

Special Section: In Honor of James Emmett Birren (1918-2016)

The Wisdom of James Birren

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Wisdom is, and has been, considered a major virtue and powerful psychosocial strength both trans-historically and cross-culturally. Despite its benign neglect in the social sciences, the last 30 years has witnessed a burgeoning interest in the area with resulting advancements in theory, methodology, and empirical findings (Staudinger & Gluck, 2011). When we think of wise persons in our lives, we think of those traits and characteristics that demonstrate not only personal strengths but also generative concern for immediate family, friends, and ever-expanding circles of community and humankind.

For me, Jim Birren is associated with wisdom in at least two ways. First, Jim was a pioneer in the empirical revival of wisdom scholarship. Second, to my mind, he represents a prototypically wise person. Indeed, Jim reflects all of the elements described in one contemporary model of wisdom. In this article, I use the five dimensions of the H.E.R.O.(E.) model (Webster, 2014) to illustrate how Jim manifested elements of wisdom in his own life. I start with a very brief description of Jim's academic contribution to wisdom scholarship and then devote the majority of my discussion to ways in which Jim exemplified wisdom in his own life and career.

Jim was a pioneer in the field of wisdom research, co-authoring a seminal article with Vivian Clayton in 1980 (Clayton & Birren, 1980). In this article, Jim and Vivian conceptualized wisdom as an integration of conative, cognitive, and affective components. Wise persons have the cognitive and emotional skills to adaptively confront the exigencies of life, and are motivated to engage in actions, which bring personal goals to fruition in ways which also benefit others. Jim followed this article with a chapter (Birren & Fisher, 1990) in Robert Sternberg's highly influential edited volume on wisdom. Here, Jim and his co-author synthesized extant knowledge on wisdom conceptualization, measurement, and outcomes. Many of the identified elements in his review featured prominently in subsequent models of wisdom such as Ardel's (1997) and in my own H.E.R.O.(E.) model (Webster, 2014).

Very briefly, in the H.E.R.O.(E.) model of wisdom, five interdependent characteristics are synthesized to

produce a wise person. These five characteristics are operationalized in the Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale (SAWS; Webster, 2010; Webster, Bohlmeijer, & Westerhof, 2014). Following the H.E.R.O.(E.) acronym, the first element of wisdom is a particular type of *humor*. Wise persons are humble, and use a gentle form of humor which reflects humility, a sense of irony in life, a way of coping with difficult situations, and as a means of affiliation with others. Second, wise persons have *experienced* many challenging and difficult life events. These often involve difficult life choices, moral conflicts, and highly stressful life events. Wise persons are able to learn and grow from such adversity. Third, wise persons are highly reflective and use *reminiscence* to understand themselves and the world around them. Non-ruminative, autobiographical reflection helps wise persons gain perspective, contributes to increased well-being, and facilitates future goal-setting and pursuit. Fourth, wise persons seek out, and are *open* to, myriad life experiences. They are growth oriented and search for and find meaning in various life domains. They seek novelty and are willing to entertain (although not necessarily agree with) discordant views. Wise persons are the antithesis of close-minded bigots. Finally, the fifth element is *emotional* regulation. In part as a consequence of the other elements (e.g., being open to new experiences of a difficult nature; reminiscing about affectively charged life events), wise persons need an ability to manage, and effectively employ, the full range of emotions. Intensifying certain emotions (happiness) in the service of increasing motivation and moderating other emotions (e.g., sadness) in order to enhance coping responses, are examples of emotional regulation. Wise persons are adept at managing the full spectrum of emotional reactions within themselves as well as identifying affective responses from those around them.

