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Wisdom in later life: ethnographic approaches

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ABSTRACT
The concept of wisdom, popularly associated with the idea of old age, was neglected during the 20th century. It has recently revived as a matter of academic concern, but remains imperfectly understood. This article therefore begins to explore both the concept of wisdom and some forms we might expect wise behaviour to take. It emphasises the contemporary relevance of historical approaches through an examination of Hebrew and Greek writing on wisdom. Recent contributions from psychology develop aspects of these traditions; but studying wisdom ethnographically also substantially expands our understanding of what wisdom is. An ethnographic interview from Austria exemplifies social as well as psychological aspects of wisdom, showing that part of the meaning of wisdom resides in its effects on a social setting. Aspects of discourse in rural Ireland, when interpreted in the light of maxim-related wisdom traditions, extend this claim, showing more about how wise interventions activate wisdom in the society surrounding them. Other ethnographic cases also develop this notion of wisdom as based on social interaction, by exploring its effects. If we face the methodological challenges entailed in tracing wisdom ethnographically, we enhance our understanding of the concept itself and stress the fruitfulness of the idea of wisdom as an attainment of the lifecourse.

KEY WORDS – wisdom, ageing, ethnographic method.

Introduction

Records for millennia show that human ageing has repeatedly been associated with the development of wisdom, and that it has been regarded as an accretion of knowledge, tacit or explicit, about how to respond to other people, to oneself, and to profound problems of human existence that lack predetermined answers. Customarily, it was considered one of the highest aims of a human life. Wisdom was seen in part as practical knowledge that draws on various emotional, social and ethical capacities. Achieving it might offer consolation for the 'pains of ageing'. Older people might

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develop capacities for insight rarely displayed by those younger, which would endow their personal lifecourses with additional force and meaning and would supply a special resource for others in society. The institution of the Senate is intended, in theory, to enhance political decision-making by exploiting such mature and experienced advice. As a corollary, honouring older people need not stem from charity or condescension but would relate to their capacity to enhance societal life in general.

During much of the 20th century, the notion of wisdom was seldom accorded attention in academic work. Reasons for this include the fact that wisdom is difficult to analyse in the clear, distinct terms associated with 'technical-analytic expertise' (Holliday and Chandler 1986: 2). Wisdom is often expressed and alluded to indirectly or behaviourally. It entails forms of reasoning which are broader than the strictly cognitive model of thought which became the focus of academic psychology during the 20th century (*cf.* Edmondson 1984). It may also have been associated with religious world-views that were declining in popularity, or treated as bland and disengaged (*cf.* Woodward 2003). As a result, understanding of how wise thought functions, or what conduct wisdom entails, became attenuated. Yet, particularly in psychology, there was a clear need to understand practice-based competences associated with the complexity of human interaction, and the idea of wisdom began to revive towards the end of the century. This process was enhanced by the study of gerontology itself, which renewed the acknowledgement of genuine capacities on the part of older people (Dittman-Kohli and Baltes 1982). While recent contributions have noted that wise behaviour depends upon the social nature of human beings and has strong implications for inter-personal conduct, psychologists' major emphasis has been on individuals, leaving more to be learned about the social ramifications of wisdom. Real-life learning entails both recognising examples of concepts and understanding the principles that connect them (Clark 2000); similarly, academic understanding of an idea entails explicating instances of what happens when it is put into practice. Thus, tracing social aspects of everyday wisdom using ethnographic examples enriches our understanding of what wisdom entails, and draws attention to some problems about successful ageing in contemporary societies.

This paper first provides indications of what we might expect of wisdom, by referring to ancient traditions that still affect the western world – though they are not always acknowledged. The Hebrew tradition emphasises the roots of wisdom in daily practices connected with perennial problems of human living. The Graeco-Roman approach is also recalled, especially for its diversity and its culmination in the idea of 'the art of living', which reappears, directly or by implication, in recent

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psychological research. Several psychological treatments are then explored, showing their continuity with historical discussions. Next, we examine evidence about how European citizens can be shown to be 'wise' in everyday life. While the psychological approaches are highly significant, ethnographic evidence from Austria shows that they do not exhaust what we need to know about wisdom. Analysing social uses of wisdom, by combining folklore and ethnography, can extend our understanding of the attribute: instances of wisdom in Ireland show similarities with ancient Hebrew constructions, by stressing the activation of wisdom among the *recipients* of wise interventions. Further ethnographic examples develop exploration of the impacts on their settings made by wise actions or utterances. I then briefly consider aspects of contemporary societies that offer individuals the opportunity to become wise, or which hinder them in the attempt.

