Abstract and Keywords

In search of concepts that help us understand how individuals strive for growth and perfection within the boundaries and constraints of human lives, we describe theory and research on the concepts of wisdom, or expert knowledge about human nature and the life course, and Sehnsucht (life longings), the recurring and strong desire for ideal (utopian) alternative states and expressions of life. Both represent concepts on the agenda of life span research that originate from an interest in identifying major topics of public and humanist discourse about the potentials and constraints of life span development and finding ways to measure them with the methods of normative psychological science. Despite their complexity and multiple meanings, progress has been made in the theory-driven operationalization of wisdom and life longings, allowing insights into their life span development and role for positive development. Existing research shows that wisdom and life longings do not directly promote a hedonic life orientation or happiness: neither the insight that life is incomplete (wisdom) nor the experience of this incompleteness (Sehnsucht) is compatible with feelings of unequivocal joy and pleasure. Yet there is evidence that they can contribute to other aspects of positive development, emphasizing personal growth and maturity, meaning, and the aligning of one’s own and others’ well-being.

Keywords: wisdom, life longings, Sehnsucht, life span development, functionality
Philosophers, theologians, and psychologists have long considered and discussed the criteria for a successful or perfect life and the different ways in which people strive for optimality and perfection (Baltes, 2008; Baltes, Glück, & Kunzmann, 2002; Staudinger & Glück, 2011). This topic is also prominent in developmental psychology, as the concept of development is inherently linked to notions of growth and improvement in personal functioning (Harris, 1957; Lerner, 2002). The search for improvement and optimality, however, occurs in the context of developmental constraints, including limited resources, restricted opportunities, and blocked pathways. Such constraints are especially salient in later phases of adulthood when people face a reduced remaining lifetime to pursue their goals, declines in physical and cognitive functioning, as well as losses of social partners and roles (e.g., Baltes et al., 2006). As a result, human development is marked by a chronic incompleteness, especially at older ages (Baltes, 1997).

Two concepts reflect the dynamic interplay between two motivational principles: striving for perfection and growth, and compensating for constraints, losses, and the chronic incompleteness of life. These are wisdom, or expert knowledge about human nature and the life course (Baltes & Smith, 2008; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Kunzmann & Baltes, 2005), and Sehnsucht (life longings), the recurring and strong desire for ideal (utopian), alternative states and expressions of life (Baltes, 2008; Scheibe, Freund, & Baltes, 2007). Both concepts have been major topics of public and humanist discourse about life and life span development. However, only a few researchers have endeavored to address these concepts in psychological research—arguably because of their multiple meanings and complexity and the challenges that are involved when studying them empirically.

In this chapter, we review research suggesting that wisdom and Sehnsucht can be meaningfully operationalized and studied with the standards of normative psychological science. Even more important, we believe that studying concepts such as wisdom and life longings makes a meaningful and necessary contribution to both the field of aging and a positive psychology approach more generally (see also Baltes & Smith, 2008; Kunzmann & Thomas, 2015; Scheibe, Kunzmann, & Baltes, 2007, Staudinger & Glück, 2011).

Positive Psychology and the Study of Wisdom and Sehnsucht

Wisdom and Sehnsucht fit well into the general notion of “positive psychology,” the science of what makes life worth living (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The positive psychology initiative aims to counteract a presumably one-sided focus of 20th-century psychology on negative experiences and the dysfunctional. Although proponents of positive psychology may have overstated the focus on negativity in past psychological research, it certainly is worthwhile to strengthen research that explicitly addresses positive subjective experiences, desirable individual traits, civic virtues, as well as the
positive aspects and gains that adult development and aging may bring about (Baltes et al., 2002).

Within the positive psychology framework, our goal has been to provide a balanced view emphasizing both positive and negative aspects of human experience. This balanced view is consistent with a central proposition of life span developmental psychology; namely, that gains and losses, the positive and the negative, are always intertwined; every phase of life and every developmental change simultaneously involves benefits and costs (Baltes, 1987, 1997; Baltes et al., 2006; Brandtstädter, 1998). Even in the best scenario possible, life does not consist of unlimited opportunities and exclusively positive experiences; it always involves constraints, challenges, threats, losses, and difficult, sometimes even traumatic, life events. If one considers life as a whole, these negative experiences are often the rule rather than the exception. Therefore, one important aspect of a positive psychology approach is to acknowledge that negative realities do exist and that studying the ways in which people learn to accept them as important parts of life or manage to deal with them constructively is critical to gaining a better understanding of human nature and life span development (see also Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; King & Hicks, 2007; Labouvie-Vief, 2003).

