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Author(s)	Kasuga, Ayaka; Sato, Shinichi; Takahashi, Masami
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## **JAPANESE PEOPLE’S CONCEPTUALIZATION OF WISDOM: QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEWS WITH MIDDLE-AGED AND OLDER ADULTS**

**AYAKA KASUGA<sup>1)</sup>, SHINICHI SATO<sup>1)</sup> and MASAMI TAKAHASHI<sup>2)</sup>**

### **Abstract**

A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 middle-aged and older Japanese adults to identify wisdom dimensions. The qualitative analysis revealed the following five categories with two to eight subcategories in each: (1) problem solving ability, (2) ability to prioritize (insight), (3) plasticity, (4) harmony with others, and (5) disciplined life. In particular, the concept of “wisdom” appears to emphasize harmony (courtesy, *okage* (a sense of gratitude), and humbleness) and the ability to complete actions toward chosen life goals (accomplishments, actions with strong will, and existential understanding). These subcategories or factors are distinct from those found in previous studies conducted in the West, and they are believed to embody Japanese values and ethical disciplines some of which are shared with other Asian cultures. Our findings suggest that the knowledge of such cultural influences should be applied to future investigations on wisdom in Japan.

Key words: wisdom, implicit theories, cultural characteristics, qualitative study

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1) Graduate School of Human Sciences, Osaka University, 1-2, Yamadaoka, Suita, Osaka 565-0871, Japan

2) Department of Psychology, Northeastern Illinois University, 5500 North St. Louis Avenue, Chicago, IL 60625, United States.

## 1. Background and aims

Wisdom is generally understood as skills and characteristics cultivated through the accumulation of experiences over many years, and is seen as a positive aspect of advanced age. However, while it is a familiar word, it is also complex, as it is used in various contexts and is one of the most difficult concepts to define.

The concept of wisdom has been investigated through several approaches. One approach involves research into how wisdom is treated in historical literature (intellectual archaeology; Chandler & Holliday, 1990), while another focuses on how it is understood by lay people (discovering implicit theories; Sternberg, 2005). The third approach seeks to provide its operational definition based on existing psychological theories (constructing explicit theories; Sternberg, 2005). It is common for terms used in research to be operationally defined by the authors; however, since wisdom is a concept that has been commonly used since antiquity, diverging from its definition as understood by the general population was considered unwise, which led to the development of implicit theory analysis. For example, Clayton and Birren (1980) surveyed young, middle-aged, and older individuals to find out how a “wise person” was understood. They found that cognitive (e.g., intelligent, pragmatic, and observant), reflective (e.g., intuitive and introspective), and affective (e.g., gentle, empathetic, and peaceful) dimensions of wisdom were shared by the three age groups. Similarly, Sternberg (1985) studied the relationships among the three concepts of “intelligence,” “creativity,” and “wisdom” in participants representative of the general population as well as art, business, philosophy, and physics professors. He reported that wisdom comprised “reasoning ability,” “sagacity,” “learning from ideas and the environment,” “judgment,” “expeditious use of information,” and “perspicacity.” Holliday and Chandler (1986) also examined young, middle-aged, and older individuals and extracted several wisdom factors: “exceptional understanding,” “judgment and communication skills,” “general competencies,” “interpersonal skills,” and “social unobtrusiveness.”

The majority of studies on wisdom have been conducted in Western countries, such as Germany or the US. Thus, most conventional wisdom scales and assessment methods are based on Western views of wisdom. For example, wisdom is defined as “expertise in the conduct and meaning of life” (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000) in the wisdom empirical method developed by the Berlin Group led by Baltes (Staudinger, Smith, & Baltes, 1994). In this assessment method, people with high functionality in the five criteria of wisdom (i.e., factual knowledge, procedural knowledge, lifespan contextualism, understanding value relativism, and awareness and management of uncertainty) are considered to possess wisdom. This is consistent with the Western concept of wisdom, which considers pragmatic skills such as practical knowledge and expertise in a specific field to be wisdom (Takahashi, 2000). The three-dimensional wisdom scale developed by Ardelet (2003) is also based on an implicit

theory analysis by Clayton and Birren (1980) conducted in the US.

