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Laidlaw Reflection Report

Introduction

This report serves as an account of my experiences as a Laidlaw Scholar over the past year. Though the program officially only lasts twelve weeks, I have learnt many things in the full year spanning the start and end of the program. The report will cover the leadership development programs that took place mostly in the first summer, as well as the preparation and execution of my independent research project over the second summer, before concluding with a discussion of some of my greatest takeaways from the program.

Stepping into university, my aim has always been to use my undergraduate education as preparation for a future in the field of research and academia. This was not the easiest as I quickly realized that there were relatively few research opportunities for an undergraduate (perhaps especially so in the humanities and social sciences). Given this, when I found out about the Laidlaw Undergraduate Research & Leadership Scholarship Program offered by NUS-USP, I was fairly certain that this an opportunity not to be missed. And indeed, I have found that this program has equipped and moulded me in a myriad of ways.

Leadership Development

Strategic Leadership, Innovation, and Society in China 2019

From 19th to 27th May of 2019, I traveled to Hangzhou with some of my fellow Laidlaw Scholars as part of a Community Leadership Project organized jointly by USP-NUS and the Chu Kochen College (CKC) of Zhejiang University. Across the seven days, we attended lectures given by seven different professors and interacted up-close with students from CKC. Initially, I was fairly apprehensive about the lectures which were about topics very foreign to me. Out of the seven lectures, only one was in the field of the social sciences, while the remaining covered topics like entrepreneurship, neurobiology, and cloud security.

Despite my worries, I found the lectures to be incredibly relevant and insightful. Though the areas of research were diverse, the professors were able to demonstrate their fields'

potential to address issues regarding the leadership and development of society. Despite the lack of expertise on the topics involved, I was able to learn a lot through the lectures. At the end of the program, we were able to interview the professors about their thoughts on future leadership. We were also given the opportunity to collaborate with the CKC students to make presentations on ideas generated from the lectures and discuss how they could be applied to specific topics such as crime or overpopulation.

This trip was rewarding for a few reasons. Firstly, I gained a greater appreciation for scholarly research beyond my field. Given my module requirements as a double-major, I spend the bulk of my time taking classes in my field and have not had as many chances to take electives. Because of this, I did not know much beyond Political Science and Philosophy. This trip made me realize the importance of a holistic education and how what I learn beyond my field can actually give me greater perspective in my own. This trip was also where I was able to get to know my fellow scholars as friends and colleagues, which was helpful for the subsequent year we would spend working together.

Laidlaw Leadership Workshop by Growthbeans

A three-day leadership workshop was also held in the first summer by Growthbeans. Over the course of the workshop, we explored the many dimensions of leadership. This, of course, involved public-speaking skills, learning about different personality-types and working styles, as well as the principles of teamwork. Within the cohort, we were also able to draw upon our diversity to practice some of these skills firsthand. This workshop pushed me beyond my comfort zone to develop my weaker areas such as my public-speaking and interpersonal skills.

Beyond that, we also learnt about the importance of self-leadership, including elements such as self-discipline, self-development, as well as self-awareness. I have always believed that leadership is more than knowing how to manage others and how good leaders first lead themselves. Hence, this segment was particularly helpful to me as it gave me many practical handles with which I could develop myself. On the whole, from the minutiae of giving constructive feedback to the broad principles of good leadership, the Laidlaw Workshop was immensely helpful to my progress as a leader.

Research Development

Wisdom in Politics: Voters' Perceptions and Preferences Towards Wise Political Leaders

Does wisdom have a role in politics today? Across history, wisdom has traditionally been a trait highly sought after and expected in political leaders.¹ After all, these political leaders wield great power over the society and its members—*sometimes even on issues of life and death*. Yet, there seems to have been a decline in the importance of wisdom in political leadership over the years. Most notably, the rise of populism today signals a certain disregard for reasoning and truth in favor of inflammatory and hostile rhetoric that prey on the anxieties of the populace.

It was this concern with populism, the election of Trump, and the so-called ‘post-truth era’ that formed the foundation of my independent research project. At the same time, Dr. Bart Van Wassenhove from USP was supervising research projects in the area of wisdom research. Given my background in Political Science and Philosophy, studying the role of wisdom in politics seemed to be a fantastic combination of both my interests. With Dr. Bart’s guidance, I was able to create a suitable research proposal.

Below is an excerpt from the original proposal²:

Is wisdom a valuable and necessary trait in and of itself, or is the perception of one’s wisdom sufficient? Is wisdom perhaps no longer a necessary criterion for leadership? What are the implications for politics if this becomes our reality? The first question we seek to answer is how contemporary voters define wisdom in politics. Given that most countries today live in democracies where leaders are voted in by constituents, how these voters define wisdom is much more important than any academic or scientific breakdown of the term. The second question that we aim to answer, is whether voters today see wisdom as a necessary trait for politics.