Ancient traditions of wisdom: the structure of human experience

For over 4,000 years of human history, the capacity for wisdom was seen as central in responses to problems for which accepted knowledge failed to provide secure solutions. Seeking wisdom seemed crucial to an individual's lifecourse and to society. Traditions of wisdom are disparate in many ways – reflecting the various social settings in which they evolved and to which they were applied. Nonetheless, there seems to be a spectrum of human capacities whose interconnectedness makes it possible to talk intelligibly about the wish to attain wisdom or about the appropriateness of respect for those who have it. Among many ancient traditions of wisdom, the Hebrew and the Graeco-Roman have influenced western culture radically, partly through their influence on Christianity. Psychological models may be offered with little explicit reference to earlier ideas, but in effect they develop insights introduced in early recorded thought.

The Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) contains not only a mosaic of reflections on the experience of a people but also a rich collection of ideas and practices derived from Egypt, Babylon (in present-day Iraq), and other sources in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cultures. This biblical tradition contains contrasting elements: wisdom seen as specific to God, and wisdom special to humans. Human wisdom, *Hokma*, is primarily practical. It derives from and is applied to experience: 'the essentials for coping with reality' (von Rad 1972 [1970]: 113). It is a knowledge of life 'wholly accessible to man' (1972: 95), and 'a particular form of human knowledge and behaviour' (1972: 8) that deals with ways of confronting quotidian predicaments in all their confusing ambiguity. The Hebrew

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language of that time used abstract terms reluctantly (1972: 13 and 93 *ff.*), expressing this knowledge poetically or allusively. In any case, the problems with which it deals – how to set priorities that guide one's lifecourse, how to respond to destructive behaviour, or how strongly to identify with one's community – are not susceptible to rigid regulation. Teaching and study, rather than law in its literal sense, are the best expressions of this knowledge (Cohen 1949: xlix). It is a perennial feature of wisdom in this and other traditions that it eschews dogmatism or certitude.

Proverbs and maxims have a strong guiding function, by casting light on a flux of events that would otherwise seem chaotic. In a sense, they play at summarising what cannot be summarised. Von Rad compares the Hebrews' maxims to small plots on the social and intellectual landscape, whose suitability *to a given purpose* can be measured against each other: 'This is not a question of staking an exclusive claim to truth. A maxim used to correct another claim does not demonstrate the *falsity* of this claim. Instead it leads on to a further perspective on the order of things, which it has now become possible to perceive' (von Rad 1962: 435, my translation). This 'wisdom' accentuates practical reason, perceptiveness, prudence, moral responsibility and adroitness in dealing with predicaments between people; it may be playful and tentative, even ironic (*Proverbs* 8: 22–31).

Like the Biblical tradition, Greek accounts of wisdom show evolution over time, as well as tensions between Godlike and human 'wisdom', and between wisdom as reflective or as centrally engaged with human practice. In Homeric times, wisdom was expected from skilled craftsmen, or from travelled, experienced older people, those with special and useful capacities. By the sixth century before Christ, the Seven Sages were famed for wisdom not only on the basis of their skills in statesmanship and in dealing with people, but also for their way of life, which was intricately bound up with the struggle for human excellence. They too condensed insights into maxims, riddles and gnomic sayings, or epigrams about prudent living and shrewd, insightful public decisions. The production and application of maxims resulted from a concern with what is basic for a well-lived human life, where microcosm and macrocosm are in tune.

In the Greek Enlightenment of the subsequent century, the Sophists placed human needs at the centre of the search for wisdom, and associated it with citizens' education for public roles in society. Their treatment of human action aimed to be critical, rational and autonomous, and also highlighted political virtues such as mutual respect and justice that made community life possible. Since no overall recipe could be found for human political life, wisdom would enable observers to analyse a community's particular needs and abilities, and devise forms of public life to suit it.

