understand, and regulate emotion in the self and others, has been identified as a critical factor in personal development (Goleman, 1995). Wisdom may, therefore, reflect a specific form of emotional intelligence dealing with intrapersonal and interpersonal matters, as well as critical life dilemmas (Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1997).

Older adults also appear to have acquired the dispositions and skills to benefit from social exchanges with others and handle interpersonal conflicts more effectively than do younger people (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Labouvie-Vief, Hakim-Larson, DeVoe, & Schoeberlein, 1989). Consequently, older individuals can be a good source of advice for younger people, particularly in the areas of relationships and in cases of uncertainty (e.g., Sternberg, 1990), thereby providing a valuable contribution to society that is qualitatively different than that offered by any other age group (Mergler & Goldstein, 1983). This is consistent with Erikson's theory of generativity in which psychological maturity is marked by an interest in contributing to society and leaving a legacy for future generations. While many fulfill their generative desires through procreation and childrearing, generativity also includes mentoring, creation of new products or ideas, and many other activities that contribute to the betterment of society for the next generation.

One such way that older adults can be generative is through the intergenerational transmission of knowledge to younger generations (Erikson, 1982; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). In adulthood, reflecting on one's own life course may lead one to engage in generative behaviors (e.g., mentoring, leadership, leaving a positive legacy) that promote the development and well-being of successive generations. Although the exact mechanisms are

unclear, we hypothesize that being generative, as well as the desire for generativity, may be conducive to the accumulation and refinement of wisdom through self-reflection and engagement with environments that promote the expansion of care beyond oneself toward others (Erikson, 1982). However, it is equally plausible to assume that wise individuals purposefully invest efforts to shape their environment and seek out generative opportunities as a means of carrying forth their wisdom.

Stimulating Wisdom Through Intergenerational Contexts

Assuming that wisdom is linked with qualities and characteristics of older individuals, the question then becomes, are there contexts that foster the integration and activation of wisdom in adulthood? As stated by Baltes and Smith (2003), older adults have specialized forms of knowledge, skills, and expertise that can be brought to the task of creating a society with a strong sense of intergenerational connectivity and co-production. We hypothesize that the growth of wisdom may be nurtured across the lifespan through these intergenerational interactions. Through mentorship and modeling, older adults are presented with an opportunity to reflect on, synthesize, and utilize their life experiences, perhaps enhancing a perception of successful generativity and creating wisdom in their own lives (Montgomery, Barber, & McKee, 2002). In turn, their experiences and wisdom may be transmitted to future generations, thereby contributing to the affective and cognitive development of children (Sternberg, 2001).

Unfortunately, as a society, we do not readily afford cross-generational opportunities for such social interactions and mutual growth. Removing existing structural age barriers (e.g., providing role opportunities in education, work, and leisure across all ages) and increasing exchanges between generations may allow us to move towards a more age-integrated society (Riley & Riley, 1994, 2000). Therefore, if we are concerned with generating wisdom we also need to make concerted efforts to provide generative opportunities that facilitate its development, while expanding societal benefits.

The Experience Corps®: A Model for Intergenerational Knowledge Transmission

The Experience Corps® is an intergenerational school-based, volunteer program in which older adults serve as mentors and tutors for the younger generation. This program was designed to capture the wisdom, maturity, and life experiences of older individuals to enhance the education of children in kindergarten through third grade (Rebok et al., 2004), while simultaneously serving as a health promotion model aimed at improving the cognitive and physical function of older adults (Fried et al., 2004). We theorized in designing the program that it would activate the wisdom, as well as the social capital, of an aging society.

Consistent with the notion that wisdom may be attained through generative potential, in the Experience Corps program, older adult volunteers are trained and placed in public elementary schools to serve as mentors and tutors in roles including literacy development and behavioral management skills. These roles were designed to have high impact for the children in enhancing academic success. Volunteer training includes lectures, discussion, and exercises designed to provide necessary skills for working with children, to assist in conflict resolution, and to facilitate communication. The volunteers are required to devote a minimum of 15 hours a week for an entire school year, providing over 450 hours of sustained activity working with individual children or small groups of children. Using the Experience Corps® as a case example, we explore how participation may stimulate wisdom across generations.

Wisdom through experience

Although older adults bring prior experiences, knowledge, and values to the classroom, sustained participation in Experience Corps® presents them with novel opportunities to learn and refine interpersonal skills, leadership, and mentoring ability to support children's academic and personal development. Through these new experiences and information, Experience Corps® volunteers are presented with an opportunity to refine, correct, and update knowledge about the pragmatics of life (Baltes, 1997). Ongoing development of communication skills, including conflict negotiation and mediation, listening, collaboration, and team building, may catalyze integrative and dialectical thinking and cognitive flexibility among the older adults. At the same time, the acquisition and modeling of these social skills (e.g., cooperation, responsibility, empathy, and control) may benefit the younger generation as well, potentially setting them on a developmental trajectory towards wisdom. For instance, if a student was having trouble with a classmate, the older adult may reflect on and generate ways to handle the conflictual situation based on their previous experiences and knowledge, ultimately guiding the student toward successful conflict resolution. Repeated exposure to these cognitively complex and emotionally charged encounters may synthesize and enhance wisdom in older adults. At the same time, younger generations may learn valuable life skills through the lived lessons of older adults and generalize these lessons inside and outside of the classroom.