In this spirit, wisdom and Sehnsucht are not unequivocally positive phenomena in the sense that they directly and inevitably optimize a person’s level of well-being in a hedonistic sense. Striving for wisdom or indulging in life longings even appears to have costs in terms of hedonistic well-being. However, there is reason to believe that wisdom and life longings are both linked to another central facet of the good life; that is, personal growth or maturity (e.g., Baltes & Kunzmann, 2004; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Kunzmann & Baltes, 2003a, 2003b, 2005; for the distinction between the two aspects of a good life, growth and happiness, see, e.g., Kunzmann, Stange, & Jordan, 2005; Labouvie-Vief & Medler, 2002; McGregor & Little, 1998; Ryff & Singer, 2008; Staudinger & Kunzmann, 2005).

As we will discuss here, wisdom and life longings both deal with life’s potentials and constraints. People high on wisdom-related knowledge are presumably motivated to understand the complex and sometimes paradoxical nature of life; they view events and experiences from multiple perspectives, and they simultaneously consider the gains and losses inherent in any developmental change (Kunzmann & Baltes, 2003b). Similarly, Sehnsucht involves at the same time ideal conceptions of self and development (personal utopias of life) and a sense of incompleteness and imperfection, leading to ambivalent, bittersweet emotions. Persons with moderate- to high-level expressions of Sehnsucht may at times be critical of themselves and their lives, may have high ideals and seek to attain them, and at the same time, may realize that perfection is an ideal rather than a goal that can be reached. Given these insights and experiences, it is unlikely that wiser persons and persons with strong Sehnsucht experiences have an abundance of pleasant feelings. However, wisdom and Sehnsucht may contribute to a good life and a positive development
by facilitating personal growth and a balancing of various, sometimes conflicting and negative, personal experiences, goals, and values.

Wisdom: Knowledge about Life’s Potentials and Constraints

At the core of the concept of wisdom is the notion of a perfect, perhaps utopian, integration of knowledge and character, mind and virtue (e.g., Baltes & Kunzmann, 2003; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). Although the psychology of wisdom is a relatively small field, several promising theoretical and operational definitions of wisdom have been developed during the last years (for reviews, see Baltes & Smith, 2008; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Kramer, 2000; Kunzmann & Baltes, 2005; Staudinger & Glück, 2011; Sternberg, 1990, 1998). At least three types of conceptualizations of wisdom can be identified in the literature. Specifically, wisdom has been defined as a part of personality development in adulthood (e.g., Ardelt, 2003; Erikson, 1980; Wink & Helson, 1997), a form of post-formal dialectic thinking (e.g., Kramer, 2000; Labouvie-Vief, 1990), and an expanded form of intelligence (e.g., Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Sternberg, 1998).

Despite their different origins, these three types of conceptualizations share several theoretical ideas. First, wisdom is thought to be different from other human strengths in that it facilitates an integrative and holistic approach to life’s challenges and problems—an approach that embraces past, present, and future dimensions of phenomena, values different points of views, considers contextual variations, and acknowledges the uncertainties inherent in any sense-making of the past, present, and future. A second feature of wisdom is that it involves being aware that individual and collective well-being are tied together so that one cannot exist without the other. In this sense, wisdom has been said to refer to time-tested knowledge that guides our behavior in ways that optimize productivity on the level of individuals, groups, and even society (e.g., Kramer, 2000; Sternberg, 1998). A related idea is that wisdom involves a preference for personal growth and self-actualization (e.g., Kekes, 1995; Staudinger & Kunzmann, 2005). Therefore, the acquisition of wisdom during ontogenesis may often be incompatible with a hedonic life orientation and a predominantly pleasurable, passive, and sheltered life. Given their interest in self-realization and the maximization of a common good, wiser people are likely to partake in behaviors that contribute, rather than consume, resources (Kunzmann & Baltes, 2003a, 2003b; Sternberg, 1998). Finally, an interest in understanding the significance and deeper meaning of phenomena, including the blending of developmental gains and losses, most likely is linked to emotional moderation and complexity rather than strong one-sided feelings such as exuberant pleasure or great sadness and despair (Kunzmann & Baltes, 2003b; Labouvie-Vief, 1990).