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Socrates, legendary both for wisdom and for denying that he possessed it, rejected the Sophists' stress on the conventionality of public habits and beliefs, but made permanent their concentration on human concerns. He regarded the quest for wisdom as the search for a proper way to live, an art of living. This involves care for one's soul, which in turn means seeking to understand what virtues such as courage or justice really are, or what virtue itself is, though Socrates hardly expected to arbitrate such matters conclusively. A central feature of his wisdom rested in his choice of communicative forms (Woerner 2000*a*): joint discussion and the refutation of false beliefs helped people to understand their own behaviour, and raised questions about how far they could genuinely respect the principles of their own conduct. Such processes of enquiry enhanced strength both of character and intellect. They entailed tolerating uncertainty wherever reliable foundations could not be found. In contrast to Plato's more intellectual version, accommodation to uncertainty was also a significant feature of Aristotle's account of practical wisdom, *phronesis*, which he distinguished from the more theoretical version of wisdom that he termed *sophia*. Aristotle's practical wisdom still had room for maxims. It marked a return to wisdom for those pressed to make judgements on human affairs on the basis of fallible insights and fluctuating circumstances (Edmondson 1984; Woerner 1990).[1]

Traditional representations of wisdom that concentrate on human and practice-related qualities conjoin wisdom with the person who exercises it by drawing on experience, feeling and ethical values. Wise actions or judgements may (like Solomon's) initially appear astonishing, even absurd, but are revealed as balancing consensus with unconventionality, and supply insights in such a manner as to heighten the integrity of the decision. Far from prohibiting political criticism (*cf.* Woodward 2003), this form of wisdom is used in human contexts, and applied to promote social justice.

Psychological models of wisdom

It is among psychologists (rather than philosophers or sociologists) that research during the last quarter-century has re-focused on wisdom as uniting forms of intelligence that are acquired and developed during the lifecourse. This work echoes ancient approaches to practice-oriented forms of wisdom, and has seen thought, feeling, morality and experience as combined in wise discourse and decisions. On this view too, wisdom responds to circumstances non-dogmatically, and embraces far more than intellectual capacity. Nonetheless, it has yet to become fully clear how

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such 'synthesised' modes (Dittman-Kohli 1984) can be described theoretically, how they work in practice, or what effects we should expect them to have.

Erik Erikson's developmental account of the lifecourse pointed to three capacities: for integrating one's life experiences, for confidence in the value of one's own personality, and for accepting death as life's culmination while identifying with humankind as a whole. These he and his co-authors termed 'wisdom' (Erikson, Erikson and Kivnick 1986: 54 *ff.*). The terms they used to describe the 'psychosocial' stages that are traversed during the life-course are explicitly moral. 'Identity' versus 'confusion' offers the possibility of 'fidelity', 'generativity' versus 'self-absorption' offers the possibility of 'care', 'integrity' versus 'despair' offers the possibility of 'wisdom' (1986: 36). Here we find a use of themes that recur in other accounts of wisdom, notably the idea of balance, and that of recurrent struggle between opposites. Like other writers on wisdom, these authors say wise older people 'understand that situations are complex and that many factors have to be weighed and distinguished. Prejudice is maladaptive and presumptuous, for with age one is forced to concede how little one knows' (1986: 288). People who have internalised such knowledge are likely to be older because it takes *time* to work through the experiences necessary to do so; the learning involved is not merely cognitive but requires effort by the entire personality. Wise knowledge, then, contrasts sharply with swiftly applicable technical knowledge. From this conception stems the interest taken by Erikson's colleague, Helen Kivnick (1990), in documenting the music and daily culture of black South Africans: their form of wise knowledge forcefully illustrated this contrast. But these authors, who postulated five developmental stages up to and including adolescence, suggested only three for subsequent life (this is common in psychological models: *cf.* Dittman-Kohli and Baltes 1982). They said little about *how* these later stages can be confronted in ways that enhance wisdom.

Throughout the millennia in which practical wisdom has been discussed, it has been held to combine features such as character, judgement, morality, knowledge of human nature, practical good sense, and breadth of vision (*cf.* Staudinger 2001). These features are emphasised by writers who espouse the 'Berlin paradigm': they see wisdom not as a stage in personal development but as an 'expert system dealing with the meaning and conduct of life' (Baltes and Staudinger 2000: 124; *cf.* Dittman-Kohli 1984).[2] They link the development of wisdom not only with maturity (Dittman-Kohli and Baltes 1990: 74) but also with an 'acknowledgement of and tolerance for value differences', combined with toleration of multiple perspectives in the light of an 'explicit concern with the topic of virtue

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and the common good' (Baltes and Staudinger 2000: 125–6). Based on rich human experience, practical wisdom entails the 'ability to exercise good judgment about important but uncertain matters of life' (Dittman-Kohli and Baltes 1990: 69). It takes different dynamic forms in different cultural settings (*cf.* Labouvie-Vief 1985). Wisdom is 'a key factor in the construction of a "good life"', and supplies 'knowledge and judgment about the essence of the human condition and the ways and means of planning, managing, and understanding a good life' (Staudinger 2001: 16512).

