

## Reflection Report

To kick off the Laidlaw Research and Leadership Programme, I joined five students from NUS on a trip to Chiang Mai, Thailand, to learn about the issue of air pollution there. We sat through lectures that taught us how different disciplines such as chemistry, geography, health sciences, sociology and political science factor into our understanding of why the air pollution in Chiang Mai was so bad. The most memorable and insightful experience for me though, was spending three days in the remote village of Pong Sa Yaen up in the mountains. The village was so isolated that it could not even be found on the map. There, I interacted with local villagers, joined them in their daily toils on their farms and experienced a sliver of their lives. Through my new-found Thai friends from Chiang Mai University, I found out that the villagers were being blamed for the severe air pollution back down in Chiang Mai city (even though their plantations were nowhere the size of the massive commercial ones elsewhere), threatening their livelihoods. The complexity of the factors that surrounded the controversy of these villagers' simple lives grounded me and helped me see the very real implications that can result from people's decisions from miles away, as well as the structural forces that can entrench such illegitimacy.

Upon returning to Singapore, I attended a leadership workshop alongside the other NUS Laidlaw scholars. The highly-personalised sessions helped me identify the strengths and weaknesses I possessed as a leader, and brought to my attention concrete behaviors that I could change in order to work more effectively with a team. For instance, the instructors introduced the Sandwich model, a balanced way of complimenting and criticizing others' work without dealing blows to a person's self-esteem, something I realised I may have been doing prior to the workshop.

I then turned my attention to the research component. Over a year ago when I first started thinking about the project I wanted to create under the programme, I had a rather different topic in mind. I was interested in behavioral economics and in particular, nudge theory. I approached my supervisor, Dr. Bart Van Wassenhove, with the idea. He, being interested in wisdom research, suggested that I incorporate both nudge theory and wisdom into my project. At the time, this seemed like a great idea, since nudging and wisdom are both concerned with decision-making, but in different ways.

Nudging is a way of altering people's behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic interests<sup>1</sup>, while wisdom requires the individual to make decisions while balancing multiple interests and taking into account environmental contexts<sup>2</sup>. Under nudge theory, there is a course of action that is considered "better" for all individuals across the board, and for those individuals who do not make that "better" choice

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<sup>1</sup> Thaler, R. H., & Sunstein, C. R. (2009). *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness*. Penguin.

<sup>2</sup> This broad definition is suggested by the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm but also fits other prominent theories, such as Sternberg's Balance Theory and Ardel's 3D-WS. For precise definition, see: Baltes P. B. & Staudinger U. M. Wisdom. A metaheuristic (pragmatic) to orchestrate mind and virtue toward excellence. *Am Psychol.* 2000;55(1):122-136. doi:10.1037//0003-066x.55.1.122

for themselves naturally, there seems to be a need for external intervention to help them make that choice without sacrificing any liberties. Meanwhile, there is no recommended course of action when making decisions under wisdom frameworks; the “better” choice in a particular scenario is extremely context-dependent, and can vary significantly from one individual to the next. This is why wisdom researchers usually advocate for decisions to be left up to the individual who knows their situation best, and for decisions not to be unduly influenced by external agents. To me, this seemed a rather interesting contrast to look into, and I was keen to investigate if nudging or wisdom would be more effective in helping a person make the “right” choice.

Unfortunately, as I delved deeper into the literature for nudge theory and wisdom research, the two subjects that I initially thought were intertwined turned out to be fairly separate. There was no imaginable way for me to construct a study assessing both of their effects on decision-making as the contexts in which nudging and wisdom are used are substantially different. Nudging is used only in situations where it is clear that a particular thing is considered almost universally good, such as improving one’s health by engaging in more exercise and maintaining a healthier diet. It is rather useless in circumstances where there is no one agreed-upon “right” thing for everyone to do, such as in the case of whether a pregnant 16-year-old should abort her child. This is because nudging happens by altering the environment around people, which would affect a mass of people, all of whom may have to make different choices in order to be considered to have made the “right” choice. On the other hand, those are the situations where wisdom is most needed, since part of making a wise decision is taking into account the many contextual factors. Due to the irreconcilable differences between nudge theory and wisdom, I decided to move past this research area and into another one. It took me longer than I am willing to admit to let go of the project I had developed in the beginning due to the amount of time and effort I had invested into it, but in the end, this in itself was an important lesson for me. Letting go was a difficult thing to do, but hanging on to an idea that was not going to work did me no favors either.