The Berlin Wisdom Model
Proceeding from and integrating work on the aging mind and personality, life span developmental theory, and cultural-historical work on wisdom, in the Berlin paradigm, wisdom has been defined as highly valued and outstanding expert knowledge about dealing with fundamental—that is, existential—problems related to the meaning and conduct of life (Baltes & Kunzmann, 2003; Baltes & Smith, 2008; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Dittmann-Kohli & Baltes, 1990; Dixon & Baltes, 1986). These problems are typically complex and poorly defined, and have multiple, yet unknown, solutions. Deciding on a particular career path, accepting the death of a loved one, dealing with personal mortality, or solving long-lasting conflicts among family members exemplify the type of problem that calls for wisdom-related expertise. In contrast, more circumscribed everyday problems can be effectively handled by using more limited abilities. To solve a math problem, for example, wisdom-related expertise usually is neither necessary nor particularly helpful.

Five criteria were developed to describe this body of knowledge in more detail. Expert knowledge about the meaning and conduct of life is thought to approach wisdom if it meets all five criteria, including:

1. Rich **factual knowledge** about human nature and the life course;
2. Rich **procedural knowledge** about ways of dealing with life problems;
3. **Life span contextualism**; that is, an awareness and understanding of the many contexts of life, how they relate to each other and change over the life span;
4. **Value relativism and tolerance**; that is, an acknowledgment of individual, social, and cultural differences in values and life priorities; and
5. **Knowledge about handling uncertainty**, including the limits of one’s own knowledge.

As a conceptual refinement, Staudinger and colleagues have recently suggested a differentiation between **general wisdom** (i.e., insight into life in a generalized form that transcends self-related experience and evaluation) and **personal wisdom** (i.e., insight into one’s own life and self-related experiences; e.g., Staudinger & Glück, 2011). The idea of personal wisdom is closely linked to approaches to wisdom as a stage of personality development (e.g., Ardelt, 2003; Helson & Wink, 1987). Following the tradition of the Berlin wisdom paradigm, Staudinger and colleagues have formulated two basic criteria of personal wisdom: **self-knowledge** (the insight into oneself) and **growth and self-regulation** (heuristics to deal with challenges); and three meta-criteria, **interrelating the self** (the insight into possible causes of one’s own behavior), **self-relativism** (distance from the self), and **tolerance of ambiguity** (to recognize and manage uncertainties in one’s own life).

**Assessment of Wisdom-Related Knowledge**
The Berlin wisdom paradigm is based on a modified version of the method of “thinking aloud” (Ericsson & Simon, 1984). Specifically, after a warm-up phase, participants are instructed to say out loud everything that crosses their minds when they think about a given hypothetical life problem. One might be: “Imagine that someone gets a call from a good friend who says that he or she cannot go on anymore and wants to commit suicide.” Another problem reads: “A 15-year-old girl wants to get married right away. What could one consider and do?” Trained raters evaluate responses to those problems by using the five criteria that were specified as defining wisdom-related knowledge. The assessment of wisdom-related knowledge on the basis of these criteria exhibits satisfactory reliability and validity. For example, middle-aged and older public figures from Berlin nominated as life-experienced and wise by a panel of journalists—individually of the Berlin definition of wisdom—were among the top performers in laboratory wisdom tasks and outperformed same-aged adults who were not nominated (Baltes, Staudinger, Maercker, & Smith, 1995).

Personal wisdom as part of personality has traditionally been assessed with self-report (e.g., Ardelt, 2003). In contrast to this approach, Staudinger and colleagues developed a measure of personal wisdom that follows the tradition of performance-based testing. Participants are asked to think aloud about the self, and the resulting think-aloud protocols are assessed on the basis of the five wisdom criteria that are structured like the traditional Berlin wisdom criteria but focused on different contents (see preceding; e.g., Mickler & Staudinger, 2008).

### Selected Findings from Studies Using the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm

The Berlin research program on wisdom has addressed many questions concerning the development of wisdom, including individual and social factors that facilitate or hinder its acquisition and refinement during ontogenesis. Other research has focused on the plasticity of wisdom-related knowledge and used interventions to enhance this body of knowledge. Finally, there is research interested in the links between wisdom-related knowledge and psychological adaptation or what has been called “the good life” (for reviews, see Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Kunzmann & Baltes, 2005; Kunzmann & Stange, 2006; Staudinger, 1999a). We will briefly review some of the major findings in the following sections.

### The Development of Wisdom During Ontogenesis

Societal beliefs suggest that wisdom is an attribute of aging and old age (e.g., Clayton & Birren, 1980; Heckhausen, Dixon, & Baltes, 1989). There are also suggestions in the
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literature that wisdom and old age are closely intertwined; for example, Erikson (1959) postulated in his personality theory of life span development that generativity and wisdom constitute advanced stages in personality development.

