STORIES OF WISDOM:
A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES OF
RELATIVELY WISE AND UNWISE INDIVIDUALS

Master of Arts (2011)
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Abstract

The scientific study of wisdom is a contentious field. There is little agreement among
dominant research programs concerning how to conceptualize and measure the elusive
phenomenon of wisdom. The current study argues for a narrative analysis of this
concept given that autobiographical stories offer a contextually rich vista into real-life
manifestations of wisdom. Presented here is a qualitative investigation of
autobiographical wisdom narratives from 8 individuals distributed across parameters of
age, gender, and degree of wisdom. Results point to the possibility that relatively wise
persons define wisdom more elaborately, participate in more sophisticated
autobiographical reasoning processes, and engage with master narratives in a more
evaluative and critical manner than relatively unwise individuals. These features did not
appear to differ across levels of age and gender. This study validates a narrative
approach to the science of wisdom, and suggests that stories may be central to advancing
our understanding of this concept.
Acknowledgements

Since the inception of this project, I have grown both intellectually and personally by diving deeper and deeper into this phenomenon we call wisdom. One of the pearls of wisdom that I have surfaced with concerns the importance of relationships in living “the good life”. To this end, I offer my sincere gratitude to all of the individuals who supported me whilst working on this thesis. This includes friends, family, and in particular, my partner, Alvi.

I offer special thanks to Dr. Michel Ferrari, my thesis supervisor, whose guidance, patience, and wisdom has been a true asset on this journey. I am lucky to be associated with, in my opinion, one of the “great thinkers” of our time. I also offer thanks to Dr. Kate McLean, my undergraduate research supervisor, who directed me to the exciting world of narrative psychology. Thanks, Kate, for helping me to find my home.
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CHAPTER 1

The Problem with the Science of Wisdom Today

When asked, virtually everyone will offer a general definition of wisdom, or claim they can recognize it when presented to them in a real-life context. Despite the facility with which people can sense wisdom, attempts at studying it empirically have been ridden with challenge and disagreement. While researchers tend to agree that wisdom is a multi-dimensional construct that serves an integrative purpose for individuals, empirically speaking it remains an elusive concept, and despite its inception into contemporary scientific inquiry 30 years ago by Clayton and Birren (1980), there has been very little agreement among the various wisdom paradigms in terms of a unified empirical definition of wisdom and a procedure through which one should measure it.

Wisdom itself is an ancient concept, which has received dynamic treatment across history in terms of what it is, who has the authority to study it, and how it should be measured (see Assmann, 1994; Birren & Svensson, 2005; Kekes, 1983; Osbeck & Robinson, 2005; Staudinger & Glück, 2011). From this it is clear that the debate over wisdom is not a new one. But, why has wisdom persevered as an object of curiosity, while many other phenomena have fallen to the wayside of scientific interest? It might be because wisdom is often seen as the ultimate resource that humans have available to them to positively transform their lives. Not only can wisdom be thought of as a road map or a guide to living the good life, but it also may hold the key to solving life’s difficult problems. Wisdom is the keeper of life’s secrets and life’s lessons. The question now remains, who can access wisdom and how?
The character of the “old wise man” or “sage” represents a master narrative of wisdom in many cultures (e.g., Confucius, Socrates, Merlin, King Solomon). This canonical image suggests that the attainment of wisdom is rare, and implies that this special capacity is arrived at only after considerable time has passed and one has had the opportunity to learn from many, sometimes tumultuous, life experiences. These notions lead to the assumption that wisdom comes with age. This viewpoint is consistent with dominant theories in developmental literature, such as the Eriksonian belief that successful development culminates in the acquisition of wisdom in late life (Erikson, 1963). It seems that the quantitative literature available to us would agree that wisdom is indeed rare, even among older adults (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Jordan, 2005; Staudinger, 1999). Yet, research on wisdom has not confirmed the older and wiser hypothesis. Perhaps surprising to some, wisdom does not seem to increase with age after young adulthood (see Sternberg, 2005 for a review) and, in general, gender does not appear to be a parameter across which it differs (e.g., Le, 2008; Levenson, Jennings, Aldwin, & Shiraishi, 2005; Kunzmann & Baltes, 2003; Takahashi & Overton, 2002; Wink & Dillon, 2003; Webster, 2007).

These findings, however, are obscured by conceptual and methodological inconsistencies. Furthermore, an emphasis on the testing of abstract models of wisdom in the pursuit of grand claims loses sight of some of the more nuanced dimensions across which wisdom may very well differ. Such limitations pave the way for qualitative approaches to its study.

In order to situate the current study in a diverse landscape of approaches to the science of wisdom, in the following section I will briefly review major trends in its
Dominant Approaches to the Science of Wisdom

Contemporary research programs tend to take either the position that wisdom is a general or personal phenomenon (see Mickler & Staudinger, 2008; Staudinger & Glück, 2011). From the general wisdom perspective, wisdom is taken to be a quality that can be abstracted from the experience of persons, and defined in universal terms. That is, wisdom exists independently as a special body of knowledge, which can only be accessed by people who possess the cognitive capacity. Whereas the general approach posits humans as imperfect approximations of wisdom, personal wisdom researchers hold the position that wisdom only becomes such when it is embodied by people. That is, people transform knowledge into wisdom. In this section I will review two dominant research programs falling into each of the general and personal approaches to wisdom. I venture to summarize the guiding ideas and assumptions underlying each of the chosen models, and synthesize the major findings in terms of gender and age, primarily.

General Wisdom

Wisdom as expertise in the fundamental pragmatics of life. Baltes and his colleagues (e.g., Smith & Baltes, 1990; Baltes & Smith, 2008) at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin have pioneered what is perhaps the most prolific research program on wisdom, which is referred to as the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm. Researchers following this tradition have conceptualized wisdom as an expert knowledge system about fundamental life matters. That is, those persons who are labeled wise are
assumed to have expert knowledge in the domain of “life”. Fundamental life pragmatics includes life planning, life management, and life review. Expertise has been defined by Baltes and colleagues in the cognitive-science sense, and is measured by the presence of five wisdom criteria. Rich factual knowledge and procedural knowledge are basic criteria for expertise and serve a foundational role in this definition. The remaining criteria include understandings of life-span contextualization, value relativism, and the ability to recognize and manage uncertainty. These final three are considered meta-level wisdom criteria. Together, these five criteria are commonly referred to as “wisdom-related knowledge”.

This model also describes various antecedent factors for the acquisition of wisdom. First, general person factors play a role in the development of wisdom. Examples of person factors are one’s cognitive mechanics, mental health, and openness to experience. Second, expertise-specific factors are thought to contribute to one’s capacity for wisdom. In this vein, factors such as organized tutelage, mentorship in dealing with life’s problems, and motivational dispositions are named. Finally, there are certain facilitative experiential contexts that lend themselves to wisdom. These pertain to age, education, or historical period. Exploring these various antecedent conditions has been one component of the Berlin research program.

Baltes and colleagues see their paradigm as moving from research on the semantic meaning of wisdom and lay-theories about the attributes of wise persons, to an empirical investigation of wise judgment as a cognitive-behavioural phenomenon. In other words, their main goal has been to bring wisdom into the laboratory and subject it to the rigor of empiricism. Through empirical analysis they make the distinction between the
philosophical and practical aspects of wisdom, positioning themselves in favour of practical wisdom.

In terms of operationalizing wisdom, the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm analyzes “think-aloud” responses to hypothetical life planning, life management, and life review tasks (e.g., One is consulted by a 15-year-old girl who wants to get married right away. What could one consider and do? What advice could be given?). This is an adaptation of typical planning tasks used in the cognitive literature. The unit of analysis is the transcribed verbal response to the hypothetical scenario, which takes the form of advice to fictitious persons. These responses are then scored by trained raters on a 7-point scale for each of the five wisdom criteria. A response is considered wise when it receives a score of 5 to 7 on all of the criteria. In this framework, participants are not asked about their own life plans and decisions, rather the researcher’s interest is in the participant’s general knowledge in the domain of fundamental life pragmatics. This standardized task enables researchers to easily compare responses from different individuals and groups.

In general, researchers following this procedure have found no gender differences in wisdom-related knowledge (Smith & Baltes, 1990; Kunzmann & Baltes, 2003). Additionally, wisdom-related knowledge does not seem to differ as a function of age (Smith & Baltes, 1990; Staudinger, Smith, & Baltes, 1992). According this Paradigm, wisdom-related knowledge increases across the adolescent years and plateaus in young adulthood (Pasupathi, Staudinger, & Baltes, 2001).

Personal Wisdom

Clayton and Birren (1980) who suggested that wisdom is found in multiple person-related levels such as an individual’s actions, judgments, values, and personality characteristics. That is, wisdom is assumed to reside in what a person is, rather than what a person knows. Building on this assumption, Ardelt proposed a model that views wisdom as the integration of three personality characteristics, which are represented by cognitive, affective, and reflective dimensions. The cognitive dimension reflects an individual’s desire to know the truth and attain a deeper understanding of life, particularly with regard to intrapersonal and interpersonal matters. One who is high in the cognitive dimension of wisdom accepts the positive and negative aspects of human nature, accepts the unpredictability and uncertainty of life, and recognizes the inherent limits of one’s knowledge. The affective dimension consists of a person’s sympathetic and compassionate love for others. One who is high on the affective dimension of wisdom makes an effort to direct positive emotions and behaviours towards others. Finally, the reflective dimension represents self-examination, self-awareness, self-insight, and the ability to look at phenomena and events from different perspectives. This encompasses an objective perspective on one’s life situation and the absence of projections. A summary table of these dimensions, including examples of how they are operationalized can be found in Ardelt (2005) and (2009).

In summary, Ardelt proposes that the simultaneous presence of cognitive, reflective, and affective personality characteristics are necessary and sufficient for a person to be considered wise. According to Ardelt (2004b), this definition represents an “ideal type” of wisdom in the Weberian sense (Weber, 1980), and can be measured by “concrete empirical exemplars of this concept” (Ardelt, 2004a, p. 204).
On the note of measurement, Ardelt (2003) has operationalized her model with a self-report questionnaire called the 3-Dimensional Wisdom Scale (3D-WS). In an older adult sample, Ardelt (2003) empirically established that the scale possesses predictive, convergent, and discriminant validity, as well as test-retest reliability. Recently, she also validated its use with a younger adult sample (Ardelt, 2010). Positive correlates of the 3D-WS include general well-being, mastery, purpose in life, and subjective health. On the other hand, negative correlates involve depressive symptoms, feelings of economic pressure, death avoidance, and fear of death.

In terms of main findings, Ardelt (2010) has found that there are no age differences on her overall wisdom scale (3D-WS), across younger and older cohorts. Age differences did emerge on the overall wisdom scale and subscales, however, when education was included as a variable (older adults with a college education, older adults without a college education). Similarly, Ardelt (2009) has found that there are no gender differences on her overall wisdom scale (3D-WS), as well as no age by gender interactions. On the subscales however, gender differences were found (Ardelt, 2009). In terms of the cognitive dimension there was an interaction effect for age and gender. Older males tended to score higher than older women, yet there was no significant gender difference in cognitive wisdom among the younger cohort. On the affective dimension of wisdom, women scored significantly higher than men in both the younger and older samples. Ardelt investigated whether or not these findings were reproduced across levels of high and low wisdom. The same pattern of gender differences persisted on the cognitive and affective dimensions for low wisdom scorers, but not for high wisdom scorers. This finding suggests that wise individuals have integrated both feminine
(affective) and masculine (cognitive) dimensions of wisdom. The subscale findings corroborate the idea that “gender-specific socialization practices, obstacles, and opportunities throughout the life course” restrict the area of wisdom in which one develops (Ardelt, 2009, p. 9).

In summary, there appears to be no main effects or interactions for age and gender on Ardelt’s overall wisdom scale. Differences emerge at the level of subscales, and when other factors are included, such as education level, but because Ardelt defines wisdom as the integration of the three personality characteristics, and not as a high score on one dimension, the interpretation that wisdom does not differ across age and gender persists.

**Criticisms of these Approaches**

As reviewed above, dominant paradigms for the measurement of wisdom have largely been based on coded responses to hypothetical scenarios pulling for expert advice (e.g., Baltes), and psychometric scales assessing wisdom as an aspect of mature personality (e.g., Ardelt). These methods have been favoured because of the standardization and control properties they offer (Glück, Bluck, Baron, & McAdams, 2005). Although each method has its strengths, one unifying limitation to these approaches is the abstraction of wisdom from real-life contexts. As proposed by Glück et al. (2005), wisdom is “not just knowledge of the human condition but the ability to interpret it in human context” (p. 198). These approaches to the study of wisdom do not address wisdom within the confines of real-life or personally relevant events, and therefore lack the contextual richness and significance that wisdom holds for individual lives.
With specific reference to the tasks used by the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm, it is expected that real-life problems differ from hypothetical dilemmas in many important ways. Yang (2008b) points to four reasons why we might expect wisdom to differ when examined from the real-life and hypothetical perspectives, and ultimately argues that real-life problems provide a superior access point to the study of wisdom, at least as lived by individuals.

• First, real-life problems that give rise to wisdom are inclusive of one’s personal goals and desired outcomes in life. Decisions made in such dilemmas are always done so in light of one’s goals. Hypothetical scenarios may be entirely irrelevant to an individual’s purpose in life, making it difficult for them to apply any wisdom they may possess.

• Second, real-life problems are emotion and value-laden. It may be easy for one to give wise advice in an objective and abstracted situation based on faculties of rationale thought, but in real-life one may not be able to follow this advice or might choose instead to give or follow alternative advice, given the contextual factors that make real-life situations emotional.

• Third, real-life situations are ill-structured and poorly defined. It might be clear what wisdom is needed in a well laid out hypothetical scenario, but real-life is inevitably messier than this. What one may confidently suggest in a clear-cut hypothetical scenario may take a very different form when one considers the inherent uncertainties of real-life.
• Finally, the timescale of hypothetical and real-life problems may differ. In real-life, wisdom isn’t always called upon episodically. Longer-term considerations might impact the wisdom needed in real-life.

In summarizing the critique of the hypothetical approach to wisdom, suffice it to say that, “[Wisdom] is more about what we did do than what we would do.” (Randall & Kenyon, 2001, p. 22).

Subscribing to one of the dominant approaches to wisdom not only disables one from accessing a contextually rich account of it, but it can also lead to a distorted view of wisdom. Referring to Ardelt’s 3D-WS, Randall and Kenyon (2001) take the position that, “Laboratory assessments of this type lack real-life expressions of wisdom… This is a stereotypical face of wisdom, which may be wisdom but could also be deception–of self and/or other–or ego inflation.” (p. 23). One is certainly limited in the degree to which they can self-enhance when they are required to support their claims with a detailed story, for example. Thus, decontextualized approaches might also lead to a less authentic representation of wisdom.

In conclusion, it appears that dominant approaches to studying general, and perhaps more surprisingly, personal wisdom, equally suffer from similar limitations. It is argued next that approaching wisdom from a narrative perspective offers a superior method of analysis, particularly for the examination of personal wisdom.
CHAPTER 2

The Narrative Turn in Wisdom Research

As a critical reaction to the aforementioned issues with dominant practices in wisdom research, a small group of researchers have turned to narrative as a viable way to measure the subtleties of lived wisdom, preserving its contextual richness and personal relevance. The narrative turn in wisdom research was led by Randall and Kenyon (2001) in their book *Ordinary Wisdom: Biographical Aging and the Journey of Life* (see also Randall & Kenyon, 2004). Despite having successfully presented a provocative model of wisdom, Randall and Kenyon (2001) failed to study this issue empirically. Soon thereafter others began to fill this void with research (e.g., Ardelt, 2005, 2008, 2010; Bluck & Glück, 2004; Glück, Bluck, Baron, & McAdams, 2005; Montgomery, Barber, & McKee, 2002; Yang, 2008a, 2008b), which I will review shortly.

