

How Wise People Cope *with* Crises and Obstacles *in* Life

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God grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change;
Courage to change the things I can;
And the wisdom to know the difference.
—Serenity Prayer

Wisdom is often believed to be the quintessence of successful human development (Erikson 1963; Erikson, Erikson, and Kivnick 1986; Hart 1987; Staudinger and Pasupathi 2003). Wise people are considered to be exceptionally mature, integrated, satisfied with life, able to make decisions in difficult and uncertain life matters, and capable of dealing with any crisis and obstacle that they encounter (Ardelt 2000a, 2000b; Assmann 1994; Baltes and Freund 2003; Baltes and Kunzmann 2003; Bianchi 1994; Clayton 1982; Dittmann-Kohli and

Baltes 1990; Kekes 1983, 1995; Kramer 2000; Kunzmann and Baltes 2003; Sternberg 1990b, 1998; Vaillant 1993, 2002). In fact, 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 (Ardelt 1998; Bianchi 1994; Kramer 1990; Pascual-Leone 2000). According to Pascual-Leone (2000), “. . . *ultimate limit situations* that cannot be undone and are nonetheless faced with consciousness and resolve—situations like death, illness, aging, irremediable oppression or loss, extreme poverty, rightful resistance or rebellion, guilt, absolute failure, danger, uncontrollable fear, etc., lead to the natural emergence of a transcendental self, if they do not destroy the person first” (247, emphasis in the original).

Yet, no research to date has analyzed what wise individuals actually do when

confronted with hardship and obstacles in life. The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study was to examine how relatively wise older people cope with

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life crises in comparison to older people relatively low on wisdom. An in-depth analysis was performed of six semi-structured qualitative interviews with older adults (ages fifty-nine to eighty-five) who had been asked about the most pleasant and most unpleasant events in their lives and how they had coped with the unpleasant events. Results show that the three older persons who scored and were rated as relatively high on wisdom were more reflective and used more active coping strategies than did the three elders who scored and were rated as relatively low on wisdom. As a consequence, the three relatively wise elders gained in wisdom through their encounter with crises and obstacles in life, whereas respondents who scored and were judged as relatively low on wisdom had great difficulties in coping with severe hardship in life.

Definition of Wisdom

Before the question of how wise people cope with crises and obstacles in life can be examined, one first has to define what wisdom is. Even after two and a half decades of contemporary wisdom research, however, a uniform definition of wisdom still does not exist. Some current wisdom definitions are derived from explicit (expert) theories of wisdom, whereas others are based on implicit (lay) theories of wisdom, and those definitions can be further distinguished according to the wisdom traditions of the West or the East and whether they refer to personal or general wisdom (Sternberg and Jordan 2005). For example, explicit theories define wisdom as expert knowledge in the fundamental pragmatics of life (life planning, management, and review) and in the conduct and meaning of life (Baltes and Smith 1990; Baltes and Staudinger 2000; Baltes et al. 1995; Dittmann-Kohli and Baltes 1990; Smith and Baltes 1990; Smith, Staudinger, and Baltes 1994); as “the application of tacit knowledge as mediated by values toward the achievement of a common good through a balance among multiple (a) intrapersonal, (b) interpersonal, and (c) extrapersonal interests in order to achieve a balance among (a) adaptation to existing environments, (b) shaping of existing environments, and (c) selection

of new environments” (Sternberg 1998, 347); as the transformation of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal experiences in the domains of personality, cognition, and conation (will, desire, resolve) (Achenbaum and Orwoll 1991); or as “seeing through illusion,” which entails (a) recognizing the illusion of a false belief, (b) freedom from the temptation of the illusion, and (c) sympathetic understanding of others who are under the spell of the illusion (McKee and Barber 1999).

Implicit wisdom theories, which categorize how most lay people perceive wisdom, define wisdom as a combination of cognitive, reflective, and affective personality characteristics (Clayton and Birren 1980); as exceptional understanding, judgment and communication skills, general competencies, interpersonal skills, and social unobtrusiveness (Holliday and Chandler 1986); or as reasoning ability, sagacity, learning from ideas and environment, judgment, expeditious use of information, and perspicacity (Sternberg 1990a). Furthermore, Takahashi and Bordia (2000) have shown that Western undergraduate students emphasize the cognitive dimension of wisdom, whereas for Eastern undergraduate students wisdom consists of both cognitive and affective dimensions.

Overall, most definitions of wisdom describe the concept as a multidimensional and multifaceted construct with cognitive, reflective, and affective (emotional) elements that are inherently related to each other (Baltes and Staudinger 2000; Manheimer 1992; Sternberg 1990b; Sternberg and Jordan 2005; Taranto 1989; Vaillant 2002; Webster 2003). My own definition of wisdom as a combination of cognitive, reflective, and affective dimensions derives from Clayton and Birren’s groundbreaking research on implicit wisdom (1980), but it has been developed to include explicit theories of wisdom from both the Western and Eastern wisdom traditions. Table 1 summarizes the definition and operationalization of the three-dimensional wisdom model that was used in the present research. More detailed descriptions of the wisdom model are available in Ardel (1997, 2003, 2004).

The *cognitive wisdom dimension* represents a deep and clear understand-

ing of life and the desire to know the significance and deeper meaning of life, particularly as it relates to intrapersonal and interpersonal phenomena and events (Ardelt 2000b; Blanchard-Fields and Norris 1995; Chandler and Holliday 1990; Kekes 1983; Sternberg 1990a). That requires knowledge and acceptance of the positive and negative aspects of human nature, of the inherent limits of knowledge, and of life’s unpredictability and uncertainties. However, a deep and unbiased understanding of life is only possible after one has “seen through illusion” (McKee and Barber 1999) and transcended one’s subjectivity and projections to perceive reality as it is. That is the task of the *reflective wisdom dimension*. By looking at phenomena and events from many different perspectives and by engaging in self-examination, self-awareness, and self-insight, one can gradually overcome one’s subjectivity and projections, perceive and accept the reality of the present moment, and gain a more thorough and sympathetic understanding of oneself and others (Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde 1990; Hart 1987; Kekes 1995; Levitt 1999; Taranto 1989). The likely result is a reduction in self-centeredness and an increase in sympathetic and compassionate love for others, which characterizes the *affective wisdom dimension* (Achenbaum and Orwoll 1991; Clayton and Birren 1980; Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde 1990; Holliday and Chandler 1986; Kramer 1990; Levitt 1999; Orwoll and Achenbaum 1993; Pascual-Leone 1990).

Based on those definitions, it is not surprising that wise people are presumed to have developed an integrated personality, exceptional maturity, superior judgment skills in difficult life matters, and the ability to cope with life’s vicissitudes (Ardelt 2000a, 2000b; Assmann 1994; Baltes and Freund 2003; Bianchi 1994; Clayton 1982; Dittmann-Kohli and Baltes 1990; Kekes 1983, 1995; Kramer 2000; Kunzmann and Baltes 2003; Sternberg 1990b, 1998; Vaillant 1993, 2002). The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study is to investigate what exactly wise people do to cope successfully with crises and obstacles in their lives.