But what is the empirical evidence? Pasupathi, Staudinger, and Baltes (2001) reported that wisdom-related knowledge considerably increases during adolescence and young adulthood (i.e., between ages 14 and 20). However, there has been little evidence for further normative age-related increases during adulthood and old age. Specifically, in four studies with a total sample size of 533 individuals ranging in age from 20–89 years, the relationship between wisdom-related knowledge and chronological age was virtually zero and not significant. In addition, mean levels of wisdom-related knowledge were generally below the mean of the wisdom scales (e.g., Staudinger, 1999b). These findings suggest that high levels of wisdom-related knowledge are rare even among older adults, and that wisdom-related knowledge does not automatically increase with age.

Given that the way to higher wisdom has been thought to be resource-demanding and requiring an intensive preoccupation with difficult and uncertain life problems, the absence of a normative increase in wisdom with age may not come as a surprise. In addition, a range of supportive person-related and contextual factors are probably involved in the development of wisdom-related knowledge. Some wisdom-facilitating resources have been shown to decline with age; others remain stable; and yet others increase, suggesting a zero-sum game and age-related stability in overall wisdom-related knowledge (e.g., Staudinger, 1999b). As we will review later, a differentiation between distinct forms of wisdom even suggests that there may be some facets of wisdom-related knowledge that decline with age. In addition, there is reason to believe that the development of wisdom-related knowledge may be better described as a process of sequential gain and loss rather than a process of cumulative growth.

**Personal vs. General Wisdom: Multidirectional Age Differences?**

In a cross-sectional study with a sample that covered most of the adult lifespan, Mickler and Staudinger (2008) recently found that, consistent with past cross-sectional evidence, general wisdom remained stable across the age groups studied; however, personal wisdom, as assessed by criteria such as self-relativism and tolerance of ambiguity, was negatively related to age. The authors argued that this age-related decline may be associated with parallel age-related declines in openness to new experience (e.g., Specht, Egloff, & Schmukle, 2011), making it increasingly unlikely that older individuals have to test previously established self-related insights against new evidence—a prerequisite to developing higher levels of personal wisdom. The often-documented age-related increase in positivity effects in attention and memory (e.g., Mather & Carstensen, 2005) may also be incompatible with veridical and differentiated self-knowledge (Labouvie-Vief, 2003).

Finally, adopting an environmental perspective, one could also argue that our society is still structured in a way that prevents older adults from having new and varied experiences with the outer world.
Before accepting this and related ideas, however, it certainly remains to be seen if the currently cross-sectional evidence for an age-related deficit in personal wisdom will be replicated in the context of longitudinal data. For example, it could well be that the decrease in personal wisdom across the age groups studied is at least partly the result of cohort rather than age effects, given that the members of earlier cohorts most likely are less used to talking and thinking about themselves than later cohorts.
The Ontogenesis of Wisdom: A Sequence of Gain and Loss?

Although the majority of past evidence is consistent with the idea that few individuals possess high wisdom-related knowledge and that age per se does not bring wisdom, it is still possible that many adults, regardless of their age, can gain some wisdom about certain problems; namely, the problems that are particularly salient in their own current life (e.g., Thomas & Kunzmann, 2013). Lifespan developmental researchers would suggest that the problems that a person faces are at least partly influenced by the person’s age (e.g., Baltes, 1987). In a similar vein, Erikson (1959) proposed that in each stage in the life cycle, a person faces specific challenges and tasks. For example, old age has been described as a period of loss during which individuals need to let go of many goals and find meaning in their lives as lived. Eventually, because of their greater exposure to the theme of loss, older adults may be more likely to gain wisdom-related knowledge about the problems and challenges that surround this theme than their younger counterparts. This does not necessarily mean, however, that older adults generally have greater wisdom-related knowledge than younger people. As with any type of knowledge, wisdom-related knowledge may be less likely to be available and may even vanish if it is of little salience to the individual and therefore is not regularly used (e.g., Förster, Liberman, & Higgins, 2005; Jarvis, 1987).