Since activating individuals' potential for wisdom depends not only on time and experience but also on propitious circumstances, such as the support of mentors, wisdom is not ubiquitous. But for the Berlin writers, some compensation may be achieved by co-operation, since 'wisdom is considered to be inherently tied to collective systems of knowledge' (Staudinger and Baltes 1996: 746). Even 'virtual dialogue' can help, that is to picture what another person might say. As in the tradition of Socrates and Aristotle, these authors hold that 'social collaboration, whether internal or external, facilitates wisdom-related performance if, afterwards, persons [have] the time to reflect about the discourse' (Baltes and Staudinger 2000: 130–1). Clearly, we need to know more about processes involved in such social collaboration. How do different individuals' versions of 'good judgement' or 'morality' affect social situations on which they impact, how are they recognised, and what short- and long-term differences do they make?

Other writers perceive wise reasoning as a mixed genre that includes sagacity, judgement, perspicacity, or the ability to use information creatively (Sternberg 1985). Clayton and Birren (1980) are among those who have highlighted the role of emotional abilities such as compassion or empathy, or reflective processes such as intuition. Their approach is supported by Ardelt (1997), who sees the Berlin account as excessively cognitive. For Sternberg, since wisdom is procedural knowledge, we need to examine its preconditions as well as its outcomes. For him, wisdom entails understanding 'what to do in unusually difficult and complex circumstances', and involves exploiting tacit knowledge in practices which balance a variety of interests and environmental contexts (Sternberg 1998: 353). Here also, the role of morality and values is significant, for wisdom is linked to the common good rather than to egocentrism or domination. But conventional academic criteria expressly prohibit combining moral and emotional stances with cognitive analysis, seeing this as bias or lack of impartiality. If the idea of wise thought is to become acceptable, new standards are needed for assessing the synthesised procedures that psychologists describe.

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Since the rehabilitation of the concept of wisdom is in its infancy, it seems premature to treat these models as mutually exclusive. In each, we can perceive different emphases on insights which have recurred since ancient times. But while contemporary psychologists link wisdom to individual personalities, they also contend that it both responds to and affects cultural, moral and political circumstances, effecting change in social settings (Dittman-Kohli 1984: 118). Wise deliberation takes place in the centre of experience, not leaving the deliberator unaffected but blending mental, social, emotional, prudential and moral processes. Yet there has been little exploration of what actually *happens* when people talk or behave wisely. Thus, while the psychological models are significant, they do not exhaustively explain what wisdom is. What the social aspects of wisdom consist of and how they operate remain under-specified. Tracing the presence of wisdom in natural settings can therefore expand our knowledge of what it is and how it works.

Wisdom and older people: conceptual and empirical challenges

The ethnographic collection of instances of wise behaviour entails a number of problems – as will shortly be instanced – but these cases still allow us to explore how wise interventions operate within their social environments: the matching half, so to speak, of the set of features identified by psychologists. Examples given are of *everyday* wisdom: talk or behaviour that combines features highlighted in the models so far discussed, such as acceptance of mortality, tolerance, moral commitment, or sensitivity to context. Cases like this can usefully be taken from rural as well as urban settings. Wisdom in rural contexts may not be unique in function, but it is often *expressed* differently: its communicative rather than strictly linguistic complexity can clarify the *social* processes involved. The instances here are presented in an order intended to help to explore the *meaning* of 'wisdom'. It is suggested that the processes they exhibit centre on activating responses in their social settings, so that 'wisdom' must be understood as a partially social concept.

Wisdom as culmination of the lifecourse

The following excerpt is taken from an account of his life by a man aged in his late seventies who lived in a large village in Austria.[3] He had spent most

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of his life in rural settings and pursuits. Asked what it is to have led a good life, he did not answer directly but replied:

W.S.: I have to say, I am not afraid of dying. … I used always to say, I imagine dying like this. When the time comes for me to die, I'd like to have a fortnight's illness first, then I'd like to have my family round my death-bed. Hanni would be there with them, then I could say goodbye to each of them. I could say something special to each of them. I always used to say I'd be quite glad to be ill for two weeks to do that. … But last year, when I had my heart operation, I changed my mind. Three days of sickness would be quite enough! (laughs) … When there are dozens of tubes all over you, you've lost all your strength and you're really miserable. So I changed my mind – I shortened the period!
Interviewer: Well, I hope it won't happen for a long time.
W.S.: But it's no problem.
Interviewer: Really not?
W.S.: It's not a problem. Really not. I like living, but I feel quite calm about dying. Completely.