My preliminary hypothesis is that wisdom is still seen as an important and necessary for a political leader, but the differences lie in how the nature of this wisdom has changed. Of course, it should be noted that voters’ perceptions of

¹ Trevor Curnow, “Introduction Sophia’s World: Episodes from the History of Wisdom,” in *Teaching for Wisdom* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2009), 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-6532-3_1.

² Esther Ng, Original Laidlaw Research Write-up, 2019.

wisdom and its relation to politics may differ across different cultures and contexts. In certain countries, other traits, such as decisiveness or strong-handedness, may be attributed greater value. If a different form of wisdom is valued by voters today, we must then seek to understand how this wisdom is presented by politicians and how this appeals to contemporary voters.

In the year between the first and second summer, Dr. Bart and I continued to discuss and refine the proposal. An extensive review of the literature gave me a better understanding of contemporary wisdom research and its development as a field of empirical inquiry. Wisdom has been understood in many different ways from Antiquity to modern times—some of the most influential approaches being Socrates’s epistemic humility, Aristotle’s account of practical wisdom, and Plato’s grasping of the Form of the Good. Wisdom has also been interpreted as technical or practical know-how, theoretical understanding, and the following of religious teachings or general maxims and proverbs.³ Because of my background in philosophy, I was familiar with such conceptions of wisdom.

However, I found the field of contemporary wisdom research to be very different. This is due to the fact that contemporary wisdom research has largely been dominated by psychologists and gerontologists thus far—with much different aims and methods compared to philosophers. This is not surprising given that those who seek to define wisdom quickly come to recognize the elusiveness of the concept. Wisdom is not simply intelligence, talent, or maturity. It does not only relate to decision-making or problem-solving. Its many conceptions may not even be compatible with one another.⁴ Because of this, psychologists have continuously attempted to empirically define and measure wisdom. Through my literature review, I came to know about the explicit and implicit theories of wisdom.

While explicit theories of wisdom have to do with the search for a reliable and externally valid way of defining and measuring levels of wisdom,⁵ implicit theories examine individual, non-expert beliefs on what constitutes wisdom.⁶ Researchers aim to draw out the conceptions of wisdom that we all have—influencing our actions and decisions but are usually

³ Ricca Edmondson and Markus H. Woerner, “Sociocultural Foundations of Wisdom,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Wisdom* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 43, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108568272.004>.

⁴ Edmondson and Woerner, “Sociocultural Foundations of Wisdom,” 41.

⁵ Susan Bluck and Judith Glück, “From the Inside Out,” in *A Handbook of Wisdom*, ed. Robert Sternberg and Jennifer Jordan (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 84, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511610486>.

⁶ Bluck and Glück, 84.

not fully articulated. I learnt that research on implicit theories thus far has been to map out the traits or attributes that individuals associate with wisdom and the most common ways for this have been the use of descriptor and nomination studies. The former involves asking people to generate and judge single-word descriptors or phrases based on their relevance to wisdom. The latter investigates the individuals that people nominate as exemplars of wisdom so as to determine the relevant traits that are valued where wisdom is concerned.

While wisdom research has been dominated by psychologists and gerontologists thus far, I realized that this field of inquiry presented invaluable opportunities to political scientists as well. For one, most individuals believe wisdom to be a highly desirable trait for political leaders who “steer the fates of our modern society and economy.”⁷ After all, one should expect those who wield the power to determine issues of life and death to have the wisdom to make the right choices. Yet, most modern leadership and management theories have mostly neglected the notion of wise leadership in their discourse.⁸ This is perhaps not surprising given that our understandings of wise political leadership have been highly diverse and even conflicting. This was the gap I hoped my research could meet.

This need, then, subsequently shaped my research design. Thus far, research into implicit theories of wisdom has revolved around general traits that people deem to be relevant to wisdom. In order to explore the dimensions of political wisdom and wise leadership more directly, I sought to identify the perceptions that people hold toward wise political leadership specifically, its differences from generalized perceptions of wisdom, and how one’s perception toward this might guide their political preferences.

I chose to use the descriptor study as my method of choice so as to get a larger sample of the voting population with my limited resources. Below is an excerpt from my final research design protocol⁹:

⁷ Staudinger and Glück, “Psychological Wisdom Research: Commonalities and Differences in a Growing Field,” 234.

⁸ Bernard McKenna and David Rooney, “Wise Leadership,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Wisdom* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 650, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108568272.030>.

⁹ Esther Ng, Final Research Protocol, 2020.

My project aims to find out (1) how American citizens define political wisdom, and (2) whether they choose wise leaders. This may shed some light on recent trends in voting behavior and choice.

This requires a two-stage descriptor study to be carried out among two distinct groups of participants via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk is an online labor market where requesters post jobs and workers choose which jobs to do for pay. MTurk has become a significant research tool in the social sciences due to its large and diverse participant pool, streamlined process, and relative low cost. There are mechanisms for quality assurance and the collected data, on the whole, has also met acceptable psychometric standards.