Seen in this light, there may be problems that elicit greater wisdom-related knowledge in younger than in older adults; namely, problems that are particularly relevant in young adulthood but not in old age. In a recent study, we provided first evidence for the idea that conflict in intimate relationships may be such a domain (Thomas & Kunzmann, 2013). In this study with 200 adults spanning the adult life span, we found that wisdom-related knowledge about marital conflict, a problem that is far more common in young adulthood than in old age (e.g., Birditt, Fingerman, & Almeida, 2005), was highest in the youngest age group studied (20–29 years of age) and linearly decreased across the subsequent age groups. A follow-up analysis revealed that young adults’ greater exposure to serious conflicts and greater willingness to actively engage in conflicts partly accounted for the age differences in wisdom-related knowledge about marital conflict. In contrast, wisdom-related knowledge about suicide, a non-normative life event that is not particularly likely to occur at a specific age during the adult life span, remained stable across age groups.

In sum, this evidence is consistent with the idea that young adults can be wiser in some domains than older adults, and that the development of wisdom-related knowledge may not be cumulative. Just like any other type of knowledge, wisdom-related knowledge about a particular type of problem may only be available if it is regularly used (Förster, Liberman, Higgins, 2005; Jarvis, 1987). In this sense, the development of wisdom may be described as a sequential process of gain and loss: most individuals are likely to gain a certain degree of wisdom-related knowledge about the problems that are highly salient in their current life; however, this knowledge may become less available and may even vanish if it is no longer adaptive (i.e., if it is not used because it refers to developmental tasks and problems that are no longer salient). Consistent evidence was reported by Glück and colleagues (Glück, Bluck, Baron, & McAdams, 2005; König & Glück, 2012). The
authors asked their participants from different age groups to report situations in which they themselves thought, said, or did something wise. There were systematic age differences in what people considered as instances of wisdom in their own life; and, more to the point, these age differences reflected the developmental tasks of each age group.

Conclusions

Past evidence has supported the view that wisdom does not automatically come with age. We all can learn lessons about the challenges and problems that are part of life regardless of whether we are in our twenties or sixties. Given that individuals have limited resources, however, they have to be selective and can neither acquire wisdom-related knowledge in all possible life domains, nor maintain wisdom-related knowledge that they had previously acquired if this knowledge has lost its relevance. Only for few individuals, and if a rare constellation of facilitating factors and processes is present, domain-specific wisdom-related knowledge may be a stepping-stone to wisdom-related knowledge in a more generalized sense that transcends a particular problem type. Seen in this light, the absence of a normative increase in wisdom-related knowledge with age shown in cross-sectional research is not surprising. As long as wisdom-related knowledge is assessed by age-neutral and rather general life-dilemmas, more domain-specific gains and losses in wisdom-related knowledge cannot be made visible. Notably, these ideas are consistent with several models of successful life span development, particularly the model of selection, optimization, and compensation proposed by Baltes and his colleagues (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2002).

The Activation of Wisdom-Related Knowledge

Many adults presumably are interested in learning more about the ways of improving their levels of wisdom-related knowledge. The psychological wisdom literature has suggested three strategies to reach this goal. One strategy involves organizing one’s life around the factors that have been shown to predict individual differences in wisdom during adulthood and old age. For example, one may attempt to develop wisdom by finding role models and mentors, pursuing certain professions, or developing certain motivational orientations and values. In the long run, this strategy may help the individual attain sustainable improvement in wisdom.

A second way of improving one’s wisdom-related knowledge is to attend structured courses explicitly designed to teach skills and thinking styles that can be considered preconditions or components of wisdom. Sternberg and his colleagues have implemented such a wisdom training in an educational setting (Sternberg, 2001). Their curriculum addresses diverse topics ranging from an introduction to scientific definitions of wisdom,
to discussions of specific wisdom components (e.g., value tolerance and approaching a common good), to encouraging students to use particular wise individuals as role models.

A third strategy of enhancing wisdom-related knowledge is to use short-term interventions that help people access and express their existing wisdom-related knowledge more effectively (Glück & Baltes, 2006). Three such interventions have been successfully tested within the Berlin wisdom paradigm. Staudinger and Baltes (1996) tested a first intervention that was based on the idea that wisdom is a social phenomenon. The study suggests that individuals will increase the quality of their activated wisdom-related knowledge if they engage in actual or imagined consultations with others before dealing with a complex and serious life problem. A second intervention study suggests that people’s wisdom-related knowledge can be improved by activating knowledge about variations among cultures. Specifically, imagining traveling around the world and reflecting on the differences and similarities among different locations, people, and cultures before dealing with a wisdom problem can improve the quality of people’s wisdom-related knowledge (Böhmig-Krumhaar, Staudinger, & Baltes, 2002). Finally, there is evidence that at least some individuals can improve their wisdom-related performance by consciously trying to be wise. A simple instruction to “try to give a wise response to a wisdom task” was enough to improve wisdom-related performance when dealing with a life problem—at least for people with an above-average profile of wisdom resources such as high intelligence, openness to experience, and good social relations (Glück & Baltes, 2006). Taken together, this evidence suggests that wisdom-related knowledge is not fixed; rather, it is dynamic and can be improved by relatively simple social and cognitive strategies.