Methods

Procedure

Between December 1997 and June 1998 one hundred eighty older adults were recruited from eighteen civic, community, or church groups in north central Florida to participate in a "Personality and Aging Well Study." The primary purpose of this study was the development and empirical assessment of a three-dimensional wisdom scale (Ardelt 2003), but the researchers did not inform participants of this goal to avoid biasing the results in a socially desirable direction.

Respondents completed a self-administered standardized questionnaire that contained one hundred thirty-two potential wisdom items, which were selected primarily from existing scales to assess the cognitive, reflective, and affective dimensions of wisdom as operationalized in Table 1. After extensive empirical tests that demonstrated the validity and reliability of the scale, thirty-nine items were chosen for the final version of the three-dimensional wisdom scale (3D-WS). The cognitive dimension contains fourteen items (for example, "Ignorance is bliss";

"People are either good or bad"; "I am hesitant about making important decisions after thinking about them"—all items in this dimension represent the *absence* rather than the presence of the cognitive characteristic of wisdom), the reflective dimension twelve items (for example, "When I am confused by a problem, one of the first things I do is survey the situation and consider all the relevant pieces of information"; "When I'm upset at someone, I usually try to 'put myself in his or her shoes' for a while"; "I always try to look at all sides of a problem"), and the affective dimension thirteen items (for example, "I can be comfortable with all kinds of people"; "Sometimes I feel a real compassion for everyone"; "If I see people in need, I try to help them one way or another"). All items were measured on one of two five-point scales, ranging either from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) or from 1 (not true of myself) to 5 (definitely true of myself).

Ten months after the initial study, semistructured qualitative interviews were conducted with ten respondents who scored relatively low on each of the cognitive, reflective, and affective dimen-

sions of the 3D-WS or the average of the three dimensions of the 3D-WS, eighteen respondents who had median scores on the 3D-WS, and twelve respondents who scored relatively high on the 3D-WS (see Ardel 2003 for details). Participants were asked about the most pleasant and most unpleasant events that they experienced during the last week, month, year, and their entire life by interviewers who were not aware that the ultimate purpose of the study was to test the validity of a three-dimensional wisdom scale. Respondents were also asked what they did to cope and deal with the unpleasant events, based on the assumption that wise persons might use coping strategies that reflect their cognitive, reflective, and affective skills and that they might have learned those skills through the successful mastery of crises and hardships in the past (Ardelt 1998; Park 1998; Park and Fenster 2004). Although the focus of the research was how older people coped with crises and obstacles in life, interviewers first asked about pleasant events during the past week to "break the ice" and then alternately inquired about pleasant and unpleasant events to prevent the respondent's stress level from rising and to allow

TABLE 1. Definition and Operationalization of Wisdom as a Three-dimensional Personality Characteristic

Dimension	Definition	Operationalization
Cognitive	A deep and clear understanding of life and a desire to know the truth, that is, to comprehend the significance and deeper meaning of phenomena and events, particularly with regard to intrapersonal and interpersonal matters. Includes knowledge and acceptance of the positive and negative aspects of human nature, of the inherent limits of knowledge, and of life's unpredictability and uncertainties.	Scale items and ratings assess - the ability and willingness to understand a situation or phenomenon thoroughly - knowledge of the positive and negative aspects of human nature - acknowledgement of ambiguity and uncertainty in life - the ability to make important decisions despite life's unpredictability and uncertainties
Reflective	A perception of phenomena and events from multiple perspectives. Requires self-examination, self-awareness, and self-insight.	Scale items and ratings assess - the ability and willingness to look at phenomena and events from different perspectives - the absence of subjectivity and projections (that is, the tendency to blame other people or circumstances for one's own situation or feelings)
Affective	Sympathetic and compassionate love for others.	Scale items and ratings assess - the presence of positive emotions and behavior toward others - the absence of indifferent or negative emotions and behavior toward others

Adapted from Ardel, M., 2004. Wisdom as expert knowledge system: A critical review of a contemporary operationalization of an ancient concept. *Human Development* 47:257-85.

pleasant memories to interrupt the unpleasant memories. The interviews, which took between thirty and sixty minutes to complete, were tape-recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

The transcribed qualitative interviews were rated by three independent judges according to the degree of cognitive, reflective, and affective characteristics that the respondents displayed on scales ranging from 0 (not at all) to 10 (very much). Two of the three raters were blind to the ultimate purpose of the study, and all three judges were unaware of the respondents' scores on the 3D-WS. Ratings were based on a list of one hundred and twenty-seven wisdom characteristics that was derived from three empirical studies on implicit theories of wisdom (Clayton and Birren 1980; Holliday and Chandler 1986; Sternberg 1990a). The one hundred and twenty-seven characteristics had been sorted earlier into five areas (cognitive, reflective, and affective components of wisdom, equanimity, and maturity) by a different set of four independent raters. The designation of individual items for which unanimous interrater agreement for one of the five areas could not be obtained was discussed and decided jointly by all raters. The finished list contained forty cognitive characteristics, twenty-four reflective characteristics, seventeen affective characteristics, and eight characteristics each for equanimity and maturity.

The three judges who rated the transcribed semistructured qualitative interviews were first trained on two practice interviews to apply the list of cognitive, reflective, and affective characteristics before they independently rated all forty qualitative interviews. Interrater agreement for the three ratings was moderately high with Cronbach's alpha values of .61, .75, and .64 for the cognitive, reflective, and affective dimensions of wisdom, respectively. The ratings of the three judges were first averaged for the cognitive, reflective, and affective dimensions separately, and then the three dimensions were averaged to form one composite wisdom rating.

Selection and description of cases

The purpose of this study was to compare cases that come closest to the

"ideal type" (Weber 1980) or pure type of a relatively wise person with cases that resemble the "ideal type" of a person lacking in wisdom. Hence, the qualitative interviews of three respondents who were rated relatively high on wisdom (greater than an 8-point average on the three 0-10 scales) and had a relatively high score on the 3D-WS (greater than a 4-point average on the three 1-5 scales) were compared with the qualitative interviews of three respondents who were rated relatively low on wisdom (less than a 5.5 average on the three 0-10 scales) and scored relatively low on the 3D-WS (less than a 3-point average on the three 1-5 scales). Those respondents represent the most extreme cases in the sample that are certainly not typical of older people in general or even of the remaining 34 respondents in the sample. Most people will be wiser in one area than in another, and they might use "wise" coping strategies for some problems while utilizing inappropriate coping strategies for other problems. However, by analyzing the most extreme cases available, the coping strategies of relatively wise older people can be contrasted with the coping strategies of older adults relatively low on wisdom, which should accentuate and highlight possible differences.