This excerpt might at first be taken to illustrate Erikson's interpretation of wisdom. The speaker retains consciousness of his own personality in the face of mortality, and seems to be showing wisdom as he accepts death with humour and realism. But do we know that this is the specific culmination of a sequence of psychological stages in which each was attained by resolving conflicts in the preceding stage? Erikson himself would not have diagnosed such a process without protracted investigation; yet neither does he give a clear account of what such an investigation would entail. This speaker associates a 'good life' with reflecting on *dying*; we might, equally, interpret this within an ancient tradition in which accepting death – *ars moriendi* – was seen as integral to an *ars vitae*, or art of living (Woerner 2000*b*).

This speaker's display of moral and emotional insight is also consonant with an emphasis on these sources of perception by writers like Clayton and Birren (1980). Not every aspect of the conversation can be quoted here (it is a problem in ethnographic reporting that the data invariably exceed the space available for them); but remarks made elsewhere by the same speaker show further characteristics that different psychological models might evaluate differently. He refers to his support for the local church and his leadership in renovating a derelict mountain chapel (for which he received a Vatican acknowledgement); this indicates communal engagement. Yet it does not signify one-sided or uncritical support of a particular worldview. One reason for his appreciation of the chapel is that: 'Even before Christianity, there was a place of pagan worship there'. He is willing to criticise the pre-Reformation Church, describing it as 'terrible': 'Thank God Luther came along'. He speaks highly of the current Catholic Church for its effectiveness in social work: 'To work in a parish,

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to collect money and so on, is definitely meaningful'. Yet he cannot include the Vatican in this approval: 'I'd like to do away with that, it doesn't bear scrutiny'. Does this show the 'relativism' emphasised in the Berlin paradigm? Or is it the 'balance' expounded by Sternberg?

It seems over-hasty to assign such conversations to particular models of wisdom, especially since psychological accounts advert to the influence of social settings without exploring how this influence is exercised and what its results may be. The interviewee referred to in this section is highly conscious of his social environment; he recognises the complexity of environmental, housing and family problems, attributing them not only to individuals' conduct but also to economic structures. 'Capitalism, money – I always say, money ought to stink'. He realises that psychological challenges make it hard to raise children in today's world, but refrains from definitive prescriptions, acknowledging that he too made mistakes as a father. He recognises simplicity as well as complexity, pointing out that 'if we all lived according to the Ten Commandments … we wouldn't need any laws, everything is contained in them'. In a manner recalling current debates on social capital, he said:

> It's very important to live in a society, to be able to live with people who share a common point of view (*Gleichgesinnten*), to have friends. There's nothing better than to have a little group of friends … For that reason I've been in a church choir for so long, since 1937. 1937! (laughs) … It's just such pleasant company.

Such remarks again relate this speaker's wisdom to his participation in community life. His account of his own lifecourse reflects the way in which different social settings encourage particular types of wisdom (Dittman-Kohli and Baltes 1982: 271). He comments that past societies offered alternatives to materialism that are hard for us to access now, whereas today's world has the virtue of paying more attention to ecology. But all societies need the small gestures of everyday to maintain them:

> In society there's no togetherness any longer, no mutual help between people. … Everyone goes their own way. … Everyday in the street, I greet every person I meet. That produces a relationship with them. In former times, it was so self-evident that you should greet everyone. That doesn't exist any more. They often just look at you, but I always greet people and I always get a reply! … [The] human part of life gets lost when people don't do that.

This speaker showed a lively and reflective participation in society. In a wealth of ways he had changed his social setting, from restoring the chapel to enhancing street manners. He welcomed diverse change – in the Church to changes in environmental politics – as long as it was directed towards the common good. But what is *wise* about what he says? The single pronouncements that he made are perhaps not individually

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astonishing. But they achieve their effect on those around him not as pieces of information but as aspects of a life well lived. It may be a combination of this impact *and* its recognition by those affected which make this person wise. If we are to form a better grasp of what wisdom is, such lived and social aspects of wisdom need further investigation.