Wisdom through social interactions

As wisdom may be manifested (and perhaps activated), at least in part, through a role expectation of generative interaction with others, the Experience Corps® serves as a facilitative context for the development of new relationships and support through regular and structured social interactions. Aside from interactions with members of the school community (children, teachers, and staff), individuals are trained in team-building skills and placed in the school as a team of volunteers. This team-based approach brings older adults together with other individuals who have a mutual interest in helping elementary students increase their likelihood of academic success and serves as a resource for mutual problem-solving, modeling, feedback, reinforcement, and support. Through increased social integration, generativity and usefulness may be enhanced by their collective efficacy.

Further, by having direct interaction with adult volunteers, elementary school children show academic (e.g., reading and writing skills) and behavioral (e.g., social functioning) improvements (see Rebok et al., 2004). Several other youth prevention programs have shown that achieving social and emotional competence positively affects youth development and improves educational outcomes (e.g., increase in academic performance, better attendance), as well as overall school climate (e.g., fewer serious discipline problems and school suspensions) (e.g., Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). Moreover, opportunities for children to engage with productive older adults provide positive attitudinal benefits; they allow children to see beyond the typical declines associated with aging and recognize the dimensions of aging that continue to grow and mature (Aday, Sims, McDuffie, & Evan, 1996). By enhancing social competencies, as well as a positive view of human development across the life course, children may also develop prerequisites for the attainment of wisdom (e.g., empathy, compassion, recognize multiple perspectives) in adulthood (Femia, Zarit, Blair, Jarrott, & Bruno, 2008).

Wisdom through generativity

Consistent with the notion of generativity, Experience Corps® offers an opportunity for greater fulfillment and purpose in later years. Many older adults in the Experience Corps® program report that they participate because they want to give something back to the community, make a difference for future generations, feel a societal responsibility, and

consider participation as an opportunity to give back in retirement (see Fried et al., 2004). This redirection of attention from the self towards future generations fills the need to nurture, teach, communicate positive values, and leave a legacy. Younger generations also have a need to be nurtured, be taught, have positive role models, and be connected to preceding generations (Sternberg, 1990). The desire for generativity may promote engaging in situations that further consolidate the wisdom of aging, thus fostering important social capital to improve the well-being and success of the next generations.

Wisdom through social capital

Social capital represents “the nature and extent of networks and associated norms of reciprocity” (Putnam, 2000). As baby boomers become seniors, we can expect to see a greater emphasis on how their collective wisdom might benefit future generations. Intergenerational programs, such as Experience Corps®, can capitalize on the accumulated experience and knowledge of an aging population to address unmet academic and social needs in public elementary schools. Currently, many educational programs primarily promote the acquisition of intellectual, rather than wisdom-related, knowledge (Ardelt, 2000). However, the goal of schooling should be not only to impart knowledge but also to help students develop use of such knowledge (Sternberg, 2001). Through mentoring, tutoring, and role modeling, Experience Corps® volunteers may help children develop the ability to apply knowledge. Bringing older adults to the classroom is, therefore, a relatively untapped and potentially cost-effective way of making positive impact on both the older and younger generations.

Concluding Remarks

The older population is rapidly growing and they are looking for more meaningful, challenging ways to spend their retirement years; Experience Corps® is a valuable solution to address this need. Simultaneously, providing opportunities in which children are exposed to the wisdom of older adults might enhance the likelihood that this younger generation will manifest wisdom in later years. Tapping into the characteristics of this cohort and fostering intergenerational relationships through mentorship-related, volunteerism can enhance quality of people’s lives and create a wiser global community. If correct, this makes explicit some of the expected value of creating intergenerational programs. For older adults, we theorize that wisdom may be activated or enhanced through the reflective and dialectical nature of intergenerational interactions. Through the practice of mentorship, adults may formulate alternate solutions to children’s questions by drawing from and reflecting on prior knowledge and experience, thus allowing them to consider life’s complexities in deeper, more meaningful ways. For children, providing and modeling skills and reflective ways of thinking may increase the emergence of wisdom later in life. As the child acquires ability to think abstractly and hypothetically, emotions become less linked to the here and now and more concerned with others (Labouvie-Vief, 2003). If wisdom is developed over the life course, it is possible that these early life experiences would assist in developing the qualities of wisdom. Therefore, programs such as the Experience Corps® can capitalize on an aging population to consolidate or activate wisdom and confer its benefits for children’s educational and societal needs (Sternberg, 2001). In this respect, we may not only stimulate wisdom in older individuals, but also pave the way for younger generations to become wise.

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Figure 1.
Components of wisdom.