

---

# Learning Wisdom Through Geographical Dislocations

Dragos Simandan

*Brock University*

Wisdom is at once one of the most elusive and most valued kinds of knowledge. Empirical research shows that, indeed, across cultures, people hope that life experience will eventually make them wiser. The problem is that, to date, the academic study of wisdom and of the processes by which it can be learned has been dominated by psychologists. The first part of the article reviews the state-of-the-art psychological scholarship on wisdom to show how that conceptualization lacks geographical sensitivity and therefore misses some of the crucial geographical mechanisms by which people become wiser. The second part of the article singles out and focuses on one such mechanism, namely, the learning of wisdom through geographical dislocations. By drawing on insights from the study of international migration, exile, and transculturation in postcolonial contexts, the final part of the article suggests specific learning processes that might strengthen the hypothesis that geographical dislocations and the attendant cross-cultural experiences they generate are often conducive to wisdom. **Key Words:** distance, geographical dislocations, international migration, visceral learning, wisdom.

智慧以前是各类知识里最难以捉摸和最有价值的。实证研究表明,事实上,在跨文化的范围,人们都希望生活经历能最终使他们变得更聪明。问题是,迄今为止,心理学家已经主导了智慧的学术研究和学习它的那些过程。本文的第一部分回顾了有关智慧的最先进的心理学术研究,以显示这一概念化怎样缺乏地理的敏感性,因此错过一些关键的使人们变得更聪明的地理机制。本文的第二部分挑出和侧重于这样一个机制,即通过地理错位的方法获得智慧。通过借鉴在后殖民环境背景下的国际移民,流亡,和文化融合的研究见解,文章的最后部分提出具体的学习过程,该过程可能加强地理错位的假说,它们所产生的随之而来的跨文化经验有利于智慧的发展。关键词:距离,地理错位,国际迁移,本能地学习,智慧。

La sabiduría es a la vez uno de los tipos de conocimiento más esquivos y más valorados. La investigación empírica en verdad muestra que en todas las culturas la gente espera que la experiencia de la vida eventualmente los haga más sabios. El problema es que hasta ahora el estudio académico sobre la sabiduría y sobre los procesos por medio de los cuales ésta puede alcanzarse ha estado dominado por los psicólogos. La primera parte del artículo revisa el estado del arte de la erudición psicológica sobre este particular, para mostrar cómo esa conceptualización carece de sensibilidad geográfica y en consecuencia deja de considerar algunos de los mecanismos geográficos cruciales mediante los cuales la gente se hace más sabia. La segunda parte del artículo escoge y se concentra en uno de tales mecanismos, o sea, el aprendizaje de la sabiduría por medio de las dislocaciones geográficas. A partir de la perspicacia del estudio de la migración internacional, el exilio y la transculturación en contextos poscoloniales, la parte final del artículo sugiere procesos de aprendizaje específicos, que podrían fortalecer la hipótesis de que las dislocaciones geográficas y las experiencias culturales de vasto espectro generadas por aquellas a menudo llevan a la sabiduría. **Palabras clave:** distancia, dislocaciones geográficas, migración internacional, aprendizaje visceral, sabiduría.

**I**s the process of international migration conducive to the acquisition of wisdom? This has been the research question that has increasingly attracted my interest in the last few years, and I am currently trying to answer that in a variety of ways. The aim of this article is to begin

to build a theoretical framework that attempts to explain why I suspect that the answer might often be positive. From the outset, I hurry to add that much of my recent work has been at the interface of psychology and geography and that the kind of learning I want to study is

individual and not social learning (cf. my introduction to this issue and Le Heron [this issue]). To further specify, in what follows the concern is with how individuals learn from their life environments and become wiser than their earlier selves in spite of the inherent ambiguities of much of their experience (March 2010; Simandan 2011b). It is important to notice that instead of thinking in binary terms (some are wise, some are fools), and instead of comparing individuals with one another (she is wiser than him), the learning process I want to delineate is how individuals could become wiser than their own earlier selves. This particular way of looking operates with an underlying presupposition of a behavioral continuum (analog distinction) from foolishness to wisdom and with a methodological choice to allow the individuals themselves to subjectively assess their own learning of wisdom (or lack thereof). Before returning to the research question that opened this article, though, I first owe my readers an explanation as to what is meant by *wisdom* and how I became interested in it.