The focus here is on *autobiographical narratives*, or stories, of personally important events involving wisdom. An autobiographical narrative is taken to be distinct from autobiographical memory, although there is a relationship between the two. Autobiographical memories, or accounts of the personal past, are transformed into a narrative when recounted to important others, and the outcome of this process is a meaningful story that situates an individual in a landscape of people, places, and events vis-à-vis the goals one has in telling the narrative (Fivush, 2010).

While narratives help us to organize our past experiences, they are not simply a chronicle or script of remembered events. In one’s narrative, a network of causal linkages and connections are established between the self and the events on which the narrative is built. What an autobiographical narrative offers then is a rich *explanatory and evaluative*
framework through which we come to understand our self (Fivush, 2010). In other words, narratives are powerful sense-making structures (Baumeister & Newman, 1994). Thus, the process of creating an autobiographical narrative renders one’s experience meaningful to them, as well as to others.

In the following section I will first review some general psychological perspectives on narrative. I will then move on to further articulate how wisdom research can benefit from the inclusion of autobiographical narrative from both a theoretical and methodological perspective.

**General Psychological Perspectives on Narrative**

In the following quote, Randall and Kenyon (2001) quite poetically articulate the importance of stories to humankind: “[Story is] to you and me as water is to fish. We breathe it with each breath, think it with each thought, believe it with each belief. We live by story and in story, and story lives in us.” (p. 38). Given the ubiquity and importance of stories, it is not surprising that recently there has been a great deal of theoretical and empirical work dedicated to the idea that we are the stories we tell (e.g., Bruner, 1987, 1991; Cohler, 1982; McAdams, 1996, 2001; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007; Ricoeur, 1991). That is, in telling our life story we actively construct and embody our personal identity. The “life story” itself is a selective sequence of autobiographical narratives that, functionally speaking, provide us with a sense of self-understanding and coherence (see McAdams, 2001). On a structural level, one may think of the life story as an internal story-like mental representation that we carry with us from situation to situation bringing us a sense of personal unity through time.
Ontogenetically speaking, Pasupathi and Mansour (2006) claim that, “The development of the self consists of the integration of autobiographical experiences into a coherent life story” (p. 798). From a process perspective then, in storying one’s self, one is actually participating in an integrative process whereby he or she brings coherence to his or her life. Importantly, narrative coherence is positively related to psychological well-being (Baerger & McAdams, 1999), and thus might be necessary for living a good life.

Studying the development of the life story and the various integrative processes that lead to it has been a central focus of narrative identity research. One mechanism through which the life story is created and maintained is autobiographical reasoning (see Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Habermas and Bluck (2000) define autobiographical reasoning as a “process of self-reflective thinking or talking about the personal past that involves forming links between elements of one’s life and the self in an attempt to relate one’s personal past and present” (p. 749). They have pointed to four specific outcomes of successful autobiographical reasoning processes: Temporal coherence, the cultural concept of biography, thematic coherence, and causal or explanatory coherence. I will revisit these processes in more detail in a later section of this paper, as they will form a central role in the qualitative analysis presented here.

Following a life-span developmental perspective, there have been a few studies that have looked at autobiographical reasoning across age cohorts. In a study on narratives of turning points and crises, Pasupathi and Mansour (2006) observed that older adult participants were more likely to show autobiographical reasoning by connecting experiences to their sense of self (i.e., causal coherence). In a study of heterogeneous
autobiographical experiences, linear increases in autobiographical reasoning with age were also observed (Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006). Other studies, however, have not corroborated the relationship between age and autobiographical reasoning, at least in the context of self-defining memories. For instance, in a study of younger and older adults, McLean (2008) observed that age cohorts did not differ in terms of reflective processing and causal coherence. Older adults were, however, more likely to demonstrate thematic coherence (McLean, 2008). In a study of life reflection, Staudinger (2001) found that a sample of wisdom nominees (41-80 years) and two comparison groups of younger (25-35 years) and older adults (60-85 years) did not differ in their degree of reflective processing. Wisdom nominees, however, did differ in terms of the functions of reflection. Wise individuals more often used reflection as an evaluative process, as opposed to simple reminiscing. One question explored in the current qualitative analysis is the degree to which increases in successful autobiographical reasoning (e.g., thematic coherence, causal coherence, reflective processing, etc.) are a function of wisdom, in addition to age and gender.

Improving the Science of Wisdom Through Narrative

I started by identifying a number of shortcomings with current approaches to the science of wisdom, namely the abstraction of wisdom from personally meaningful contexts. I have also suggested that taking a narrative approach to studying wisdom would be an advantageous alternative. After having just established some general principles of narrative, I will now elaborate on the utility of stories within the specific parameters of wisdom research.
Randall and Kenyon (2001) take as their primary thesis the idea that wisdom inhabits the life story. Further, they propose that we can only access our own wisdom by telling our life story. In telling our life story we can then step back from it to investigate and interpret it—to “read” it, so to speak. Reading our life story is a reflective process, whereby we make connections between our experiences and our self, and learn lessons along the way. From here, we glean the wisdom of our lives. These statements are enticing, albeit general. To substantiate this argument further, I will turn to a few specific examples of how narrative can extend the study of wisdom.

**Narratives are contextual.** Put succinctly, “The various aspects of wisdom must apply to real people in real situations in real time.” (Birren & Fisher, 1990, p. 31). Abstraction has been a theme in my critique of the dominant approaches to wisdom. Personal wisdom narratives, on the other hand, are stories about the self that describe an experience of wisdom in a real-life context. An autobiographical approach is inclusive of wisdom’s context-dependent nature, given that for stories to be understandable they are always told with explicit contextual factors in mind, such as setting, characters, place, and time. Therefore, studying wisdom autobiographically in real-life contexts will create a more ecologically valid measure of this construct.

**Narratives are cultural and historical.** Extending on the idea of context with a more macro perspective in mind, personal narratives are also necessarily embedded within a particular cultural-historical moment, and thus reflect cultural understandings of the concept of wisdom as well. As Randall and Kenyon put it (2001), “Our personal stories—and thus the wisdom they embody—are invariably shaped by the various larger stories we live our lives within.” (p. 35). Narratives cultivate a deeper understanding of
the personal and cultural elements that jointly constitute wisdom. We will revisit the person-culture interface of wisdom when we discuss master narrative engagement in a subsequent section, which in addition to autobiographical reasoning processes will also be a focus of the current qualitative analysis.

**Narratives are complex and integrative.** An autobiographical approach to wisdom is also consistent with the idea that wisdom involves more than cognition (Ardelt, 1997; Clayton & Birren, 1980; Glück et al., 2005; Sternberg, 1998). In addition to cognition, autobiographical stories also involve affective, reflective, and conative elements. Thus, autobiographical narratives effectively integrate various definitions of wisdom in the extant literature.

**Narratives involve life reflection.** Returning to the opening quote of this section by Randall and Kenyon (2001), “reading” our life story for the purposes of making meaning or gaining insight is a fundamental way through which we access wisdom. The common denominator here is reflection. Constructing a narrative and thereby engaging in autobiographical reasoning processes requires a degree of self-reflection (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). By participating in a reflective process, where one is able to forge connections between self and events, one is able to gain insights about oneself and learn lessons about life in general. As Staudinger (2001) puts it, as opposed to reminiscing, life reflection is one part remembering and one part further analysis. Because wisdom involves learning lessons from life and applying these to future situations, reflective processing is necessary if we are to benefit from wisdom in the pursuit of a better life. The ideal way to study reflective processing is through an analysis of autobiographical
narratives, which will lead to a clearer understanding of the transformative power of wisdom.

In summary, wisdom narratives are personally meaningful units that create a vista into how wisdom manifests in daily life. They are illustrative of how one meaningfully experiences wisdom in relation to the self. Further, if it is true that wisdom resides in what a person is (Ardelt, 2004), and if persons, especially personal identities, are narrative constructions (Bruner, 1991; McAdams, 2001; Ricoeur, 1991), then it is logical that we turn to the study of narratives to gain a deeper understanding of this concept. To demonstrate these claims, I will now turn to four examples depicting how autobiographical narratives have been used in empirical studies to generate a rich and multifaceted understanding of wisdom.

**Empirical Wisdom Studies Using Narrative**

Although not dominant, narrative analyses have not been absent from wisdom research. In terms of narrative studies, Susan Bluck, Judith Glück, and colleagues (e.g., Bluck & Glück, 2004; Glück et al., 2005), Shih-Ying Yang (e.g., 2008a, 2008b), Anita Montgomery, Clifton Barber, and Patrick McKee (2002), and Monika Ardelt (2005, 2008, 2010) have all undertaken respectable research programs that have privileged the role of narratives.

**The Wisdom of Experience Paradigm**

In two studies, Bluck, Glück and colleagues (Bluck & Glück, 2004; Glück et al., 2005), have proposed and tested what they refer to as the “wisdom of experience”
paradigm, which emphasizes the importance of autobiographical memory in understanding one’s implicit theory of wisdom.

In 2004, Bluck and Glück first proposed their wisdom of experience approach. At the most basic level, the researchers sought to examine whether ordinary people have some sense of themselves as being wise in thought or action, and to investigate the degree to which this self-understanding is integrated into the life story through autobiographical reasoning processes. These processes are explored by asking each participant to recall experiences in his or her life where he or she said, thought, or did something wise (what Bluck and Glück refer to as “wisdom-related events”). Adhering to a life-span developmental perspective, these responses were then descriptively analyzed for similarities and differences across three age groups (15 to 20, 30 to 40, and 60 to 70 years). Although, as reviewed above, quantitative studies do not indicate robust age differences in explicit wisdom, Bluck and Glück take the position that age may still be an interesting parameter to study wisdom through a qualitative methodology, where each participant is allowed to subjectively define wisdom experienced in his or her life (i.e., using his or her implicit theory to drive the memory search).

The first objective of Bluck and Glück’s (2004) study was to validate the wisdom of experience paradigm. Bluck and Glück believed that a wisdom of experience approach would be valid if (1) participants were able to list one or more wisdom-related events in their lives, (2) the majority of these events were related to fundamental life situations, and (3) the types of events recalled were consistent with other models of wisdom. Specifically, they expected that the eliciting event be a negative or challenging one, and the outcome positive, much like McAdam’s redemptive story sequence
(McAdams, 2006; McAdams et al., 2001). In this way, wisdom should be used as a resource in a person’s life to transform negative situations into positive ones, regardless of age. Thus, wisdom is viewed as a coping strategy (e.g., Ardelt, 2005) or life management resource (e.g., Smith & Baltes, 1990).

The second dimension of this study concerned the relationship between wisdom-related events and the life story. According Bluck and Glück, wisdom-related events should not exist in isolation; rather, they should be integrated into the life story, given that integrating events of this nature is likely to be self-enhancing. Consistent with other narrative theorists, this integration is believed to happen through autobiographical reasoning processes (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Specifically, they identify temporal and causal coherence as indicators of such integration. Bluck and Glück hypothesized that because the capacity for coherence emerges across late childhood and adolescence (see Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Habermas & Paha, 2001; McAdams, 2001), there would be less evidence of temporal and causal coherence in adolescent autobiographical narratives when compared to young and older adults.

Finally, in addition to examining connections between wisdom-related events and life story, made possible through autobiographical reasoning, Bluck and Glück were also interested in whether or not individuals learn a life lesson from experiences of wisdom, and carry this lesson forward with them to subsequent life events (i.e., positive transformation). Bluck and Glück hypothesized that, while all groups were expected to extract a lesson from wisdom-related events, adolescents were expected to restrict the application of the lesson to the immediate event, whereas young and older adults were
more likely to generalize the lesson to broader life experiences or to a life philosophy. Thus, a difference in scope of the lesson was expected to emerge.

To assess these hypotheses, subjects participated in a semi-structured autobiographical interview that focused on the memory of a wisdom-related event. Participants were also asked if they had learned a lesson from the event, and to elaborate on what exactly that was. In the end, 86 interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a content-coding technique.

Is the wisdom of experience paradigm a valid approach to studying wisdom? Regardless of age, all participants were able to recall at least one event that had transpired in their lives involving wisdom, and were able to provide a narrative of the event of a reasonable length. Of these events, the vast majority of them (89.5%) pertained to fundamental, not trivial, life situations, centering on life decisions, reactions to negative events, and life management. Lastly, Bluck and Glück argue that these situations cohere with other explicit theoretical work, such as the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm (see Baltes & Smith, 2008 for a review).

Is wisdom really about making things better? In terms of eliciting events and outcomes, in almost all of the cases, the eliciting event was negative or involved negative aspects. It is the challenges in one’s life that require wisdom, not positive events, and this is true irrespective of age. Also, as expected, outcomes for the most part were significantly positive, implicating the role of wisdom in producing positive transformation in one’s life.

Is wisdom connected to greater aspects of the life story? Although the instructions given were to discuss wisdom within the context of a specific event, one
third of the participants talked about generic events (“generic” meaning an event that represents repeated similar events). Thus, events recalled were not isolated, but rather extended across a longer temporal period. That is, wisdom is recalled by individuals as being gained and applied over time. In other words, one third of the narratives were temporally coherent. A greater proportion illustrated causal coherence (60%)—the majority of participants made connections between the wisdom-related event recalled and later events or the self in general. No age differences were found in temporal coherence, but did manifest in causal coherence. Midlife and older adults were twice as likely to show causal coherence than adolescents. This may be reflective of developmental factors, namely that adolescents are just beginning to forge their life story, which may temporally restrict their capacity for coherence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2001).

Do experiences of wisdom lead to learning a lesson? The majority of participants indicated that they had learned a lesson from the wisdom-related event. This lesson was generalized to other events or aspects of the self 80% of time. The degree of generalization did, however, differ by age, with adolescents being less likely to learn a generalized lesson than young and older adults.

Bluck and Glück interpret the age differences in causal coherence and lesson learning as evidence that wisdom is still being developed in adolescence. More generally, it is of significant interest that age differences emerge when looking at wisdom qualitatively, and not quantitatively, which provides further justification for a narrative approach to wisdom.
I’ve chosen to discuss this study in detail, because it was the first empirical attempt at establishing an autobiographical narrative approach to the science of wisdom. My personal feeling is that Bluck and Glück formulated a compelling argument, with ample supporting evidence, to sustain their claim that narrative is a rich method for accessing personal wisdom.

In a follow-up project, Glück et al. (2005) further validate their autobiographical approach to wisdom, which I won’t elaborate on here (suffice it to say that the findings were consistent with the previous study), and extended their theory by further investigating the types of life situations in which wisdom arises, and the qualitative forms (or themes) that wisdom takes. The research cited here involved two studies aimed at replicating and extending the findings. The studies followed the same semi-structured interview design used in Bluck and Glück (2004). The second study added two additional questions, which asked for autobiographical memories of a peak experience and a memory in which a person was foolish (commonly viewed as the antithesis of wisdom). These two narratives were used for comparison purposes.

