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Exploring the Role of Practical Wisdom in Addressing Adolescent Childrearing Dilemmas

Objective: To explore whether practical wisdom may provide a useful lens for understanding how mothers can address difficult childrearing problems more effectively when raising adolescents.

Background: One of the major difficulties of raising adolescents is that there are no clear-cut responses or universal solutions to many of the problems that regularly arise. Parents are expected to make responsible decisions about complex, indefinite problems even though they may lack a thorough understanding of the situation and have little formal training in childrearing. Practical wisdom—the ability to make sound, ethical judgments and decisions about difficult and uncertain problems—may be a valuable asset for addressing such challenges.

Method: Thirty mothers of adolescents (12–17 years of age) were asked to reason aloud about how they would respond to a series of hypothetical childrearing dilemmas.

Results: Guided by prior work on practical wisdom, our qualitative analysis identified a complex combination of eight interrelated parenting wisdom strategies: Compassion for Self and Child, Integrative Thinking, Parenting Knowledge, Perspective-Taking, Problem-Framing, Purpose Identification, Reflection, and Socioemotional Awareness.

Conclusion: The findings provide evidence that mothers sometimes use a process that has been historically conceptualized as practical wisdom and offer insight into what some of these practices entail.

Implications: The identification of these wise problem-solving strategies highlight an important overlooked aspect of childrearing and hold promise as a valuable asset for helping mothers address difficult parenting problems.

A major challenge of raising adolescents is that there are often no simple answers or universally applicable solutions. Many childrearing problems involve conflicting interests, moral choices, and questions about whose authority should prevail (Smetana, 2011; Sokhabi, 2013). Parents are expected to make important and responsible decisions about complex, indefinite problems where there may not be a single correct response (e.g., How should a parent deal with an adolescent who holds religious beliefs that are in conflict with their own? What is an appropriate response to a teen who chooses to be sexually active?). Moreover, parents often face such matters despite incomplete or imperfect knowledge and understanding of a situation and little formal training in parenting practices. Even if parents are well versed in the latest scientific knowledge regarding adolescent development and childrearing practices, effective childrearing requires more. Indeed, good parenting practice, like other types of practice, involves

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many factors including the consideration of personal values, an understanding of the particular context, the ability to draw on expertise developed through experience, and the capability to put these elements together in the moment (Dunne, 2011).

To better understand the experience of day-to-day parenting practice, we looked to research and theory on a construct known as *practical wisdom* to see whether it could inform how mothers understand and address challenging childrearing problems involving adolescents. Specifically, we explored whether practical wisdom could provide a theoretically and practically useful lens for understanding how mothers deal with the often difficult, complex, value-laden, and ill-formed problems and decisions that commonly occur when raising adolescents.

CHILDBEARING PRACTICE

Much of the scientific and popular literature related to childrearing practices with adolescents is directed at the development of particular skills such as discipline and communication techniques (Sandler, Ingram, Wolchik, Tein, & Winslow, 2015); parental monitoring (Stattin, Kerr, & Tilton-Weaver, 2010); general childrearing principles (e.g., providing warmth and support, setting and enforcing clear family rules; Smetana, 2011); parenting styles and orientations (e.g., adopting an authoritative parenting style; Baumrind, 2013); and being mindful (Duncan, Coatsworth, & Greenberg, 2009). Many of these practices are evidence-based and are known to be related to positive childrearing outcomes, but they are incomplete in that they do not typically take into account several other important aspects of the parenting process that are vital for effective childrearing.

First, for a childrearing strategy or practice to be effective, it should be well matched to the problem to which it is being applied. Little is known about how parents identify and frame problems or how they decide on which strategies they will use to address them. This is further complicated by the fact that many problems, especially during adolescence, are complex and open-ended, where neither the problem nor the solution is apparent.

Second, although scientific knowledge on adolescent development and effective childrearing practices has steadily expanded over the past

3 decades, most parents are not well versed in these findings, nor do they take parent training classes where they might improve their childrearing competence (Pew Research Center, 2015). For the majority of parents, childrearing ability is largely developed through personal experience and trial and error (Pew Research Center, 2015), through which some parents become more adept but others show little growth. However, not much is known about how parents draw on this experience, learn from it (or fail to learn from it), and why some become wiser, more competent parents as a result.

Finally, as with other forms of practice, good childrearing involves not just knowledge of effective techniques and principles but also the capacity to make good judgments (Hannush, 2002). This includes the ability to assess and deliberate about a problem, take into account personal ethics and values, and consider and select appropriate goals to pursue. It also involves taking into consideration the details of the specific situation and the particular individuals involved (Schön, 1983). The ability to make good judgments and assess these context-bound and personal factors relies on an individual's expertise, experience, and wisdom. Unfortunately, little is known about how parents actively deliberate about such factors, make judgments and decisions, and formulate solutions regarding childrearing problems. Wise and effective parenting clearly involves more than knowledge of child development and the routine application of technically derived skills.

PRACTICAL WISDOM

More than 2,000 years ago, the Greek philosopher Aristotle discussed the importance of wisdom for sound practice. For Aristotle, practical wisdom or *phronesis* is concerned with the need to consider particular circumstances and weigh arguments in the face of challenging decisions and actions, especially those that cannot be met through the direct application of norms or principles (Aristotle, 1953/2003). It involves deliberation, reflection, and ethical judgment and combines the intellectual virtue of intuitive reason or knowledge of the particular with scientific knowledge, or the knowledge of generalities (Flaming, 2001). Science (*episteme*) and practical skills (*techne*) are valuable for practice, but it is through practical wisdom that these elements are unified, and, in the case

of childrearing, it is where parental experience, values, and judgment are integrated into the process of effective childrearing practice. Practical wisdom may be a critical missing element in the quest to understand more fully and promote effective childrearing practice.