## Understanding Wisdom

The problematic of wisdom and how to acquire it is far from being bounded to a particular culture. But the academic, scholarly enquiry into the nature of wisdom has been of particular interest to only two research communities: philosophers and psychologists. Among philosophers, wisdom has been studied mostly by means of personal reflection and theoretical speculation. As a favorite example of a philosopher's definition of wisdom, Whitehead's concise but deep formulation stands out. In his view, wisdom is the way in which we hold knowledge (Whitehead 1929), and I have to say more about it later in my argument. The most sustained research effort for the study of wisdom was launched in psychology in the 1980s. Psychologists have not limited themselves to theoretical speculation and instead approached the issue empirically. They have screened the key sacred texts of various religions and the major works of philosophers and have asked lay people in a variety of cultures to explain what wisdom means to them. Although this research effort is still ongoing and expanding in fascinating directions (e.g., detecting the brain correlates

of wisdom and assessing differences in the conceptualization of wisdom between the two sexes; Aldwin 2009; Meeks and Jeste 2009), we already have a number of collective works that summarize and organize these empirical findings (Sternberg and Jordan 2005; Jeste et al. 2010; Staudinger and Glück 2011). Psychologists now agree that it is essential to clearly separate wisdom from intelligence. The latter is a biological property of the brain technically defined as the periodicity of neural oscillation in the action potentials of the brain and central nervous system (Jensen 2011). When it comes to wisdom itself, it has been explained elsewhere in much more detail (Simandan 2011c) that there are three major schools of thought defining wisdom in related but far from identical ways. Brown (2005) identified "seven pillars" of wisdom (appreciative wisdom, common behavioral wisdom, uncommon behavioral wisdom, discernment, collective wisdom, transcendental wisdom, and virtue). Sternberg (2005) defined wisdom as the use of intelligence and creativity as mediated by one's values to achieve a balance between (1) the short term and the long term; (2) personal interests, others' interests, and transpersonal interests; and (3) adapting to one's environment, changing one's environment, and moving to a different environment altogether. Finally, Baltes's school of thought (Baltes and Smith 2008) defines wisdom as expertise in living life and specifies its five key ingredients: factual knowledge about the process of living, procedural knowledge of how to deal with difficult life situations, awareness of life-span contextualism, ability to manage uncertainty, and awareness of the relativity of values.

I became interested in wisdom for two reasons. The first one was a concern with epistemic efficiency. Given that there is so much to learn and to study, I began to wonder what kind of topic would repay the most dividends for studying it. Because both philosophers and psychologists identify wisdom as the highest grade knowledge, or even as a form of metaknowledge (recall Whitehead's definition), I decided that going in more depth with this problematic would be worth the effort. The second reason, and more connected to this article's aim, was the counterintuitive finding of empirical psychologists that wisdom and biological age are uncorrelated or only very modestly correlated (Ardelt and Oh 2010). This finding raised in

my mind a set of questions as to what the possible mechanisms and processes by which people learn to be wiser are.