During the research process for nudging and wisdom, I stumbled upon the idea of humor and wisdom being linked. It came in the form of a series of videos produced by Singapore’s National Environment Agency urging citizens to save electricity. Some of the videos were humorous while others were more informative in nature. I began to wonder whether one type of video had more effect on the behavior of viewers than the other, and hypothesized that the humorous video would have less of an effect since the humor might detract attention from the actual content of the video. I mentioned this to Dr. Bart, who helped me realize that there are many types of humor, each of which may have a different effect on people. For instance, sarcasm and caustic humor is unlikely to create lasting impressions that make people more environmentally-conscious, whereas observational humor or irony, which invoke more reflection in a person, may be able to generate long-term change<sup>3</sup>. Following this train of thought, I began to explore the

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<sup>3</sup> Kunzmann, U., & Glück, J. (2019). Wisdom and Emotion. In R. Sternberg & J. Glück (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Wisdom* (Cambridge Handbooks in Psychology, pp. 575-601). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781108568272.027

relationship between humor and wisdom in more detail, and found that to both my and Dr. Bart's surprise, very little research has been done in the area.

The link between humor and wisdom has been drawn before in the past, for example, by late psychologist Erik Erikson in 1988. He said: "I can't imagine a wise old person who can't laugh. The world is full of ridiculous dichotomies."<sup>4</sup> In fact, the Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale (SAWS), one of the most frequently-used self-report measures of wisdom, includes humor as one of its subcomponents. Yet, research on the exact relationship between humor and wisdom is sparse. Jeffrey Dean Webster, creator of SAWS, has himself said that humor as a facet of wisdom "has received only passing attention", and that "systematic attempts to investigate this component are lacking"<sup>5</sup>. All literature I could find around humor and wisdom did not capture the full essence of wisdom as we understand it today either, understandably because wisdom is still a nascent research field which only took off in the past ten years or so. Instead, those studies used proxies such as "love of learning", "intelligence" and "cognitive strengths" for wisdom, which represents only a slice of what wisdom encompasses. Hence, I saw an opportunity for me to explore the true relationship between humor and wisdom, which could contribute to our understanding of how wisdom measures that use humor as a subcomponent should look like and more.

Since the link between humor and wisdom is under-researched, I thought it would be appropriate for me to explore more elementary questions. I read up on a few ways that humor can be segregated into different types – from Schmidt-Hidding's eight comic styles<sup>6</sup> to comedic genres to personal humor styles. Eventually, I settled on investigating the relation between personal humor styles and levels of wisdom since wisdom is an intrinsic trait within an individual, and so is personal humor style, whereas comic styles and comedic genres tend to apply to comedic acts, pieces of writing or other forms of media. Hence, the first research question in my project is: Does possessing certain styles of humor correlate more with wisdom? In line with the idea that I had when watching the videos produced by Singapore's National Environment Agency, I came up with a second research question: Does exposure to humor increase wisdom?

To address the first research question, I set out to craft an online survey that would assess the humor style and wisdom level of participants. I decided to use an online survey with self-reported data because I wanted my project to be quantitative in nature. This requires a fairly large sample size, and hence would be most feasible as a survey. To determine participants' humor styles, I used the Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ)<sup>7</sup>, which measures four types of humor styles

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<sup>4</sup> Goleman, D. (1988, June 14). Erikson, In His Own Old Age, Expands His View of Life. *The New York Times*, Section C, pp. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Webster, J. D. (2007). Measuring the character strength of wisdom. *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 65(2), 163–183.

<sup>6</sup> Schmidt-Hidding, W. (1963). *Europäische Schlüsselwörter. Band I: Humor und Witz* [European key terms. Volume I: Humor and wit]. Munich: Huber.

<sup>7</sup> Martin, R.A., Puhlik-Doris, P., Larsen, G., Gray, J., and Weir, K. (2003). Individual differences in uses of humor and their relation to psychological well-being: Development of the Humor Styles Questionnaire. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 37, 48-75.

– affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive and self-defeating. Affiliative and self-enhancing humor are further grouped under positive or adaptive humor since the humor in these styles do not come at the expense of the self or others. Meanwhile, aggressive and self-defeating humor are considered negative or maladaptive humor styles. As for the measure of wisdom, I decided to use the Three-Dimensional Wisdom Scale (3D-WS)<sup>8</sup>, which measures three subcomponents of wisdom – cognitive, reflective and affective. According to the creators of the 3D-WS, all three components have to be present for a person to be considered wise.