The contemporary study of wisdom has blossomed over the past 30 recent years. Scholars have distinguished different forms of wisdom and proposed multiple theoretical models (e.g., Ardel, 2011; Baltes & Smith, 2008; Sternberg, 1998). An increasing number of empirical studies have further added to the knowledge base, leading to a growing consensus regarding some of the common elements of practical wisdom. Although the role of practical wisdom in parenting has yet to be explored, many of the dimensions identified in the existing literature seem particularly relevant to effective childrearing practice.

Central to most conceptualizations of practical wisdom is the concept of reflection (Ardelt, 2011; Schwartz, 2011). Depending on the scholar, reflection is thought to include deliberation, discernment, self-awareness, insight, and reflective thinking. Sternberg (2013) suggested that reflection often serves as a catalyst that activates wise thinking. For Bassett (2006), reflection involves the ability to be discerning, “to see deeply into what is really going on while separating personal desires and emotions from the event or issue at hand” (p. 294). Reflection in childrearing might be manifested in a parent’s ability to recognize which parenting challenges require more intentional consideration and effort and which are more routine and can be addressed using standard childrearing techniques.

Several wisdom scholars have stressed the idea that wise actions are guided by the proper aims or goals of a particular activity (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010; Small & Kupisk, 2015). Following the “right” purpose is what Aristotle called *telos*, and the right purpose transcends the individual to address some greater, moral good (Sternberg, 2013). The ability to understand the ultimate purpose of an action is a process that involves reflecting on one’s values and being able to see the current challenge within the context of a longer term goal. Applied to childrearing, this might mean that the goals of the parent are aimed at the child’s best interests and take into account their long-term development and well-being. For example, a wise parent who

is faced with the decision of how to respond to an adolescent who comes home drunk might see the goal as helping the child develop better self-regulation and personal responsibility regarding alcohol use rather than a less noble aim such as punishing the child for breaking rules or embarrassing the parent.

Another commonly cited characteristic of practical wisdom is the ability to take into account the perspective of others (Ardelt, 2011; Grossman, Gerlach & Denissen, 2016). Because wise solutions maximize a variety of personal and extrapersonal interests, understanding the perspectives and interests of other stakeholders is important for developing solutions that supersede self-interest (Sternberg, 1998). Applied to childrearing, the ability to consider the perspectives of others might involve taking into account the adolescent’s point of view as well as the perspective of other family members.

Finally, central to nearly all models of wisdom is the role of experience and other forms of knowledge (Bassett, 2006; Schwartz, 2011; Sternberg, 1998). Baltes and Smith (2008) identified several components of wise knowledge that are particularly relevant to the context of parenting: (a) rich factual knowledge—knowledge about the conditions of life; (b) rich procedural knowledge—knowledge about strategies of judgment and advice concerning matters of life; (c) life-span contextualism—knowledge about the contexts of life and their temporal relationships; (d) relativism—knowledge about differences in values, goals, and priorities; and (e) uncertainty—knowledge about the relative indeterminacy and unpredictability of life.

In the context of childrearing, wiser parents might be expected to have rich factual knowledge about child development and procedural knowledge about effective childrearing strategies. In addition, wise parents might be expected to have an understanding of life-span contextualism (e.g., an ability to apply this knowledge across specific childrearing contexts and attention to their child’s past behavior, needs, and ways of responding); an understanding of relativism as it pertains to children and parenting (e.g., all children are unique and have individualized needs); and an understanding of uncertainty when it comes to childrearing (e.g., that they cannot always predict or

control their child's behavior and that there will be moments when they may lack understanding about how to respond). In addition, a wise parent would be able to draw on the tacit experience they have gained from their previous interactions raising children but also be aware of the gaps in their parenting knowledge and skills.

The aforementioned characteristics of practical wisdom are not exhaustive but touch on some aspects that would seem particularly relevant to wise parenting. Other qualities, such as compassion, problem-framing, flexible reasoning, open-mindedness, and humility, have also been posited by scholars as aspects of practical wisdom (Staudinger & Gluck, 2011; Williams & Nusbaum, 2016). Because practical wisdom has yet to be examined within the context of childrearing, we remained open-minded about what this process might look like and which dimensions might manifest themselves in the context of childrearing during adolescence.

Although the specific definitions vary, there is general agreement that practical wisdom involves the ability to make sound, ethically grounded judgments and decisions about important, difficult, uncertain problems that often have no definitive solution (Grossman, 2017; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010; Small & Kupisk, 2015; Sternberg, 1998). Parents who demonstrate wisdom in childrearing might be expected to be more reflective, open to multiple perspectives, and possess both formal and experiential knowledge that can inform their childrearing practice.

The present study was designed to examine whether mothers use practical wisdom when attempting to understand and solve difficult childrearing matters. We were also interested in what these processes and strategies look like within the context of parenting. The study was guided by the premise that practical wisdom may provide a theoretically and practically useful framework for understanding how parents can more effectively address the complex, indeterminate, and morally challenging dilemmas that occur during adolescence. Because this research embarks on a new area of study, we focused our initial work on mothers given that prior research on parenting suggests differences in how mothers and fathers relate to and rear adolescents (Holmbeck, Paikoff, & Brooks-Gunn, 1995; McKinney & Renk, 2008).

