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COMMENTARY

Making room for wisdom

Wisdom is a hallowed concept for philosophy and religion, but not for science. Traditionally, there have been few attempts to integrate the construct of wisdom into basic or applied research. However, a growing area of research suggests that wisdom can not only be objectively defined and measured, but also that the development of wisdom is an important aspect of mental health (Grossmann *et al.*, 2020; Jeste and Lee, 2019). Indeed, there are now several reliable and valid scales that can be used to measure wisdom (Glück *et al.*, 2013). These scales are being used for a variety of purposes, but especially in research on healthy aging as well as positive psychology and positive psychiatry (e.g. Jeste *et al.*, 2020).

Despite this, measures of wisdom are rarely included in large cross-sectional and longitudinal studies. One issue with these scales is that they tend to be lengthy. Most measures of wisdom include several dozen items (e.g. Ardelt, 2003; Thomas *et al.*, 2019; Webster, 2003). Moreover, the items can be hard for participants to rate because they probe general patterns of thought and behavior rather than current experiences or mental health symptoms. Often, a wisdom measure will require 10 or more minutes of survey time. While 10 minutes may not seem like a long period of time, large-scale cross-sectional and longitudinal studies often try to pack in as many outcome measures as possible. In the space of 10 minutes, an investigator might be able to alternatively collect 10 short measures health outcomes. Thus, there is little question that shorter measures of wisdom would be valuable.

Creating a shorter measure of wisdom is the aim of the paper, "An Evaluation of the Factor Structure of the Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale (SAWS) and the Creation of the SAWS-15 as a Short Measure for Personal Wisdom" by Leeman and colleagues (2022). The SAWS was developed to measure five dimensions of wisdom: Reminiscence/Reflection, Humor, Emotional Regulation, Critical Life Experiences, and Openness (Webster, 2003). The original 30-item measure was expanded to 40 items, and it has since been used and validated in a number of studies. In this paper, the authors reduce the 40-item SAWS to a shorter 15-item scale (i.e. the SAWS-15).

However, reducing the length of any psychological scale is no simple task. This is especially true of multidimensional measures. Psychological measures are expected to show "structural validity". That is, their items should relate to specific latent factors—the subdimensions of wisdom in this case—and a statistical model of these associations (i.e. the measurement model) should adequately fit the data (McDonald, 1999). Typically, structural validity is examined using a technique called factor analysis. In this paper, Leeman and colleagues used both exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis and ultimately find that the proposed five-factor model did not adequately fit their data. This is a key finding, because it suggests that interpretations of SAWS data based on the original proposed five dimensions of wisdom may be invalid. However, the reasons for poor model fit are complex. Whether there is a problem with the theorized model, specific items, or a peculiarity with the sample is not something that is easily determined. Nonetheless, the authors use this finding as further motivation to develop their shortened scale. Specifically, they strategically select a new subset of 15 SAWS items that are consistent with the proposed five-factor model of wisdom. Thus, the SAWS-15 not only reduces assessment time but also provides greater measurement validity.

Despite strong efforts by the authors to develop and validate a brief measure of wisdom, questions remain about the SAWS and other measures of wisdom. As noted by the authors, this work is based on samples of mostly White participants. Whether definitions and measures of wisdom are generally applicable to other ethnic, racial, and cultural groups is questionable. Certainly, more work is needed on the topic. Additionally, while the so-called nomothetic span of the SAWS and other wisdom measures has been well established, their construct representation has not. Nomothetic span refers to significant relations among measures of the same or different constructs (Strauss & Smith, 2009). For example, the finding that SAWS scores relate to health outcomes and other measures of wisdom supports the nomothetic span of the measure. It seems likely that the shorted SAWS, the SAWS-15, will have a nomothetic span that is similar to the original scale. Construct representation, on the other hand, refers to validation of the theory that underlies responding (Whitely, 1983). In other words, construct representation asks whether the SAWS actually measures wisdom, or some different

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construct or set of cognitive processes that have a similar nomothetic span. The construct representation question has not been adequately addressed for the SAWS or any other measure of wisdom (Grossmann *et al.*, 2020). Thus, the question of whether these tools truly measure wisdom will likely persist, even as new or shortened versions of wisdom measures become increasingly available.

Despite lingering concerns about the broader science of wisdom measurement, these concerns are not unique to this field. Indeed, validation of all psychological constructs is complicated by the fact that they are intangible. Ultimately, more empirical research is needed to better understand the significance and meaning of wisdom measures. This article by Leeman and colleagues will no doubt make empirical research easier to come by. The shortened version of the SAWS is not only more manageable for participants when included in a larger battery of assessments, but it also shows better validity in terms of measuring the proposed five factors of wisdom. This is an important step in the direction of developing better tools for measuring wisdom and its underlying factors.

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