### Geographical Dislocations as a Process Conducive to Wisdom

Given that I am a geographer by training and that in pursuit of an academic career as a geographer I moved from Romania to England and from England to Canada, I have a natural interest in understanding the range of effects that the massive geographical dislocations inherent in international migration (and subsequent living in global, multicultural cities) have on people. In this interest, I am hardly alone (see also Godlewska [this issue], for a study of learning through geographical dislocations at a smaller scale). As the blossoming geographical literature on international migration (Blunt 2007; Silvey 2009; Bailey 2010; Cresswell 2010) and life in global, multicultural cities (Massey 2010; Saldanha 2010; Van Leeuwen 2010) shows, the phenomenon of international migration and ensuing cross-cultural experience challenges people's subject positions and enriches them, even though (or precisely because) the experience of that challenge is often traumatic and almost always disruptive and unsettling (Pratt 2009; Culic 2010; Price 2010; Simandan 2010). On theoretical grounds,<sup>1</sup> I expect that immigrants will often perceive their geographical dislocation as conducive to wisdom, because several key ingredients of wisdom seem to be involved in the act of migration and subsequent cohabitation in a multicultural setting (e.g., a growing awareness of the relativity of values; a heightened sense of perspective; a sharpened questioning of received wisdom; a better understanding of life's contingencies; a broader repertoire of procedural knowledge for dealing with life's knotty problems; etc.). The extant geographical literature on international migration and global cities (broadly defined to include work on cosmopolitanism and citizenship, exile, diaspora, and even transculturation in colonial contexts) does not focus explicitly on the acquisition of wisdom as such, but its implicit and sometimes even explicit attention to learning through cross-cultural experience (Martin and Glesne 2002; Preston and Kobayashi 2007; Butz 2010; outside

geography see Said 2001; Turner 2002; Gilroy 2005; Appiah 2006; Calhoun 2007; Todorov 2010) and to the spatial politics of multiethnic cohabitation and conflict (Amin 2002; Mitchell 2004; Thobani 2007; Isin and Nielsen 2008; Wood 2008; Rodríguez-García 2010; Staeheli 2010) provides a useful theoretical and empirical context for my specific interest.

To understand the single most important reason for which the experience of international migration is likely to lead to a growing sense of personal wisdom, it is useful to stop thinking about wisdom in abstract terms and to begin to think of it in embodied, nonrepresentational ways (Anderson and Harrison 2010; Pile 2010). When one thinks of a wise person, the image that pops to mind is decidedly not that of a coldly intelligent robot such as Data from *Star Trek*. When we label somebody wise in everyday life we take into account not only the words uttered by that person but also the manner in which they are delivered (and recall Whitehead's definition of wisdom). The prototypical wise person speaks from the soul (or from the heart), is aligned and congruent, and deeply feels her words. One can see in her eyes and hear in the tone of her voice that she lived the experience for which she is providing reflection or advice. One can tell that *that* advice was learned the hard way, through the emotionally charged trials and tribulations of personal, embodied experience. When people come across to us as wise, we can say that they embody a wise stance (Simandan 2011c) that consists of the sum total of body posture, gestures, mimic, voice tempo, voice warmth, and the general emotional load carried by means of voice, gaze, and quality of touch. The learning of wisdom, I argue, is a visceral kind of learning (Bondi 2009; Smith et al. 2009), in which multiple learning mechanisms (see Simandan introduction to this issue) are engaged simultaneously: learning facts, learning episodes, learning how to do and how not to do something, learning to feel, learning to cope with the feeling, and so on. One cannot acquire wisdom from reading books or simply hearing other people's experiences, because those kinds of learnings are abstract and detached. The experience of international migration is a total lived and embodied experience that intensely touches the heart and the mind, the body and the soul. The kind of learning it offers is generative of wisdom (or at

least of the subjective experience of becoming wiser) precisely because it is a very intense type of learning that encompasses the whole of one's being. Furthermore, it is a learning of the greatest scope because it is about changing (cultural) worlds altogether. In migrating from culture A to culture B, one does not merely increase one's store of factual and procedural knowledge through the summation of the learnings of the two cultures. Rather, a qualitative leap in one's knowledge occurs, because the move from one culture to another opens up a breathing space between them. That breathing space allows one to sniff the scent of wisdom. It means that one can learn how to escape being spellbound by the hypnotic trance of any given culture (Heller and Steele 2009) and that one can become acutely aware of why "language is the House of Being" (Heidegger 1947, 216) and of the extent to which humans are social animals, mere waves in the ocean of their own culture. That breathing space enables the acquisition of wisdom through the sheer ability (and propensity) to compare everything between the country left behind and the newly elected country. Personal geographical change enables and compels geographical comparisons, and through these comparisons we learn to appreciate the relativity of values (one of the components of Baltes's theory of wisdom) and the importance of learning to live with uncertainty (yet another component of Baltes's view of wisdom). These kinds of massive geographical dislocations foster deeper forms of factual knowledge (e.g., awareness that any achievement comes with a loss; that our impoverished mental maps of the world are not the same as the world out there; better knowledge of what all humans have in common and of what cultures do to humans) and procedural knowledge (knowing how to let go of everything and start all over again; the importance of taking opportunities at their tide; "expect and plan for surprises"; learning how to adapt to a new environment or how to change it to make it more similar in some respects to the one left behind). Finally, the experience of geographical dislocation enables the acquisition of wisdom by means of the learning affordances inherent in gaining *distance* (geographical and psychological; Simandan 2011a) from one's earlier self and native culture. By literally moving away