The researchers expected to see age similarities in terms of the types of events that elicit wisdom (e.g., life decisions, life management, etc.), but age differences in the forms that wisdom takes. These age differences are expected in light of potentially different developmental demands for individuals at different life phases.

Consistent with Bluck and Glück (2004), in both of the studies the majority of narratives concerned three types of life situations: life decisions, reactions to negatives life events, and life management. As expected, the types of wisdom-related events did not differ by age. In terms of forms of wisdom, both studies revealed the same three
forms centering on the themes: *empathy and support* (e.g., offering or providing problem-focused support), *self-determination and assertion* (e.g., taking control of a situation), and *knowledge and flexibility* (e.g., making compromises). The frequency of these forms differed across studies, and age differences only emerged in the first study. According to the first study, it seems that adolescents are concerned with empathy and support, early midlife adults are concerned with self-determination and assertion, and older adults narrate about knowledge and flexibility.\(^1\) With a lack of replication in the second study these age findings, while provocative, should be viewed as inconclusive. They do, however, justify further qualitative exploration. Perhaps most important are the findings concerning the comparison events included in the second study. Results indicate that the types of wisdom-related events and the forms of wisdom observed in the present research studies appeared significantly less in the peak experience and foolishness narratives. Thus, the authors conclude, the types and forms are more or less unique to autobiographical wisdom narratives.

Notably, these findings do in fact relate back to the dominant approaches of the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm and Ardelt’s three-dimensional wisdom model. In particular, they corroborate the Berlin notion that wisdom pertains to the fundamental pragmatics of life (Bluck & Glück, 2004; Glück et al., 2005). Further, the forms of wisdom identified by Glück et al. (2004) relate back to Ardelt’s affective (empathy and support) and cognitive (knowledge and flexibility) dimensions of wisdom.

In summary, Bluck, Glück and colleagues (Bluck & Glück, 2004; Glück et al., 2005) have validated an autobiographical narrative approach to the study of wisdom, and

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\(^1\) Note: The second study did not include an adolescent sub-sample. Also, the second study was conducted using an American sample, as opposed to the original German sample utilized in Bluck and Glück (2004) and the first part of this study.
have arrived at a number of findings concerning wisdom’s relationship to age that have been absent from quantitative approaches. While not entirely conclusive, this research warrants further work. Notably, in the aforementioned studies, Bluck, Glück and colleagues found no gender differences across any of their variables.

**A Process View of Wisdom**

An alternative approach to the study of wisdom through an autobiographical narrative framework was taken by Yang in a series of studies (Yang, 2008a, 2008b). Like Bluck and Glück (2004) and Glück et al. (2005), Yang was interested in real-life manifestations of wisdom, with an emphasis on the core components of wisdom (Yang, 2008a) and the contexts in which wisdom arises in real-life (Yang, 2008b). These efforts were made in order to establish a process view of wisdom, where she proposes that wisdom is found in *integration, embodiment, and positive effects*. That is to say, wisdom is found in one’s ability to integrate what may be considered ordinarily separate or conflicting systems, the embodiment of this integration through action, and the resultant positive effects on self and others that is brought forth through action. Yang conducted a nominee study where she had 80 participants nominate wise individuals, and subsequently followed up by conducting semi-structured interviews with 66 of the nominees. In Yang (2008a), nominators were asked to provide an explanation for why they nominated a particular individual as wise. These explanations were coded following a thematic/content analysis technique. It was found that nominators did indeed cite themes of integration, embodiment, and positive effects when justifying why they nominated an individual as wise (Yang, 2008a); therefore, it is concluded that wisdom is perceived by individuals to possess these three core components. More importantly,
however, in the second part of this study Yang examined the autobiographical narratives of the persons nominated as wise. The interviews asked for a number of life-related experiences of wisdom, such as wise decisions the nominee had made and things they had done that they considered wise. First, Yang (2008a) observed that wisdom is abundant in narratives of nominees; coders found 220 incidents of wisdom across the 66 interview protocols. Further, these narratives were rife with imagery of integration, embodiment, and positive effects. Finally, Yang had independent lay-raters provide a subjective judgment for how wise they perceived the nominee to be. Results showed that incidents that involved explicit reference to integration, embodiment, and positive effects were rated as significantly wiser than narratives where these core components were not explicit. Thus, wisdom is seen to involve a special process whereby individuals exhibit integration, embodiment, and produce positive effects on the self and others. One criticism of Yang’s approach is the fact that she was looking to confirm an *a priori* theory of wisdom by searching for evidence in autobiographical narratives. A more inductive approach where she explores the themes presented in the narratives themselves would have led to a richer understanding of wisdom. In other words, I believe her analysis was constrained by her original theory.

In a second publication, Yang (2008b) expands her process model by examining types of life situations where wisdom is manifest. Through using a similar content-coding technique on the same 66 interview protocols, Yang concluded that wisdom presents itself in five unique life contexts: striving for good by helping others and contributing to society; achieving and maintaining a satisfactory state of life; deciding and developing life paths; resolving difficult problems at work; and insisting on doing the
right thing in the face of adversity (Yang, 2008b). Yang’s analysis indicates that
“striving to achieve the common good” is the most frequent manifestation of wisdom,
presenting itself 36% of the time. This is consistent with other theoretical models of
wisdom, such as that of Sternberg (1998). While difficult life problems didn’t present
itself as the primary context of wisdom, as it does in the work of Bluck and Glück (2004)
and Glück et al. (2005), it wasn’t absent from the data. The results here indicate that
contexts such as making life decisions, reacting to negative events, and life management
are still prevalent arenas for the manifestation of wisdom (e.g., “deciding and developing
life paths” and “resolving difficult problems at work”), indicating some convergence
between two separate lines of autobiographical wisdom research (i.e., Bluck & Glück,
2004 and Yang 2008b). These contexts are also consistent with the Berlin Wisdom
Paradigm’s emphasis on fundamental life situations (e.g., Baltes & Smith, 2008). With
that said, the fact that the exact same life contexts didn’t arise in the data could be
attributed to cultural factors, given that Yang’s (2008a, 2008b) work involved a sample
of Taiwanese people and Bluck and Glück’s (2004; Glück et al., 2005) work involved
German and American participants, representing Eastern and Western worldviews
(Markus & Kitayama, 1991), respectively. Cross-cultural differences in narrative studies
present a direction for future research.

In the end, narrative presents itself as a fruitful candidate for examining
contextualized wisdom. While Yang’s studies did not specifically address age and
gender, they did consider the degree of wisdom. That is, these studies looked at wisdom
in a group of wisdom nominees, as opposed to ordinary wisdom as it is conceptualized by
Bluck and Glück (2004) and Glück et al. (2005). I will return to the issue of degree of
wisdom shortly when I present the parameters of the current study, which synthesizes age, gender, and degree of wisdom into one analysis.

The Phenomenology of Wisdom

Montgomery, Barber, and McKee (2002) take a strictly phenomenological approach to the study of wisdom. In doing so they sought to describe the attributes and dimensions of wisdom as lived by older adults. They believe that such attributes can only be accessed by examining real-life accounts of wisdom through autobiographical narrative. Other implicit theory approaches have gone to great lengths to document those attributes that are associated with wisdom, but only through sorting tasks and other traditional methods in the implicit literature (e.g., Sternberg, 1985). Montgomery et al. (2002) make a distinction, however, between those attributes that are associated with wisdom and those that we come to through analyzing wisdom as lived by individuals. The goal in studying the lived experience of six older adults (aged 60 to 88) was to extract the essential elements of wisdom by using a phenomenological analysis. Phenomenology is not concerned with the truth or falsity of a claim, but is rather focused on the experience of a given phenomenon, in this case wisdom, from the subjective perspective of the teller. The goal is to cultivate a deep understanding of the experience of wisdom, and to articulate the essential or defining characteristics of that experience. In order to arrive at a deep understanding of the experience of wisdom, six participants were asked to describe a time in their life when they had acted wisely, and to describe a wise person in their life.

At the conclusion of their analysis, Montgomery et al. (2002) came to see lived accounts of wisdom as involving the following essential elements: guidance, knowledge,
experience, moral principles, time, and compassionate relationships. Guidance emerges as superordinate characteristic that seemed to permeate the other elements. Here guidance, as an essential aspect of wisdom, “acts to show the way in each participant’s life world” (Montgomery et al., 2002, p. 144). Guidance is delivered to the individual through the other characteristics. For instance, one can be shown the way through one’s knowledge and experience, which are the next two essential elements. Another characteristic of lived wisdom is that in making wise decisions, one must rely on moral principles. The authors highlight the word “good” as a common adjective to describe decisions made by wise persons, here the word good bears its moral connotation as in righteous or ethical. Time is also a consideration in the experience of wisdom, insofar as a wise action is only deemed so after one has reflected on the event. Thus, a degree of reflective distancing is an essential feature. Time also enters the equation to the extent that wisdom is not experienced in isolated episodes or moments; participants saw wisdom as consummatory in nature. Finally, the essence of wisdom as lived by older adults involves relationships. That is, wisdom manifests in relationships between people, and thus possesses an orientation towards others and not just the self.

Montgomery et al. (2002) conclude that the essential elements of the experience of wisdom are consistent with many conceptions of wisdom in the extant empirical literature. Thus, as we have seen with other autobiographical approaches, measuring wisdom as lived by individuals is a fertile endeavour. The authors also note that certain features discovered in this phenomenological analysis are new additions to the literature, further justifying qualitative approaches as playing a vital role in advancing our understanding of wisdom.
How Wise People Cope with Obstacles and Crises in Life

Earlier, I discussed Monika Ardelt’s model as a dominant approach to the study of wisdom. From this viewpoint, wisdom is considered to be a three-dimensional personality characteristic that can be measured via a questionnaire. In addition to her quantitative enterprise, Ardelt has also conducted qualitative studies on the topic. I will present two of her three qualitative studies here, in light of the fact that, while all three studies involve a narrative analysis, one is not autobiographical, and is thus not germane to the analysis at present.

In her first analysis of autobiographical narratives, Ardelt (2005) suggests that, “successfully coping with crises and hardships in life might not only be a hallmark of wise individuals but also one of the pathways to wisdom” (p. 7). With this in mind, Ardelt conducted her first study, both qualitative and exploratory, which examined how wise individuals cope with the vicissitudes of life. Ardelt conducted semi-structured interviews concerning autobiographical memories of pleasant and unpleasant life events with six older adults, ranging in age from 59 to 85. These six individuals were selected from a sample of 40 older adults, because they represented relatively high (three participants) and relatively low (three participants) scores on two wisdom measures. The participants were considered to be approximations of the “ideal type” of the wise and unwise person. An “ideal type” is defined as scoring relatively high or low, respectively, on the 3D-WS, as well as scoring high or low on a second wisdom rating measure. This additional measure involved three independent raters who scored each interview protocol on a scale depicting the degree of wisdom (mindful of cognitive, affective, and reflective dimensions) from 0 (not at all) to 10 (very much). For example, relatively high scorers
had to be assigned a score of 8 or greater on the subjective rating scale and a score of 4 or higher on the 3D-WS (scores range from 1 to 5). By taking extreme cases, that is, highest and lowest wisdom scorers from the sample, Ardelt hoped to accentuate the possible differences in coping between wise and unwise individuals.

An in-depth analysis of the autobiographical narratives of pleasant and unpleasant events yielded interesting results in terms of the differential coping strategies utilized by relatively wise and unwise individuals in the face of hardship. Specifically, Ardelt concluded that wise individuals engage in “higher-order” coping strategies such as mental distancing, active coping, and the application of life lessons. Mental distancing includes taking time to reflect and look objectively at a problem, distancing oneself from any immediate emotional evaluation. Active coping includes positively reframing events such that an unpleasant experience is seen as a challenge to be mastered or a puzzle to be solved. Active coping also involves taking control of a situation, and viewing problem solving as something that starts from within, not externally. Finally, relatively wise persons apply life lessons to navigate negative events. This involves the ability to extract lessons from life experiences for later application. For example, one common lesson identified by Ardelt is the recognition and acceptance that life can be unpredictable and uncertain at times, and that change is part of the human condition. This finding relates back to Bluck and Glück (2004), who found that their participants were also likely to learn lessons from wisdom-related events.

In contrast to the adaptive coping strategies engaged by relatively wise older adults, Ardelt also found themes in the coping strategies employed by relatively low wisdom scorers. She found that relatively unwise older adults rely on passive coping
strategies and avoid reflection. More specifically, passive coping strategies include acceptance of the unpleasant situation when the problem itself is solvable. Also, passive coping include a reliance on God to intervene in crisis situations. Lastly, in terms of avoidance of reflection, relatively unwise persons make no attempt to take a step outside of the situation in order to discern the best way to solve the problem, and make no effort to understand the underlying meaning of hardships in life.

In conclusion, it appears that relatively wise and unwise individuals participate in different coping strategies, which inevitably impact the pursuit of living a good life. It seems possible that wise individuals have a greater chance of achieving the good life, in light of their adaptive orientation to life’s difficulties. An obvious limitation of this analysis is the lack of a younger comparison group, so as to investigate whether or not these strategies are unique to older adults.

In a more recent mixed-methods study that examined wisdom in two age cohorts, Ardelt (2010) found that older adults with a college degree scored significantly higher than younger adults on her overall 3D-WS, and also the affective and reflective subscales (the quantitative aspects of this study are discussed in more detail above). Because this was a cross-sectional study, it was impossible to determine quantitatively if these older adults grew wiser with age, or if they were already wise in young adulthood. To examine this issue, Ardelt did a follow-up qualitative analysis by conducting semi-structured interviews with a portion of the older sample. Twelve participants were selected from the highest 20% of older wisdom scorers and 10 were chosen from the lowest 20% of scorers. Like the last study discussed (Ardelt, 2005), participants provided autobiographical memories of pleasant and unpleasant events in their lives. Ardelt
analyzed these narratives for evidence of *personal growth.* Personal growth was defined as the propensity to learn important lessons from life (see Bluck & Glück, 2004) and as increases in insight, integrity, and self-transcendence, as defined in a study by Staudinger and Kunzmann (2005). Of the 22 interview protocols analyzed, 64% had evidence of personal growth. Of the high wisdom scorers, 83% demonstrated personal growth in their narratives, whereas only 40% of the low wisdom scorers contained imagery of personal growth. The differences here were significant at the trend level, but these results should be interpreted with caution given the small sample sizes. Ardelt took this as support for her hypothesis that participants in the highest 20% of wisdom scorers would be more likely to show evidence of personal growth than the lowest 20% of wisdom scorers. Thus, the acquisition of wisdom can perhaps in part be explained by the possession and engagement with indicators of personal growth. This is consistent with the idea that wisdom involves the pursuit of living a good life. In seven of the eight cases, where no evidence of personal growth was found, Ardelt notes a distinct lack of reflective processing. This lack of reflection disables one from accessing important life lessons, and could serve as a barrier to the development of personal wisdom.