The Relationship Between Wisdom and Indicators of Successful Development

Does wisdom-related knowledge guide a person’s behaviors in grappling with difficult problems and interacting with others? How do people use their wisdom-related knowledge in everyday life; and what is the motivational orientation that goes hand-in-hand with this type of knowledge? If wisdom-related knowledge were an end in itself and had no correspondence with what an individual wants and does in his or her life, it could hardly be considered a resource. This is at least the idea that was proposed by several modern philosophers influenced by the tradition of early Greek philosophy. This group of researchers has argued that wisdom as knowledge is closely linked to wisdom as manifested in an individual’s everyday behavior. In this tradition, wisdom has been thought to be a resource facilitating behavior aimed at promoting a good life at both an individual and a societal level. For example, Ryan (1996) defined a wise person thus: “A person S is wise if and only if (1) S is a free agent, (2) S knows how to live well, (3) S lives well, and (4) S’s living well is caused by S’s knowledge of how to live well” (p. 241). Kekes
Wisdom is a character trait intimately connected with self-direction. The more wisdom a person has the more likely it is he will succeed in living a good life” (p. 277).

Notably, a good life is not linked exclusively to self-realization and personal happiness but encompasses more; namely, the well-being of others. In this sense, Kekes (1995) has stressed that wisdom is knowledge about ways of developing oneself, not only without violating others’ rights, but also with co-producing resources for others to develop. Thus, in these philosophical conceptualizations, a central characteristic of a wise person is the ability to translate knowledge into action geared toward the development of oneself and others.

Psychological wisdom researchers have begun to respond to the longstanding notion that wisdom-related knowledge requires and reflects certain motivational tendencies, which in turn shape the use of wisdom-related knowledge and guide its application in daily life (e.g., Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Kramer, 2000; Sternberg, 1998). Notably, however, wise persons have been described as being primarily concerned with other people’s well-being rather than with their own (e.g., Ardelt, 2003; Holliday & Chandler, 1986). Consistent with this view, Helson and Srivastava (2002) provided evidence that wise persons tend to be benevolent, compassionate, caring, and interested in helping others.

However, wisdom arguably is different from prosocial behavior in that it involves a joint consideration of self- and other-related interests rather than a one-sided focus on others’ interests. Evidence for this idea was provided by Kunzmann and Baltes (2003b), who examined the relationships between wisdom-related knowledge and certain affective experiences (pleasantness, interest/involvement, and negative affect), value orientations (pleasurable life, personal growth, insight, well-being of friends, environmental protection, societal engagement), and preferred modes of conflict management (dominance, submission, avoidance, cooperation). As predicted, people high on wisdom-related knowledge reported that they less frequently experience self-centered pleasant feelings (e.g., happiness, amusement) but more frequently process-oriented and environment-centered positive emotions (e.g., interest, inspiration). People with higher levels of wisdom-related knowledge also reported less preference for values revolving around a pleasurable and comfortable life. Instead, they reported preferring self-oriented values such as personal growth and insight as well as a preference for other-oriented values related to environmental protection, societal engagement, and the well-being of friends. Finally, people with high levels of wisdom-related knowledge showed less preference for conflict management strategies that reflect either a one-sided concern with one’s own interest (i.e., dominance), a one-sided concern with others’ interests (i.e., submission), or no concern at all (i.e., avoidance). As predicted, they preferred a cooperative approach reflecting a joint concern for their own and their opponents’ interests. This evidence clearly supports the idea that wisdom-related knowledge requires and reflects a joint concern for developing one’s own and others’ potential (see also...