However, the meaning of wisdom has been noted to vary across cultures. Takahashi (2000) described differences in the concept of wisdom in the West and East in a historical literary review. Yang (2001) reported “modesty and unobtrusiveness” as a factor of wisdom that was not found in Western implicit theory analysis and identified this as the defining characteristic of Taiwanese people’s concept of wisdom. Similarly, Hu et al. (2018) reported the “spirituality of disengagement” and a “positive mindset” as two characteristics of the Chinese concept of wisdom.

Although cultural differences in the conceptualization of wisdom have been noted, the few studies on wisdom in Japan still used foreign definitions and assessment methods (Kusumi, 2018; Takayama, Shimonaka, Nakazato, & Gondo, 2000). However, considering that there are cultural differences in views on wisdom, the direct application of foreign definitions and assessment methods in Japan may not be adequate. Rather, the facets composing “wisdom” according to Japanese people should be identified before attempting further studies on wisdom. Thus, this study aimed to elucidate the dimensions of wisdom according to Japanese people.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Fifteen individuals residing in Hyogo Prefecture (mean age  $74.13 \pm 8.05$ , range: 59–89) were included in this study. Ten were men ( $70.4 \pm 6.02$ , range: 59–84) and five were women ( $81.6 \pm 6.18$ , range: 72–89). The participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Participants were recruited from *kominkan* (public halls) and “life-long education centers.” We focused on the narrow range of the age group to avoid a possible cohort effect in the conceptualization of wisdom as reported in previous studies (Clayton & Birren, 1980; Holliday & Chandler, 1986; Hu et al., 2018). The study was conducted among middle-aged to older people based on the assumption that those with more life experiences should have a better understanding of “wisdom” (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./2014). Although there was a difference in the number of male and female participants, concepts of wisdom are known to be more strongly influenced by experiences than by gender (Orwoll & Perlmutter, 1990); thus, the unequal representation of genders in the sample is believed to have had minimal effects on the outcomes of the study.

TABLE 1.  
Participant characteristics

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Previously held job or occupation types
A	M	59	Service, political organization staff
B	F	85	Teacher
C	F	72	Service
D	F	77	Administrative
E	F	85	Administrative
F	M	84	Teacher
G	F	89	Teacher
H	M	67	Service
I	M	76	Manufacturing
J	M	70	Teacher
K	M	69	Engineer
L	M	70	Engineer, administrative
M	M	70	Public servant
N	M	69	Technical
O	M	70	Teacher

Note: Only Participant A was in his 50s. There was an eight-year gap between his age and that of the next-youngest participant, H. However, he did not mention anything that differed significantly from the others regarding concepts of wisdom.

## 2.2. Procedures

One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted. After explaining the purpose of the survey orally and obtaining informed consent, the participants were asked to start by filling out their basic information on the questionnaire. This was followed by 30-to-60-min interviews, which were recorded on an IC recorder with the participants' permission.

## 2.3. Questions

The participants were asked to describe 1) the characteristics of a "wise person," 2) their experiences related to wisdom, 3) the reasons why they believed that they had or did not have wisdom, and 4) their beliefs related to the functions of "wisdom." To ensure that the interviews could delve into highly abstract and difficult topics, the interview questions were not asked in a fixed manner. Furthermore, the order of the questions was switched if it was conducive to encouraging the participants to discuss specific episodes in a natural conversation.

## 2.4. Method of analysis

The analysis was performed using open coding from the grounded theory approach (Saiki-Craighill, 2006). The aim of the grounded theory approach is to seek a "theory" through the association of concepts, and it stresses gaining an accurate grasp of the concepts. Thus, we

adopted this method for the accurate extraction of the components of the complex concept of wisdom.

Verbatim transcriptions of the recorded audio data were created. First, two researchers independently read the verbatim transcriptions of two participants closely and selected parts of the dialogue pertaining to wisdom. Next, the reasons for selecting said parts were discussed, and these two researchers also checked whether they agreed in their interpretations of the content. After this process, one of the researchers continued with the analysis. The participants' utterances were broken into the smallest units that carried meaning, labelled, and classified based on the similarities and differences between them. These units, according to the grounded theory, are called "categories" and "subcategories." While the "categories" correspond to the wisdom dimensions found in previous studies, the "subcategories" are structurally similar to the factors included in these categories. After analyzing the first six participants' interview data, another researcher double-checked the utterances and their corresponding labels and categories. Items with potential label and category inaccuracies were discussed for further revision.