from one's earlier self and earlier whereabouts, one gains a sense of perspective. One can see the forest. One is liberated from the cognitive load of inessential details and therefore can grasp the essence of what happened, of that which is left when all is said and done. Through distancing, one can begin to see what matters and what doesn't matter. Last but not least, one can begin to ponder not whether or to what extent one has achieved one's goals but what goals are really worth pursuing in the first place. All of these shifts are telltale signs of wisdom. ■

## Note

<sup>1</sup> This article is a theoretical preliminary to an empirical research program (pending funding) enquiring into the processes of wisdom acquisition of a variety of types of immigrants in Toronto, Ontario.

## Literature Cited

- Aldwin, C. 2009. Gender and wisdom: A brief overview. *Research in Human Development* 6 (1): 1–8.
- Amin, A. 2002. Ethnicity and the multicultural city: Living with diversity. *Environment and Planning A* 34:959–80.
- Anderson, B., and P. Harrison, eds. 2010. *Taking-place: Non-representational theories and human geography*. London: Ashgate.
- Appiah, K. A. 2006. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a world of strangers*. London: Penguin.
- Ardelt, M., and H. Oh. 2010. Wisdom: Definition, assessment, and its relation to successful cognitive and emotional aging. In *Successful cognitive and emotional aging*, ed. D. V. Jeste and C. Depp, 87–113. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing.
- Bailey, A. 2010. Population geographies, gender, and the migration-development nexus. *Progress in Human Geography* 34 (3): 375–86.
- Baltes, P., and J. Smith. 2008. The fascination of wisdom: Its nature, ontogeny, and function. *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3:56–64.
- Blunt, A. 2007. Cultural geographies of migration: Mobility, transnationality and diaspora. *Progress in Human Geography* 31:684–94.
- Bondi, L. 2009. Emotional knowing. In *International encyclopedia of human geography*, ed. R. Kitchin and N. Thrift, 446–52. Oxford, UK: Elsevier.
- Brown, W. 2005. Discussion. In *A handbook of wisdom: Psychological perspectives*, ed. R. Sternberg and J. Jordan, 353–68. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