Proverbs and everyday wisdom

To give greater weight than hitherto to the *effects* of wise interventions, we can examine a second ethnographic case, one for which none of the psychological approaches is really helpful and which, for one to understand, one must turn to more traditional approaches to wisdom. The case is of Tim O'Flaherty, an inhabitant of the West of Ireland village of Spiddal. He was a local rate collector, one who showed forbearance in extracting money from hard-pressed small farmers even though this would have dismayed county officials had they known. He was often used as a matchmaker, which implied much trust in his judgement and estimation of people. (A woman whose parents were married by a matchmaker said of her mother, 'She knew that a man chosen by the Dwyers would be all right … and they were very happy'.)[4] In his later years, Tim hitch-hiked for his own amusement, to meet people and for a change of scene. He would take the first car that stopped, irrespective of its direction – literally 'going with the flow'. His wisdom was attested by people whose judgement was taken seriously. Lord Kilannin, Chairman of the Olympic Games Committee from 1972, lived locally, admired Tim and used to seek him out for the pleasure of his company. A well-known local businessman, when driving with Tim would sometimes stop his car in astonishment, to think about what he had said. He recalled that Tim 'was famous for his vast store of proverbs and the skill he would use to apply them. There was always a perfect fit between what he said and the predicament you were in'.[5]

Formal models cast little direct light on Tim's reputation for wisdom and for using proverbs wisely. Proverbs or maxims, considered more characteristic of oral than written literature (Pfeffer 1997: 1), are still cited with enthusiasm in the Irish and Arabic languages. They are short, pithy insights based on experience and which express shared everyday wisdom. Though ancient forms of wisdom revered maxims, this is now little understood. Insofar as attention is paid to them at all outside theology, it is chiefly in the study of folklore. Maxims may rest upon 'a kind of *sociologic* – a socially developed sense of practical reasoning … expressed in terms that are immediately intelligible' (Goodwin and Wenzel 1981

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[1970]: 140). These are not rules in the sense of straightforward, universal instructions: 'Part of the skill of the wise man is to know when it is time to use which insight' (Beardslee 1981 [1970]: 166). Nonetheless, in contemporary western terms, maxims have come to be thought of as clichés and as stale and trite. It may seem hard to sympathise with a view of wisdom that accords them centre place.

But exploring the social settings in which maxims are used can help us to understand more about how wisdom works. To explicate proverbs, we need to concentrate not on their surface contents but on *what they do* in their communities of use. Tim O'Flaherty's store of proverbs was acquired during a lifetime of hearing them and observing the occasions of their use. Learning to use a proverb seems to have meant experiencing its relation to situations characterised by a particular point: caused, perhaps, by a particular type of mistake and susceptible to a particular type of remedy. Not only would the learner's grasp of key features of relevant situations become honed and refined, but s/he would learn to describe them in terms which *provoked the remedy*: the proverb made people want to apply it. Inter-personal dynamics are also significant, as Tim's son-in-law expressed:

> It was a way of diagnosing a situation and finding just the saying to describe it. The proverb would lay things out for you in a way that made you think about them; think what you would do in the future.[6]

As in the ancient traditions, using proverbs aptly requires the capacities to perceive precisely and humanely what is at issue in a given circumstance and to *activate* this knowledge *for the person or people addressed*. Stressing the role of *shared* knowledge in wisdom does not imply that it is confined to conventional insights. Rather, it shows how a wise person can work with recipients of wisdom in a process of achieving a shared insight.

There are thousands of traditional Irish proverbs, and many are believed to have originated centuries ago (Rosenstock 1999). They are used in discourse that contrasts fundamentally with *individual* utterances that employ *statements of propositions* as central to communication. Conversation in rural Ireland (as in many other rural settings) is often used as an instrument for elaborating and amending local networks; people meeting each other may be expected less to demonstrate their special individuality than to work in terms of what they can establish in common (Edmondson 1998). The consensual basis of these processes should not be exaggerated, for they can allow speakers to convey critical or ironic stances towards common assumptions. But they are uses of language in which plain statement is relatively rare, for every exchange has social, emotional and political uses in addition to its surface meaning. This use of language,

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allusive rather than analytical, poetic rather than abstract, has much in common with the Hebrew tradition described above.

If maxims were used as statements intended to convey information, they would indeed be clichés, but in their living form they are not, for (it is argued here) their *use* is more important than their surface meaning. Activating some aspect of shared knowledge for the use of hearers, a proverb provides a *social* response to a problematic situation. It associates both speaker and hearer with a particular approach to perceiving the world (Edmondson 2000: 73 *ff.*), but may also be used for change: to provoke insights in which people can come together, as in a joke or witticism, or to take shelter, as when in a dilemma. The choice of a particular proverb is not then merely a passive application of known information. Aiding discernment of the type of situation at hand, the proverb can *change the hearer's reaction to it.*