METHOD

Procedure

Participants were recruited to the study via a press release electronically disseminated statewide by the university media office. Several news sources and websites published or posted the news release including a large statewide newspaper, several smaller regional newspapers, and several newsletters and parenting websites. Because of the widespread publication of the news release, recruitment was completed within a few days. Interested participants were referred to a website where they provided informed consent and were then redirected to an online survey designed to gather demographic information. Following confirmation of eligibility and completion of the online survey, participants were contacted via e-mail, and a time was scheduled for an interview. The interview process involved asking participants to respond to a series of hypothetical childrearing problems (described later in the article). The interviews were conducted by phone and lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. They were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by trained transcribers. Participants were sent a \$25 gift card at the end of the interview process.

Participants

The participants were 30 mothers (M age = 46.8 years), most of whom (87%) resided in a single midwestern state located within the United States. All had at least one adolescent between 12 and 17 years of age ($M = 15.0$). Sixty-three percent of the children reported on were male ($n = 19$). A majority of the mothers had at least a college education (77%), were Caucasian (93%), and were married or in a domestic partnership (77%). Of the single mothers, they were nearly equally divided between never married and divorced.

Assessment of Wisdom in Parenting

Following previous conceptualizations of practical wisdom (Grossman, 2017; Schwartz, 2011; Sternberg, 2013), wise parenting was operationalized as the ability to make sound, high-quality, ethical judgments and decisions about important, difficult, uncertain childrearing problems. Like prior research on practical wisdom (Baltes & Smith, 2008; Grossman, 2017),

we posited that it could be observed through the reasoning processes, decision-making strategies, and problem-solving approaches that mothers use to deal with challenging childrearing situations. In the present investigation, wise parenting was assessed by the Parental Problem Solving Task, which was developed for this study. The task was structured to encourage responses that would lead participants to use processes of practical wisdom. This was done by presenting challenging, open-ended parenting scenarios that had no single correct response. This approach is similar to the method used in the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm (Baltes & Smith, 2008; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). Baltes and colleagues contend that the use of difficult, open-ended vignettes are an ideal method for drawing out the kinds of high-quality judgments, decisions, and strategies that are indicative of wisdom.

The scenarios in the present study were designed to elicit how mothers would react to, define, and solve an assortment of problems. Specifically, after each scenario was presented, participants were asked to think aloud about how they would approach and solve the dilemma if it involved their adolescent child. This format was repeated for each of three scenarios. If mothers had more than one child in the targeted age range, they were instructed to respond to the scenarios keeping in mind the child who they perceived to be the most challenging to parent.

A larger number of vignettes were initially piloted with a small sample of mothers before the study. On the basis of this pilot work, we selected three vignettes that mothers found relevant, discouraged simple answers, and encouraged some depth of thought. Conceptually, they touched on a range of issues (e.g., honesty, trust, disclosure, autonomy, religion, values, fairness, authority) commonly faced by most working- and middle-class American families with adolescents. Although the scenarios were somewhat challenging, they were designed so that most mothers of an adolescent could respond to them. None of the study participants reported having difficulty relating to them and most reported some experience dealing with similar issues with either the target child or another child. The scenarios used in the study are as follows:

1. Your teen has a curfew on weeknights. They tell you that they want to go to a concert with friends on a school night and think the rule is unfair.
2. One day you notice that your teen is upset. You ask them what's bothering them, and they say that they're very worried about a friend of theirs, but they promised the friend that they wouldn't tell anyone and now they're not sure what to do.
3. One evening at dinner your teen tells you that they think your religious beliefs are wrong. They then tell you that they want to become involved in some religious practices you are not comfortable with.

After each scenario was presented participants were asked the following: (a) How would you handle this situation? (b) Take me through your thinking. (c) Were there any other things that you considered about the problem or how you would address it? To facilitate more in-depth responses, additional nondirective follow-up probes were asked as needed (e.g., Can you elaborate on your thinking? Why did you think that was important?).

Qualitative Coding

Our approach to coding followed what Hsieh and Shannon (2005) have referred to as directed content analysis. This method involves a mix of grounded theory and attention to existing theory on the subject of interest. Using this approach, we began by attending to existing research and theory on practical wisdom and looked for examples within the responses. Because no research on practical wisdom in childrearing has previously been published, we also remained open-minded about what this process might look like when applied to the domain of childrearing. We paid particular attention to the ways that mothers actively approached, thought about, and addressed the hypothetical dilemmas in the study. We looked for unique and common ways that mothers understood, reasoned about, framed, and proposed solving the hypothetical dilemmas. In sum, we attended to sensitizing concepts from prior research and theory on practical wisdom, our research questions, and the particular strategies and reasoning processes that participants used when responding to the dilemmas.

Two coders who were well versed in the literature on practical wisdom initially analyzed the data. They read through a random selection of half the interviews. Drawing on existing theory and research on practical wisdom,

each coder identified key concepts as initial coding categories. The coders then discussed the particular concepts that they observed in the data. For those categories where there was general agreement, the coders worked to refine the categories, develop operational definitions, and determine coding criteria. The next step in the analysis involved identifying responses that could not be categorized with the initial coding scheme but were consistent with the general operational definition of practical wisdom (i.e., involved aspects of reasoning processes, ethics, decision-making, and problem-solving strategies). For these, the coders followed a process more in line with open coding by identifying all responses that fit the general criteria but did not fit with any of the previously identified categories. The coders then met to distill similar codes into more general themes. More general categories or dimensions were then developed from the themes identified in the previous step. Finally, similar to the process used in the more directed analysis discussed earlier, operational definitions and coding criteria were developed for the newly identified categories. This coding process resulted in the development of a codebook that could then be used by the researchers as well as by independent coders for the reliability analysis and for more formally coding all of the cases (described subsequently). Once the categories were finalized and the criteria defined, all 30 interviews were coded using these newly delineated criteria.