**Sehnsucht:** Personally Experiencing Life’s Potentials and Constraints

In comparison to wisdom, which involves generalized knowledge about human nature and the life course, Sehnsucht (life longings) can be regarded as personalized, experiential knowledge and awareness of the fundamental conditions of life, including the incompleteness and imperfection of life. Sehnsucht denotes the recurring, strong desire for ideal (utopian) states and experiences of life that contrast with current life realities. For example, a middle-aged man may realize that his marriage is not nearly so gratifying as he had imagined and dream about an ideal partnership with someone else. This two-sided focus elicits ambivalent, bittersweet emotions—for example, sadness and frustration coupled with joy and excitement—as well as reflections about his personal development—for example, whether the current marriage still meets his needs and why things developed the way they did. German culture has a popular concept for such emotional-mental representations of perfect, alternative life realities: the concept of Sehnsucht. Having a rich history in 18th- and 19th-century German Romanticism, this concept strongly influences German everyday culture, the arts, and philosophy up to today (Vosskamp, 2004; for a discussion of the cultural origins, see Baltes, 2008). However, Sehnsucht-related experiences are not exclusive to German culture. When given a description of Sehnsucht, U.S. Americans—as representatives of a highly individualistic and agentic culture—can as easily report personal life longings as Germans (Scheibe, Blanchard-Fields, Wiest, and Freund, 2011). The same is likely to be true for people from (most) other cultures.

**A Psychological Conceptualization of Sehnsucht: Six Characteristics**

Sehnsucht’s dictionary definition is “a high degree of intense and often painful desire for something, particularly if there is no hope to attain the desired or when its attainment is uncertain, still far away” (Grimm & Grimm, 1854–1871/1984). Considering this dictionary definition of Sehnsucht, general principles of life span psychology (Baltes, 1987) and previous (mostly conceptual) psychological work on the topic (Belk, Ger, & Askegaard, 2003; Holm, 1999), Scheibe, Freund, and Baltes (2007) conceptualized Sehnsucht in terms of six core characteristics. In studies with German and American samples of adults aged 18–91 years, these six characteristics proved to be a useful description of the experiential gestalt, or structure, of life longings (Baltes, 2008; Scheibe et al., 2011; Scheibe, Freund, et al., 2007). First is the observation that a central aspect of the experience of life longings is a feeling of incompleteness and a sense of imperfection of one’s life. Something is missing that appears essential for a meaningful life and if
attained, promises to make life more complete and perfect (Boesch, 1998; Holm, 1999). Second is the observation that life longings are directed at an idealized alternative to the imperfect present; that is, personal utopias of desired alternative expressions of life. Utopian ideals may represent individuals’ memories or expectations of highly positive developmental states and conceptions of the ideal life course or self; they can be approximated, but they cannot be fully attained (Boesch, 1998).

Third, life longings extend beyond the present into the past and future; they have a tritime focus. They can be directed at memories of past peak experiences (e.g., moments of intense joy, positive feelings associated with a past life phase or place) that one desires to re-experience in the present and future, and at peak experiences envisioned for the future. The fourth characteristic is emotional ambivalence (Belk et al., 2003; Boesch, 1998). This attribute is consistent with the notion that development is multifunctional and always involves both gains and losses (Baltes, 1987; Brandstätter, 1998; Labouvie-Vief, 1981). The emotional quality of life longings is postulated to be inherently ambivalent or “bittersweet,” combining pleasant feelings elicited by utopian fantasies with unpleasant feelings of disappointment and frustration as these fantasies are out of reach.

Fifth is the notion that life longings elicit reflective and evaluative processes dealing with the consideration of one’s actual developmental state; self-critical reflection on the past, present, and (expected) future; as well as an exploratory search for optimal ways of living. Finally, Sehnsucht is rich in symbolic meaning. Objects of Sehnsucht are more than a specific, concrete behavior or experience. Instead, specific objects or targets of Sehnsucht are linked to a network of broader motives and needs at the core of a person’s identity (Kotter-Grühn, Wiest, Zurek, & Scheibe, 2009). A specific longing (e.g., for an embrace by a loved one) is considered a life longing only if the desired state is linked with a broader configuration of thoughts and feelings that are relevant for multiple domains or times of life.

**Assessment of Sehnsucht**

Based on the framework of the six life longing characteristics, our research group developed a self-report procedure to assess life longings in adults (Scheibe et al., 2007), which was subsequently further refined (Scheibe et al., 2011). This procedure combines idiographic and nomothetic techniques. In the idiographic part, participants are asked to generate a list of life longings; that is, dreams about, strong desires, or wishes for persons, objects, experiences, events, or conditions of life or the world that are intense, enduring, or recurring, and very unlikely to be or not easily attainable at present. This is preceded by a warm-up task, in which they are asked to reflect on different life phases (childhood, youth, adulthood, old age) or life domains (relationships with other persons, health and personal situation, self-view). Content-coding of life longings reported by more than 1,300 adults aged 18–81 years showed that reported life longings deal primarily with social relationships, such as a fulfilling partnership, true friendship, or the lasting well-being of family members (Kotter-Grühn, Wiest, et al., 2009). Other frequently mentioned
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topics concern the self-image or state of mind (e.g., inner peace), health (e.g., recovering from serious illness; being active until old age), leisure (e.g., traveling the world), and work-related issues (e.g., becoming head of a company). The top content domains of life longings are very similar across adult samples from Germany and the United States (Scheibe et al., 2011).