While interesting, these findings are problematic for three reasons. First, as I have mentioned earlier, the findings in this study are only significant at the trend level. This, coupled with the fact that the sample size is small (only 14 of the 22 interviews contained evidence of personal growth), limit the generalizability of the claims made here. It would have been more strategic to focus solely on a qualitative analysis, as opposed to statistical tests, which Ardelt relies on to test her hypothesis that top scorers show more evidence of personal growth.
Second, Ardelt’s (2010) intention was to examine “whether older adults grew wiser with age or were already wise in young adulthood”, and to determine this, “wisdom scorers were rated for evidence of personal growth in adulthood…” (p. 201). The analysis conducted could not conceivably answer this question. The fact that relatively wise individuals demonstrate more personal growth, albeit marginally, does not necessarily imply that they did not learn and apply life lessons or exhibit insight, integrity, and self-transcendence as young adults as well. Granted, the passage of mere time allows one to accumulate more lessons and experience greater increases in insight, integrity, and self-transcendence, but it could be that the amount of personal growth is not what is important in developing wisdom, but more so it is the capacity or tendency to engage in personal growth that matters in predicting wisdom. The older adults in the current sample could have been equally likely to demonstrate personal growth as a young adult, a possibility that we cannot examine and would obscure any conclusion that Ardelt has come to in the current qualitative study. A better way to investigate such a possibility is to qualitatively analyze autobiographical narratives of both a young and old sample, looking for engagement with personal growth and its relationship to wisdom scores across age cohorts (e.g., do all high wisdom scorers exhibit personal growth, irrespective of age?), or to look at this issue longitudinally, which Ardelt acknowledges in her discussion of her study’s limitations.

The final criticism I have of Ardelt’s analysis is that she did not consider education as a factor that might be more important in the development of wisdom than age, at least according to her quantitative results. She found that older adults with a college degree had significantly higher wisdom scores than uneducated older adults on
both the overall wisdom scale (3D-WS) and the affective dimension subscale. It is conceivable then that education could play as critical a role in the development of wisdom as age.

In conclusion, this qualitative analysis seems limited by marginal results, the inability to test the central question of interest, and the exclusion of appropriate parameters such as multiple age groups and education levels in its analysis. Although we cannot take much away in terms of age differences in personal growth, considered to be a key facet of wisdom and a catalyst in its development, it can be surmised that degree of wisdom matters in how one engages in processes like lesson learning and the presence of insight, integrity, and self-transcendence, at least from a qualitative perspective. From this viewpoint, Ardelt’s current work justifies further exploration of the embodiment of wisdom in autobiographical narratives.

Summary

The study of wisdom from an autobiographical narrative paradigm is new. Through examining four unique and innovative research programs that endorse this methodology, a clearer picture of wisdom emerges, most of which is consistent with past empirical research, but there are some aspects that are new contributions to the field. Although one cannot compare the findings across different qualitative studies in the same manner that one can contrast results from various quantitative studies, here I cautiously summarize some of the more important discoveries that emerge from the various research programs.
• First, we have learned that wisdom is manifest in a diverse array of real-life contexts, with a particular emphasis on difficult situations that involve life management, but not exclusively so.

• Second, we have seen that wisdom takes a variety of common forms or themes.

• Third, in terms of functions, wisdom is used for the purposes of producing positive effects (i.e., living a good life) through embodiment, the application of life lessons, active coping, and personal growth.

• Fourth, autobiographical reasoning processes, such as reflective processing and the pursuit of coherence, may play a role in catalyzing positive transformation.

• Fifth, access to resources for positive change, such as sophisticated autobiographical reasoning processes, might be dependent on how wise you are, as was the case for relatively wise and unwise individuals (Ardelt, 2005, 2010).

• Sixth, such positive effects are directed at not only the self, but others as well.

• Seventh, these general findings seem consistent across samples of individuals that range from ordinary (Bluck & Glück, 2004; Glück et al., 2005; Montgomery et al., 2002) to extraordinary in their wisdom (Ardelt, 2005, 2010; Yang, 2008a, 2008b).

• Finally, we have discovered one’s engagement with wisdom might depend on age, but gender does not seem to matter. These findings, however, are inconclusive and warrant further inquiry.
CHAPTER 3
The Current Study

The goal of the current project is to expand the science of wisdom, specifically in the autobiographical narrative tradition. This study is situated at the nexus of the four approaches previously described, and endeavours to build upon the foundation that has been laid by these researchers. Perhaps the greatest advancement is the inclusion of multiple parameters by which to analyze autobiographical narratives concerning the experience of wisdom in one’s life. That is, the experience of wisdom is examined at different ages, by different genders, and across different degrees of wisdom. These variables are included in an effort to fill in some of the gaps that have arisen in the narrative research reviewed above. The general purpose is to look for similarities and differences in autobiographical narratives across these variables.

Narrative Focus of the Analysis

The current study is an exploratory, case study-based investigation of lived wisdom. Narrative constitutes both the method and object of the current analysis (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Polkinghorne, 1995). In terms of the object of analysis, I will not provide specific operationalized measures in the spirit of keeping my analysis open to any notable phenomena that might arise in the autobiographical narratives. Generally speaking, this narrative analysis will investigate features of wisdom that past qualitative studies have studied, such as the definitions of wisdom offered by participants, the type of events in which wisdom presents itself, the fundamentality of these events, and the functions of wisdom. More significantly, however, I will analyze two forms of narrative processing believed to be important to the experience of wisdom.
These are *autobiographical reasoning* and *master narrative engagement*. I have talked about autobiographical reasoning in some detail already, and will now expand upon how it has been operationalized in other studies to provide an approximation of how it will be analyzed in the current study. Second, I will introduce the topic of master narrative engagement and present a case for its adoption as a new focus for studies using autobiographical wisdom narratives.

**Autobiographical reasoning processes.** Studies have shown that the various autobiographical reasoning processes used by individuals to create a coherent life story may also be important in the development and application of wisdom (Ardelt, 2005, 2008; Bluck & Glück, 2004; Staudinger, 2001). That is, autobiographical reasoning may play a central role in our ability to learn lessons from life, as it encourages evaluative reflection and the creation of explanatory connections between self and events (see also Glück & Bluck, in press). The nature or quality of autobiographical reasoning may also be a function of how wise an individual is (Ardelt, 2005), their age (Bluck & Glück, 2004; McLean, 2008; Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006) and possibly their gender (McLean, 2008). I will spend some time now describing various operationalizations of autobiographical reasoning processes that will guide the current analysis.

According to Habermas and Bluck (2000), autobiographical reasoning involves the construction of globally coherent narratives. Four items are thought to constitute global coherence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). These are temporal coherence, the cultural concept of biography, thematic coherence, and causal or explanatory coherence. *Temporal coherence* concerns the order or sequencing of events in narratives, and the extension of events across time. This ordering must follow the natural flow of time in
order to be legible to listeners (e.g., when one introduces a new event to a story it is positioned as occurring before or after previously disclosed events). The *cultural concept of biography* is the extent to which one’s experiences cohere with cultural norms concerning what an appropriate event is for inclusion in the life story at a given developmental stage (e.g., marriage, childrearing, starting a career, etc.). When one deviates from this trajectory it must be explained. Thematic and causal coherence are argued to be more sophisticated categories of coherence, and have a greater impact on the life story (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). *Thematic coherence* concerns the emergence of a theme that continues throughout a story, appears at various repeated points, or materializes at the end of the story. A theme may be thought of as a central metaphor or motif. Finally, *causal or explanatory coherence* refers to the presence of linkages in one’s story that connect events together or events to the self. Thematic and causal coherence are especially important in delivering one a sense of personal continuity through time.

In terms of operationalizing temporal coherence, as previously discussed Bluck and Glück (2004) looked at the extent to which wisdom was experienced as an isolated event or longer-term event. Specifically, they borrowed Singer and Moffit’s (1992) time-frame categories that characterize narrated events as (1) single events, (2) generic events (an event that recurs over time), and (3) extended events or events that span a long period of time.

Thematic coherence is operationalized by McLean (2008) as the general theme of one’s life narrative. Across three different self-defining memories she looked for consistency in the central metaphor. If a theme emerged consistently, the life story
was considered to be thematically coherent. Examples of themes given were “life is
difficult”, “I have been lucky”, and “people cannot be trusted”.

Causal coherence, or explanatory coherence, is operationalized similarly by
Pasupathi and Mansour (2006) and McLean (2008). Here, researchers have looked
specifically for self-event and event-event connections. A self-event connection exists
when one explicitly links an event to an aspect of the self for explanatory purposes. For
example, signing up for the Boston Marathon might be connected to one’s self-view as
being very competitive. The event supports or explains an aspect of the self. Self-event
connections can also be coded as stability or change connections. Stability connections
explain why one remains the same over time (e.g., “giving money to that charity shows
how generous I am”). In contrast, a change connection demonstrates how one has
evolved over time (e.g., “After that event I learned not to take things so personally”). In
terms of event-event connections, such linkages explain how one event leads to another.
For example, attending a professional development conference might lead one to apply
for a higher-ranking job. In the end, all of these connections function to form linkages
across one’s life providing them with a sense of personal continuity, as opposed to living
a series of chaotic, disjointed experiences.

Autobiographical narratives have also been coded for the degree of reflective
processing, which is useful given that some models of wisdom foreground reflection as
an important component of wisdom (e.g., Ardelt, 1997). McLean (2008) categorized
stories as either possessing a high level or low level of reflective processing. A typical
high level narrative may include something like, “Looking back on that experience, I can
really see how far I’ve come. I really learned a lot during that period of my life.” A low
level example might include, “I really don’t know how I came to this place, it just happened and here I am.”

It is a unique combination of these processes that leads one to be able to experience personal growth, gain insight, and learn lessons for the purposes of benefiting one’s life and others. In particular, I point to the role of reflective and causal processing as key autobiographical reasoning skills that provide resources for positive transformation. This idea is consistent with past research on personal growth (Ardelt, 2005) and lesson learning (Bluck & Glück, 2004) that highlights the relationship between these outcomes and autobiographical reasoning processes.

To extend these ideas, other researchers have also studied aspects of autobiographical reasoning similar to Habermas and Bluck’s (2000) conceptualization. Baerger and McAdams (1999) presented a model of narrative coherence as involving four items: orientation, structure, affect, and integration. Orientation requires the narrator to provide sufficient background information to make the story comprehensible. This may include introducing central characters, temporally locating the narrative, and describing relevant past events. Structure refers to the requirement that the narrative conform to a culturally recognized and accepted story structure. Basic requirements for a coherent structure are that the story follows a temporal and sequential ordering. A linear, chronological, or causal structure is generally accepted. Further, canonical story structure typically contains an initiating event, an internal response, an attempt or action, and a consequence—what Baeger and McAdams (1999) refer to as an “episode system”. Interestingly, the episode system seems to map onto Yang’s process view of wisdom with the internal response relating to her view of “integration”, the action to her idea of
“embodiment”, and the consequence to “positive effects”. *Affect* encompasses the degree to which an individual makes an evaluative or reportable point in the narrative. By taking an evaluative stance the narrator provides the story with affective or emotional significance. This aspect of coherence also specifically relates back to a model of wisdom, namely the affective dimension of Ardelt’s three-dimensional model (e.g., Ardelt, 1997). Finally, *integration* describes the effort made by the narrator to situate events, and their meaning, into the context of a larger life story. Doing so brings otherwise fragmented pieces into a meaningful whole. Such a synthesis necessitates that discrepancies, contradictions, and inconsistencies be resolved.

In summary, autobiographical narratives are coherent to the extent that they possess evidence of these interrelated features. This is of consequence because narrative coherence indicates a coherent personal identity (i.e., life story). These specific criteria for narrative coherence are also consistent with research directed at proposing and testing models of what constitutes a “good” story (see McCabe & Peterson, 1984). That is to say, indicators of coherence seem to be positively related to subjective ratings of story quality (see Baerger & McAdams, p. 72, for a discussion of this issue). People like coherent stories. Thus, successful engagement with autobiographical reasoning processes could be what leads to a good story. Research has shown that older adults tell better stories as rated by audiences (Pratt & Robins, 1991). It could be the case then that older adults possess more sophisticated autobiographical reasoning skills, as evidenced by the ability to produce a coherent or “good” narrative.

**Master narrative engagement.** There is a burgeoning field of research that focuses on the socially situated nature of personal narratives (see McLean, Pasupathi, &
Pals, 2007; Hammack, 2008). Provocatively, research conducted from this viewpoint has shown story construction to be a product of cultural factors, in addition to individual factors. Phillip Hammack (2005, 2008) has been particularly influential in terms of our thinking about the intersection of person and culture in the development of a narrative identity, and therefore autobiographical processes. To this end, Hammack (2008) insists that researchers consider the relationship between personal narratives and master narratives, as one way of studying how personal identity is culturally embedded.

Master narratives are overarching stories or cultural storylines that are shared by a community of individuals in a specific cultural milieu. They are communal sense-making structures that are constantly available to individuals, effectively guiding and shaping the stories they tell. Master narratives are dominant stories, and thus enjoy a degree of power and privilege in a given context. These stories can be plot driven (e.g., one must grow up, get a good job, and raise a family) or character driven (e.g., one must be a generative person and be self-sacrificing in the hopes of creating a better future for others). As individuals, we naturally come into contact with these canonical stories as we forge our identities. I suggest that there exists a bidirectional relationship between master narratives and personal narratives. That is, when we engage master narratives they help us to make sense of the raw material we have for our personal narratives, but conversely, personal narratives shape master narratives to the extent that they support, and thus reify, the dominant story, or deconstruct the canonical narrative through active disengagement (e.g., oppose, subvert, resist, etc.). The degree to which we endorse the master narrative has theoretical implications for (1) the ease with which we can integrate our experiences into a coherent story and (2) the acceptability of our story by members of our culture at
large. It is the nature of this engagement with master narratives that is the focus of the current analysis.

It is suggested here that a qualitative analysis of this relationship may be beneficial, wherein we may gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which individuals oppose or support master narratives of wisdom through storytelling. This approach is consonant with how Hammack (2006, 2009; Hammack, Thompson, & Pilecki, 2009) has approached the issue of master narrative engagement. Hammack (2006, 2009) has fruitfully studied how narratives of Israeli and Palestinian youth diverge and converge with historical master narratives of Jewish Israeli identity and Palestinian identity, with a specific focus on how master narrative engagement reproduces conflict between these groups. Hammack, Thompson, and Pilecki (2009) have also studied how young gay and lesbian individuals engage with master narratives of same-sex desire in order to produce identity configurations that are meaningful and coherent with available sexual taxonomies.

The goal of the current study is to examine master narrative engagement within the context of wisdom stories. In advocating for a narrative approach to wisdom, Randall and Kenyon (2001) also point to the importance of master narratives in their position that our personal stories, and thus wisdom, are shaped by the larger stories that we live within. The question arises then, what “larger stories” about wisdom are available to individuals?

Wisdom theorists and researchers, such as Aleida Assmann (1994), have identified some master storylines and characters that are representative of wisdom. First, Assmann describes the wisdom of Solomon as representing a judicial or political understanding of the concept. Shakespeare’s Prospero, the exiled magician king,
represents the second figure, whose wisdom lies in cosmic knowledge. In more recent times, with the rise of the empirical sciences, this wizard figure is interpreted as possessing deep knowledge of the natural world. Third is Polonius, a character in *Hamlet*, who represents the “old wise man” figure. Polonius possesses practical wisdom, guiding others in solving life’s problems through the use of pragmatic maxims and proverbs. Lastly, Assmann (1994) calls upon the character of Jaques, this time from *Shakespeare’s As You Like It*. Jaques, a professional fool, is consumed by the contradictory, paradoxical, and impermanent ways of the world. This skeptical view of wisdom shifts from Polonius’s problem-solving orientation to a problem-finding stance (Assmann, 1994). These are but a few examples of possible wisdom master narratives. Bluck and Glück’s forms of wisdom, reviewed earlier, also provide frameworks for master narratives.