Analysis

To assess the reliability of our raters and the viability of our coding scheme for future work, we performed a simple reliability analysis using intraclass correlations. As noted previously, formal coding criteria were developed for each of the eight parenting problem-solving strategies identified in the qualitative analysis. Using those criteria, all interviews were individually scored on a four-point rating scale from 0 (*not present*) to 3 (*highly present*) according to the presence of the eight dimensions of wise parenting. Because there were three dilemmas for each participant, the scores across the dilemmas were individually scored then added together. This resulted in separate scores for each of the eight wise parenting dimensions, with possible scores ranging from 0 to 9 within each dimension. In addition, a total score was calculated based on the sum of the

eight wise parenting dimensions (the observed range in these data was 19–70).

Interrater reliability was established among three independent raters on 25% of the interviews using the same rating procedure described earlier. The interviews were randomly selected from the larger set of interviews. Two of the raters were involved in creation of the original codebook; the third rater was trained on the coding procedure and was familiar with the literature on practical wisdom. Using intra-class correlation analysis (Shrout & Fleiss, 1979), the scores of the three raters were highly reliable across seven of the eight identified dimensions: Purpose ($r = .95, p < .001$), Parenting Knowledge ($r = .92, p < .001$), Reflection ($r = .88, p = .002$), Problem-Framing ($r = .84, p = .010$), Compassion ($r = .84, p = .010$), Socioemotional Knowledge ($r = .82, p = .010$), Perspective-Taking ($r = .79, p = .020$), and Integrative Thinking ($r = .64, p = .080$).

RESULTS

On the basis of the qualitative analysis, eight interrelated strategies or dimensions were identified. They were focused around the problem-solving strategies, reasoning processes, and decision-making schemes that mothers used to solve the hypothetical child-rearing dilemmas they were presented. These eight strategies were termed (a) *Compassion for Self and Child*, (b) *Parenting Knowledge*, (c) *Perspective-Taking*, (d) *Purpose Identification*, (e) *Problem-Framing*, (f) *Reflection*, (g) *Socioemotional Awareness*, and (h) *Integrative Thinking*. They are presented in alphabetical order, except for Integrative Thinking, which is presented last because it builds on the seven other strategies. Each of these processes is described next, and exemplars from the data are provided. To highlight the most exemplary responses, we used excerpts from mothers who were in the top quartile based on their total scores on the Parental Problem Solving Task.

Compassion for Self and Child

Compassion for self and child involved having an empathetic frame from which to view the parent–child relationship. Mothers who exhibited compassion tended to communicate respect and unconditional love for their child in their responses. A common aspect of compassion

involved mothers who spoke about respecting their child's judgment and individuality. Some also talked about the importance letting the child know that he or she was trusted, while recognizing that mistakes will sometimes be made. Sarah talked about the importance of both trust and respect in her relationships with her children:

I give my kids a lot of chances to try to practice good judgment and bad judgment because I'd rather have them have mistakes when they're living with me than when they're living out in the world and it's more serious. I try and let them know that I trust them overall and part of that trust, getting back to your question, is I respect my kids' privacy.

Parenting Knowledge

This was the most commonly observed dimension. It was demonstrated by mothers as they used various types of formal and informal knowledge to inform their responses. This included knowledge of child development, parenting, parent-child relationships, and an understanding of how one's role as a parent evolves over time. On the basis of the coders' expertise (all had substantial professional and scholarly expertise in parent education and adolescent development), most of the parenting knowledge cited was consistent with current research, theory, and best practices (the few responses where this was not the case were not counted). Although mothers did not always explicitly identify the sources of their knowledge, many reported that they had learned from past childrearing experiences with the target child or other children in the family. A smaller group indicated that some of their parenting knowledge was gleaned from a mix of formal sources such as books, print and online articles, and parent education classes.

Parenting knowledge was most commonly manifested by mothers demonstrating knowledge of adolescent development and childrearing practices and how it applied to their child. For example, Mary (all names used are pseudonyms), mother of three teenage daughters, pointed out that it is normative for adolescents to want to make decisions on their own, and that although this can sometimes lead to mistakes, it is important for their development:

The ability for children to make their own decisions starts in these teen years. Well, it really

starts younger than the teen years, but these teen years are so important because they're exploring so much at once. And making good decisions means that you have to make some mistakes.

Perspective-Taking

This strategy involved seeking out and understanding the child's perspective as well as the perspectives of others who were involved in or affected by the situation. The most commonly observed aspect of perspective taking was when mothers responded that they would actively try to understand their child's perspective and use that knowledge to develop a solution that was fair and appropriate. For example, in response to the religion scenario, Della, a mother of a 15-year-old son, said: "I would want to ask him all about it, and hopefully he would tell me more about how this started and why and what his reasoning is, and kind of get his whole layout first."

