

# Words to the wise: Experts define wisdom

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Compassion. Self-understanding. Morality. Emotional stability.

These words would seem to describe at least some of the universal traits attributed to [wisdom](#), each of them broadly recognized and valued. In fact, there is no enduring, consistent definition of what it means exactly to be wise. It is a virtue widely treasured but essentially unexplained, a timeless subject only now attracting rigorous, scientific scrutiny.

In 2009, Dilip V. Jeste, MD, and Thomas W. Meeks, MD, both professors in the department of psychiatry at the University of California, San Diego and researchers at the Sam and Rose Stein Institute for Research on Aging, published a paper proposing that sagacity might have a neurobiological basis.

In other words, that wisdom is wired.

In the June issue of *The Gerontologist* and currently online, Jeste and Meeks go further, attempting to identify the central, unifying elements that define wisdom. With colleagues from four other universities, Jeste and Meeks asked a group of international experts to characterize the traits of wisdom, [intelligence](#) and spirituality - and measure how each trait is either similar to or different from the others.

"There are several major definitions of wisdom, but no single definition that is all-inclusive and embraces every important aspect of wisdom," said Jeste, who is the Estelle and Edgar Levi Chair in Aging, professor of psychiatry and [neuroscience](#) and chief of geriatric psychiatry at UC

San Diego. "Intelligence and spirituality share features with wisdom, but they are not the same thing. One can be intelligent, yet lack practical knowledge. Spirituality is often associated with age, like wisdom, but most researchers tend to define wisdom in secular terms, not spiritual."

The research consisted of a two-part survey and a questionnaire comprised of 53 statements related to the concepts of wisdom, intelligence and spirituality. Fifty-seven experts were identified and contacted by email; 30 responded.

Phase 1 of the survey revealed significant group differences among the concepts on 49 of 53 statements. Wisdom differed from intelligence on 46 of 49 items, and from spirituality on 31 items.

In Phase 2, the definition of wisdom was further refined by focusing upon 12 items from the Phase 1 results. Most of the experts, Jeste and Meeks said, agreed that wisdom could be characterized thus:

- It is uniquely human.
- It is a form of advanced cognitive and emotional development that is experience-driven.
- It is a personal quality, albeit rare.
- It can be learned, increases with age and can be measured.
- It is probably not enhanced by taking medication.

The survey was conducted using the Delphi method, developed by the RAND Corporation in the 1950s and based on the principle that forecasts from a structured group of experts are more accurate than

those from unstructured groups or individuals. The paper's authors identified 60 recognized experts on wisdom in the world, focusing upon those outside their own institutions. The nominees were required to have at least two peer-reviewed publications on wisdom or spirituality, though the number of total publications was not the sole criterion for selection.

The survey asked participating experts to rate the relevance and importance of six statements (i.e. "The concept can be applied to human beings."), based upon their knowledge of empirical evidence, to the concepts of intelligence, wisdom and spirituality. The rating scale ranged from 1 (definitely not) to 9 (definitely so). The experts were then asked to rate the importance of 47 components, such as altruism, practical life skills, sense of humor, realism, willingness to forgive others and self-esteem, to the concepts of wisdom, intelligence and spirituality.

"One survey, of course, cannot fully and completely define wisdom," said Jeste. "The value here is that there was considerable agreement among experts that wisdom is indeed a distinct entity with a number of characteristic qualities. The data from our research should help in designing future empirical studies on wisdom."

Provided by University of California - San Diego

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