Following this, more participants were added, and one of the researchers performed the analysis as more data were obtained. The survey was completed when no new categories were encountered, after which the data from the entire sample were re-analyzed. Then, another researcher, who played a supervising role, checked the subcategories and categories and made revisions as needed when they were deemed unsuitable for expressing the content. Finally, additional two researchers independently created labels for all isolated utterances to determine how to best classify each utterance under the subcategories to improve the reliability of the results. Disputed label names and subcategory classifications were further discussed. The final categories and subcategories were determined when a consensus was reached among all the researchers involved.

### *2.5. Ethical considerations*

This study was conducted with approval of the ethics board of the School of Human Sciences of Osaka University (Approval no. Jin-kou 28-045).

## **3. Results**

The analysis revealed five categories as the dimensions of wisdom according to Japanese people: [Problem solving ability], [ability to prioritize (insight)], [plasticity], [harmony with others], and [disciplined life]. Each category contained two to eight subcategories, which are shown in Table 2 along with example utterances. In this article, categories are indicated with square brackets [ ], subcategories with angle brackets < >, and utterances with quotation marks " ".

### 3.1. [Problem solving ability]

<Factual knowledge> refers to the quality of possessing knowledge that forms the foundations of thought. This may relate to an amount of knowledge (e.g., “I know everything that others don’t know. That’s why I think I have wisdom” (Participant G)) or to the effective application of knowledge (e.g., “Take the example of proverbs. Some people can spontaneously use precise expressions to describe certain situations. They know what words or expressions to use so that others can understand them well” (Participant D)).

TABLE 2.  
Dimensions of wisdom according to Japanese people

Categories	Subcategories	Utterances
Problem solving ability	Factual knowledge	“I know everything that others don’t know. That’s why I think I have wisdom.” (Participant G) “Take the example of proverbs. Some people can spontaneously use precise expressions to describe certain situations. They know what words or expressions to use so that others can understand them well” (Participant D).
	Procedural knowledge	“For cleaning, we would have used a duster and wet newspapers...I believe that was wisdom, wetting newspapers and wringing it, placing them on the tatami and wiping using a broom.” (Participant B) “A truly mastered skill is something that only that person can do, regardless of whether they are able to [explain it] in words. These probably link to a kind of wisdom.” (Participant K)
	Organizational skills	“Take the example of a meal. [It’s important to think about] the feelings of the participants. First, it should be in a nice, clean and calm place with a good view...the meal itself should be decent, too. [...] That’s where I believe I apply my limited wisdom.” (Participant I) “For designing, you had to think well because you can’t do wasteful designing, finding out the financial plan as well. If you want to design economically, the costs [can’t] balloon—it really depends on individuals, so our designing uses wisdom for economic design.” (Participant L)
	Creative thinking	“Somebody with creativity. Someone who can come up with idea after idea. Someone who is not trapped in preconceived notions, and with creativity... I would say creativity. And someone with many ideas.” (Participant K) “Think about the times before Japan was developed. Think about building the battleship Yamato or Zero fighter planes from nothing. I can see that because I’m an engineer myself. The people who built them were able to fill the gap between what was known and what they were capable of. So, I believe those people really squeezed out their wisdom.” (Participant N)
	Leadership	“[Someone with wisdom] knows how to demonstrate leadership by stating their opinion when the others are facing a problem to direct them to a goal.” (Participant M) “I was forced to work like a horse [by the wise person], but that allowed me to learn many things.” (Participant M)
	Prudent responses	So, when someone talks to them about a problem...I don’t know what exactly, but such people are able to give good advice on whatever they are asked.” (Participant G) “Someone who can provide situation-adapted responses from moment to moment.” (Participant F)