Problem-Framing

Problem-framing involved a mother's ability to clarify problems as well as recognize the multiple ways a problem could be conceptualized. It was most commonly observed in a mother's capacity to reframe problems from how they initially presented themselves to something more complex and multifaceted. For example, in the excerpt that follows (a response to the scenario about a teen's reluctance to disclose the problem of a friend), Lani, mother of three, recognized that the problem as presented might not actually be the real issue. Consequently, she talked about the need to probe further to gain a better understanding of what might actually be going on:

First off, I wouldn't want them to initially reveal who the friend is. I would not ask because they could be talking about themselves or they could be talking about a friend. So, I would want to find out more about what the situation is... I would dig a little bit deeper to try and isolate the issue.

Another aspect of problem-framing involved recognizing that a problem might have multiple facets and could evolve over time. Elana, mother of a 12-year-old son, shared her initial ideas about how she would think about her child's interest in a new religion:

One of the easier things, I think for me, is that I have a 12-year-old [so] it's not like he can go and

drive himself somewhere to go to these religious services or participate in that thing, but as he got older, I think that would be much harder; as he gets older, he gets to make his own decisions.

Finally, some of the most advanced responses came from mothers who recognized that sometimes the problem presented in the dilemma was not really their problem to solve and so they framed the problem in terms of how could they best support and guide their child through the problem-solving process. For instance, Kristen noted that rather than offering solutions, she would begin by asking her 16-year-old daughter questions so that her daughter might gain greater clarity regarding the nature of the problem:

If she's worried enough to actually say that out loud, then I'm thinking that maybe this situation is exactly the kind of situation that an adult needs to get involved in. And I would, at that point, ask her questions about her friend's state of mind. Is her friend in harm's way? Is her friend thinking about hurting herself? And not in such a way that suggests courses of action. I guess that's the next step after that ... it's not my job to step in and take over and control it; it's my job to help my daughter.

Purpose Identification

The ability to identify goals or purposes that a mother hoped to ultimately achieve if she were successful in addressing the problem that was presented was termed *purpose identification*. More sophisticated responses usually went beyond obvious short-term goals and took into account the broader context, other individuals, long-term goals, and the good of the child. Such goals were usually unselfish, child-directed, and often had to do with the child's long-term development and well-being. In contrast, less sophisticated responses focused on meeting the mother's needs or gaining immediate compliance by the child. The most complex responses also tended to be principled, reflecting a mother's stated ethics and values. In the following response, Ellen, mother of a 17-year-old son, talked about her goals for responding to a child who is interested in exploring a new religion. Ellen explained that her purpose in resolving the dilemma would not be to convince her son to have a particular religious belief but to help him develop the ability to be reflective and develop tolerance for the beliefs of others:

My biggest goal is for him to be able to be self-reflective. Not so much like "I believe this" but why do I believe this; what is your rational explanation for why you think a certain thing? Not necessarily do you believe it, but why. So I am always hoping he can back up his beliefs with arguments or discussion and to be able to be self-reflective. Also, as a parent, particularly of a teenager, I want to be able to understand where his line of thinking is and by how I responded to his teen years, to certain conflicts, is I want him to try to be able to think through conflicts so that he doesn't behave irrationally and then also to be able to be self-reflective. Ultimately, I am hoping to have been able to have taught him a degree of tolerance for understanding the differences in how other people think.

Reflection

Reflection took several forms but most commonly involved a mother's recognition of the need to detach from her initial emotional response to deal with a problem in an objective and reasoned manner. Mothers also talked about the importance of listening to their child in a nonreactive and unbiased way and keeping an open mind rather than rushing to judgment. In the following response, Diana, mother of a 14-year-old daughter, described how strong emotions—both her own and her daughter's—can undermine their ability to effectively deal with a problem, and conveyed that allowing these strong emotions to dissipate can be beneficial so that problems with her daughter can be more rationally and thoughtfully addressed.

Sometimes it's not being able to have the discussion right at the moment because maybe both sides—definitely my daughter's viewpoint is just mired in emotions ... and so we get to that stage and can feel both of us kind of having our emotions getting high, we have to just say, "Let's set this aside; let's go back and talk about it when we can be calm about it" because otherwise we just get upset and angry at each other ... It's learning how to say we can't have this discussion right now and then giving her time.

Socioemotional Awareness

Socioemotional awareness involved the ability of mothers to monitor their own and their child's emotions, to discriminate between different emotions and label them appropriately,

and to use this emotional knowledge to guide how they would approach a parenting dilemma. One common aspect of socioemotional awareness involved mothers demonstrating knowledge of their child over time and a desire to continue learning new things about the child as he or she grew older. For example, as Debra, mother of a 14-year-old son, explained:

He's not overly emotional ... but I do think he's very empathetic and he's very loyal. It would be really, really hard if he was sworn to secrecy or pledged confidence to a friend and he was being pressured to betray that confidence.

Another aspect of socioemotional awareness involved acknowledging the limits of one's own knowledge and the need to seek additional sources when necessary. Debra continued her response by describing the importance of being aware of what one does not know:

I'd like to think that I'm a parent in the know, but don't know everything ... If we're trying to make a decision or we're trying to get more information, my husband and I would make use of our resources, and actually we would probably talk to each other first and then think about who else can we talk with, what else can we consider.

Integrative Thinking

Integrative thinking, as the label suggests, had to do with a mother's ability to think systematically and simultaneously consider, weigh, and integrate multiple ideas, values, perspectives, and goals. It was often manifested when mothers recognized how the role of context (both historical and situational) and individual and developmental differences in their child could influence how problems and solutions are best handled. It was also reflected in a mother's capacity to integrate opposing ideas and reconcile them. In the following excerpt, Karen considered multiple situational and individual factors as she discussed how she would respond to her 16-year-old daughter's request to attend a concert on a school night.