Two surveys corresponding to Stage 1 and Stage 2 in the original research proposal will be sent out via MTurk. In the first stage, participants will be asked to list the characteristics/descriptors of political wisdom. The collected results are compiled and narrowed down to a list of descriptors for stage 2. In stage 2, participants will be asked to rank the given characteristics on a five-point scale from "not important" to "very important to political wisdom", as well as to indicate the presidential candidate (the top three democratic and republican presidential nominees and the independent presidential candidates in the last three elections) that they most preferred.

The first stage involved 200 participants while the second involved 150 participants. In total, the first stage produced 78 attributes that people thought were important for wise leadership. This was then narrowed down to 55 attributes for the second stage of the study. The second stage then sought to see whether there was any correlation between the attributes voters valued and who they thought would be the best president. My results found that voters across all party-leanings showed similar trends in how they scored different attributes (figure 1). This means that there is some general agreement on whether a trait is important or not to wisdom. For example, the different cohorts all produced lower scores for traits like "manipulative" compared to others like "sincere".



Even so, there were significant differences in the extent to which different cohorts valued a trait. For example, democrat-leaning voters gave higher scores for all attributes except “untrustworthy or deceitful”, “manipulative”, “religious”, “physically attractive”, “patriotic”, and “authoritative”. This means that despite a similar general trend, i.e. all voters think of “manipulative” as a trait not important to wisdom (< 3.0), Democrat-leaning voters thought it much less important (2.18) compared to Republican-leaning voters (2.73).

This implies that there are variations in perceptions of political wisdom according to political orientations, even if *some* general agreement is still present. Importantly, this may affect voters' preferences in choosing political candidates due to the different standards by which they judge the capabilities (of which wisdom is a part) of leaders. This leads us to wonder if our everyday discourse on the capabilities and performance of political leaders have been so polarized because we have largely been talking past one another when we talk about wisdom. Of course, we note that voters' preferences of candidates are not completely determined by considerations of wisdom. In particular, loyalty to one's political party or assent to specific policy proposals are important factors that influence voters' choices.

One also notes that there are polarizing opinions on the value of seemingly mutually exclusive attributes in wisdom such as “manipulative” and “accountable and trustworthy”. In

the first stage, different respondents produced both “trustworthy” and “untrustworthy” as attributes of wise leaders. Other unexpected responses such as “manipulative”, “physically attractive”, and “creative” were also received. When presented with seemingly contradictory attributes in stage 2, many respondents produced contrasting valuations accordingly. Yet surprisingly, there were also a significant number of voters who did otherwise, deeming it important to be trustworthy yet also manipulative or untrustworthy as well. This is consistent with the diverse conceptions of wise leadership among political theorists. While Plato would deem it necessary for a wise political leader to be morally good, Machiavelli might argue that a wise leader is one who does everything he can to maintain the security of the state, even if they involve morally reprehensible actions.

I believe this research project has the potential to be mapped to existing research both in the study of wisdom as well as in politics. In the area of wisdom research, we might observe that certain attributes not typically valued in wisdom might come into play where *political* wisdom is concerned. Therefore, efforts to examine wisdom specifically in the political arena may prove useful. This project may also contribute to existing studies of party affiliations and its influence on one’s values and, by extension, electoral behaviour. This includes studies by Jonathan Haidt and his findings on the variations in moral matrices of American liberals, social conservatives, and libertarians.¹⁰

If this research project were to be expanded, it would be beneficial to study how much wisdom is weighted among other factors in voters’ overall decision-making. We might also seek to determine if differences in perceptions of wisdom also vary according to other factors like one’s educational or demographical background. Most importantly, it would be key to determine whether a common or core set of values can be found among voters’ perceptions of wisdom. If we are able to make some headway in answering these questions, we would be better able to understand electoral patterns and facilitate wiser decision-making among voters.

In the process of preparing and executing my research, there were quite a number of roadblocks and unexpected difficulties. For one, the COVID-19 situation derailed my initial plans to conduct my research as a visiting scholar at Columbia University. Given that my

¹⁰ Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided By Politics and Religion*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2012.

research project is based on American politics, this was a critical problem for me. The last-minute decision to use the online platform Amazon MTurk was, however, a blessing in disguise. The platform allowed me to efficiently get a large number of participants representative of the population. Furthermore, I was also able to experience using an emerging yet relatively new platform in social science research.

I also learnt that research is an ever-evolving process that involves continual learning and improvement. In stage 1 of the data collection, I realized that having 200 respondents producing 15 attributes each was not necessary given the amount of work required to transcribe and process all the responses, as well as the final number of attributes we had. I also felt that there were areas of stage 2 where survey questions could have been more relevant so as to address the original research question. This research project also required me to engage in statistical analysis using software such as STATA. As a political theory and philosophy student, this exposed me to skills that I did not previously acquire. I believe the research project made me a more well-rounded researcher with a holistic set of skills. On the whole, the program has developed my abilities to engage in long-term, independent projects, building my planning and time management skills, as well as stronger habits for self-discipline and productivity. I also gained more exposure to the processes involved in research and publication, which will be of great benefit to me in the future.

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