Categories	Subcategories	Utterances
	Accomplishments	<p>“[A wise person] also needs to have execution skills. This is a must. There are too many people who are eager to give their input, but without ever doing anything. That’s an example of somebody whose wisdom isn’t being applied.” (Participant I)</p> <p>“To plan to actualize something, it can be affected by a multitude of things, from international affairs, domestic affairs—so it’s an incredible thing to be moving that. Those who accomplished it were the [leaders] of the Meiji Restoration. They moved the country and accomplished all that.” (Participant N)</p>
	Interpersonal skills	<p>“It’s very difficult to build good interpersonal relationships, even among family members. It takes wisdom to be able to do that, especially to be able to find happiness in it.” (Participant K)</p> <p>“As you age, you learn how to choose your battles. You realize you don’t need to fight over everything, and know which areas are the most important for self-asserting, mutually. And I believe that takes wisdom.” (Participant I)</p>
Ability to prioritize (Insight)	Discretion	<p>“[A wise person] delves deeply into problems.” (Participant C)</p> <p>“For example, [a wise person] wouldn’t just do something recklessly... [a wise person] is always thinking about how to answer if somebody said something; they would take a moment to think rather than show a thoughtless reaction.” (Participant D)</p>
	Larger perspectives	<p>“Let’s say I am trying to create a system. Wise people will have thought through to how the system ends while they are designing it.” (Participant N)</p> <p>“Something good for one person may be bad for the others. So [a wise person] sometimes has to choose a solution for the common good.” (Participant O)</p>
	Intuition	<p>“Coming up with an idea without thinking about trivial things in life.” (Participant B)</p> <p>“People who can carry an interesting conversation by, for example, telling a few jokes. [I think] they are [wise].” (Participant K)</p>
Plasticity	Rich life experience	<p>“Because they have been through many challenges and gained experience.” (Participant A)</p> <p>“If you have experienced something, it would come in handy. Without real experience, you wouldn’t be able to come up with those kinds of wise ideas.” (Participant I)</p>
	Intellectual curiosity	<p>“He doesn’t just do farm work; he goes to study about it. The other day he was telling me that he has been taking courses to get a boat license. I guess those types of people bring themselves to all sorts of places to study all sorts of things.” (Participant H)</p> <p>“Constantly watching and listening to different things, and making the effort to hear about objective views, not assumptions.” (Participant E)</p>
	Reflectivity	<p>“I believe it’s important to think over the assumptions and mistakes one may have that come from previous experiences, especially those that come from youth [lack of experience]. I believe these should be revised and dealt with through a new, age-adjusted stance that’s also better suited to oneself. I believe that’s the essence of wisdom.” (Participant E)</p> <p>“Someone who knows themselves pretty well. Knowing what they like, what they don’t like, what they’re capable of, what their weaknesses are—people who can see themselves with decent objectivity have wisdom.” (Participant J)</p>
	Flexibility	<p>“Let’s say you realize you can’t do something anymore today that you were able to do until yesterday. Of course you’ll feel down. But then it’s important to have a shift in mindset quickly, and live for tomorrow... That’s how I would describe my wisdom, which allows me to avoid being down and pessimistic.” (Participant A)</p> <p>“Something isn’t right just because it’s done the way it’s been done forever. And exploring new ideas takes wisdom.” (Participant M)</p>



Categories	Subcategories	Utterances
Harmony with others	Courtesy	“Someone with common sense. Things that normal people understand. Being able to speak properly, being able to respond properly, being able to answer questions properly.” (Participant D) “Living a communal life [wisely] takes someone who respects norms: someone who can’t do basic things like greet somebody, or offer a seat to an old person—a person like that is no good.” (Participant H)
	Compassion	“A person who can imagine hardships of others, or the difficult challenges they have overcome—when he or she hears a bit about their families, that person can picture that they must have had a lot of things going on.” (Participant A) “Perhaps [she] said it to mean that she doesn't really want to cause trouble to people she knows, or she wants them to live with confidence.” (Participant J)
	<i>Okage</i> (Sense of gratitude)	“I don’t mean people who believe in [a particular] god, but [I believe wise people] feel thankful toward events and situations, to people, to things, and feel thankful to nature, too.” (Participant C) “So, the belief that you are always protected by somebody, and working hard and earnestly...” (Participant C)
	Altruism	“[A wise person seems to be] thinking not just about oneself, but about others, always thinking all sorts of things for them, taking care of them, that’s what [the wise person] does.” (Participant H) “Someone who doesn’t mind getting hurt a bit himself if it’s going to help somebody out.” (Participant N)
	Humbleness	“Not acting cocky, even though they’re smart.” (Participant C) “That person would never say it, but he always makes me think that he has researched it in advance. [...] Some people would say it themselves, but that wouldn’t give me the impression that they are wise.” (Participant H)
Disciplined life	Actions with strong will	“[He was] thinking seriously about society. Will coming up with theories in that academic area make money? No. It might seem corrupt, but I would think of things that would make money, like writing a popular book. But he would rather be poor, gather references, and was creating his own theory while neglecting his family” (Participant A) “[A wise person is] pretty brave, he’s a man. He’s able to say whatever he needs to say firmly.” (Participant L)
	Existential understanding	“Having decided how to live one’s life” (Participant E) “[A wise person is] someone who has contemplated what it should mean to be human” (Participant N).