Sometimes those scenarios are dependent on what's going on in my daughter's life at the time. If she's just done really well in school, then this could almost be perceived as a one-time thing that we would make an exception because it's a reward. On the other hand, if she lets me know

she's going to be going with children who I'm not real comfortable with her hanging out with, that would definitely make me say no, it's a rule and you have to abide by it. I guess the most important thing is, these are situationally dependent. I'm not a parent who sets hard and fast rules and there's no exceptions ever.

DISCUSSION

The present study serves as an initial exploration of a largely unexamined aspect of childrearing: how practical wisdom can be used to solve difficult and uncertain childrearing problems. Eight interrelated strategies or dimensions were identified. Following our initial proposition that parents need wisdom when faced with challenging, complex, and uncertain childrearing problems, we examine our findings in terms of how well they align with previous research and theory on practical wisdom as well as explore what they convey about effective childrearing practice and problem-solving processes.

Practical Wisdom in Childrearing

Mothers who displayed *compassion* typically did so by exhibiting respect and unconditional love for their adolescent. Although this was not always overtly stated, it was usually implicitly communicated in how mothers talked about their child. For instance, some mothers spoke about respecting their adolescent's right to individuality and beliefs. They also discussed the importance of supporting their adolescent's happiness and well-being. Unconditional love, nurturance, and support have long been identified critical components of optimal parenting (Barber, Stolz, & Olsen, 2005). A compassionate attitude is likely not only to have a direct effect on children through its ability to communicate trust, respect, care, and love but also might be expected to influence a mother's motivation to approach other aspects of parenting wisely. For example, highly compassionate mothers may be more strongly inclined to seek their child's perspective and focus on solution-oriented goals that take into account the adolescent's best interests.

A majority of mothers in the study used some knowledge of parenting and adolescent development to guide the problem-solving process. In fact, drawing on *parenting knowledge* was the most commonly observed strategy. However, there was substantial variation in the

type, variety, and quality of knowledge used. Typically, the source of this knowledge was not explicitly stated, but our analysis indicated that for the most knowledgeable mothers, it tended to come from both informal sources such as personal experience and formal sources such as articles, books, and parenting classes. The responses of more knowledgeable mothers reflected a good understanding of normative adolescent development and commonly used childrearing techniques. This is consistent with most conceptualizations of wisdom and the role that experience and knowledge are thought to play (Baltes & Smith, 2008). However, as Sternberg (2004) noted, “although knowledge is necessary for wisdom, it is not sufficient for it. Merely having knowledge does not entail its use in judging rightly, soundly, or justly” (p. 167).

Perspective-taking usually involved seeking out the child’s perspective and using that knowledge to better understand the problem and develop a fair solution. Such a strategy would seem highly constructive given that some of the most taxing parent–adolescent tensions involve disagreements around the appropriateness of rules, acceptable behavior, and the legitimacy of parental authority (Smetana, 2011). Resolving social conflicts begins by taking into account the perspectives of others so that understanding and common ground can be found (Grossman et al., 2016).

Most models of wise reasoning view the ability to take into account multiple perspectives as a critical skill (e.g., Grossman et al., 2016; Williams & Nusbaum, 2016). This is because many of the situations that require wise reasoning stem from conflicts between various intrapersonal, interpersonal, or extrapersonal interests and being able to take into account and weigh these multiple perspectives is central to developing wise solutions (Sternberg, 1998).

What we termed *problem-framing* was a common element in many mothers’ responses to the dilemmas we presented to participants. However, there was wide variation in mothers’ ability to recognize that problems were often more complex than they initially appeared and that there were often multiple ways that a dilemma could be defined. This is similar to the concept of a *presenting problem* in medicine and psychotherapy when an experienced clinician listens to a patient describe his or her symptoms but does not accept the patient’s initial statement or symptoms as the only possible

ailment (Groth-Marnat, 2003). Rather, the clinician explores other possibilities through further examination and questioning to discover other issues that may be contributing to the problem. We found that some mothers used a similar practice as they thought about the nature of the problem they were trying to solve.

Another manifestation of problem-framing was evident in some responses when mothers concluded that the problem was not really theirs to address but their child’s. This is similar to what has been referred to in the popular parenting literature as problem ownership (e.g., Dinkmeyer, McKay & Dinkmeyer, 2008). These mothers recognized that for the problem to be effectively addressed, the adolescent had to take responsibility for it. In most cases, these mothers believed that they still had a role in the process. However, it was less direct and involved supporting and guiding adolescents as they addressed the problem on their own.

Our concept of problem-framing is consistent with prior conceptualizations of wisdom and involves the ability to see the larger context surrounding the challenge and the best way to conceptualize the problem to be addressed. In a review of contemporary approaches to wisdom, Bassett (2006) noted that wisdom involves the need to expand one’s thinking to identify the larger underlying issue that one is trying to solve. Similarly, both Arlin (1990) and Sternberg (1998) considered problem-framing to be one of the essential meta-components of wise thought.

What we called *purpose identification* appeared to provide a guiding context to mothers as they reasoned about how to solve the parenting dilemmas. It also anchored the problem so mothers could frame it in a way that took into account their long-term childrearing goals, aspirations, and parenting values. For example, recall Ellen’s response regarding what she would do if her child became involved in a religion with which she was uncomfortable. Her goal was not to convince her son to have a particular religious belief but to help him develop tolerance for the beliefs of others and to think critically about his own. Her identified purpose led her to reframe the problem from one of rebellion to how to encourage her son to become a more reflective, tolerant individual. Having a well-identified purpose also helped guide mothers in identifying which strategies they might use to achieve that purpose. Without a clear goal in mind, there was a tendency to jump to

particular childrearing strategies (e.g., grounding, withholding privileges) that may have had little to do with resolving the underlying problem or achieving the long-term goal.