These five key components of wisdom serve as a convenient framework for discussing the qualities exhibited by Jim over his long and distinguished career and life. I'm sure most people will recognize many of these wise characteristics from their individual relationships with Jim over the years. I was not as privileged as most contributors to this special issue in terms of the frequency nor intimacy of the relationship I had with Jim. These were limited to a few conferences, workshops, and minor collaborations (e.g., Jim was kind enough to write the Forward for the edited volume on reminiscence by myself and Barbara Haight: *Critical Advances in Reminiscence*

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Work. In what follows, therefore, I have taken the liberty to speculate and infer. Perhaps readers will be able to fill in some details based upon their own reflections.

Humor

One of my few personal anecdotes concerning Jim illustrates nicely two elements of wise humor. Happening upon Jim and Betty between sessions at a Gerontology conference as they waited for an elevator, I asked whether he was returning to his room to get some papers or get organized for his next session. “No”, he replied, “I’m going up to take a nap.” This was said with a smile and represents the type of gently deprecating humor detailed in the SAWS. Not taking oneself too seriously, and admitting some fatigue after morning sessions, was a way of letting me know that, despite his deserved reputation as a giant in the field, he was a mere mortal, an approachable colleague who valued egalitarian interactions rather than sycophantic subservience.

Riding up in the elevator with Jim and Betty, I prevailed upon Jim to accept a manuscript of mine that detailed some findings from my wisdom research and identified the five components. He graciously accepted the draft, and I assumed that was the end of the road and that he might come across the paper months later buried under others on his office desk back home. I was not actually expecting to hear back from him, but was tickled nevertheless that he seemed genuinely interested in the paper. A few hours later I met up with Jim and Betty again. To my surprised delight, he said he enjoyed reading the paper and then proceeded to rate himself on the five dimensions. Alas, he rated himself low on the humor element!

Experience

We were fortunate to have Jim with us for 97 years. Jim often used his own life experiences in Guided Autobiography (GAB) groups to illustrate certain points or to model a productive type of open and reflective discussion of earlier life experiences. Personally, I always liked the story of the horse-drawn milk truck which made the rounds in the Chicago neighborhood of Jim’s childhood. Jim amassed myriad accolades and awards over his distinguished career, and these are testaments to life experiences with breadth and depth. From his first job as part owner of a gas station in his teens to his continuing work on GAB until his death, Jim experienced a life replete with challenging and rewarding experiences.

Jim’s longevity illustrates an important point about wisdom development. One of the relatively few positive stereotypes of growing older is the putative increase in wisdom as we age. Unfortunately, this optimistic characterization lacks strong empirical support. Indeed, certain models and several studies have shown that wisdom shows some small decline from midlife, although younger and older adults score at approximately the same level when

global wisdom scores are used. For instance, my colleagues and I (Webster, Bohlmeijer, & Westerhof, 2014) found such a curvilinear pattern when assessing total SAWS scores; however, interesting patterns occurred when we investigated the factor scores. For instance, consistent with longitudinal studies in the personality domain, openness to experience was somewhat lower in our oldest participants relative to younger and midlife adults. This could be a cohort, rather than an age effect, of course. The point here is that a long life, in and of itself, is not a guarantee of wisdom. Imagine people who are very privileged and sheltered from the basic slings and arrows of life. Such persons might live a long time but become increasingly narcissistic or feel increasingly entitled, rather than wise. In the H.E.R.O.(E.), and other models of wisdom, rich and varied life experiences require reflection, evaluation, and ongoing integration in order for persons to benefit from their accumulated years.

Reminiscence/Reflectiveness

Of course, the reminiscence/reflectiveness element of wisdom is the most obvious connection with Jim and this special edition. Jim was a pioneer in the study of autobiographical memory, and the profound role reminiscence could play in the mental well-being and social health of both individuals and groups of persons. Jim clearly modeled effective reminiscence processes as part of his Guided Autobiography groups. His illustrations of key life events from his own life story provided clear guidelines and examples for others to emulate. Jim, with his collaborators, formalized many aspects of the life review process in the GAB workshops, eventually culminating in a well-received guidebook on the topic (Birren & Cochrane, 2001).