Like the examples given above, master narratives typically contain two components. First, they meaningfully describe a type or form of wisdom, and second, they often provide a characterization of that wisdom. Such characterizations are culture-bound, so it may be expected that the invocation of master narratives will differ across individuals, groups of individuals, and the social worlds in which they are situated.

**Research Questions**

A general principle adopted by many narrative studies is the use of research questions, as opposed to *a priori* hypotheses (Lieblich et al., 1998). The research questions listed below will provide both a general framework for how the sample of cases will be drawn and a direction for the qualitative analysis.
• Question 1: To what extent will this study replicate past observations regarding the fundamentality, functions, and types of events in which wisdom is manifest?

• Question 2: Is there a pattern to how people from different positions (age, gender, and degree of wisdom) engage with personal wisdom narratives from an autobiographical reasoning perspective? If so, what does this pattern look like?

• Question 3: Generally, what does master narrative engagement look like across the sample of cases (age, gender, and degree of wisdom)?
CHAPTER 4

Method

Participants

This study involves a qualitative analysis of eight individuals (see Hammack, 2006, 2009 and Hammack, Thompson, & Pilecki, 2009 for examples of similar case studies). The cases were chosen from a larger Canadian sample of young and old adults (N = 82), who participated in an international study on wisdom. Participants were chosen so that there was equal representation across three variables: age, gender, and degree of wisdom. Table 1 illustrates how each case is situated across these parameters. All names are pseudonyms assigned to the participants to protect their anonymity.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of wisdom</th>
<th>Young adult</th>
<th>Old adult</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Stephan</td>
<td>Ariana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisdom mean</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>4.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Craig</td>
<td>Beth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisdom mean</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>3.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. “Wisdom mean” refers to participant’s mean score on Ardelt’s overall 3D-WS.

The current study utilizes a mixed-methods design in that a quantitative scale was used to assess the relative degree of wisdom possessed by the participant. For this purpose, Ardelt’s 3D-WS was utilized (Ardelt, 2003, 2010). The 3D-WS is comprised of one subscale for each of the affective (13 items; e.g., “There are some people I know I would never like”), reflective (12 items; e.g., “I always try to look at all sides of a problem”), and cognitive (14 items; e.g., “A person either knows the answer to a question or he/she
doesn’t”) dimensions. Each of the items is scored on one of two scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) or 1 (not true of myself) to 5 (definitely true of myself). This scale was chosen for a number of reasons. First, it is a commonly used and generally accepted measure of wisdom that has demonstrated sufficient validity and reliability with both young (Ardelt, 2010) and old samples (Ardelt, 2003). Second, in the past Ardelt has conducted qualitative analyses of relatively high and low wisdom scorers according to her scale (Ardelt, 2005, 2010). It follows then that using this scale will allow for more direct comparisons to her findings. In keeping with Ardelt’s (2005, 2010) approach, relatively high and low participants were chosen from the top 20% and bottom 20% of the sample. In fact, all except 2 participants (Marty and Beverly) reflected the highest and lowest scores in their gender and age divisions. Beverly was chosen due to technical complications with the highest wisdom scorer’s audio file, and Marty was chosen over the highest wisdom scorer because that person had difficulty following the interview prompts, leading to concerns about the quality of his responses. As was Ardelt’s (2005) intention, it is hoped that extreme cases will accentuate potential differences. Table 1 summarizes the mean scores on the overall wisdom scale, which ranges from 1 to 5, with 5 representing the highest level of wisdom.

In terms of demographic factors, all of the participants identified as “White/European”, with exception to one who did not report ethnicity. All of the participants have lived in Ontario for most of their lives; most reside in the Greater Toronto Area. Only one participant was born outside of Canada—Wayne was born in the Netherlands and immigrated to Canada at a young age, where he’s lived for most of his life. In terms of marital status, not surprisingly, 3 of 4 young adults are unmarried, and
all older adults are either married or divorced. Interestingly, and perhaps unexpected, only 1 participant has children. All of the young adults and 3 of 4 older adults do not have children. Education is equivalent across the groups, with 6 of 8 participants obtaining a “Bachelor’s degree”, and 2 completing “some college”. The 2 participants who only completed some college were both in the older cohort, but were spread across the wise and unwise groups. The fact that older participants had less education than young adults is likely a result of greater access to education today than 40 to 50 years ago. Occupations represented in the group consisted of student, university student affairs professional, teacher, law clerk, project manager, customer service representative, photographer/journalist, and nurse. The only demographic variable to substantively differ across the groups was reported degree of religiosity and spirituality. Specifically, participants who belonged to the relatively wise group reported higher levels of religiosity ($M = 5.25$) and spirituality ($M = 7$) on a scale from 1 to 10. Compare this with the relatively unwise group, whose means for religiosity ($M = 2.75$) and spirituality ($M = 1.67$) were notably lower (one participant in this group didn’t report a score for spirituality). Thus, relatively wise persons appear to be more religious and spiritual than relatively unwise persons. Although it is not the focus of the current study, there has been a great deal of research conducted on the relationship between spirituality and wisdom (e.g., Ahmadi, 1998; Lewin, 2000; Le, 2008; Wink & Dillon, 2003). Ardelt has never reported a significant relationship between her three-dimensional wisdom scale and religiosity or spirituality, so perhaps the differences that are emerging here do not persist when larger samples are considered.
**Procedure**

**Questionnaire.** After consenting to participate in this study, participants were administered a demographic survey that requested basic information, such as age, gender, ethnicity, education level, and so on. As mentioned above, participants also completed Ardelt’s (2003, 2010) 3-Dimensional Wisdom Scale, which contains 39 items, each measured on a 1 to 5 point Likert scale.

**Interview protocol.** Subjects participated in a semi-structured interview on the topic of wisdom. The interview protocol involved three main sections:

1. **Life history.** The participants were be invited to share about their life history, namely self-defining memories, high and low points, turning points, and any other story or piece of information that they consider important to who they are.

2. **Acquaintance, self, and historical figure.** Participants were asked for three specific autobiographical wisdom narratives. In each case they were asked to think about and describe a specific event in their lives that involved wisdom. The first narrative pertained to an event where an acquaintance had demonstrated wisdom. The second narrative involved a time when they had demonstrated wisdom themselves. The final narrative related to a time when an historical figure they knew of demonstrated wisdom. The questions were asked independently and in this sequence. After each question the participant was prompted further in order to solicit information about why he or she considered the nominee to be wise, how he or she thinks the nominee became wise, and most importantly, to share a story that illustrates the nominee’s wisdom. Pulling for a narrative in these three areas (i.e., acquaintance, self, and historical figure) ensured that a broad range of wisdom events were collected. Further, it is possible that wisdom may
manifest differently in these three areas. By having participants share at least one example in each area I was able to look for similarities and differences in how wisdom is experienced in these three domains.

3. Definition of wisdom. After having reflected on wisdom in these three different areas, the participant was asked for a summative definition of wisdom.

The current analysis focused on the acquaintance, self, and historical figure narratives, and the definitions of wisdom, but also looked at the life history information for descriptive and contextual purposes. The interview lengths ranged approximately from 25 minutes to 1 hour. All interviews were transcribed verbatim for the purpose of content analysis.

Analytic strategy. Narrative research differs substantially from positivist science in its underlying assumptions, methodology, and outcomes (Lieblich et al., 1998). As opposed to the pursuit of a single absolute truth found through objective analysis, in turn leading to claims of generalizability and statistical significance, the current project subscribes to a postmodern approach to science (Gergen, 2001). From the postmodern perspective, the subjective experience of the participant is taken as truth, and the analysis follows along the lines of a critical qualitative exploration and interpretation of autobiographical narratives. Importantly, narrative research of this nature does not claim that there is one correct reading or interpretation of any one narrative account (Lieblich et al., 1998). Despite this pluralism, in the current analysis all claims are justified with narrative evidence. Results are presented as valuable and transferable, in contrast to statistically significant and generalizable. This approach will produce a rich, descriptive,
and deep understanding of the experience of wisdom that cannot be obtained through
experiments, questionnaires, or observations (Lieblich et al., 1998).

Narrative research requires an explanation of the procedures adhered to in
analysis. The particular approach to qualitative analysis adopted here is a combination of
*holistic-content* and *holistic-form analysis* (Lieblich et al., 1998). Among the myriad of
ways that autobiographical narratives can and have been analyzed, Lieblich et al. (1998)
distill these possibilities into four approaches which fall along two dimensions. First, a
researcher may take a *categorical* or *holistic* orientation to the narrative. Categorical
approaches examine specific utterances or sections of extended narrative materials,
whereas holistic approaches look at the entire narrative as a whole. The current analysis
considers the whole narrative to be the object of analysis. When the scope of analysis is
narrowed to a specific autobiographical narrative (e.g., wisdom event featuring an
acquaintance), it is always interpreted in relation to the entire interview. The second
dimension concerns whether the focal point of analysis is on the narrative’s *content* or
*form*. Examples of narrative content include analyses of what happened, why it
happened, who it happened to, and so on in relation to a specific event. It may also
include a deeper reading of the meaning of a story, what a story says about the characters
involved, and what certain images might symbolize. On the other hand, Lieblich et al.
(1998) identify a number of formal properties of narratives that might be analyzed, which
include the structure of the plot, sequencing of events, relationship to time, complexity
and coherence, feelings evoked by the story, style of the narrative, among others. The
current analysis is concerned with both content and form. For example, a content
analysis concerns the types of events where wisdom is presented, and a formal analysis more accurately describes the investigation of coherence.

In terms of procedure, each interview protocol was passed through several times examining various aspects of content and form. The analysis was an iterative process to the extent that with each pass through the transcripts, interpretations made, clarified, and further developed. Analysis was conducted with an eye to within-subjects factors, across each of the three autobiographical narratives, and between-subjects, in order to examine similarities and differences across age, gender, and degree of wisdom. Results are presented thematically.

These methods are consistent with existing approaches to the narrative study of wisdom, but also differ in important ways. Bluck and Glück (2004) and Glück et al. (2005) take a more reductionistic approach to their analysis. Using a larger sample they coded and subsequently quantified their findings in the pursuit of generalizable findings. While valuable, this approach sacrifices depth of analysis—something that is important to the current study. Both Yang (2008a, 2008b) and Montgomery et al. (2002) take a phenomenological approach to analysis (e.g., Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Phenomenology is an excellent way to garner a deep understanding of the experience of wisdom, but not an ideal candidate for my analysis, which sought to investigate many different and specific aspects of autobiographical narratives simultaneously, not just the general experience of wisdom. Finally, Ardelt described the analytic procedure that she used in only one of her three qualitative studies as a “sentence by sentence analysis procedure as well as a method that is best described as analytic induction” (Ardelt, 2005, p. 10). This seems the most in line with the procedure that I chose, which is also
inductive. As opposed to following Ardelt’s exact procedure, I chose *holistic-content* and *holistic-form analysis* because they are designed specifically to analyze life narratives (Lieblich et al., 1998), and offer a structured and rigorous approach to qualitatively examining the content and form of autobiographical wisdom narratives. Further, it has been used successfully to study master narrative engagement in the past (Hammack, 2006, 2009; Hammack, Thompson, & Pilecki, 2009).
CHAPTER 5
Results and Discussion

In general, the qualitative analysis presented here indicates both differences and similarities in autobiographical narratives of wisdom across levels of age, gender, and degrees of wisdom. Similarities were found across age, gender, and degree of wisdom in the types of events discussed, the fundamentality of these events, and the functions of wisdom presented in autobiographical narratives. Further, definitions of wisdom were similar across age and gender, but did differ across degree of wisdom. Similarly, narrative processes, namely autobiographical reasoning and master narrative engagement, did not differ as a function of age or gender. This finding is inconsistent with some quantitative studies that have illustrated age and gender differences in autobiographical reasoning (Bluck & Glück, 2004; McLean, 2008; Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006). Further analysis along these dimensions is warranted. Interestingly, differences did emerge in narrative processing across degrees of wisdom. In terms of autobiographical reasoning, in most cases relatively wise and unwise individuals differed in both the degree of autobiographical reasoning they participated in and the quality of these processes. This was especially true for thematic and causal coherence. Differences also emerged in the quality of master narrative engagement across degrees of wisdom.

The following section will address each of these findings in turn. Narrative excerpts were intentionally chosen to descriptively represent the various results. These findings will be discussed throughout and more generally at the conclusion of this section.
**Definitions of Wisdom**

As part of the interview protocol, participants were asked to define wisdom. The responses to this question do not reflect all of the forms and functions of wisdom as discussed throughout the course of the interviews in the other autobiographical narrative sections. The definitions took the form of an abstracted synopsis of what wisdom is through the eyes of the participant, devoid of any explicit autobiographical significance. Although this analysis does not contain data from autobiographical narratives, it is still reportable in light of differences that materialized across relatively wise and unwise individuals in terms of their definitions.

First I will present the definitions of wisdom according to each individual and then comment generally on them. In terms of relatively wise persons, Stephan believed that wisdom involves both giving and taking of personal experiences. That is, wisdom is in being able to identify when and where one’s personal experiences would be of help to someone else, but also in being able to identify when someone else’s personal experiences might be able to help you. It is the “sharing” of experiences that defines wisdom for Stephan. Presumably, the purpose of sharing such experiences is to learn from life and promote positive transformation. Similarly, Ariana believes that wisdom is more about life skills and learning from life experiences than it is about factual knowledge. Also important to her definition of wisdom is the understanding that there is something greater than oneself, and wisdom involves being able to situate oneself in this “bigger world”. For her, “understanding each other” is central to wisdom, and the more we “talk” to one another the more we gain wisdom. For this to be possible there has to be a willingness to understand each other. Importantly, such a mutual understanding is the
secret to moving past “hate and anger and war”. Marty sees wisdom as an “ability” that includes both an “active” and “reflective” component. Specifically, he sees wisdom as the ability to see how individual things, people, and events fit in the broader reality of life and existence. The active component consists in having this vision effect your own way of living—there is “something more to it than just seeing it”. Essential to this is acting out of reflective practice. If it is not reflective then behaviour doesn’t have “reason or rhyme”. Finally, Marty opposes the idea that wisdom comes with old age or education.

The last relatively wise person is Beverly, who sees wisdom not as intelligence because intelligence is a natural gift, whereas wisdom is acquired. She believes that wisdom is something that very few people want because the price of wisdom is very high, the cost being personal suffering. According to Beverly, through facing hardship one can see deeper into situations and further into the future, which in her opinion constitutes wisdom.

In terms of relatively unwise individuals, Craig sees wisdom as requiring life experience or exposure to life events. He also believes that wisdom requires intelligence. Craig proposes that a person needs to be able to absorb and remember an experience, and link that experience to other experiences in one’s life—these connections help to extract morals or other lessons from those experiences for application “down the road”. Notably, this is a textbook definition of causal coherence; however, ironically Craig does not make these connections in his own autobiographical narratives, as we’ll see in a subsequent section. Beth offers a much simpler definition of wisdom, but is still similar to Craig’s. Beth plainly states that wisdom is being able to experience things in life and to learn from mistakes. Wayne refuses to offer a definition of wisdom, claiming that he doesn’t know
how to define it. He plays with the idea that wisdom is not “smarts” and it is not
“courage”, but cannot present a more specific articulation of the concept. After many
prompts, Wayne amusingly asks the interviewer if he’s “googled it”. Finally, Collette is
able to offer a more developed answer to this question. According to her, wisdom is the
ability to use your knowledge to pick out the best course of action in a situation,
depending on the circumstances. That is, it requires an amount of knowledge and the
ability to judge, in order to apply that knowledge. Collette suggests that wisdom may
involve helping somebody in order to make a positive difference in his or her life.