At this juncture, I learnt how essential it is to continue familiarizing myself with literature related to my research project. It was only through continuing to read up on humor and wisdom even after confirming my methodology that I found a study introducing an alternative method of analyzing data derived from the HSQ<sup>9</sup>, something I would not have thought of otherwise. In the paper, the author suggests segregating participants into four clusters based on their HSQ responses. Cluster 1 consists of participants scoring above average on all humor styles; Cluster 2 consists of participants scoring below average on all humor styles. Cluster 3 consists of participants scoring above average on positive humor but below average on negative humor, and Cluster 4 consists of participants scoring below average on positive humor but above average on negative humor. Further analysis based on these clusters is interesting and salient as it is commonsensical that most people do not use only one humor style. The practice of continual research also helped me realize to include the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding Short Form (BIDR-16)<sup>10</sup> to guard against socially desirable responding, which has been reported to be associated with the 3D-WS<sup>11</sup>. This is as opposed to using the traditional Crowne-Marlowe Social Desirability Scale, which the creator of 3D-WS has said to be unsuitable for use in wisdom studies since wise individuals may act in ways described in that scale.

To address the second research question, I conducted an interview (via Zoom) with several participants from the survey respondent pool. During each interview, I showed participants three videos of stand-up gigs by comedians on obesity, society's consumerist culture and abortion respectively. The order in which the videos were shown to participants was assigned randomly using the Latin square design to ensure neutralization of any carry over effects. After each video, I asked participants to rate how funny they thought the video was, then posed an open-ended question related to the video's topic to evaluate their wisdom level. Each response was then rated according to the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm (BWP), which consists of five dimensions – rich factual

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<sup>8</sup> Ardelt, M. (2003). Empirical assessment of a three-dimensional wisdom scale. *Research on Aging*, 25(3), 275–324. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0164027503025003004>

<sup>9</sup> Galloway, G. (2010). Individual differences in personal humor styles: Identification of prominent patterns and their associations. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 48, 563–567.

<sup>10</sup> Hart, C. M., Ritchie, T. D., Hepper, E. G., & Gebauer, J. E. (2015). The balanced inventory of desirable responding short form (BIDR-16). *Sage Open*, 5(4), 2158244015621113.

<sup>11</sup> Webster, J. (2019). Self-Report Wisdom Measures: Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions. In R. Sternberg & J. Glück (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Wisdom* (Cambridge Handbooks in Psychology, pp. 311). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781108568272.015

knowledge, rich procedural knowledge, life-span contextualism, value-relativism and uncertainty<sup>12</sup>. I chose to conduct an interview for this portion of the research not only to standardize the environment and constraints under which participants experienced the exposure to humor and responded to the questions, but also because I wanted to expose myself to different research methods. Since I am not an expert in the field of wisdom, however, and there was no second rater to corroborate my BWP ratings with, this part of my project is only able to produce preliminary results.

To answer my first research question, I first removed survey responses from participants who were shown to be answering in a socially desirable way (as per the BIDR-16). Then, I ran correlation analysis between the different humor styles and the various dimensions of wisdom. I also correlated the humor styles with the 3D-WS mean since as mentioned before, the creators of 3D-WS remarked that all three dimensions need to be present for a person to be considered wise. In the end, the data showed negative correlations between possessing an aggressive humor style and affective wisdom, as well as possessing a self-defeating humor style and all dimensions of wisdom, including the 3D-WS mean. Under the cluster analysis, it was also found that those in Cluster 4 (scoring below average on positive humor styles and above average on negative humor styles) show a lower level of reflective wisdom. However, since my sample size was not large, the number of participants who could be grouped into the various clusters was very small. Thus, further research is definitely needed before any proper conclusions can be made in that area.

As far as I know, this project shows the first empirical evidence of the link between humor and wisdom, particularly with wisdom defined as a multifaceted construct as we understand it today. Proof of the relation between the two concepts not only opens up many new possibilities for research into the area, it can also potentially affect scales such as SAWS which include humor as a component. SAWS uses eight statements to assess its humor subcomponent, which is subsequently used as a proxy of a person's wisdom. Two of the statements are "There can be amusing elements even in very difficult life situations" and "I try and find a humorous side when coping with a major life transition.", which both seem to resonate very closely with the self-enhancing humor style. Another statement is "I often use humor to put others at ease.", which is closely related to the affiliative humor style. However, neither self-enhancing nor affiliative humor style showed a significant correlation with wisdom in this study.