<Procedural knowledge> refers to having knowledge of the series of steps needed for successful attempts, life skills, and ingenuity developed by forebears, and in the traditional arts; e.g., “A truly mastered skill is something that only that person can do, regardless of whether they are able to [explain it] in words. These probably link to a kind of wisdom.” Participant K described a series of strategies that have been acquired through practice.

<Organizational skills> refers to the ability to create a plan and execute it in the best order to accommodate a given set of conditions. This is exemplified by the utterance “Take the example of a meal. [It’s important to think about] the feelings of the participants. First, it should be in a nice, clean, and calm place with a good view...the meal itself should be decent, too. [...] That’s where I believe I apply my limited wisdom” (Participant I). The comments in this subcategory were related to the ability to organize steps to fit the given conditions.

<Creative thinking> denotes the ingenuity to allow something to develop and evolve, such as devising methods to achieve a goal or conceiving new ideas, e.g., “Somebody with creativity. Someone who can come up with idea after idea. Someone who is not trapped in preconceived notions, and with creativity... I would say creativity. And someone with many ideas” (Participant K). The participants’ comments related to this subcategory thus included utterances regarding the ability to conceive new ideas without being caught up in fixed notions.

<Leadership> refers to the ability to lead and engage others. For example, it may refer to the ability to guide groups of people, as mentioned by Participant M: “[Someone with wisdom] knows how to demonstrate leadership by stating their opinion when the others are facing a problem to direct them to a goal.”

<Prudent responses> refers to the ability to provide appropriate, flexible, and quick responses and more broadly refers to the ability to make sound and suitable judgments in a given event. This may refer to the ability to give appropriate advice, e.g., “So, when someone talks to them about a problem...I don’t know what exactly, but such people are able to give good advice on whatever they are asked” (Participant G). It is also the ability to provide flexible and adaptive measures, e.g., “Someone who can provide situation-adapted responses from moment to moment” (Participant F).

<Accomplishments> refers to the ability to take action to fulfill objectives. This is exemplified by Participant I’s comment on converting concepts and ideas into action: “[A wise person] also needs to have execution skills. This is a must. There are too many people who are eager to give their input, but without ever doing anything. That’s an example of somebody whose wisdom isn’t being applied.”

<Interpersonal skills> signifies possessing the social skills necessary for maintaining good human relationships or making amicable negotiations. This was evident in the example provided by Participant I on the ability to achieve a balance between assertion and compromise: “As you age, you learn how to choose your battles. You realize you don’t need to fight over everything, and know which areas are the most important for self-asserting, mutually. And I believe that takes wisdom.”

### 3.2. *[Ability to prioritize (Insight)]*

<Discretion> signifies the attitude of considering things thoughtfully before making judgments. For example, Participant D mentioned “thinking before leaping” in her comment: “For example, [a wise person] wouldn’t just do something recklessly ...[a wise person] is always thinking about how to answer if somebody said something; they would take a moment to think rather than show a thoughtless reaction.”

<Larger perspectives> signifies objective and comprehensive points of view; problem-solving that takes into account both the future and present of the problem; and an attitude

of viewing the “big picture” of events, situations, or problems. Comments related to this subcategory mentioned the attitude of seeking a comprehensive perspective, e.g., “Let’s say I am trying to create a system. Wise people will have thought through to how the system ends while they are designing it” (Participant N).

<Intuition> refers to the ability to understand the essence of things instantaneously and find solutions without pondering the theoretical aspects. Participant B’s ideas about spontaneous thoughts and sharp intuitions are an example: “Coming up with an idea without thinking about trivial things in life.”

