Most of us can remember a few instances in their life in which we did something very wise – but in many other instances we acted much less wisely. Why are we so often unable to utilize our wisdom when it is most needed? Previous research has mostly assumed that wisdom is a largely stable characteristic that some people have more than others, but recently a growing body of evidence has suggested that the same individuals can behave wiser and less wise depending on the situation they are in. This project breaks new ground for psychological wisdom research by systematically investigating characteristics of situations that make it more difficult for people to utilize their own wisdom. The project is also novel in that it investigates wisdom in professional contexts – specifically, the wisdom of teachers and managers, two professions that are often perceived as requiring wisdom and indeed face many wisdom-requiring challenges. Based on theoretical and empirical work on wise leadership and personal and general wisdom, we propose five preliminary characteristics of professional wisdom: (1) a focus on ethical considerations, (2) complex thinking about complex issues, (3) balancing control and uncontrollability, (4) openness and self-reflectivity, and (5) a balance of empathy and emotion regulation.

The project comprises three empirical studies: In Study 1, managers and teachers who have been nominated for their professional wisdom will be interviewed about situations in which they think they did something particularly wise and something particularly unwise. We will use their reports to identify relevant characteristics of those situations and participants’ behavior in them. Study 2 builds upon these results in developing and evaluating a new approach for measuring professional wisdom. Study 3 will consist of a series of experiments in which we directly test how certain situational conditions affect wisdom. Two conditions that will definitely be included are overconfidence and competition; additional conditions may be identified in Study 1. We expect participants who are experimentally induced to be overconfident and participants who want to win a reward for the best response to give less wise responses than participants under standard conditions.

Confirmation of our hypotheses about situational obstacles to wisdom would have important implications concerning the often-heard claims for wisdom in professional fields such as political, juridical, or medical decision-making: perhaps it would be easier to increase the wisdom of decision-makers by changing characteristics of their situational contexts than by trying to recruit highly wise individuals, who are generally rare and may not be particularly interested in such positions. Our approach to measuring professional wisdom should also be useful for researchers in many applied areas of psychology.

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