The three cases in the relatively high wisdom category are James, a seventy-seven-year-old African-American retired school administrator with a graduate degree, Claire, a fifty-nine-year-old White homemaker with ten years of schooling, and Edna, an eighty-five-year-old White homemaker with a high school degree. The relatively low wisdom category is represented by Agnes, an eighty-two-year-old African-American retired worker with eight years of schooling, Marcella, a sixty-one-year-old African-American retired hospital worker with eleven years of schooling, and Wilma, an eighty-two-year-old White homemaker and retired farm worker with twelve years of schooling but no high school degree. All names are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the respondents.

None of the respondents was spared from hardship in life. James witnessed death and devastation as a soldier in World War II and slipped into a severe

depression after he returned from the war and saw "how reckless and carelessly Americans were living." Four years later, he had another severe episode of depression when his marriage fell apart. Claire had seven children from nine pregnancies. One of her sons had cerebral palsy, but she refused to place him in a home, even though she had a fifteen-month-old child when he was born and three children after him. She told the doctors, "This baby, all he needs is love, and somebody to take care of him, I would put my healthy kids in a home first, instead of putting a baby in there that can't talk for himself." Edna experienced economic hardship during the Great Depression when she was newly married, had three family members die within the course of one week in 1949, survived several tornadoes, and had to cope with the death of her husband after fifty-nine years of marriage. Agnes' oldest son died suddenly and unexpectedly two years prior to the interview. Marcella witnessed the death of her husband of forty-seven years from lung cancer after several months of suffering. Wilma grew up with an alcoholic father and married a man whom she loved deeply but who "was awfully sickly" for about twenty-five years until he passed away twenty-four years ago.

Analysis

All interviews were analyzed in-depth, using a sentence-by-sentence analysis procedure as well as a method that is best described as analytic induction (Katz 2001). The analysis of the first case (James) served to build a preliminary theory of how wise people cope with crises and obstacles in their life. The two other cases in this category were then introduced to confirm or modify the theory. Coping strategies that were utilized by all three respondents became an integral part of the theory, whereas coping strategies that were used by only one or two of the respondents were investigated further to see if and in which way they were compatible with the strategies used by the other respondents. Subsequently, the three cases in the relatively low wisdom category were analyzed in the same manner. Then the coping strategies in the rela-

tively high wisdom category were compared to the coping strategies in the relatively low wisdom category by focusing on the essential differences between the strategies. This resulted in the discovery of "higher-order" coping strategies that can be summarized as mental distancing, active coping, and application of life lessons for relatively wise elders and as passive coping and avoidance of reflection for older people relatively low on wisdom.

Results

Coping strategies of relatively high wisdom respondents

Interestingly, all three relatively high wisdom respondents had difficulties thinking about their most unpleasant events during the past week, month, or year because there was a general consensus that life is good and enjoyable. James remarked, "That's hard. When you enjoy life like I do, that's hard. . . . Very few unpleasant things happen to me. I find life beautiful. I'm enjoying things that I'm going through." Edna concurred, "I experience many pleasant things all the time. . . . Well, really, I haven't experienced any unpleasant things [in the last month]." Claire implicitly summarized the sentiment of all by stating, "I don't have time for unpleasant things."

Of course, that does not mean that these elders had an easy life. On the contrary, and as described above, all three experienced severe crises and hardships in their lives. However, they did not allow crises and hardships to defeat their spirit and prevent them from enjoying life. They learned how to cope with crises and obstacles in life, which prepared them to face the physical and social challenges of old age, such as declines in physical health and the loss of loved ones (Ardelt 1998; Bianchi 1994; Caspi and Elder 1986; Giesen and Datan 1980).

Wise elders appeared to use three "higher-order" or metastrategies when coping with crises and obstacles in their life: First, they mentally distanced themselves from the situation by taking a step back to relax and calm down; second, they actively coped with the challenge by doing whatever needed to be

done and could be done; and third, they applied the life lessons that they had learned.

Mental distancing

The three relatively wise elders did not allow a crisis to overpower them. They took a step back, reflected on the situation, calmed down, and took time to look at the problem objectively and to think about it from an emotional distance. James, who was the most reflective of the six respondents—perhaps due to his more advanced educational degree in comparison to the other respondents—expressed his mental preparation in this way:

Normally when something . . . comes up that I'm unhappy about, the first thing I do is completely relax. Completely relax and say to myself, "I'll get through it." Or, "It will work out some way." . . . Usually, if I'll relax and give whatever the problem is some thought, don't try to solve it right then, just give it some thought, and it'll come to me. I don't know how, but it'll just come to me and work itself out. But the thing is not to get frustrated over it.

By not getting frustrated and trusting that the problem can somehow be solved, mental energies can be preserved and applied for the solution of the crisis rather than being engaged in worrying about the problem. It is definitely easier to deal with a problem if one is calm and open to possible solutions rather than nervous, agitated, and sick with worry.

Claire claimed that she did not dwell on unpleasant events and, hence, refused to be overpowered by them. Edna tried to stay calm even if the situation was very upsetting to others. She told the interviewer how she coped with trying to escape from a hurricane with her family by seeking shelter in a small church only to end up in the middle of a tornado.

Well, I don't know what kind of a personality I have. I have fear and anger and all that, but I try to, oh, I guess I do control it. I had to control it for the others. . . . And, of course, I can't deny it because I don't know, but I guess I had a certain amount of calmness. Now whether it's just from experience or whether I really didn't feel calm, no, because I know how dangerous the hurricanes are. But I didn't fall apart. I, and that was mostly for [my family's] benefit, because they couldn't

take it. So they said, "How could you do that, mother? How could you sleep on that bench [in the church in the middle of the tornado]?" I said, "Well, I was pretty tired, I guess, and I went to sleep." But someone has to, someone has to be calm in all those situations, you have to. And it goes all the way down to funerals. You have to be, somebody has to be cool. . . . Not that they feel that way, but you have to be cool. . . . So I've had a lot of experiences with that.

Edna recognized that remaining calm in a crisis situation did not only benefit herself but was also necessary for her family's sake. Her adult children were able to draw some strength and confidence from her patience and equanimity. At the very least, they knew that they did not have to worry about their mother, while they were worrying about the hurricane and the tornado. If there is nothing else that can be done in a particular situation, staying calm can be a powerful coping strategy.

Active coping

Relatively wise elders engaged in active mental and physical coping to overcome crises and obstacles in life. They often used reframing to mentally redefine problems as interesting challenges or puzzles rather than unpleasant events and they took mental or physical control of the situation to solve a crisis.