It was in the process of purpose identification that mothers' values and moral orientations were most evident. Their values and moral orientation guided the identification and selection of goals that mothers sought and also helped them make decisions about how to balance competing goals and interests. This is consistent with the idea that wisdom is not just a practical skill but also a moral one (Aristotle, 1953/2003; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010).

Reflection was a common strategy, taking several forms. Most common was the ability of some mothers to recognize the need to detach from their initial emotional response to deal with a problem in an objective and reasoned manner. Many challenging childrearing dilemmas that parents face during adolescence are characterized by social conflicts and ambiguity that can give rise to negative emotional responses. Such emotions can be an important signal that something is worthy of concern, but they can also lead parents to respond rashly, resulting in heat-of-the-moment, ill-advised decisions. For wise reasoning to take place, negative emotions need to be regulated and reflected on so appropriate decisions can be made (Williams & Nusbaum, 2016). In addition, mothers who are able to minimize negative emotions and remain calm will be in a better position to listen objectively and with fuller attention (Hayes et al., 2004).

Many approaches to wisdom have viewed reflection as a key component. For example, Staudinger and Gluck (2011) posited that the social-cognitive processes of life reflection are critical for the development of wisdom-related knowledge and judgment. Similarly, Tiberius and Swartwood (2011) suggested that not only is thoughtful reflection critical to wise action but that it should be done in a calm, levelheaded manner when one has the time and composure to think things through fully.

Socioemotional awareness involved a mother's ability to monitor her own and her child's emotions and knowledge and use that information to guide how she would approach and solve a parenting dilemma. Although the outcome of socioemotional awareness was a type of personal knowledge, we distinguished it from parenting knowledge because it manifested itself more as a skill than as a knowledge

source. Bringing an awareness of emotions to parenting interactions can help mothers respond with conscious choices instead of reacting automatically and letting emotions undermine parenting practices and goals (Duncan et al., 2009). Socioemotional awareness may also enhance a mother's accuracy in interpreting and responding to an adolescent's needs, behavior, and emotional state, leading to more constructive problem-solving and interaction (McKee, Parent, Zachary, & Forehand, 2018).

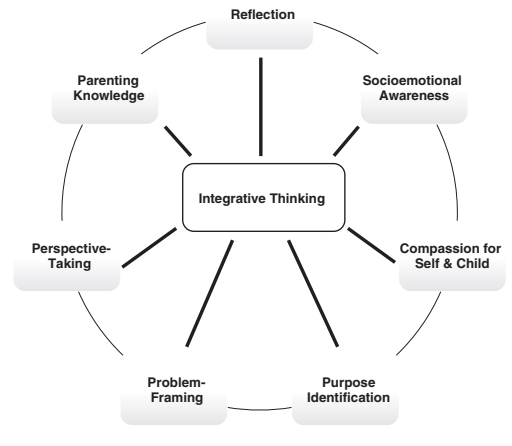
We also found that socioemotional awareness sometimes involved recognizing the limits of one's own knowledge and the need to seek additional sources. Several historical and contemporary conceptualizations of wisdom view self-awareness and humility as important elements. Specifically, an awareness of and humility about one's knowledge limitations (i.e., knowing what one does not know) is viewed by some wisdom scholars as critical to wise action (Bassett, 2006).

Integrative thinking played a central, organizing role in how mothers approached and reasoned about the dilemmas they were presented. It involved the ability to think systemically and simultaneously consider, weigh, and synthesize multiple ideas, perspectives, and purposes while taking into account the particulars of the situation. Integrative thinking was the ability that made possible the effective integration and synthesis of the other aspects of the problem-solving process.

The idea that wisdom involves advanced cognitive reasoning ability is common to both historical and contemporary conceptualizations (e.g., Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Williams & Nusbaum, 2016). According to Schwartz (2011), a wise person knows how to "improvise, balancing conflicting aims and interpreting rules and guiding principles in light of the particularities of each context" (p. 9). This draws on Aristotle's (1953/2003) notion that practical wisdom is the executive decision-maker that does the balancing in situations requiring thoughtful judgment.

The alignment of strategies identified in the present study with previous research and theory on wisdom provides a strong case for the presence of practical wisdom within the context of parenting. Figure 1 provides a working model of the eight identified strategies and how they might operate in the context of wise childrearing. Because research is just beginning

FIGURE 1. DIAGRAM OF EIGHT WISE PARENTING STRATEGIES.



to understand this phenomenon, we are reluctant to specify a more detailed mapping of how these processes may be related to one another. However, integrative thinking is at the center because of its organizing role and its importance to the engagement of the other seven processes. In addition, we observed what appears to be a dialectic relationship between purpose-setting and problem-framing due to the way these two strategies interact and inform each other. Finally, we believe wisdom in parenting is more than the sums of its parts. It is the integration of these strategies, occurring together, that constitutes wise judgment, not simply the use of individual strategies.