Many of the insights derived from years of GAB groups served as invaluable heuristic prompts for reminiscence work, both theoretical and applied. For instance, Jim often said that although GAB groups were not therapy, they could be very therapeutic. Comments such as these resonated with researchers (e.g., Webster & Haight, 2002) trying to disentangle different forms of reminiscence processes and outcomes. Westerhof, Bohlmeijer, and Webster (2010) for instance, described the similarities and differences among what they termed, simple reminiscence, life review, and life review therapy. Basic taxonomies such as these help focus attention on possible precursors, consequences, and modifiers of reminiscence processes with potential implications for both clinical interventions and theory development. For instance, Kotre, Westerhof, and Bohlmeijer (2012) documented that both a sense of meaning in life and mastery mediated the relationship between negative forms of reminiscence and distress among mildly depressed older adults.

Openness

Perhaps one of the ways in which Jim exemplified openness was his willingness to go against the dominant *behaviorism* model of the times which eschewed “soft” approaches to gerontological science. Behaviorism is primarily concerned with observable behavior, as opposed to internal events like thinking and emotion. Despite his founding membership and strong influence in the Gerontological Society of America, Jim willingly risked potential censure when he began to seriously consider approaching important gerontological questions from an autobiographical or narrative perspective. By being open to new orientations and pursuing ways to investigate what Randall and Kenyon term the “inside of aging,” Jim lent his considerable academic gravitas to a creative and promising avenue of investigation.

Going against the grain takes courage and so we can consider Jim’s evolving shift in research perspective and empirical investigation as H.E.R.O.(E.)ic. Such path-breaking behavior was inspiring for many. If luminaries such as Robert Butler and Jim Birren were championing reminiscence and life review, then it felt as though they were legitimizing this domain in the eyes of many. Attending the early International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review (IIRLR) conferences, I always felt galvanized when Robert and Jim were in attendance and felt as though my investment in the area was validated.

Emotional Regulation

In terms of describing Jim’s emotional regulation abilities I am on much shakier ground. I knew Jim only during his later years and, as stated, only in the context of academic conferences and workshops. I cannot attest to his level of emotional maturity or intelligence outside of these settings. Nevertheless, within this restrictive sample, in my experience Jim did evince a type of Yoda-like equanimity. I never saw him flustered or upset. This calmness, I would argue, is in part a consequence of some of the other elements of wisdom described previously. For instance, reflecting on a rich life in an open and humble way enables a person to cope with daily stressors and unanticipated obstacles in a detached manner, recognizing in the grand scheme of things that these problems are resolvable in adaptive ways. Hence, there is no reason to become overly angry, frustrated, or frightened. Remaining involved, yet somehow detached, is a hallmark of wisdom.

Wisdom and Psychosocial Strengths

Wisdom is considered a virtue, in part because it is associated with so many positive human attributes. Research with the SAWS illustrates that wisdom is correlated in expected directions with generativity, ego integrity, forgiveness, attributional complexity, mental

health, and a balanced time perspective, to name just a few. We might safely consider Jim Birren to embody most of these types of traits as well. Certainly, his generative concern for younger colleagues is well-documented. His willingness to have his and Betty’s name used as a major award in the International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review is a further example of the kind of generativity which Kotre notes will “outlive the self” (Kotre, 1984).

At a more prosaic level, Jim was just a decent human being. I remember wandering around a large eating area with a tray of food at the British Gerontological Society meeting many years ago; Jim and Betty were seated at a table and waved me over to join them for lunch. This small gesture of kindness from Jim and Betty exemplifies their humble and compassionate nature. But my intent is not to write a hagiography. Wise persons are not saints and, I suspect, neither was Jim. Nevertheless, like other wise persons, Jim recognized his limitations and faults and had the skills and motivation to work towards improving them. All of us can benefit from Jim’s example, for after all, “...wisdom is not simply for wise people or curious psychologists: it is for all people and the future of the world” (Birren & Fisher, 1990, p. 332).

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