Reframing: Making the best of things

If unpleasant events are viewed as a challenge that can be mastered or a puzzle that needs to be solved, they are not necessarily a dread but can become pleasant and enjoyable. James advised,

[I]nstead of looking at [the unpleasant event] as being something that's a dread, I look at it as something that's pleasant and enjoy it while you're in it. . . . And it usually works itself out most of the time. . . . [A]t least if it seemed to be something unpleasant at first, we work it into something that'll give us boost or make you happy in the end. . . . I have a secret of finding the light side or the happy side of just about everything I do, even this interview (laughing). . . . That's the secret, finding pleasure in what you do. And you've got to be sensitive to it in order to see it, to look for it, because basically you see what you look for. . . . You can find happiness in just about everything.

Relatively wise respondents followed the motto "If life gives you lemons,

make lemonade.” Claire said, “I don’t really think of stuff as, what do you call it . . . unpleasant things? You go around them and you go on. You don’t dwell on stuff like that.” Although an event might appear to be unpleasant, it might actually turn out to be a positive event in disguise by encouraging psychosocial growth (Park 1998).

Taking control of the situation

Wise elders had learned that it is foolish to rely on external events to make them happy. They also knew that external events ultimately have no control over one’s fate and happiness. No event can make one unhappy unless one allows the unpleasant feelings to fester within. Problem solving starts within, not on the outside. James explained how this process works and how he has dealt with unpleasant events during his long life.

I’ve had as much bad things to happen as good things, but I’ve never allowed any outside force to take possession of my being. That means, whenever I had a problem, I went to something wholesome to solve it. I’m a good bowler. I bowl. I play tennis. In high school, I was a four-letter high school athlete, football, basketball, track, and tennis. And so, when something happened to me, that’s what I rely on. And I think this has been a secret that I’ve had, bad things and things that worry me, but I didn’t let it take possession of me. And I did not pick up any outside things to solve my problems, like smoking or drinking, you know. And I think if there would be more of that with young people now, we would get them learning how to solve their problems differently other than blaming someone else and taking it out in violent ways. If you can solve it within yourself . . . I teach a Sunday school class. . . . Every time something happens, I say where does that feeling come from? If it comes from within you, then you need to handle it. You can handle it. I can’t make you angry. You get angry. I can’t make you embarrassed. You get embarrassed. (laughing) . . . I mean, it’s silly, but you think of it, if it is a feeling that comes from within, I am responsible to control it. Yes. And I think if we work on young people that way, yes, it would be different.

James learned to accept responsibility for his feelings and emotions rather than blaming outside events or circumstances. He also knew what to do to gain control of a situation and the emotions that were related to it. The other two respondents in this relatively wise group had similar

insights. Claire observed, “. . . people move someplace or something, and say, ‘People aren’t very friendly.’ Well, I don’t know how they can say that. I’ve not met any unfriendly people. It’s just, I think a lot of it is you.” This insight, however, did not shield Claire from disappointment and loss. For example, Claire and her husband had loaned her son’s mother-in-law about sixteen thousand dollars to start her own business. After the woman filed for bankruptcy, Claire knew that the money would be lost, yet she decided not to let this unpleasant event disturb her too much. She explained,

It was not really money that we ever counted on, so we just chalked it up to experience and go on. I mean, I’m not wasting my time hating her or anything. She got mixed up with a con man, you know, and she not only owed us a lot of money, she owed her sisters, I mean, a lot of people, so she’s really done an injustice to the family. . . . I mean, we used to see her four or five times a year and help them in the business, and go up there and work for days and not charge them, you know. But, it’s just life, and I’m not going to sit around and brood about it, I’ll just earn some money of my own.

Of course, Claire and her husband might have had the financial means to chalk the loss of sixteen thousand dollars “up to experience,” although they did not appear to be wealthy. Not everyone might be able to relinquish this amount of money, but not everyone might be willing to loan a distant family member a sizable amount of money to start a business either. In fact, Claire most regretted about the episode that the woman had “really done an injustice to the family” and “made a lot of people unhappy.” Furthermore, “when she takes from us, she takes from her own grandchild, who’s our grandson. It’s going to hurt him in the future too.” Those concerns are an indication of the other-centeredness of wise elders. Instead of hating the woman, Claire remarked, “I feel sorry for her, really, ‘cause her family means a lot to me.”

Another disappointment in Claire’s life was the divorce of one of her other sons after he returned from military duty during the first Gulf War in Saudi Arabia. He subsequently married a young girl with two children in Oregon.

After his divorce and remarriage, he ceased any contact with his three biological children and his parents. Although this development was difficult for Claire to witness and she was at a loss to understand “what happened to him,” she decided to accept the fact that her son “is a grown man” who has to live his own life. At the same time, she did what she could to help her former daughter-in-law and the three grandchildren from her son’s first marriage. She admitted,

I can’t do anything about it [but] I can help take care of the three grandkids, which we do. . . . [W]hen you can’t do anything, just let the Lord take care of it. Put it in His hands. [My son] doesn’t know what he’s missing. He has wonderful children, you know, and little Nick, he says, “Grandma, I have a dad somewhere in Oregon.” I said, “I know, Nick, but you have Grandma and Grandpa.”

Claire even sided with her former daughter-in-law when her son tried to get custody of the three children, because she knew that it would not be right to take the children away from their mother. At the same time, Claire did not condemn her son but continued to have sympathy and compassion for him. She suspected that “he has to be very sad. . . . [But] I told [the former daughter-in-law] no, he is my son, but he will not take these children away from you, I’m sorry. I won’t allow it.”

By doing what could be done to help her former daughter-in-law and her grandchildren and leaving the rest in God’s hands, Claire followed the advice of the serenity prayer: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference.” Claire declared, “I don’t sit around and dwell on bad things. I don’t have time for it, really. There’s so many good things you can do.” Claire was too busy helping others in need to have time for unpleasant events or disappointments. That others sometimes took advantage of her did not make her disillusioned or prevented her from doing what she believed had to be done to make the world a better place. She said,

Who has time for disappointment anyhow? We help people. If they act like they’re taking advantage of us, which a lot of them do, because we spend a lot of

money helping them, then I tell them, "Okay, you're on your own then, and we'll go help someone else that needs it." You know, we'll just go to the next person and help them. . . . I mean, you can only do so much, and if people don't want to help themselves, you know, you try to give them a good example, and I tell them, "We don't want pay, when you find someone who needs help, pass it on." This world will never get better if you don't keep passing on your good deeds, and helping each other. . . . I mean, we tried to lead the good life so things will be, I mean, you get paid back, you don't have to do an awful lot, you know. It's so easy to be good, to do good. It's not worth the pain, to do bad, in the payback.