Limitations

Our findings should be interpreted in light of some limitations. First, although the use of telephone interviews allowed us to recruit a more geographically diverse sample, it also constrained the number of communication channels between the interviewer and participants. This could potentially have limited the responses of some participants who might have been more communicative if the interviews were conducted face to face. In addition, the sample comprised mothers whose adolescent children spanned a fairly broad age range, potentially leading to some variation in how mothers responded to the dilemmas presented. We also acknowledge that the transferability of the findings is limited by the small sample size as well as the restricted

nature of the sample. The majority of the mothers were well educated, married, Caucasian, recruited online, and from a single Midwestern state. It is reasonable to expect that how mothers responded to the study's childrearing dilemmas would likely vary by class, culture, education, and experience.

Another possible limitation of the present study was our use of hypothetical scenarios. A mother may possess the ability to excel when responding to a hypothetical dilemma, but other factors may affect her ability to perform at a comparable level when addressing the problem in real life. The use of hypothetical dilemmas may limit the generalizability of our findings to real-world situations, but they provide a more valid and credible assessment of practical wisdom and problem-solving than most prior studies. Practical wisdom has most often been assessed through interviews or self-report measures that ask respondents about their perceptions of their abilities to act wisely (e.g., "I try to weigh all sides of an issue"). In the present study, we went beyond having mothers simply self-report their perceived abilities and instead asked them to perform a series of reasoning tasks that required demonstrating these abilities. This enabled the assessment of actual competence rather than perceived or desired performance.

Future Directions

In addition to addressing some of the methodological and sampling limitations, several issues appear to be natural next steps for future research in this area. First, there is clearly a need for future studies to examine both mothers and fathers so that we can better understand areas of similarity and difference in their wisdom strategies. Likewise, the question of how universal these processes are across class and culture is another issue that could not be answered by the present study and would benefit from future research. For instance, what might be considered a wise response by a mother living in an unsafe or impoverished environment may be evaluated quite differently if she lived in a more affluent community. An equally important issue for future research involves how cultural norms and practices might affect wise parenting strategies, such as how problems are framed and the types of goals or purposes that are sought.

In light of our initial identification of wise parenting strategies, there is a need for future

work that can help unpack them. For instance, it would be useful to understand the relationship among these strategies and whether there is a general order or pattern in which they occur. The field would also benefit from understanding how practical wisdom in parenting is related to other childrearing constructs and practices like parenting styles (Baumrind, 2013), mindful parenting (Duncan et al., 2009), and the optimal balance between child- and parent-oriented parenting (Henry & Hubbs-Tait, 2013). In addition, a critical question for future research is whether these parental reasoning processes predict particular developmental and behavioral outcomes in adolescents.

Practical Implications

The present findings regarding practical wisdom in parenting not only shed light on an important and overlooked aspect of childrearing but also have practical implications for parents of adolescents and the professionals who work with them. Most important is the need to recognize that childrearing during the adolescent years often involves experiencing unexpected and difficult problems that require thoughtful reasoning and creative problem-solving. Traditional childrearing practices usually address immediate behavior problems and may not take into account family context, the need to balance short- and long-term goals, conflicting interests, and unclear moral choices. Consequently, many traditional childrearing practices may inadequately prepare parents for the kinds of complex, indeterminate childrearing problems that occur in adolescence.

In addition to the general benefits of a wisdom-oriented approach to childrearing, the specific wisdom-related strategies identified in the study hold promise as valuable skills for parents to develop. To the degree that parents can learn these strategies, they hold great promise for providing guidance on how to approach and resolve complex childrearing problems more effectively. For instance, if parents can learn to be more reflective and distance themselves from negative emotions, they can become less reactive and punitive with their children. This can also lead them to approach problems more objectively and develop solutions that are sensible and caring and that will have positive long-term consequences. A growing number of strategies have been identified that can help

parents become less emotional and more rational in how they relate to their children. Research on stress and coping (e.g., Boss, Bryant, & Mancini, 2017), as well as the growing literature on mindful parenting (Kabat-Zinn & Kabat-Zinn, 2014), provide suggestions for specific techniques that can help parents become more detached, attentive, and reflective.

Similarly, by making parents aware that problems are not always as they initially appear and teaching more effective ways to frame them, the solution space for examining and approaching childrearing problems can be expanded. Taking the time to consider and reframe a problem correctly is more likely to result in a solution that better serves the needs of the child as well as parents. Some of the actual techniques that mothers in the study used to frame problems more broadly provide some guidance about the kinds of skills parents might be taught. They include taking into account situational and developmental factors, asking questions of their child to better understand their actions, drawing on an understanding of adolescent development, and considering other motives that may explain the adolescent's behavior.

Our findings regarding *perspective-taking* highlight the importance of taking into account the perspective of others, especially the adolescent. When parents understand their child's perspective, it is easier to find common ground and develop solutions that both parents and adolescents can get behind. Taking into account their point of view can also demonstrate to the adolescent that parents really do care about them, which can result in their being less defensive and more receptive to parental responses.

Like these three examples illustrate, all eight wisdom-related strategies identified in the present study have direct implications for improving the quality of childrearing during adolescence. Pending additional research, these strategies may also hold promise for parent training programs and other family-focused interventions. Of course, more work needs to be done to better understand these processes, their relevance and variation across families, as well as whether they can be learned and incorporated into a parent's childrearing repertoire.

CONCLUSION

The present study was an initial examination of how mothers contend with the sometimes

difficult and messy issues of childrearing. The findings provide evidence that mothers sometimes use a process that has been historically conceptualized as practical wisdom and offer insight into what some of these practices entail. The identification of these wise problem-solving practices sheds light on an important and overlooked aspect of childrearing and provides a potentially new set of tools that can be used by parents when dealing with the often unexpected and difficult problems that arise when parenting adolescents.

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