### 3.3. *[Plasticity]*

<Rich life experience> refers to having a rich set of previous experiences. For example, “If you have experienced something, it would come in handy. Without real experience, you wouldn’t be able to come up with those kinds of wise ideas” (Participant I).

<Intellectual curiosity> refers to a strong sense of interest, and is accompanied by active efforts to take in varied information and inquire deeply about objects that captivate their interest. For example, as one participant mentioned of his highly inquisitive acquaintance, “He doesn’t just do farm work; he goes to study about it. The other day he was telling me that he has been taking courses to get a boat license. I guess those types of people bring themselves to all sorts of places to study all sorts of things.” (Participant H).

<Reflectivity> refers to the attitude of reflecting on past experiences and mistakes so that the lessons learned can be applied toward future success. For example, as Participant E answered about the importance of constructive self-reflection, “I believe it’s important to think over the assumptions and mistakes that one may have that come from previous experiences, especially those that come from youth [lack of experience]. I believe these should be revised and dealt with through a new, age-adjusted stance that’s also better suited to oneself. I believe that’s the essence of wisdom.”

<Flexibility> refers to the ability to change one’s mind and be able to alter perspectives flexibly without being fixated on a particular set of values or information. For example, Participant A said the following of his ability to see things from a different angle: “Let’s say you realize you can’t do something anymore today that you were able to do until yesterday. Of course you’ll feel down. But then it’s important to have a shift in mindset quickly, and live for tomorrow... That’s how I would describe my wisdom, which allows me to avoid being down and pessimistic.”

### 3.4. *[Harmony with others]*

<Courtesy> signifies behaviors in line with cultural rules, such as common sense, ethical values, and etiquette and manners. For example, “Someone with common sense. Things that normal people understand. Being able to speak properly, being able to respond properly, being

able to answer questions properly” (Participant D) is a description of attitudes that are in line with common sense.

<Compassion> refers to having empathy for others’ situations and emotions. For example, Participant J commented on cherishing others: “Perhaps [she] said it to mean that she doesn't really want to cause trouble to people she knows, or she wants them to live with confidence.”

<*Okage* (sense of gratitude)> refers to the awareness that processes and their outcomes are never linked exclusively to one’s own abilities, but are affected by many external forces, too. For example, as Participant C mentioned in describing thankfulness toward everything, “I don’t mean people who believe in [a particular] god, but [I believe wise people] feel thankful toward events and situations, to people, to things, and feel thankful to nature, too.”

<Altruism> refers to the readiness to act for the benefit of others. An example is Participant H’s comment on exerting oneself for others: “[A wise person seems to be] thinking not just about oneself, but about others, always thinking all sorts of things for them, taking care of them, that’s what [the wise person] does.”

<Humbleness> refers to having an acquiescent attitude and not becoming arrogant about one’s powers, abilities, or accomplishments. As Participant C shared, this relates to not being ostentatious about one’s skills or not talking about how much effort they have put into something to others: “Not acting cocky, even though they’re smart.”

### 3.5. *[Disciplined life]*

<Actions with strong will> refers to having a strong will in life, and the ability to advance toward it, as exemplified by the comment by Participant L on a strong will to pursue justice and a sense of mission: “[The wise person is] pretty brave, he’s a man. He’s able to say whatever he needs to say firmly.”

<Existential understanding> refers to having strong beliefs about how to live one’s life. For example, Participant E mentioned the importance of deciding how to live “Having decided how to live one’s life,” and Participant N talked about the pursuit of the human *raison d’être*: “[A wise person is] someone who has contemplated what it should mean to be human.”

## 4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to elucidate the dimensions of wisdom according to Japanese people. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with middle-aged and older people, and the analysis according to the grounded theory led to the identification of five “categories” or dimensions. In the following section, these dimensions will be compared to previous studies and discussed with reference to the characteristics of Japanese culture.