Although the last statements might sound as if Claire wanted to "get paid back" for her good deeds, it is unlikely that she meant material payback, or it would have been more difficult for her to accept a major financial loss that occurred as the result of a good deed. Rather, Claire pointed out the emotional pain for oneself and others that is caused by bad deeds and the emotional rewards one gains as a consequence of good deeds. She remarked, "We have a lot of good people, that we've helped and they help other people too, and [this] makes me happy." By being and doing good and avoiding engaging in bad behavior, one can be in control of one's emotional health.

Edna, who at age eighty-five was the oldest of the three relatively wise elders, described what she did to take control of her physical health after a very painful second knee operation.

With an operation like this, the therapy to get you on your feet is, because they do it two days after you're operated on, you're up and, you know, they want you to do things. Then when I left the hospital, I had, which was very good, I had twenty-one days of a person coming to the house and going through the exercises. . . . Well, you have to make up your mind you're going to do that. And as hard as it was, I did, painful as it was, I did. And so I concentrated on being, being able to walk and without a cane, without a walker, you know, you graduate from each one.

Edna did not allow her pain to defeat her. She also did not wallow in self-pity but did what had to be done without complaining about it. She had a goal that she pursued with determination and after a while she was able to walk again without a cane or walker. Above all, she

did it with a positive attitude and the desire to take care of herself as long as she can and to participate in her vast friendship network. She explained,

Oh, I wouldn't be happy, you know, if I wasn't able. To just sit around? No, no. No, no. And not to associate with my neighbors and friends? Ah, there's a lot of people, they just stay home and do nothing. . . . And they're so negative, all they say is "I'm so old." And I tell them, "Look, I don't know what it's like on the other side, but I know what it is here, and I like it [being old]." (laughing) I'm gonna stay [in my home] as long as I can. . . . You know, as the years go by, you'll probably find that out yourself. Ah, you don't even think about some of these things. I never just think, well, I'm going to be so, this age or that age. It happened, and I was forty, I was fifty, I was sixty, and I just, like everything else in my life, I took it in my stride. I'm not ashamed of how old I am. I'd be ashamed if I was like some people that I know [who] are so negative, don't realize what they have, you know. Ah, there's so much that you can do. There's people, there's children, there's people that need help.

Edna did not deny her age and the limitations that come with it. However, she was not a person to complain about old age. "Old age" is merely what happens if one lives a long life; it is nothing to get negative about. In fact, Edna admonished old people to be grateful for what they have and to help others as long as they are able to do it. She summarized her philosophy as follows,

I developed my style of living. Everybody does have a style of living. And they often say, well, how did you manage this, you know, and I've got to the point where if there's something [that] has to be done, you have to do it. I remember, and I think it was Thomas Hudson that said that the chief purpose of an education is to train the mind and the will to do whatever has to be done whether you want to do it or not. And that's what I've lived by.

In spite of her eighty-five years of age, Edna seemed to be in control of her life and mind. If something needed to be done, such as her physical therapy after her second knee operation, she would do it with discipline and determination and without complaining about it. Similar to James and Claire, Edna realized that one cannot always control external events, but one can have control over the mind and do what is right even if it is sometimes difficult to do.

Application of life lessons

Relatively wise elders were not devastated by crises and hardships in their life. On the contrary, they were able to learn from negative life experiences, which resulted in greater insight and wisdom. By learning and accepting one of life's most difficult lessons—that life is unpredictable and uncertain—they were better prepared to face new crises and obstacles.

Learning from life experiences

The three elders who scored and were rated as relatively high on wisdom were not necessarily perfect. However, their ability to learn from life experiences and mistakes and to value and heed the advice of others distinguished them from the three respondents who scored and were rated as relatively low on wisdom. For example, after he returned from World War II, James followed the advice of his mother, sympathetic doctors, university counselors, and a dean to learn how to cope with his severe depression. He also learned to trust in the goodness and helpfulness of other people. This, in turn, has helped him to trust in the benevolence of others when confronted by a crisis, which is evident in James's recounting of how he coped with his wife's recent illness and operation. The operation went well, but then complications occurred which necessitated his wife's return to the hospital. He described how he dealt with this episode.

Usually when something happens and you don't understand it if you aren't careful, you let it frustrate you. But I got a hold to it, and I said to her, I said, "Well, let's don't worry about it. We'll just go on into it and let it follow its course. We've got faith in the doctor, and God works through people. He doesn't stand there and do things Himself. But He does work through people, and He'll work through this doctor." And that's the way we handled things.

James's religious faith did not depend on miracles or that God miraculously intervenes in the course of events to set things straight. James believed that "God works through people," which emphasizes James's trust in the goodness of people. He trusted others because he had trust in God. He said, "And you know the Almighty is in it, but it comes through people. It gives you all

the confidence in the world in people, and things aren't going to be right all the time but there's pleasant things to happen."

Claire also learned to trust in the benevolence of others, albeit with qualifications. Even though she was aware that some people took advantage of her and her husband's generosity, many people that they helped, in turn, helped others, which more than compensated for the few "bad apples" she encountered. Consistent with her generous spirit, she declared the bad loan a learning experience rather than a disaster.

Edna, who was married to her husband for fifty-nine years, admitted that her marriage was not necessarily perfect. However, they remained committed to each other and learned how to make their marriage work. She explained,

I had a long marriage, and like all marriages we had to learn to accommodate each other. We had to make allowances for his faults and mine as well. And we did, because we were married for 59 years. . . . I'm honest and say, it wasn't always, you know, roses and that. We had times that it took both of us working together to work out our problems, but I didn't go into marriage with the idea that I could just quit. And my husband wasn't a quitter either. We resolved our differences, and, I would say, we, on the whole, we had a happy marriage. I look back more on the happy times than I do on the ones where we disagreed. I think that's what marriage is. In the beginning, the beginning for four or five years, it's an adjustment to each other and each other's friends and family and the differences. And so we have to do that.

Edna understood that to make a marriage work required not just love but also the willingness to make adjustments and to be tolerant of each other's faults. She recognized that it was not only her husband who had faults; that she was not perfect either. Edna also admitted that she "made mistakes" after the death of her husband. Yet, she did not brood over them but viewed them as learning opportunities. She said,

When my husband passed away five years ago, naturally I was very upset. We were married 59 years. And it was, it was a sudden, sudden thing. . . . And I had to make adjustments like all widows do. And I'll agree I made mistakes, but once I make the mistake, I try never to, I learn from it,

I learn from it. . . . And I try not to have it happen again. . . . Uh, but they weren't, they weren't mistakes that they were devastating, you know what I mean? . . . They were just little mistakes.

Because Edna was able to learn from the mistakes she made, her mistakes did not become devastating events but opportunities for psychosocial growth.