By itself, *Ní hé lá na gaoithe lá na scoilb* [A windy day is no day for thatching], no more than adjures the choice of an appropriate setting for a particular intervention. In its usage, however, it implies that the person in mind is acting without proper reflection and should reconsider. When used wisely, it is a comment on the capacities, resources and personalities of the participants in the situation that corrects, exhorts and advises – in a fashion that pinpoints the nub of what is under way and brings the listener to a fuller evaluation. Proverbs are applied with precision, often with creativity and wit. They form a social resource that is not static but continually developing. Far from the mere application of ready-formed observations, the apt use of maxims challenges participants in a situation to form new perceptions and discern new courses of action or feeling: building on and amending what is already known. Provoking such developments demands a comprehension of human affairs that draws on long experience and plays out some of the processes by which wise responses are evoked.

Unconventional wisdom

We have examined examples of life courses that display types of wisdom anchored in community life. This does not mean that wisdom need be rooted in what is conventionally *approved*. Certain types of suffering or even folly may sometimes be seen as augmenting traits connected with wisdom. The Irish poet Paul Durcan, in a eulogy for his friend Dr Anthony Carroll on his retirement as consultant child psychiatrist in the West of Ireland,[7] described Dr Carroll's exploits as a medical student. These included pretending he was 'poet's secretary' to James Liddy, acting as confidant and

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drinking-companion to Patrick Kavanagh, scattering largesse of all kinds, ready with quixotic forms of generosity – extending to air-fares if necessary – to invigorate down-hearted friends. Durcan's address made clear his admiration for Dr Carroll's wisdom, but without implying that Dr Carroll always acted according to conventional expectations, or that he was always wise. Indeed, the two men's adventures in their youth seem unlikely to have attracted this appellation at the time. Durcan seemed impressed, rather, by an unpredictable form of percipience, a capacity to discard the standard viewpoint to penetrate to the heart of events, in particular by actions enabling *others* to catch a glimpse of what this heart might be. It is not only proverbs, it seems, which denote rather than explicitly convey complex ideas about practice. Again, the ways in which wisdom *impacts upon* people helps to identify it.

Wisdom, ethnography and the life course

Contending that wise interventions need exploration in terms of their impacts on social constellations brings with it methodological challenges. Some psychologists use content-related criteria to 'rate' wise verbal responses to real or hypothesised predicaments, in terms of their 'maturity', 'tolerance of uncertainty', or 'depth'. But from an ethnographic standpoint, the very meanings of these terms require further analysis; it is far from self-evident what interactions they really involve. Meaning is normally not sufficiently invariant to be read off straightforwardly from surface utterances; hermeneutic, context-related interpretation may be needed to trace wisdom and its effects. This demands ethnographic observations of daily life, sometimes over considerable periods, as with the following example in rural Ireland. On the death of an elderly lady, her acquaintances feared that her husband might lapse into excessive drinking. So that this might not happen, almost every day for a couple of years a neighbour went to do small jobs around the house and on the farm, keeping him company in daily rhythms of work. At no time was this conduct or its wisdom expressed in words; it played out behaviourally in the life courses of the people involved, changing them for the better.

Continuing to attend ethnographically to what wise interventions *do* can expand our understanding not only of wisdom in general but specifically of the 'wisdom of old age'. Wisdom is often claimed to increase with age in those capable of developing it, simply because experiences take a long time to be collected and assimilated. But some wise interventions *use* long time perspectives, enabling their recipients to develop larger canvases than those that originally preoccupied them, as in the following account.

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A neighbour was in grief because he had discovered his son had lied to him about a certain matter. He visited Sean, who asked him why he thought this had happened. The concerned man had no answer, and Sean said, 'Did you make your son tell you a lie?' The man in question spoke to Sean's son about a year after Sean died, and he said that Sean took 'a very long time thinking it over again and again' until he realised he had been too strict with his son.[8]

The wisdom of the remark to the neighbour resides in its effect in shifting his perspective. Its impact on a specific time and context makes it wise, rather than the overt meaning of the words employed. Here, the speaker has the patience to allow the *recipient* to determine the time-frame needed for the remark to take effect. This patience derives from understanding that the intervention will have little impact if it is forcibly imposed, an insight that develops during a speaker's life.