#### 4.1. *Dimensions of wisdom according to Japanese people*

Category 1 was [problem solving ability], and some of its subcategories, including <factual knowledge>, <procedural knowledge>, <organizational skills>, <creative thinking>, and <prudent responses>, can be interpreted as being related to the pragmatic aspect of wisdom. These characteristics were the focus of the Berlin Group (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Staudinger, Smith, & Baltes, 1994), and similar to the ability to utilize tacit knowledge mentioned by Sternberg (1998). In Yang's implicit theory study (2001), over half of the people who were highlighted as being wise possessed <leadership> skills (Yang, 2008, 2013). <Interpersonal skills> was emphasized as a facet of wisdom by Holliday and Chandler (1986). Other implicit theory studies have also highlighted dimensions related to interpersonal relationships (Hu et al., 2018; Sternberg, 1985; Yang, 2001); thus, this is likely one important aspect of wisdom.

<Accomplishments> is a wisdom factor that was not observed in past implicit theory analyses. In his account of the characteristics of the ethics of Japanese people, Nitobe (1899/1938) mentioned the concept of 勇 *yu*, or courage. According to Nitobe, 勇 *yu* refers to bravery, persistence, and more broadly, to the ability to take action to achieve 義 *gi*, which refers to the way that one believes is just. That is, it is important to understand the direction in which one should advance, but the ability to actually execute it lies at the spiritual backbone of Japanese people. This <accomplishments> may also exist implicitly in the Western concept of wisdom; the fact that it was drawn out explicitly in this study seems to demonstrate that it is the characterizing trait of Japanese wisdom.

Category 2, [ability to prioritize (insight)], referred to determining the orientation of events or situations. <Discretion>, <larger perspective>, and <intuition> are factors that have been extracted in numerous implicit theory analyses, and they likely correspond to the reflective dimension of Clayton and Birren (1980).

Category 3, [plasticity], implied changing emotional states or behaviors. This is also a category that has been confirmed in previous implicit theory analysis. <Intellectual curiosity> and <rich life experience> likely correspond to the cognitive dimension of Clayton and Birren (1980), and <reflectivity> and <flexibility> likely correspond to the reflective dimension. In particular, <reflectivity> and <flexibility> are viewed as important developmental aspects of wisdom (Ardelt, 2003; Takahashi & Overton, 2002).

Category 4, [harmony with others], was associated with living harmoniously in society. <Compassion> and an <altruism> are mentioned in many previous studies. <Compassion> likely corresponds to the affective dimension of Clayton and Birren (1980). An <altruism> could also be explained as the attitude of pursuing the “common good,” as emphasized by Sternberg (1998).

A <humbleness> was not discussed in studies from Western countries, but it matches the “modesty and unobtrusiveness” described by Yang (2001) as characteristics of Taiwanese

people's concept of wisdom. Thus, a <humbleness> could be a factor of wisdom specific to the Asian region.

Common sense and ethics included in <courtesy> are also described in Western studies, but they were interpreted as a tool for better problem-solving (Holliday & Chandler, 1986; Kupperman, 2005). In contrast, the common sense and ethics and morality observed in this study were a set of general values founded in the Japanese culture, and people referred to respecting such common sense or ethics as normal and fundamental. That is, <courtesy> within this study signifies the integrated Japanese values that form the basis of people's behaviors and actions.

<Okage (sense of gratitude)> was another factor previously unidentified. Kaneko (1997) explained that *okage* is a fundamental part of the nature of Japanese people. *Okage*, according to Kaneko, is the sentiment that one is being helped and protected by gods and ancestral spirits. For people predominantly in agricultural, non-nomad, society, like the Japanese, nature is both a blessing and a threat; thus, Japanese people tend to recognize that various events or phenomena are a result of a multitude of factors such as natural forces, ancestral spirits, or gods (Shinto's *kami* or Buddhist's *hotoke*), rather than the result of an individual's powers (Kaneko, 1997). This deep awareness of *okage* is likely represented in the <*okage* (sense of gratitude)> as an aspect associated with wisdom.

A <humbleness>, <courtesy>, and a <*okage* (sense of gratitude)> can also be understood to reflect the Eastern notion of non-split, i.e., the perception of self as defined by one's relationship with society (Takahashi, 2000). In other words, in societies where the individual is considered inseparable from and contextualized within society or the environment, being reserved and <humble> or having <*okage* (a sense of gratitude)> are considered virtues. Furthermore, in such cultures, it is important to carry oneself in harmony and not stand out from the crowd (Nisbett, 2003/ 2004). Thus, <courtesy> is likely to be founded on such cultural backgrounds that emphasize harmony.