In general, the most notable differences in how relatively wise and unwise
individuals define wisdom is elaboration. Wise individuals offer elaborate definitions
that take into account facilitative contexts of wisdom and in some cases consequences.
On the other hand, relative unwise persons offer more general, concise, and
decontextualized definitions of wisdom, with the exception of Collette. Such general
definitions might reflect a less clear understanding of what wisdom is or at least less
critical thought or reflection on the topic.

Types of Events, Fundamentality, and Functions of Wisdom

The wisdom-related events discussed by the eight cases generally conform to past
empirical work that suggests wisdom is manifest in fundamental, not trivial, life matters.
Such life contexts include life decisions, life management, and reactions to negative
events. For example, life decisions arose as choosing to switch universities for a fresh
start or choosing to go back to school for the purposes of advancing a career. Life
management included dealing with chronic disease or maximizing few financial
resources. Lastly, reacting to negative events such as war or civil unrest were commonly
discussed. In most, if not all of the cases, wisdom was used as a resource to promote positive change. Thus, consistent with other models, people recognize that wisdom is a resource to be used in the pursuit of a good or better life. These trends did not notably differ across any of the variables of interest (age, gender, degree of wisdom).

**Autobiographical Reasoning Processes**

**Thematic coherence.** It was consistently the case that relatively wise persons demonstrated a high degree of thematic coherence across their autobiographical narratives. This determination was made following McLean’s (2008) precedent that one’s life story is considered thematically coherent to the extent that themes recur across narratives. In the current study I examined trends in the emergence of themes across the acquaintance, self, and historical figure narratives.

The primary wisdom theme in Ariana’s autobiographical narratives surrounded being kind and good to others. For Ariana, taking care of others was part of a larger narrative about the importance of maintaining positive relationships. This theme emerged across all three of Ariana’s autobiographical narratives. A second theme emerged in her acquaintance and self narratives, which concerned presenting oneself as “authentic” and “real” through behaviours such as being honest and straightforward with others. One could argue that this theme was also implicit in her historical figure narrative about Rosa Parks and Mother Teresa, who were presented as authentic in their intentions, although not explicitly stated.

For Stephan, wisdom themes also involved helping others, even when sacrifice is required. For example, Stephan’s father displayed his wisdom through his sense of responsibility and commitment to providing for his family, leading him to return to
school with the aim of extending his education and thus acquiring a better job. This theme also arose in Stephan’s self and historical narrative. Like Ariana, helping others was a dominant theme across Stephan’s interview.

Marty also demonstrated thematic coherence across at least two of his narratives. The dominant theme in Marty’s narratives concerns the importance of modesty and humility as an indicator of wisdom. In describing why he nominated his father for his acquaintance narrative, he says:

_Hmm. Dignity, for some reason, in my mind, when I picture a dignified person, it means to me that the person, somehow, is aware that they have an understanding of things, um, and are self-assured about that, and at the same time, don’t need to demonstrate it. Don’t need to advertise it._

In not advertising one’s deep understanding of things, one demonstrates humility. Later in the interview when Marty is asked to describe why he nominated Gandhi as wise, he candidly observed a connection between his acquaintance narrative and the historical figure narrative.

_Oh my goodness, there I am, my first pick was his humility again. I didn’t realize that’s what it’s gonna be. So his humility, first, his willingness to sacrifice himself to... for greater benefit to other people and to other individuals and to a wider society, I guess a whole country um..._

Again, humility emerges as a theme. Note that Marty is genuinely surprised that this theme resurfaces, suggesting that his choices were not premeditated, but rather spontaneous. This suggests that one does not simply provide narratives to fit a prevailing theme that has been previously established, but the process can actually be more organic. Interestingly, the theme of humility is consistent with the Eastern worldview (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In fact, cross-cultural research using implicit theory methods (e.g., sorting tasks) has shown “wisdom” to be associated with “discreet” (Takahashi & Bordia,
“modest” and “unobtrusive” (Yang, 2001) in Eastern cultures. It is no coincidence then that Marty also nominated Buddha to be a figure of wisdom in his eyes.

The final relatively wise individual, Beverly, provided evidence of perhaps the highest level of thematic coherence. Early in her interview Beverly foregrounds the role of suffering and hardship as an antecedent of wisdom. Beverly presents her thesis in the following manner and spends the remainder of her interview supporting it through anecdotes:

> Wisdom can be acquired, but the cost is a certain amount of personal suffering... because it’s only through that that you see... you know uh... further than you would if you hadn’t gone through the suffering.

The “wisdom through suffering” storyline emerges across all of her autobiographical narratives. As can be interpreted from this narrative excerpt, suffering leads one to possess deep insight into life. This theme arises in her acquaintance narrative focusing on a dear friend of hers who died from AIDS related complications. She gives a number of examples and short stories about historical figures who have suffered and developed wisdom from this, including Romeo Dallaire, Jesus Christ, Martin Luther King Jr, Abraham Lincoln, among many others. Interesting, in her self narrative, she rejects the idea that she is wise, the reason being that she hasn’t suffered enough in her life, despite the fact that she was a survivor of Polio at a young age. As you can see, Beverly demonstrates a high degree of thematic coherence across her narratives.

In contrast to relatively wise persons, low wisdom scorers provide very little evidence of thematic coherence. In fact, out of the four cases, only one indicated a consistent and notable theme across two of the narratives, but the quality of this theme was weaker than is the case with high wisdom scorers. I elaborate on these findings next.
Beth is a representative example of the absence of thematic coherence. In Beth’s acquaintance narrative she provides a rich, descriptive story of her grandfather, whose wisdom resides in his practical knowledge and skills. In her self narrative, Beth discusses her decision to relocate from both high school and university part way through her tenure at each institution. Here the theme is about taking risks that lead to new beginnings. Finally, her historical figure narratives center on both intelligence (Einstein) and helping others (MLK Jr). As you can see, there is no thematic coherence across her autobiographical narratives.

Without going into any further detail, the two older low wisdom scorers, Wayne and Collette, also failed to demonstrate thematic coherence across their narratives. Minor themes emerged in their narratives, but these did not seem central to the question of wisdom, nor were the themes presented by the participants as bearing any significance to the story in which they emerged, or to the concept of wisdom more generally. Within the confines of this analysis, I did not qualify such haphazard themes as contributing to coherence, especially in relation to the strong themes that emerged in the relatively wise persons’ narratives.

There was only one low wisdom scorer who contained any thematic coherence, and even this was minimal. In his acquaintance narrative Craig alludes to his mother’s wisdom as a product of her “life experiences”. “Life experiences” is a very general theme, and Craig does not elaborate on what such experiences may be. It doesn’t get more specific than saying that she has “experienced things”. With that said, Craig makes reference to life experiences again in his historical narrative where he claims that wisdom consists of one part education and intelligence, and one part life experiences. Thus, there
is some weak evidence of thematic coherence, however, these themes are left undeveloped, with very little by way of specific examples to substantiate them. This points to a difference in the quality of thematic coherence across degrees of wisdom.

In summary, it appears that the tendency for thematic coherence and the quality of that coherence is greater in relatively wise persons when compared qualitatively to unwise individuals. From a life-span development perspective and based on past research (e.g., McLean, 2008) we would expect older individuals to exhibit more thematic coherence due to the hypothesized need for stability in later life. Although claims of significance cannot be made here, the current qualitative analysis does not corroborate this expectation. Further, the current analysis identifies the possibility that thematic coherence might differ across degrees of wisdom, such that relatively wise persons demonstrate more thematic coherence.

**Causal coherence.** Causal coherence refers to one’s ability to look at events in one’s life and connect them to other events or aspects of the self in an explanatory fashion. Forging causal connections is a way of meaningfully integrating one’s experiences into one’s life story.

A qualitative analysis of this dimension of coherence has indicated that relatively wise individuals tend to demonstrate more casual coherence than low wisdom scorers. That is not to say that low wisdom scorers are void of causal coherence, however, there is a distinct difference in the quality of this coherence when it is presented. That is, in making connections high wisdom scorers draw on very specific examples and can articulate clear lessons from these events, whereas relatively unwise individuals tend to
speak in generalities. In this section I will start by presenting examples of low wisdom scorers and then move onto high.

The following narrative excerpt is a typical example of the poor quality of low wisdom scorers’ causal connections. Craig alludes to some potential causal connections when justifying the nomination of his mother as the wisest person he knows. He states that she has taught him a number of lessons, and has had the “biggest influence” on his life. When asked if there is a specific event that illustrates her wisdom, Craig responds:

No single instance. No, I think it’s a number of uh lessons that she’s taught me. Uhm, I couldn’t uh give you an instance, no, not at all. And not one that would define exactly uh I guess... exactly how I was uh molded as the way I am, so I would say no.

When pressed further about the influence his mother has had on his life, he is able to elaborate a little more:

Mhm...I guess it starts with morals – teaching the morals. Uhm, not so much just right from wrong but uhm I guess they want to see the best for you so they’re going to teach you uhm I guess uh the right characteristics, the right uh way to present yourself uhm and I just think... there’s a lot to, just a lot to be said about how they raise you and uh, but again nothing really specific comes to mind, it’s more of just a general feeling that I have. Mhm.

The interpretation here is that while Craig claims that his mother has taught him important life lessons, he isn’t able articulate what those lessons are beyond vague generalities such as “morals” and isn’t able to identify specific events from which he drew these lessons. Craig is hedging on a causal connection, but falls short in his delivery. Thus, this is taken to demonstrate a lack of causal coherence, at least explicitly.

Beth’s acquaintance narrative of a time spent with her grandfather is an exemplary case of a rich and descriptive narrative that lacks causal coherence.

So something when I was younger that he did with me one day was that he took me spear fishing with him. And I thought it was absolutely incredible that wasn’t
till later on that I realized how amazing it was. So we went spear fishing and we get on the four-wheeler and we go through the woods to the river and we get there and we’re there for hours. And I had my fishing line and my fishing pole and everything. But he would just, he would stand in the river completely still until a fish came along and he would spear fish and I was, you know, I had a lot of energy and I didn’t have the patience for that. But I sat on the side of the river and watched him for hours do this and he wasn’t doing anything. So for me being in the water and not getting any fish, it was quite boring. But when I was sitting on the sidelines and watching him to see the patience that he had and how determined he was to accomplish what he was doing, was absolutely incredible. And he um I guess another thing that I’ve already mentioned is the gardens that he makes. So he plants all his own food. And he and my grandmother live through the winter off the food that he plants in the summer time. And it’s pretty incredible. He puts all his onions, he hangs all the onions to dry them. He puts all the carrots in sawdust and he knows how to do all of that stuff, so it’s pretty incredible to watch him do those things.

In this narrative, Beth doesn’t offer any explanations and makes no connections back to her self, despite ample material to do this with. In fact, Beth doesn’t make any connections until she is later prompted in the interview to discuss how her grandfather has inspired or affected her life, a question that directly pulls for self-event connections. The point here, however, is that Beth doesn’t spontaneously make these connections. According to Baerger and McAdams’s (1998) model of coherence, the narrative that Beth provides contains a nice orientation and an acceptable story structure, but it does not have an evaluative point, nor does it indicate any integration into her life story. Explanatory connections would have provided evidence of such integration.

This pattern also emerges in the older adult cases of low wisdom scorers. Take Wayne for instance. The closest Wayne comes to a causal connection is in the following narrative, where he names his neighbour and wife as two people who possess wisdom, and is asked if he’s become more wise by virtue of knowing them:

_Uhm... no I’ve changed, but I don’t think I’ve changed to become more like them, I just changed because I’ve grown older. And uh I had this interesting discussion with [my grandson] once, which... I said well fifty years from now you won’t be_
like you are now. He was quite bewildered by that well why not? He never give up his principles, he never give up that. I said well, things change, you find that the older you get, usually you become more conservative and stuff like that. Well he didn’t believe that of course...

Wayne presents a very general change connection, but offers no explanation for the change beyond the passing of time. There is no connection between specific events and specific aspects of his growth, it is just something that unfolded over time.

Unlike Wayne who attempts to describe a change connection, Collette tells a story that represents stability.

There is no particular thing. But I know many people come to me with their problems, because they know I won’t tell anyone their secrets. Um, I know someone who went to the Detox Centre, and she came to me yesterday, and told she was going. And I didn’t know she was, and nobody here knows except certain people who had to know that she was going. But she came to me, and told me about it. And she’s been coming to me about the past 2 weeks or so. She wanted to talk to me about things, this and that. And... I could see that when she came to see me yesterday, she has been working up to it all along, but uh, she hadn’t figured out the goal that she should take in the beginning. But yesterday it was a real surprise when she came to me and told me what she was doing and what she was going. And she asked me to not tell anybody and nobody would know. And uh, people do come to me for things like that... There was another incidence where uh, this is another friend in this building, and he decided with a group of other people in the building that they decided to move out of this building and into a building that have their own kitchen suite and a regular fridge and a stove so they can do their own cooking and that kind of things. But they all have to wait until the apartment is built because there is a waiting list. And uh, he told everyone that he would go. And um, anyway, but about a month ago, he came to me and told me that he sees the advantages of being here, and uh, and in the area and everything. And he decided that he’d probably stay here. But he’s not telling anybody, and he said, “Now, don’t you tell anybody.” But he said, “I know you won’t, because I told you such and such before, and I never heard it come back to me or anybody else. So you keep what you say and you keep it to yourself.” And I do. People confide things in me and I don’t tell anybody else. When you live in a building like this, there are many people and there are a lot of gossips and things going around. If you want to spread things, you could. But if you know something and it’s supposed to be kept confidential, you should.

This is a stability connection to the extent that Collette presents herself as a trustworthy person and demonstrates this by showing that people confide in her regularly. The
problem with this connection, however, is that it is very subtle. Collette doesn’t present a strong causal case; this connection has the feel of coincidence rather than intention. Of further note, Collette doesn’t relate her trustworthiness back to wisdom, which makes me question what the purpose of sharing this narrative was, if not to explain how one is or is not wise. Thus, there is a difference in the quality of the connection, as compared to the connections forged by relatively wise persons, which I turn to now.