When wise principles are perceived by onlookers specifically in connection with a person's lifetime, the effect on recipients can be striking. Wisdom attributed to people in older age has strong rhetorical effect: it illustrates how they have chosen to live their lives. This becomes clearest at funerals, when people remember acts or sayings by the individual who has died, viewing them in the light of the life concerned. They are treated not as isolated instances but as principles of action, as the following exemplifies:[9]

Joe had asked me to write a review of one particular work, in which I included some sarcastic remarks about books of the coffee-table variety. My review came back to me scored with red and those remarks were deleted. In the margin Joe had written, *In omnibus caritas*, charity in everything.[10]

The wisdom of the original admonition is magnified in its new setting (a congregation that included many academics, some of whom may similarly have lacked charity on occasion). What may originally have been a fleeting observation is set in a new perspective by its quotation, where its *effect* is to sensitise hearers to the principles that governed the construction of the life of the person being spoken about.[11] In extreme form, such sensitisation amounts to moral conversion.

The cases here show that ethnographic methods allow us not only to identify the *attributes* of wise people – patience or moral insight – but to trace the social processes in which they are practised. Expanding our knowledge of the contexts and effects of their use expands our understanding of what such terms mean. Ethnographic methods are demanding, particularly of time; but quicker approaches may fail to detect what wisdom *does* in its settings. Ethnographic observation traces the *extent* of wise interventions, which are not confined to discrete sayings or judgements themselves. Their social, ethical and emotional components give them an inter-personal mode of existence that extends over time and

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space, in ways that still need to be completely charted. Hence the reluctance of Socrates to be termed wise: he could not be wise *alone*.

Because of the relations between wisdom and its overall settings, ethnographic wisdom research must also recognise large-scale socio-political features. Public policies may promote wisdom or hinder it (*cf.* Baltes and Dittman-Kohli 1982). As Erikson, Erikson and Kivnick noted (1986: 327), older people often struggle to retain even basic resources for survival, quite apart from their wise capacities. Social environments can foster wisdom or discourage it in other senses too. If instrumentalist, consumerist or bureaucratic forms of rationality become dominant rationales for social world-views (*cf.* Lerner 1996; Keat 2000), the idea that a life should in any way *make sense* becomes attenuated. And it is because of its power to help a life become meaningful, both for the wise and for others, that wisdom seems to be important. When we fail to encourage this, we deprive older people and ourselves. An older person in the West of Ireland remarked, 'A friend of mine, about my age, jokes to me: "As we get older, we grow in wisdom. But there doesn't seem to be much call for it!"'

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NOTES

1 St Paul's famous contrast of Christian folly with Greek wisdom was made when Greek thought had returned to veneration of the Sage – seen as someone whose perfections enabled him infallibly to comprehend both the human and the divine. This Sage invited imitation on the basis of his permanent competence to think and do the right thing. Paul castigated this particular ideal of wisdom as folly. In the Pauline version, human beings can participate in divine wisdom by acting according to God's will and by following his intentions for their salvation. A full account of wisdom traditions would give more space to subsequent Christian developments than can be accorded here.

2 Researchers who follow the Berlin paradigm try to measure wisdom by testing respondents' reactions to imagined predicaments: the 'better' they weigh up a variety of considerations in the spirit of criteria like these, the more expert they are judged to be. Randall and Kenyon (2001) among others have objected to such methods as inadequate to the complexity of the phenomenon (see also Dittman-Kohli 1984: 116, 122).

3 From an interview in October 2002 (translation by the author). Herr Schwaiger preferred his own name to be used here, as did Tim O'Flaherty's relations (see next section). Other individuals are referred to by pseudonyms if they preferred.

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4 Fieldnotes, Ennistymon, County Clare, 22 August 2003. The author has lived in or near Connemara, County Galway, for 15 years, and has carried out regular fieldwork during the same period in the North Tyrol, Austria, Bavaria and Berlin.
5 Fieldnotes, Spiddal, County Galway, 8 September 2003.
6 Fieldnotes, Spiddal, 23 June 2003.
7 Fieldnotes, The Ardilaun Hotel, Galway, 1 November 2002.
8 Recollections in November 2003 concerning an Irishman in Mayo. My thanks to Elaine McCaffrey for this example.
9 What is said about people after their death was traditionally taken seriously in Ireland. Crozier (1989) suggested that someone's memorial was constituted by what was said about that person at the end of their life.
10 Notes from funeral eulogy, Galway 2003.
11 This instance does not imply that wisdom generally adjures quietism. Woodward (2003) opposed the ageist misuse of the idea of wisdom, one which prohibits indignation with the predicaments forced on older people. But the perennial links that have been posited between a proper understanding of wisdom and the common good should rule this out. Wisdom entails appropriate feeling, even if this feeling is one of anger where social injustice is concerned.

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