Recognition and acceptance of life's unpredictability and uncertainties

All three relatively wise elders learned and accepted the fact that change is a part of life. Nevertheless, they had an optimistic faith in the future because they knew that they had control over how they chose to deal with negative events. They also knew that life



exists in opposites and that the unpleasant events in life are a necessary complement to life's pleasant events. They understood that happiness and joy can only exist against a backdrop of unhappiness and sorrow. For example, after recounting one unpleasant event, James remarked, "But it created a happy period after being unhappy . . ." Later in the interview he explained,

I think everything goes around like from what, positive to negative to negative to neutral to positive, this kind of thing. . . . Yes, and sometimes it hit right there which is in neutral and then it go up to positive and come back down to neutral and down to negative, you might have a problem. But you don't let it worry you. Expect that, because everything has an opposite. Otherwise, it wouldn't be. . . . If

there weren't bad, there wouldn't be good. If there wasn't unhappiness, there wouldn't be happiness.

Claire agreed. She said, "even those things [that are unpleasant and difficult] are just part of life, as far as I'm concerned, you know." Similarly, Edna emphasized that one needs to be prepared for difficulties in life. This eighty-five-year old elder had learned that hardship and difficulties are an integral part of life. She remarked,

Well, I haven't had anything happen bad to me, that I couldn't handle [during the last year]. I mean, I just take it for granted that these things happen and you take care of them to the best of your ability. That's how I grew up. I've lived long enough to know that I'm not the only one in the world. Other people are going through terrible things, terrible. . . . I don't dwell on terrible things, you know. I accept them and go from there.

This quote indicates that Edna did not have a carefree life, but that she would not expect otherwise. She also realized that her problems might be trivial compared to the terrible things that other people encounter. Her motto was "It could have been worse, you know. This is the whole thing. No matter what happens, it could be worse."

Wise elders were also aware and accepted that death is a part of life. James realized that his mother's death was harder on him than it probably was on her.

[I had t]he thought that: why am I fretting? You're fretting for yourself. That's selfishness. That is selfish of you. Because you're really crying for yourself. You're missing her. But Mother is at peace. She got tired. And I guess that's the time when you do as much as you can do or want to do. You're ready. You're not going to hasten it or do anything to cause it, but you're ready. And she had told us she was ready, so what are you crying for? And for a short time I worked on it badly, but I don't cry anymore.

After James could acknowledge that his grief was self-centered and that he felt more sorry for himself than for his mother, the pain subsided. Claire was able to accept her disabled son's life and death without any regrets when he died from complications of cerebral palsy almost thirteen years after he was born. She said, ". . . [h]e's an angel now, and I knew that. You know, it was a Sunday

morning . . . and he had been sick since Christmas. He had had pneumonia three times and everything, and I told you, and I couldn't be sad, because he looked up at me, he smiled, you know, and I told him, everybody at the funeral home, 'I can't be sad, because I've been with him every day of his life, you know. He's had a miserable life, and he can smile, why should I be sad?'"

Edna lost three family members within one week in 1949: her mother, which was an expected death because she was ill with cancer, but also her brother-in-law and her father-in-law, which were unexpected deaths. She recalled,

The shock of someone dying suddenly is, I think, is worse, well, I know for myself it's worse than somebody that has a chance and knows they're going to die. They can make peace. See, my mother was able to call each one of us to her bedside and tell us that she had a long, she was only seventy, but she thought that was a long life and a good life. . . . And we were not to mourn her too long because she says, "Others are going to come along." This is what she told me. She says, "You'll only be able to get comfort from other people for just so long because they have to go and help others." . . . And it proved true because we had two of them right there, right together.

Edna realized that sudden death is much more traumatic than a death that is expected. She also recognized the wisdom of her mother's advice that she should not mourn her mother's death for too long because life goes on and others might need help and comfort. Having three family members die within one week clearly demonstrated the truth that life is change and one never knows what to expect next.

Coping strategies of relatively low wisdom respondents

In contrast to the three relatively wise elders, two of the three older people who scored and were rated as relatively low on wisdom did not have difficulties thinking about unpleasant events. If anything, there were too many to mention. For example, when Agnes was asked what the most unpleasant events were that she had experienced during her entire life, she responded, "I've experienced so many, so I don't know what is the most." However, similar to relatively wise elders, Wilma also had difficulties think-

ing about unpleasant events. She said, "I don't have unhappy moments. . . . I just enjoy doing what I do, and I just don't let other things bother me."

Yet, in contrast to the three relatively wise respondents, the three elders who were relatively low on wisdom did not engage in mental distancing when they encountered crises and obstacles in life. They did not reflect on the situation and did not try to deal with a crisis in an active manner. This basically left them with two passive coping strategies: they could either choose to accept the situation or hope that God would intervene on their behalf. As a consequence, they did not learn from their experiences, did not gain wisdom and insight into the nature of life, and remained extremely



vulnerable and defenseless when experiencing extreme hardship in life.

Passive coping

The three older adults who were relatively low on wisdom used either acceptance and/or reliance on God to deal with crises and obstacles in their life.

Acceptance

Acceptance can be a useful coping strategy, particularly if one has no power over the situation. For example, Claire had to accept the fact that she and her husband lost sixteen thousand dollars on a bad loan and that one of their sons had abandoned his wife and three children. However, acceptance can be counterproductive and turn into resigna-

tion and fatalism if it prevents people from solving a solvable problem. For instance, the only way Agnes knew how to deal with her swollen knee, which made it difficult for her to walk, was by giving herself over to the situation.

So I hate to just sit down, but my daughter says, "Mommy, you need to get up and walk." I said, "I know what walking do for me." I said, "So there's no need of me getting up and doing something that I know is against me, so I just don't do it. . . . I just sit down, just give over to it, get up when I have to."

Without making a medical diagnosis, it is not clear if Agnes's strategy to "just give over" to her swollen knee was the best way to handle the situation. It is interesting that Agnes did not heed her daughter's advice "to get up and walk." Neither did she appear to consult a physician about her problem. Without a proper diagnosis, however, her physical problems might get worse. Unlike Edna after her second knee operation, Agnes did not try to do everything she could to remain mobile.

Another unpleasant event that Agnes mentioned was "getting up and down at night."

I have to get up, sometimes every hour, and some nights I can't sleep. I stay woke, 'cause I got clocks that strike and go every hour, and I be woke every hour on the hour. And there's nothing I can do, just lay down and turn. [Interviewer: What exactly is it that you do to deal with that situation?] Nothing. Just start over, stay on that side a while, and turn over again.

Again, it does not appear that Agnes consulted a physician about her sleep disturbances. By just accepting the situation without doing anything about it, an underlying physical problem might get ignored until it is much worse. Of course, one simple solution to Agnes's sleep problems might be to buy a digital clock that does not strike every hour.

Sometimes, however, acceptance of a situation might indeed be the right strategy to follow. After Agnes almost caused an accident with her car, she accepted that she was no longer fit to drive. She recounted, "And when I got here, and got out of the car, and thought about what had happened, I said, 'Now, I don't need to drive no more.' So I just gave it up." This strategy of acceptance worked in her situation because Agnes

had a grandson who took her anywhere she needed to go and also bought the groceries for her.