Let us contrast these narratives with an example from Ariana, a high wisdom scorer. Ariana’s narratives are rife with causal coherence. Here is her response to being asked for an acquaintance in her life who possesses wisdom:

*Good question um… yeah probably my mom… I don’t know if “wisest” would be – I think she’s demonstrated the most – like she’s taught me the most about being a good person, working hard, and um caring for others – I think in terms of intellect no, but in terms of wise life skills and things that I think a lot of the good qualities I think were from her… She was always saying both to my brother and I you can do anything like work here and she kind of always – what I liked about her is that she would always get us to think about our own decisions and she was – and I think I was always really independent but she was really like she would kind of coach or be the person who would listen, support but would never like be telling us what to do and what not – she never told me directly what to do and often times I wanted her to just tell me what to do cause I don’t know, and she’d always keep saying “well what do you think is best” and “have you looked at all these different options” and so I think in terms of I don’t know I think she also taught me like important things to value. So like valuing being kind to people and the importance of building of relationships and building community and being involved in the community, and like through a lot of her close relationships she was able to get ahead or be successful or help others. It wouldn’t have been possible for us to be a successful family or for her to be successful without the support of the community so that’s kind of what she taught me. I think she taught me good values and then did it in a way that wasn’t like telling but more coaching.*

It’s clear from this narrative that Ariana sees her mother as someone who has taught her life lessons; she has changed because of her mother. The most specific example offered being the importance of being kind to others, building relationships, and being involved
in the community. Beyond the development of her own value system, Ariana also
connects her mother’s value orientation to two other tangible outcomes. First, her mother
has “gotten ahead” or benefited from acting on this value, and second, this value has led
to their success as a family. The next excerpt is another example from Ariana’s
interview, where she talks about a time when she was wise herself:

*I think lately I’ve been getting better at being—like more honest and authentic in
terms of what I’m thinking with what I’m saying and doing in a way that’s like
tactful and appropriate, but just that I find that people respect me more if I’m sort
of honest with them, but I think that’s something I’ve struggled with that in the
past. So I think those choices are wise ones that I’m making trying to be like
authentic myself. Maybe that goes back to the assertive piece that I can relate—
that my mom is just making sure that I’m being—like I’m speaking up for what I
want and also telling people like even if it’s a difficult thing like being honest
about that and straight forward.*

In this narrative Ariana makes two causal connections. First, she connects her behaviour
to the impact it has on others—because she is authentic, people respect her more.
Second, she connects this push for honesty to her mother’s insistence that Ariana be more
assertive, which she discussed earlier in the interview.

Stephan gives an example that also exemplifies the causal coherence of relatively
wise individuals in a narrative about his father:

*I’ll give an example of wisdom, every time there’s work to be done around the
house he doesn’t ask ever for any help, so if... this is kind of a guilt trip thing but
hmm a couple of days last summer we were building a hmm... kind of storage
thing in our backyard, he’d go out he wouldn’t tell us he was going out he’d go
and hmm... he left it up to us to go “oh, he’s there in the back by himself” if we
were inside just waking up at like 2pm because that’s what we did during the
summer [laugh] immediately you start feeling bad for not helping out and then
and then you go outside and hmm... and hmm start building this thing with him
but... it’s kind of like the there’s so many messages in that to be learned and also
in the building thing I had no idea how to build the, build anything or use any
tools or any, I’m a victim of my generation but whatever, but you know, they’re
lessons we learned in almost everything about that and that’s what I guess kind of
molds him as a wisdom figure of my of my life.*
Here Stephan refers to all of the lessons that are inherent in his father’s wise action. He later goes on to specify that what he learned from this example is a sense of responsibility and commitment, indicating a true self-event connection.

Marty, the older adult male who is a high wisdom scorer is also quite specific in the way that he makes connections. For example:

*I suppose the issue of being wise in the example of my father is that he... he didn’t need to, to um... advise people or tell people. He was just living his life, very clearly based on his own values and beliefs. Like he was a very um... the word escapes me, but like a very honest, and family-oriented man, and he just lived that life and um.... Yeah, without much you know, announcement, of this is what I believe. Like when an issue would come up, if it was an issue of honesty, you knew what he would say and you knew where he would stand about it. And he did, like he would you know say well we shouldn’t do that because it’s not right, it’s not honest, it’s not fair, or whatever. And I think I picked up a lot of that from him because I think I have a lot of the same values.*

Here Marty explicitly refers to internalizing many of the values that his father lived by. He goes on to articulate these values specifically as being a low-key, patient person and also being fair and honest.

Beverly, the older female high wisdom scorer, bases her entire definition of wisdom on a causal connection. That is, as we’ve seen before, Beverly views wisdom as being the product of suffering. This is a causal relationship. Here is an example of the relationship:

*Romeo Dallaire was the uh... he’s still alive but he was the “chef de mission” the lieutenant general in charge of the UN force in Rwanda during the genocide. And uh and he literally was asked to perform the impossible mission... to keep the peace and safeguard the innocent people. But he wasn’t given the tools to do the job he wasn’t allowed to uh to use his weapons his force was depleted it literally it almost cost him his sanity. He had a complete mental break-down as a result of what he saw in Rwanda... But he kept on... I mean he soldiered on... trying to protect... he was responsible he and his small band of Canadian soldiers were responsible for saving over 20 thousand lives. Now that’s not very many when you consider the 500 thousand that were killed in the genocide. And that’s what it was – genocide. And the UN... not only did not help him, it actually hindered him*
because he was being told, “Oh no you must not intervene. You must not uh take sides you must” you know and he was watching people being you know slaughtered... but here again he acquired an enormous amount of wisdom which he share, he lectures on he lectures on post traumatic syndrome he lectures on uh international organizations to prevent genocide but look at the cost...I mean he he he to this day can’t be alone in a quiet room because the memories come back to him you know he’s a haunted man.

In conclusion, like thematic coherence, differences in causal coherence emerge across degrees of wisdom. It appears that relatively wise individuals create more causal connections than relatively unwise persons. These connections usually represent learning lessons from others’ wisdom. When low wisdom scorers do offer causal connections, they are qualitatively different from high wisdom scorers. Unlike low scorers, high wisdom scorers offer specific events or experiences from which they have learned a lesson, and are clear in what the lesson is. Thus, it appears that relatively wise individuals have a greater capacity to learn from life events, and thus experience positive growth.

**Reflective processing.** In analyzing reflective processing it occurred to me that creating causal connections between events or between events and the self implies a degree of reflection. That is to say, anyone who is able to create a causal connection by definition has participated in reflective processing. Reflection is required in order for one to extract a lesson or gain insight from the past via causal linkages. Thus, reflection is confounded with causal coherence, or rather, is an essential component of causal coherence. It should be the case then that if one exhibits a high degree of causal coherence, they are also high on reflective processing. This is consistent with Ardelt’s model of wisdom as involving a reflective dimension. As would be expected, in this
study relatively wise persons have greater causal coherence and by proxy must have greater reflective processing.

Perhaps reflective processing as defined by McLean (2008) measures “explicit” reflection. One can analyze a narrative for explicit references to reflection, but for what purpose? I make the argument here that just because one does not make reference to a reflective process doesn’t mean that they not participated in reflection. Thus, I am not convinced that explicit references to reflective processes is an effective indicator of one’s ability to make connections or learn lessons.

In general, there is little explicit reference to reflective processes in the eight cases that I analyzed. There is some mention of reflection in the “now that I sit back and reflect on it sense”, but nothing emerges as a trend. The only notable mention of reflection is by Marty, the older male high wisdom scorer. It is notable because Marty points to part of the definition of wisdom as including reflective practice. This is captured in the following narrative:

*I guess in the back of my mind, that is part of it, wisdom is a bigger view of life, a bigger view of the universe, existence, whatever, but it’s a bigger view of every situation, so when you’re in a moment, wisdom to me takes, asks you – makes you ask yourself – where does this moment fit in with the large picture of your whole life – I’m not trying to be philosophical here – but you’re whole life, within this family, within this community, within this world, you know, where does it all fit? And when you can stand back and have that look, to a smaller or greater extent, but when there’s that ingredient or that aspect in it, then there’s an aspect of wisdom as far as I think.*

Thus, reflection might play a role in wisdom itself, but it does not emerge as a meaningful process over which participants explicitly differ. Rather, I believe that all participants engaged in a reflective process, and that those participants who demonstrate more sophisticated forms of causal coherence likely have advanced reflective processing
skills. While there is no question about the importance of reflection to the experience of wisdom (Ardelt, 2005; Staudinger, 2001), its operationalization should be explored further.

**Master Narrative Engagement**

In the current study a great number of characters were invoked for the purposes of describing wisdom. Prompting participants for a narrative about a historical figure permitted easy identification of cultural storylines surrounding wisdom. One can say that many of these stories were elevated to the status of master narrative by virtue of the recurrence of characters and themes in the stories, and by the power and influence that each of these narratives seemed to possess (e.g., “I think that’s very wise – wise beyond what we could even label as wise”).

For example, the characters of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, Rosa Parks, Mother Teresa, Jesus Christ, Buddha, Nelson Mandela, and Romeo Dallaire surfaced in seven of the eight cases. I combine all of these characters together because the individual narratives that they represent share important similarities, and these similarities converge on a master narrative of wisdom. Despite their different methods, in one capacity or another, all of these characters were chosen because they represented selfless, self-sacrificial people, who cared deeply about the welfare of others and the world. Let us call this the “wisdom as concern for others” narrative. This master narrative was the most dominant narrative presented, and was instantiated by calling upon the aforementioned characters and stories from their lives, each representing a nuanced version of the master narrative. As I review the narrative excerpts below, I will attempt to expose these storylines.
While it is true that when the participants are asked to think about wisdom they demonstrate some agreement concerning what figures come to mind, the quality and nature of engagement with such master narratives differs across levels of high and low wisdom. Through using narrative excerpts, in the following section I venture to describe these differing levels of engagement.

Relatively wise persons are keenly aware of and engage critically with master narratives of wisdom, sometimes appropriating them and sometimes rejecting or refining them.

I’ll open with a quote from Marty, who at the very start of his interview references two master narratives of wisdom:

*I think first of my father, who wasn’t on the surface a wise old man or explicitly wise, but he was quiet, pensive, seemed to be kind of a quiet but common sense kind of person, so I think of him when you ask me about wise. Who else would I think of? It’s strange I don’t really, I don’t think of anybody who I would say, oh that’s a wise person. I think my current wife is wise in many ways, but not in the sage, old, old man wisdom kind of way, but in a common, she has a lot of common sense, which is I think a fork of wisdom.*

Marty makes reference to the image of the “sage” or the “old wise man”. He uses this master narrative as a compass to direct him to a wise person in his life. This is evident in how he compares his father to the master narrative. Marty goes on to choose his wife as wise, but invokes a different master narrative to substantiate or make sense of her wisdom. The “common sense” master narrative is more aligned with the practical wisdom of Polonius that we discussed earlier (Assmann, 1994). Thus, you can begin to see the various ways in which master narratives are called upon to understand the concept of wisdom. Notably, Marty does not recall a de-personalized, abstracted definition of
wisdom to drive his memory search. Instead, he engages various characters that he has known to be wise for the purposes of evaluating those people in his life.

The above examples are explicit invocations of master narratives. Other participants engage master narratives more subtly. For instance, Ariana draws upon the “wisdom as concern for others” narrative in the following example, without overtly labeling it as a master narrative, although this is what it represents.

*I’m thinking of like um Mother Teresa and I’m thinking of Rosa Parks. I guess it’s like people who – and the reason why those two people stood out for me was because they didn’t just look out for themselves or their needs or their immediate vicinity or people and were more thinking globally. In terms of being selfless or doing things that were so scary or risky that but they created so much change for the better within the whole world or society. I think like that kind of selfless I think that’s very wise – wise beyond what we could even label as wise. I think it’s like thinking about not yourself or not your immediate family but the bigger picture kind of more global or even the change that might of created like now with Obama for example like that change that he’s now been able to have the opportunity to do because Rosa Parks started way before and she wouldn’t have even known, but she took that risk in order to do something bigger beyond yourself.*

Here Ariana doesn’t name a mythic character like the “old wise man”, rather she pulls people she knows from real-life who she can substitute into her master narrative of wisdom. Mother Teresa embodies a saint-like master narrative of wisdom—the consummulate Christian missionary seeking positive change in India, and the world, through hard work, providing for others, and self-sacrifice. Rosa Parks, on the other hand, plays the role of social activist. Rosa Parks created a cascading effect of positive change by claiming her voice and naming the racial injustice that surrounded her at the time of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Here is a master narrative of wisdom that contains themes of struggle and eventual success for the greater good.
I digress from the topic of master narratives for a moment to comment on the causal connection that Ariana identifies between Rosa Parks and Barack Obama. This represents a very sophisticated degree of coherence to the extent that Parks and Obama are connected across both time and place. This is further evidence of Ariana’s capacity for creating causal connections, and reflective of high wisdom scorers’ autobiographical reasoning processes in general.

Returning to the topic of master narratives, I draw attention to Ariana’s statement that the wisdom embodied by Rosa Parks and Mother Teresa is “wise beyond what we could even label as wise”. By stating this, Ariana indicates that she has subjected this storyline to an evaluative process whereby she compares it to other master narratives available and ultimately decides that this story represents the quintessence of wisdom. This type of evaluation indicates a critical engagement with master narratives, and is also represented in other narratives of relatively wise individuals.

Beverly provides a further example of an evaluative process, offering ample evidence for why she views Gandhi as a wise individual. I also like this narrative excerpt because Beverly presents a true example of a “story” to the extent that it is rich in imagery and detail:

Another incredibly wise person Mahatma Gandhi, who lived uh a very very hard life he uh he was imprisoned for his beliefs, he was beaten, he was tortured, he was and he believed in nonviolence, now that was not a popular way to do things in his day but um he was wise enough to see that if you indulge in violence even in retaliation you’re only escalating the violence that uh any resistance to brutal authority must be met with non-nonviolent resistance um and the British were pretty brutal in India at the time... He was an Indian lawyer his name was actually Mohandas Gandhi, Mahatma was a title, like a lord or a servant. A tiny man, as he got older he wore only a white uh sarong shaved his head tiny wingless spectacles. Preached non-violence wherever he went and he uh there was a great civil war in India between Muslims and Hindu and uh and oh people were just being massacred for no other reason than that they were Muslim or
Hindu and he declared he was going to go on hunger strike and by this time everyone in India knew who he was because of his many marches and his lectures on freedom and peace and nonviolent resistance and uh so he came within an eyelash of dying of hunger but the violence stopped and he was resuscitated and said he could take a little bit of food now and someone came to him and uh Hindu and he said uh “Bapu” which means father in in one of the Indian dialects, “Bapu I’ve done a terrible thing I have killed, there was a riot in the streets and I have killed a little Muslim boy I can’t I can’t forgive myself for it” and uh Mahatma said “Well there is one thing you must do for your own salvation to get yourself out of the hell that you’re in right now, you must find an orphan child and you must raise him as your own, only be sure that you raise him as a Muslim and that it’s not your faith but his”. See that is how I define wisdom by giving you an example of what wisdom is that’s hard to do but it heals hatred with love and that’s what Jesus’s mission on earth was to do and uh that’s how that’s how I define wisdom by example.

The detail of Beverly’s story almost serves as an argument for why she views Gandhi as wise. Gandhi’s wisdom reflects a master narrative that both conforms to the “wisdom as concern for others” narrative but also involves elements of strategic, judicious thinking and political ideology. In ways, this narrative is reminiscent of the master narrative of Solomon as the wise judge (Assmann, 1994). The civil disobedience aspect of Gandhi’s story is also reflective of the social activist master narrative shared by others such as Rosa Parks and MLK Jr. In this narrative, Beverly simultaneously validates the “wisdom through suffering” master narrative that her interview transcript is replete with. She brings in Jesus Christ as a further exemplar of this master narrative. Jesus, a prophet sent from God as an example to mankind, suffered greatly in the interest of spreading his message, which eventually led to his death. It is clear that Beverly has evaluated Gandhi’s wisdom and has used it as a tool to support her argument.

Stephan engages with this same master narrative in an entirely different way, while still in a very evaluative manner:

Well I guess it’s just kind of like [Gandhi] has that stereotypical wisdom aura around him, whereas his ability via non-violent protest, use of words in
negotiation as opposed to physical action to bring an end to the colonization of India, was amazing but at the same time I don’t know if I per se identify with that strongly, but at the same time he was the first person that came to my mind, I don’t if that it’s because that’s just the default, everyone knows who Gandhi is or if that’s cause I identify with him per se.