- Butz, D. 2010. Autoethnography as sensibility. In *The Sage handbook of qualitative geography*, ed. D. DeLyser, S. Aitken, S. Herbert, M. Crang, and L. McDowell, 138–55. London: Sage.
- Calhoun, C. 2007. *Nations matter: Culture, history, and the cosmopolitan dream*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Cresswell, T. 2010. Towards a politics of mobility. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28 (1): 17–31.
- Culic, I. 2010. State of imagination: Embodiments of immigration Canada. *The Sociological Review* 58 (3): 343–60.
- Gilroy, P. 2005. *After empire: Multiculture or postcolonial melancholia*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Heidegger, M. 1947. Letter on humanism. In *Basic writings*, ed. D. Farrell Krell, 213–66. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics.
- Heller, S., and T. Steele. 2009. *Monsters and magical sticks: There's no such thing as hypnosis?* 2nd ed. New York: New Falcon Publications.
- Isin, E., and G. Nielsen, eds. 2008. *Acts of citizenship*. London: Zed Books.
- Jensen, A. 2011. The theory of intelligence and its measurement. *Intelligence* 39 (4): 171–77.
- Jeste, D., M. Ardel, D. Blazer, H. Kraemer, G. Vaillant, and T. Meeks. 2010. Expert consensus on characteristics of wisdom: A Delphi method study. *The Gerontologist* 50 (5): 668–80.
- March, J. 2010. *The ambiguities of experience*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Martin, P., and C. Glesne. 2002. From the global village to the pluriverse? "Other" ethics for cross-cultural qualitative research. *Ethics, Place, and Environment* 5 (3): 205–21.
- Massey, D. 2010. *World city*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Meeks, T. W., and D. V. Jeste. 2009. Neurobiology of wisdom: An overview. *Archives of General Psychiatry* 66:355–65.
- Mitchell, K. 2004. Geographies of identity: Multiculturalism unplugged. *Progress in Human Geography* 28 (5): 641–65.
- Pile, S. 2010. Emotions and affect in recent human geography. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 35 (1): 5–20.
- Pratt, G., in collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre of BC. 2009. Circulating sadness: Witnessing Filipino mothers' stories of family separation. *Gender, Place, and Culture* 16: 3–22.
- Preston, V., and A. Kobayashi. 2007. Transnationalism through the life course: Hong Kong immigrants in Canada. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 48 (2): 151–67.
- Price, P. 2010. Contemporary immigrant geographies: New patterns, old divides, lingering concerns. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 100 (2): 468–76.
- Rodríguez-García, D. 2010. Beyond assimilation and multiculturalism: A critical review of the debate on managing diversity. *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 11 (3): 251–71.
- Said, E. 2001. *Reflections on exile and other essays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Saldanha, A. 2010. Politics and difference. In *Taking-place: Non-representational theories and human geography*, ed. B. Anderson and P. Harrison, 283–302. London: Ashgate.
- Silvey, R. 2009. Development and geography: Anxious times, anemic geographies, and migration. *Progress in Human Geography* 33 (4): 507–15.
- Simandan, D. 2010. On how much one can take: Relocating exploitation and exclusion within the broader framework of allostatic load theory. *Health & Place* 16 (6): 1291–93.
- . 2011a. Distance and delays in geography. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers, Seattle, WA.
- . 2011b. Kinds of environments: A framework for reflecting on the possible contours of a better world. *The Canadian Geographer* 55 (3): 383–86.
- . 2011c. The wise stance in human geography. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 36 (2): 188–92.
- Smith, M., J. Davidson, L. Cameron, and L. Bondi, eds. 2009. *Emotion, place and culture*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.
- Staeheli, L. 2010. Political geography: Democracy and the disorderly public. *Progress in Human Geography* 34 (1): 67–78.
- Staudinger, U. M., and J. Glück. 2011. Psychological wisdom research: Commonalities and differences in a growing field. *Annual Review of Psychology* 62:215–41.
- Sternberg, R. 2005. WICS: A model of positive educational leadership comprising wisdom, intelligence and creativity synthesized. *Educational Psychology Review* 17 (3): 191–262.
- Sternberg, R., and J. Jordan, eds. 2005. *A handbook of wisdom: Psychological perspectives*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Thobani, S. 2007. *Exalted subjects: Studies in the making of race and nation in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Todorov, T. 2010. *The fear of barbarians: Beyond the clash of civilizations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Turner, B. 2002. Cosmopolitan virtue, globalisation and patriotism. *Theory, Culture & Society* 19 (1–2): 45–63.

- Van Leeuwen, B. 2010. Dealing with urban diversity: Promises and challenges of city life for intercultural citizenship. *Political Theory* 38 (5): 631–57.
- Whitehead, A. N. 1929. *The aims of education and other essays*. New York: Free Press.
- Wood, P. K. 2008. The impossibility of global citizenship. *Brock Education: A Journal of Educational Research and Practice* 17:22–37.

DRAGOS SIMANDAN is a Professor in the Department of Geography at Brock University, 500 Glenridge Avenue, St. Catharines, ON, Canada, L2S 3A1. E-mail: simandan@brocku.ca. His research interests include geographical reasoning, social theory, and the economic geography of knowledge and human capital formation.

Copyright of Professional Geographer is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.