Similar to Agnes, acceptance was the only strategy that came to mind when Wilma was asked how she handled problems and difficult times in her life. She said,

Just picked up the pieces and went on. I think, I can remember one time, when we finally got out of debt, and we wasn't out of debt three days before my husband went out and bought another truck, and got us right back into debt, and I cried all the way home when he bought it. (laughs) Ah, Lord. [Interviewer: Gosh. So when he did that, how did you reconcile it with yourself?] Just let it go. That's all you could do.

Wilma did not feel that she had any power to decide how money would be spent in their marriage. Hence, besides crying, she could only "let it go" and accept her husband's financial decisions. Similarly, when Wilma was asked how she had dealt with her husband's twenty-five-year-long illness, she responded,

I don't know. We just made the best we could of it. He was in and out of the hospital a lot, several times, and then when he passed away, we didn't have no insurance, because we, his health had got so bad, by the time we got to where we could manage to pay for health insurance, they wouldn't insure him, so I think the bill was about sixteen thousand dollars and something. Of course, that don't sound like much now, but then it was a lot. . . . And I worked, staying with elderly people, or doing housework for them, and such as that, till I got that bill paid. [Interviewer: Goodness. How long did it take you?] I don't know. About fifteen years, I think.

It is not clear if Wilma's husband could have gotten health insurance before his illness, if his illness got worse because he could not go to the doctor initially before it was too late, and if Wilma could have received financial help with the hospital bill or even could have avoided paying the bill that she "inherited" from her deceased husband if she had been looking for assistance. Yet, it seems to be evident from the interview that Wilma did not question the course of events. Rather than trying to take control of her life or learning from her mistakes, as relatively wise elders would do, she accepted her situation as fate.

Reliance on God

Besides acceptance, another passive coping strategy of older adults relatively low on wisdom was to rely on God's infinite power to take care of their crises and obstacles in life. This coping strategy consisted of prayer and patience. For example, when Wilma was asked how she coped with the dryness last year that ruined her garden, she answered, "Just let the Lord take care of it. He will in His own time. 'Cause He has everything timed to suit it." Marcella used a similar strategy to find a job to supplement her Social Security income. When asked how she coped with not having found a job yet after registering with the unemployment office, she remarked,

Well, what I do, I just pray and just ask the Lord, you know, to take care of everything and, you know, do it on His own time, because I know He going to do it anyway, and so I just tell Him, "You know what I need; I don't have to just holler on it. You know what I need." . . . And so I just sit back, you know, and just wait.

After registering with the unemployment office, Marcella did not do anything else to look for a job. She had cared for an older lady before the lady's death, and although those services are sorely needed, she was unable to think of alternative avenues of finding a job, such as studying the help wanted ads in the daily newspaper or advertising herself. Instead, her solution was to sit back and wait for the Lord to provide the job she needed. Apparently, Marcella learned this coping strategy of reliance on God from her mother. When Marcella's oldest son almost died of pneumonia, her mother told her after the son was taken to the hospital to ". . . just lean on the Lord and pray. And . . . just be patient." Even though this was the right advice in a situation where there was nothing else Marcella could have done to help her son, the advice is less suitable for a job search or other circumstances where greater control over a situation is possible. Yet, Marcella was seemingly unable to see the difference between the two events.

Whereas wise individuals might also be deeply religious, the three relatively wise elders in this study did not wait passively for God to solve their problems. On the contrary, they did what

they could to take control of their lives and only left the part they could not control up to God. For example, James's trust in the goodness of others was based on his belief that God works through other people. However, he was actively involved in finding those people as in the case of seeking a good doctor for his wife. Similarly, Claire knew that she was powerless to change her son's behavior, and she left it up to God to deal with her son. Yet, she did everything to help her former daughter-in-law and the three grandchildren after her son's divorce. Unlike the three relatively wise elders, the three older women relatively low on wisdom did not follow the serenity prayer's advice "to change the things I can [change]." They were too quick to believe that there was nothing they could do to improve their situation except to pray for God's intervention.

Avoidance of reflection

The three older women who were relatively low on wisdom did not ponder what the best way might be to deal with a crisis and made no attempt to reflect on the meaning of crises and hardship in life. For example, Wilma stated, "I had a hard life, coming up. When I was small, my Daddy drank a lot." Yet, when asked how she had coped with her father's alcoholism, she replied, "I couldn't tell you." As a consequence, the women only learned that crises and hardships in life needed to be accepted and that God might intervene and set things right if one had patience and faith. However, because their coping strategies were passive rather than active, there was no indication that the women gained wisdom and insight over the years or learned the deeper lessons that life was trying to teach them. Therefore, it is not surprising that two of the three women appeared to have great difficulties in coping with the death of loved ones, unlike the elders in the relatively high wisdom group. For instance, after Marcella's husband died after forty-seven years of marriage, it took a long time until her grief over his loss subsided. She reported,

When [my husband] passed, I'm telling you, I looked like I just couldn't hardly, I couldn't hardly handle it, but I maintained, but I just couldn't hardly handle it.

[Interviewer: How do you think you got through it?] Well, I started going to these meetings, and then I started going to the widow's club and all that kind of stuff, and that's when I really snapped back to me, you know. . . . But it really was hard. And I would sit in the house and I wouldn't drive, I wouldn't go nowhere. I didn't want my hair fixed and so I just didn't want nothing done, you know, I just wanted to sit on the porch, sit in the house and just look and moan and all this, grieve and all this. . . . But I got over it, so now I done got out going now. I go places and do different stuff, you know, and I just don't worry about it like I used to. It's come on my mind, you know, every once and again, but it don't stay, you know, it just flash and go, you know, but it used to be day by day. . . . Night by night, just be on there all the time.

Agnes had similar difficulties to deal with the recent deaths of friends and relatives. She remarked, "I just hate it, you know. But it's nothing that I can do. All of us got to go that way sometime, so I just, you know, realized it, their time was just out, that's it." Yet, she was still unable to accept the sudden death of her oldest son approximately two years before the interview. She admitted,

I'm not through with it yet. . . . I put that picture [of my deceased son] back there where I couldn't see it, because I can't hardly stand to look at it. It just, you know, makes me think about it, and I said, you know, "It don't seem like he's dead," 'cause he had told me, "Mama, I'm going to come down there to stay with you a while." And I was just looking forward to him coming down.

Unlike relatively wise elders, older adults relatively low on wisdom did allow external events to take possession over their being. They did not recognize that it is ultimately not the external event that affects their well-being but how they react to and deal with crises and hardships in their lives.