Here, Stephan refers to Gandhi as the default answer. Stephan has not yet appropriated this master narrative, but reveals a process of critical engagement, as opposed to Beverly who has already evaluated and chosen to appropriate the narrative. In this quote you can see the evaluative process that is unfolding, and the clear connections that he makes back to himself. It is not that Gandhi is not worthy of the title of wise; Stephan is more concerned with whether or not this resonates with him personally.

It is concluded that relatively wise persons have a clear understanding of wisdom master narratives. They are able to articulate a comprehensible story and provide an explanation for why they selected a particular character. They also provide evidence of critical engagement with the narrative. That is, they don’t accept the narrative without first subjecting it to an evaluative process. Their ability to identify such master narratives could be one of the factors that led to their wisdom. That is, recognizing the larger stories of wisdom that we live within might provide individuals with the opportunity to refine their understanding of wisdom and critically engage with it vis-à-vis their personal narratives. As we will see in a moment, relatively unwise individuals have less clear understandings of wisdom master narratives, cannot easily articulate a story surrounding the character chosen, and often refer to a master narrative of intelligence despite being prompted for a story about wisdom, which could be considered a counter narrative to wisdom (see Bamberg, 2004).
Beth, a relatively low wisdom scorer, gives an example relating to the “wisdom as concern for others” narrative, but note that it is qualitatively different from some of the others we’ve seen:

_Um King_. The dreams and the, you know, saying I want this to happen or I dream of this happening and things actually do happen. So it makes, it shows that it is possible. I’m a big dreamer. I like to think, yeah. I do a lot of daydreaming, I like to think of things, you know, I often think of the not possible. But it kind of brings you back and makes you realize yeah they are. The biggest things in the life, in life that you think may be impossible, they can be reached... I think it’s important to remember that we’re just not on our own here and we live in a society and we live in communities and in order for life to go and the community to continue to build itself and things to go well, it’s important to include others in your life. I can’t imagine going through life completely on your own and having no friend and not having anyone around and not caring any, anything. I think it’d be a pretty awful place. I think everything that we do everyday includes other people. And the interactions that we have with other people kind of dictates what kind of day you’re going to have... I think um someone who’s all about themselves, kind of all encompassed in their own little bubble, and they will make it through life. I don’t know that they’d ever really have a sense, a sense of accomplishment. Um someone who is concerned about their community or goes through life thinking about other people um would see the effects that they’re having whereas I think if you’re just thinking about yourself, you’re not always going to be reflecting and looking, stepping outside and looking at yourself and realizing the effects that you’re having.

Notably, although this narrative is about concern for others, the way Beth narrates the story is very self-centered. There are inherent contradictions in the language used and what the story represents. While on the surface this narrative is all about relationships and community, claims such as “the interactions that we have with other people kind of dictates what kind of day you’re going to have”, “a sense of accomplishment” and “realizing the effects that you’re having” point to a more self-centered interpretation of this master narrative. In fact, self-transcendence has been associated with wisdom according to a number of theorists (Ardelt, 1997, 2003; Le, 2008; Le & Levenson, 2005; Levenson et al., 2005). This narrative stands in stark contrast to the narratives of high
wisdom scorers by Beverly and Ariana on Gandhi, Rosa Parks, and Mother Teresa.

These narratives indicated high levels of self-transcendence. Beth’s self-centered narrative might indicate a lack of comprehension of the story, reflecting the nomination of MLK Jr because he is a default or stock response. One could interpret the contradictions presented here as a lack of integration of the master narrative into Beth’s life story.

Other relatively unwise individuals outright reject the wisdom master narrative, like Wayne in the following quote:

_In history? Well again I can think of the most courageous person in history, like Mandela and Gandhi… Now but they are not necessary wise, they are just incredibly courageous. So what’s, what’s wise? What the hell is wise?… When you need a word for wise, I keep thinking of Jesus, but I’m not a believer, so… And then never been impressed with what he did really so he’s not wise. I don’t know who is wise._

In this example Wayne begins to think critically about who he might consider wise, or at least question it, but doesn’t engage in the process long or deep enough to find an answer. He simply concludes that he doesn’t know who is wise. Note, this narrative is highly evaluative in tone, but only without the critical engagement that characterizes the evaluative processes of relatively wise individuals.

Another pattern that emerged in the narratives of relatively unwise individuals consisted of invocations of master narratives of intelligence to describe wisdom. Beth gives a clear example of this:

_First person that comes to mind is Albert Einstein, but only because of what I’ve heard. Um… I’m going to say Albert Einstein…_

_[What have you heard? What makes you think of him as wise?]_

_Uh well you know, when anyone talks about anything that’s ever been done in history that’s been smart, book-smart, I think of Albert Einstein because of his theories and the different things he’s come up with and you know the way that he_
changed science and the things that he developed. Uh I can’t think of anyone else off the top of my head that people that do that...

[Can you think of a story that you know about Albert Einstein or a thing that he’s been quoted as saying?]

Um... just picture him in my head and his crazy hair uh... anything no not right off the top of my head.

[Would you say that he’s inspired you or affected you at all?]

No, he definitely hasn’t. No, he hasn’t.

Beth cannot recall any substantial information to support her claim of Einstein as a wise figure, despite the fact that he comes to her as an image of wisdom. This is typical of relatively unwise persons who tend to talk in generalities about various characters. They do not spontaneously offer elaborate stories surrounding these characters, and even after considerable explicit prompting they do not provide a rich narrative, with a few exceptions. In contrast to her intentions in the present case, Einstein might represent the epitome of a master narrative of intelligence, as opposed to wisdom. Thus, Beth fails to connect or perhaps even identify the essence of various master narratives as representing wisdom or intelligence. In contrast to this point, one might argue that Einstein represents the Prospero master narrative of wisdom as described by Assmann (1994) to the extent that Einstein has a deep understanding of scientific knowledge, and ventures to discover the ultimate and mysterious truth about the universe. I argue that this cannot possibly represent a view of wisdom given the lack of concern for humanity and other affective considerations. Of further note is Beth’s claim that Einstein “definitely hasn’t” influenced her life. This is a further example of a lack of causal coherence. The absence of this connection is notable, especially in light of the fact that wisdom figures tend to be inspirational.
Returning to the issue of confusing intelligence for wisdom master narratives,

Craig gives another example of this fallacy:

*The wisest uhm historical figure... uhm... no one comes to mind, I mean, I guess... I’m having a tough time putting a name uhm but let’s just be general and say uh an army commander or someone to that nature uhm they... I think they need to be wise, I believe the definition of wisdom, in my opinion, is uh it’s two parts: it’s education, intelligence and experience and I think a person to that nature would have to possess, those characteristics uhm to be successful at what they do and I uh I would definitely think that it would be a person uhm with great wisdom to be in those roles uhm... but yeah, I’m just having a tough time naming anyone and for whether, I guess, they’re considered an evil army general or commander or uh one of the better ones, I would say, you know, someone like Napoleon, even Hitler - whether you agree or not but uh I think they are wise people. Uhm, whether considered heroes or not uh I guess... but yeah I think you can speak in generals on that one. Mhm.*

By all accounts in the wisdom literature, figures like Hitler are not personifications of wisdom, although they do verge on the Solomonic wisdom master narrative of leadership and strategic thinking they are devoid of affective concern for others. Sternberg (1998) has spoken about Hitler specifically as a figure that might demonstrate intelligence, but not wisdom, at least in accordance with his balance theory of wisdom that believes wisdom to be the balance or maximization of good across interpersonal, intrapersonal, and transpersonal domains. In support of this view, the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm sees wisdom as the orchestration of mind and virtue in the pursuit of excellence (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). History tells us that there was nothing virtuous about Hitler’s behaviour. Lastly, Ardelt (1997, 2003) sees wisdom as involving compassion for others, as captured by her affective dimension of wisdom. All of this is to say that characters like Hitler cannot represent wisdom, but could possibly reflect master narratives of intelligence. This level of engagement lacks the critical or discerning nature of relatively wise individuals.
High wisdom scorers also discuss the issue of intelligence, but only use such master narratives as a foil or counter narrative to support their nomination of a different character as wise.

Take Beverly for example, she uses the intelligence narrative as a rhetorical tool in proving her case about wisdom:

*I’ll mention first what I think wisdom is not. Wisdom is not intelligence. They’re not the same thing at all. Intelligence is a natural gift people some people are born with more than others... I mean I know of people who are incredibly... uh intelligent and they can, they can you know... do calculations in an instant or they can, they can plan out they can build buildings or they can you know write symphonies and they have not a grain of wisdom.*

Stephan’s engagement with the counter narrative of intelligence is more considerate and natural—you can see his argument develop as he speaks:

*Okay... hmm where you know, you can be intelligent and not want I guess, it comes to sharing because if you’re intelligent you don’t have to look out for other people, you know in order to give you don’t have anything to prove per se, you don’t have to have anything to prove hmm you can use that intelligence strictly for yourself and you don’t have to listen to anyone... you can shut yourself off and still be smart but that’s not exactly the wisest thing... so I guess that’s where the difference lies, I guess wise depends on the people around you whereas intelligence is an individual kind of trait hmm...*

These narrative examples illustrate how relatively wise and unwise individuals differentially invoke master narratives of intelligence. The former use intelligence as counter narratives, whereas the latter confuse images of intelligence with master narratives of wisdom.

In conclusion, this qualitative analysis suggests that individuals engage with the larger stories of wisdom that we live within. Master narrative engagement differs across degrees of wisdom, but does not seem to differ across age or gender. Relatively wise persons are aware of and engage critically with master narratives of wisdom. In contrast,
relatively unwise individuals only superficially invoke master narratives, or confuse master narratives of wisdom with master narratives of intelligence.

**General Discussion**

The qualitative analysis presented here validates the claim that a narrative approach to studying wisdom is a viable and rich method for understanding the subtleties of this elusive concept. In particular, it enables a detailed and nuanced examination of how individuals engage with the concept of wisdom in real-life situations.

This study has presented both consistencies and inconsistencies with the extant literature. It lends credit to those quantitative and qualitative studies that found no differences in wisdom across parameters of age and gender. Given the nature of this case study-based analysis, I cannot reliability discredit other studies that have found wisdom to differ across age and gender, and in any case, confirming or disconfirming past findings is not the intention of this study. What I can say is that age and gender should continue to play a central role in the narrative analysis of wisdom. The investigation of these items would benefit from a consistent research program that adheres to a specific set of narrative analytic techniques so that we may begin to build knowledge in this area, as opposed to the poking-around-in-the-dark feel that exploratory studies sometimes have, not to suggest that they are unimportant.

With that said, this analysis does reveal some findings that could possibly be of great consequence to our understanding of wisdom, if followed up further with more rigorous analyses. Here I refer to the finding that degree of wisdom tends to reflect important differences in autobiographical wisdom narratives, and the narrative processes that they are subjected to. That is to say, relatively wise and unwise individuals appear to
differ in the stories they tell about wisdom in their lives. This speaks most directly to findings by Ardelt (2005), who observed that relatively wise and unwise individuals engage in differential coping strategies when faced with hardships in life.

In the current study, relatively wise persons demonstrate more sophisticated autobiographical reasoning process, particularly in the area of thematic and causal coherence. In light of past research (Ardelt, 2005; Staudinger, 2001), one would assume that reflective processing would also differ across degrees of wisdom. I found no notable differences in how people make explicit references to reflection. Rather, I argue that other autobiographical reasoning processes such as causal coherence subsume reflective processing. In fact, Habermas and Bluck (2000) include reflection in their definition of autobiographical reasoning; thus, by definition other processes must involve reflection. This is all to say that I believe the lack of reflective processing observed in this study is not evidence that reflection was absent, contrary to this point, reflective processing was implied in autobiographical reasoning processes in general, and in particular, causal coherence. Reflection is also a key feature of wisdom according to Ardelt (1997, 2003), which is consistent with the fact that relatively wise persons demonstrated greater causal coherence.

On that note, one of the greatest insights this study has to offer is that the tendency to make causal connections, and the quality of these connections, differs across degrees of wisdom, such that relatively wise individuals possess more causal coherence. I use the word “sophistication” to describe the causal connections of relatively wise people, because not only do they have more coherence, but they also articulate clearer lessons in their wisdom narratives and connect these to more specific events. This
finding should not be taken lightly. I believe that the capacity to create causal or explanatory connections is tantamount to the ability to draw lessons from experience. Bluck and Glück (2004) observed that autobiographical narratives of wisdom-related events involve learning lessons. Ardelt (2005) found that relatively wise individuals apply life lessons, whereas unwise individuals make no effort to solve problems or understand the meaning of a situation. I propose that it is the sophistication with which one can reason autobiographically that predicts one’s ability to learn and apply lessons for the purposes of positive transformation. The so-called ability to “read” one’s life story is a powerful metaphor for this observation. Thus, wisdom is akin to autobiographical reasoning, and one may develop wisdom through the enhancement of autobiographical reasoning abilities such as forming causal coherence in one’s personal narratives (which assumes a high degree of reflective processing). The relationship between wisdom and autobiographical reasoning is a significant direction for future research.

The next stage of this research project will be to conduct a mixed-methods study where autobiographical reasoning is coded across a larger sample of participants to confirm the observation that high wisdom scorers have more sophisticated autobiographical reasoning abilities, and to go deeper into the qualitative nature of the causal connections made in wisdom-related events.

The final aspect of the current study that I wish to comment on pertains to master narrative engagement, largely because this is the first study to examine the larger wisdom stories in which we live. This analysis points to the possibility that relatively wise individuals have a greater awareness of cultural storylines of wisdom. Not only are wise
persons more aware, they are able to articulate clearer stories surrounding these master narratives, and are more inclined to engage with them critically and evaluatively. Master narratives are meaning-making structures that are available to individuals as they attempt navigate the vicissitudes of life. It could be the case that master narratives help one to gain an understanding of wisdom, and thus apply it to one’s life. Like autobiographical reasoning processes, master narrative engagement should continue to be the subject of scientific inquiry. Conducting a more rigorous analysis of what master narratives are available to individuals in a given culture, and creating an exhaustive taxonomy of these narratives might be an interesting place to start—see examples of love, hate, and leadership story taxonomies by Sternberg and colleagues (Sternberg, 1995, 2003, 2008; Sternberg, Hojjat, & Barnes, 2001).

In describing the qualitative methodology used here I noted some of the limitations of this approach. Specifically, all of the results gathered here can be viewed only as possibilities. Using a case study-based method provides analytic depth, but not breadth in the sense that these findings cannot be generalized to others. The current analysis has been successful, however, in directing further quantitative studies. The other limitation I would like to identify here is the restricted range in the three-dimensional wisdom scale. Extreme cases on the wisdom scale are uncommon; at least they were in this sample. This could be interpreted to mean that the emergent patterns in this study may be more significant or pronounced in a sample with more variability.
Conclusion

I conclude by emphasizing the importance of scientific inquiry into the study of wisdom in a world where people face hardships daily, and peace has yet to prevail. Wisdom represents a significant resource by which one can learn from life and improve one’s lot. The current study has shown that one who is relatively wise may be better equipped to learn lessons, gain insight, and by extension, grow personally. It has also shown that as a discipline we cannot separate the study of wisdom from the stories that we tell about it. This encompasses both the autobiographical narratives that we hold, but also the larger stories that we live within. Stories may very well be the key to unlocking the wisdom of life.
References


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