Moreover, when choosing to include humor as a dimension of wisdom, Webster argued that it is because humor reflects the ability to see oneself as not too important, among other things<sup>13</sup>. This view, I think, fails to consider the different styles of humor that exist. People with an aggressive or self-enhancing humor style, for instance, are said to use humor to enhance the self. In particular, the typical behavior of those with an aggressive humor style is to tease, ridicule,

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<sup>12</sup> Baltes PB, Staudinger UM. Wisdom. A metaheuristic (pragmatic) to orchestrate mind and virtue toward excellence. *Am Psychol.* 2000;55(1):122-136. doi:10.1037//0003-066x.55.1.122

<sup>13</sup> Webster, J. D. (2003). An exploratory analysis of a self-assessed wisdom scale. *Journal of Adult Development*, 10(1), 13-22.

deride, and “put-down” others for the sake of humor<sup>14</sup>. Such behavior suggests that these individuals see themselves as superior to the person being teased, contrary to Webster’s view. Hence, if the results found in this study can be replicated, perhaps items used in self-report scales with humor as a subcomponent could be altered to more accurately reflect the nature of the relationship between humor and wisdom. Finding empirical proof of the relationship between humor and wisdom also prompts many interesting questions for future research. For instance, we may conclude that there is a relationship between the two concepts, but what creates that relationship? What is the mechanism that links the humor styles to the different dimensions of wisdom? Understanding the reasons why humor and wisdom are linked allows us to potentially find ways to cultivate wisdom in individuals, helping us make better decisions in the long term.

To answer my second research question, I ran correlation analysis between the humor ratings participants gave to the videos and the wisdom ratings I assigned to each of their responses according to the BWP. No significant correlation was found between the humor ratings and the dimensions of BWP.

At first, I was somewhat disappointed about the null result for the second part of my research project as I felt that I had wasted all the effort and time put into conducting the interviews and assigning wisdom scores to each response. However, Dr. Bart made me realize that there are important takeaways from this outcome too. For instance, there is ongoing debate in the field about whether wisdom is a steady trait that remains constant over the long term or a state that can change based on one’s environment. The lack of results this time around seems to support the idea that wisdom is a steady trait that cannot be cultivated in a short span of time, since the short-term exposure to humor in the form of the video used in the interview did not seem to have an effect on participants’ wisdom levels. However, more research is needed in this area before we can say anything for sure.

Another issue is that the BWP, which was used to determine participants’ level of wisdom in this study, assesses general wisdom. It is possible that humor is more personal in nature as what is considered humorous to someone may be highly individualized and based on their particular life experiences rather than the shared experiences of the community they are in. Hence, exposure to humor may have no correlation with general wisdom, but have correlations with personal wisdom<sup>15</sup>, a possibility that future researchers may want to look into. Lastly, I think more research on humor and wisdom can be done using video clips as was the case in this project since even

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<sup>14</sup> Martin, R.A., Puhlik-Doris, P., Larsen, G., Gray, J., and Weir, K. (2003). Individual differences in uses of humor and their relation to psychological well-being: Development of the Humor Styles Questionnaire. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 37, 48-75.

<sup>15</sup> Personal wisdom involves sound judgment and deep insight with regard to difficult and uncertain matters of one’s own life while general wisdom is concerned with individuals’ insights into life in general, from an observer’s point of view, when they are not personally concerned. For full explanations on the two, see: Staudinger, U. (2019). The Distinction between Personal and General Wisdom: How Far Have We Come? In R. Sternberg & J. Glück (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Wisdom* (Cambridge Handbooks in Psychology, pp. 182-201). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781108568272.010

short film clips of several minutes can present wisdom problems in ways that elicit a wide range of emotional reactions<sup>16</sup>, allowing researchers to assess not only wisdom-related thoughts but also wisdom-related emotional reactions and competencies<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Levenson, Robert W. "Expressive, physiological, and subjective changes in emotion across adulthood." Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, 105th, Aug, 1997, Chicago, IL, US; This chapter is based on a presentation at the aforementioned conference.. American Psychological Association, 2000.

<sup>17</sup> Ardelt, M., & Ferrari, M. (2014). *Wisdom and emotions*. In P. Verhaeghen & C. Hertzog (Eds.), *Oxford library of psychology. The Oxford handbook of emotion, social cognition, and problem solving in adulthood* (p. 256–272). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199899463.013.016>