Discussion

Montgomery, Barber, and McKee (2002) asked six older adults, ages sixty to eighty-eight, to describe one or more times in their life when they believed they were wise or acted wisely and also to describe a wise person in their life. In-depth analyses of the qualitative interviews yielded six essential elements of wisdom as it is lived: guidance, knowledge, experience, moral principle, perspective of time, and compassion. The

same elements can be found in the coping behavior of the three relatively wise older adults in this study. The elders knew how to deal with crises and obstacles in their life, and they were willing to offer guidance and advice to others. First, they realized that it was important to keep a mental distance from the situation in order to relax and calm down. Second, and in contrast to the three older people relatively low on wisdom, relatively wise elders actively coped with crises and obstacles in their life by making the best of a situation and exerting mental or physical control over a negative event. Third, they applied the lessons that life had taught them. They were able to learn from their life experiences and recognized and accepted the fact that life is uncertain and unpredictable. They also tried to do the morally right thing in each and every situation they encountered. For example, James taught the students in his Sunday school class how to gain control over their feelings and emotions, Claire and her husband helped other people as much as they could physically and financially, and Edna tried to live according to the Golden Rule. She said,

I think that's what keeps me going because I try to be sensible about what I do and who I'm with and everything. And give other people, treat them like I'd want to be treated, and I really am grateful for all of it, for my life, I am grateful.

Although one could not claim that the three older adults who were relatively low on wisdom acted immorally, they did not actively explore how to gain wisdom through life experiences and were unwilling or unable to learn the lessons that life tried to teach them. As a result, they were vulnerable and defenseless when confronted by severe hardship, such as the loss of loved ones. By contrast, the three relatively wise elders experienced stress-related growth through the successful mastery of crises and hardships earlier in life (Park 1998; Park and Fenster 2004), which led to increases in wisdom, including greater sympathy and compassion for others (Ardelt 1998).

Even though this was not the focus of the investigation, it is striking that relatively wise elders tended to mention as most pleasant events experiences that

emphasized the well-being and welfare of others rather than their own well-being. For example, when asked what the most pleasant events were that he experienced during the past week, James answered,

My son was in need of a car to go to work . . . and in negotiations for this car and running the credit check, I was happy to find out that we were able to do it through the bank for him. That was quite a boost. . . . So now he'll have transportation, and it's going to help him and his wife out on their jobs.

James thought about his son's welfare more than his own when considering the most pleasant event during the past week. Similarly, Edna was pleased that one of her older friends had gotten remarried and found renewed happiness in her life. She said,

I did have some . . . good feelings about a friend of mine, older woman getting married for the second time. . . . And she got married in church, and she had a number of children, I think seven. . . . And they were all there, from different parts of the country in the United States. . . . I certainly wish them [the newlyweds] all the happiness in the world.

Finally, Claire's happiness clearly derived from helping others. She explained,

We bowl with the seniors. They're a wonderful bunch of people. We enjoy them very much. . . . Taking care of my babies, I do that, you know. We try to do it for Christian service. It's what we decided to do when we moved to Florida, help people. We help the elderly, we help single moms, so, it's just what we like to do. . . . [For example,] we helped an eighty-year-old lady and moved her to Orlando where her daughter's at, 'cause she was getting older, and we're not family. So we couldn't do anything for her, so we moved her down with her daughter. We enjoy helping people like that.

Although for Claire and her husband being retired was "hard work" and they did not feel that they had time for themselves anymore, they realized that helping others was "what we want to do" and that it gave them satisfaction and happiness in life.

In contrast to the three relatively wise elders, the three older people who scored and were rated relatively low on wisdom focused on their own well-being rather than on the welfare of others when talking about the most pleasant events that

they experienced during the past week. For example, Agnes mentioned that she enjoyed playing bingo once a week, and Wilma liked quilting. She noted, "That's what I do all the time." Marcella recalled that the most pleasant event during the past week was "going to the elders club on Tuesday."

I enjoy that 'cause we get together, and we eat together, and we talk. Talk that older people talk, you know. We can relate to one another. . . . Better than you would if you was talking to a younger person. . . . My daughter came over and made me a garden in the bag, yesterday, and so that was a good experience 'cause I like vegetables, and what she was planting, she knows I like it, you know.

There is nothing inherently wrong, of course, to list as the most pleasant events experiences that increase the well-being of the self. Most people would probably answer in this way. The striking fact remains, however, that the three elders who scored and were rated relatively high on wisdom initially did *not* mention events that focused on their own well-being as most pleasant, particularly during the past week, month, and year. Rather, they gained satisfaction and happiness by focusing on the well-being of others. They had realized the age-old wisdom that self-centeredness does not lead to lasting happiness and that true happiness can only be obtained by being of service to others (for example, Lozoff 2000).

Unlike the three older adults relatively low on wisdom, the three relatively wise respondents also spontaneously expressed gratitude for the help they received and for the life they were able to live. For example, James was grateful that someone else offered to do a task for which he did not have time, and Claire just felt blessed by life. She exclaimed, "I just feel so blessed all the time. That's why I don't have time for feeling bad, or thinking bad. I'm not going to waste my time doing that." Similarly, Edna professed a general gratefulness for her current situation in life. She said,

I get really nice things done for me. I really do. I feel very happy about that. . . . [L]ike I've already said, I'm grateful for my life and the help that I have now. And the friends in here and the things that we do.

Not only did relatively wise elders gain satisfaction and happiness from

focusing on the well-being of others, they also were profoundly grateful for the good things that they experienced in life. They neither took their good fortune for granted, nor relied on external events to make them happy. Rather, by finding happiness in the well-being of others, they achieved control over the creation of their own happiness and felt blessed by any additional fortune that came their way.

Of course, the results of this exploratory qualitative study can only be considered a first step in answering the question of how wise people cope with crises and obstacles in life. One has to keep in mind that the respondents in this study scored and were rated *relatively* low and *relatively* high on wisdom, although they were the six most extreme cases in this sample of "ordinary" older adults. It would, therefore, be interesting to compare the results of the present study with a study that investigates how individuals who are clearly considered advanced in wisdom, such as long-term mediators who have attained higher stages of consciousness, and those who might be considered very low in wisdom, such as repeated criminal offenders, cope with crises and obstacles in their life. However, the three relatively wise elders in this study appeared to follow the path of wisdom outlined by Eastern wisdom traditions. They perceived the past with gratitude, tried to be of service in the present, and were aware of the responsibility they had toward the future (Clayton and Birren 1980; Hart 1987; Levitt 1999; Nakasone 1994).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Carla Edwards, Anna Campbell, Adeen Woolverton, Nicolette Fertakis, Lisa Hamilton, Martine Gauthier, Stephen Mayer, Dacia Caglin, Dana Federici, Amy Monk, Brad Tripp, Elizabeth Brown, and Yvonne Combs for their help at various stages of the research project and to the research participants for their time and commitment to the study.

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