Category 5, [disciplined life], signified living according to one's chosen principles. This category seems similar to the ego development proposed by Erikson (1982). However, Erikson theorized that identity is revised by overcoming the crises encountered through the various developmental stages. In contrast to this, utterances that were classified under <actions with strong will> signified a strong will for justice or for society, representing more of a sense of mission or social obligation. Utterances that were classified under <existential understanding> also referred to beliefs regarding individual and personal disciplines, which likely reflects the significance of discovering one's own path within the greater dynamics of society or humanity. That is, importance is placed on ascertaining how one should function in society rather than on understanding one's individual identity in the concept of wisdom for the Japanese. Furthermore, <existential understanding> and <actions with strong will> likely correspond to Nitobe's (1899/ 1938) 義 *gi* (the path that one believes is just) and 勇 *yu* (the

strength to execute 義 *gi*), respectively; thus, these subcategories can be understood as relating to the morals and ethics of the Japanese.

Many of the categories or dimensions of wisdom identified in this study overlapped with those from previous studies. At the same time, <courtesy> and <*okage* (sense of gratitude)> were identified as unique factors of wisdom that comprised these dimensions. Further, a <humbleness> was identified as a factor common to Asian cultures, pointing to the importance of harmony in Japanese people's assessments of wisdom. In addition, <actions with strong will>, <existential understanding>, and the <accomplishments> are also factors that were not mentioned in Western studies, suggesting that having the ability to take action toward a chosen way of life is an important aspect of Japanese people's assessment of wisdom. Future studies should thus incorporate such cultural characteristics in their investigations.

#### *4.2. Wisdom for Japanese people and its structure*

This study revealed several wisdom dimensions according to Japanese people. The following section will interpret the structure of the state of “being wise” based on these dimensions.

Kasuga, Sato and Takahashi (2018) explained wisdom in two aspects: the functional and the structural. The functional aspect is involved in how wisdom works and signifies practical skills (e.g., the ability to apply knowledge and interpersonal skills) in behaviors that are considered wise (e.g., giving effective advice to others). The structural aspect, on the other hand, refers to psychological characteristics associated with wisdom (e.g., kindness toward others, a reflective attitude, and a wide perspective). Finally, psychological maturity (structural aspect) allows for maximizing one's superior abilities (functional aspect).

Among the dimensions that were identified in this study, [problem solving ability] was composed of factors related to practical skills; thus, it can be interpreted as corresponding to the functional aspects of wisdom. Furthermore, [ability to prioritize (insight)], [plasticity], [harmony with others], and [disciplined life] were composed of factors related to psychological characteristics; thus, they can be considered as corresponding to the structural aspects of wisdom.

Moreover, the participants' comments suggested that higher pragmatic skills (functional aspect) are based on psychological maturity (structural aspect). Here, we refer back to the example of Participant I: “As you age, you learn how to choose your battles. You realize you don't need to fight over everything, and know which areas are the most important for self-asserting, mutually. And I believe that takes wisdom.” This comment seems to show that structural aspects such as <rich life experience>, or the accumulation of various experiences over the years; a <reflectivity> to reflect back on such experiences; <flexibility>, which allows for altering one's own mind and behaviors through self-reflection; and <compassion>, which entails empathy for others, are involved in the process of maximizing superior <interpersonal

skills> (functional aspect).

As described above, the dimensions of wisdom according to Japanese people identified in this study can be interpreted within the framework of functional and structural aspects (Kasuga, Sato & Takahashi, 2018). Discussion within such theoretical frameworks is critical in future studies of wisdom.

#### *4.3. Limitations and future directions*

The participants in this study were limited to middle-aged and older individuals. The reasons for this were explained earlier; nonetheless, a wider range of ages, including younger participants, should be surveyed and compared for a more detailed understanding of the conceptual structures of wisdom for Japanese people.

We aimed to understand the dimensions of wisdom; however, it is not necessarily true that all people who are regarded by others as having wisdom actually possess all of the characteristics associated with wisdom to high degrees. That is, wise people may be highly diverse and their wisdom might represent different aspects of wisdom, such as those who are specialized in interpersonal relationships and others who are experts only in intellectual activities. This is a point that merits investigation in future studies.

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