In the nomothetic part, participants rate their two or three most important life longings on subscales covering the six characteristics of life longings (sense of incompleteness, personal utopia, tritime focus, ambivalent emotions, life reflection and evaluation, and symbolic richness) and other important characteristics (frequency and intensity, functional significance, and controllability of life longings; see following discussion). All subscales were shown to exhibit acceptable internal consistencies in both German and American samples and substantial retest stabilities across five weeks (Kotter-Grühn, Scheibe, Blanchard-Fields, & Baltes, 2009; Scheibe, Freund, et al., 2007; Scheibe et al., 2011). They can be used to compare life longings across content domains or cultures, or link them to other personal characteristics, such as emotional well-being.

Selected Findings from Research on Sehnsucht

Research on Sehnsucht based on the psychological conceptualization outlined here is much younger and more limited than research on wisdom. Nevertheless, during the past decade, we have begun to address several research questions regarding the concepts’ nature, ontogenesis, and functionality for positive development. A first research question addresses the ontogenesis of life longings; that is, when in the life course Sehnsucht experiences emerge, and what aspects of Sehnsucht change across adulthood and into old age. Another goal of our research has been to investigate the interplay between Sehnsucht and goals in the broader framework of action regulation. Third, we explored the relationship of Sehnsucht to indicators of positive development or the good life.

The Development of Sehnsucht during Ontogenesis

Like wisdom, we expect the phenomenon of Sehnsucht to develop from childhood to adolescence, with no further normative increase across the adult life span (Baltes, 2008; Scheibe et al., 2007). This assumption is based on our theory that assigns to Sehnsucht complex cognitive, affective, and motivational components that probably only become fully expressed in late adolescence or early adulthood. For example, the characteristics of symbolic richness, tritime focus, and reflection and evaluation require autobiographical reasoning and memory—abilities that only become fully available in middle to late adolescence (Bluck & Habermas, 2001; Staudinger, 2001).
Accordingly, for most people, the basic structure of life longings presumably has been established when entering adulthood, and remains available throughout adulthood and old age. Paralleling the ontogenesis of wisdom (Baltes & Kunzmann, 2003; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000), subsequent adult changes are expected to be determined more by factors other than chronological age, such as personality, cognitive style, motivational orientations, and life experiences. Confirming this view, in a German sample ranging in age from 19–81, five of the six core characteristics of life longings (personal utopia, ontogenetic tritime focus, ambivalent emotions, life reflection and evaluation, and symbolic richness) were invariant across adult age groups (Scheibe et al., 2007). The aspect of incompleteness was, however, lower in older participants, suggesting that with age, people are able to better align their ideal and actual views of themselves (Ryff, 1991). At this point, it remains open whether this is driven by older adults’ improving their actual life realities, by downwardly adjusting their ideals, or both. Stability across age groups was further found in terms of the covariance structure of the six characteristics and in frequency and intensity of Sehnsucht experiences (Scheibe et al., 2007).

Whereas the structure and intensity of life longings appears to be largely invariant across adulthood, specific contents or themes of life longings do differ. Cross-sectional evidence suggests that Sehnsucht is often directed at current and past (unattained) developmental tasks and themes. In the foreground are the age-related themes and tasks that are relevant as individuals review, manage, and plan their lives at a given age, and as they wrestle with incompleteness and imperfection in achieving their developmental goals (Baltes, 2008). For instance, content-coding of life longings reported by more than 1,300 adults aged 18–81 years showed that life longings related to work/education were more often named by young and middle-aged adults and less often by older adults (Kotter-Grühn, Wiest, et al., 2009). Work-related life longings fit with developmental tasks of establishing a career in young adulthood (“I long to be a famous actress”) and career advancement in middle adulthood (“I want to move through the ranks for higher responsibility”). Older age groups were more likely to report family-related life longings (“I long to be reunited with my daughter”), consistent with a reorientation to non-work-related sources of purpose in life as people prepare for and make the transition from work to retirement. Sehnsucht may also frequently address past, perhaps unresolved developmental tasks. For example, partnership-related life longings were named by middle-aged adults as frequently as by younger adults (Kotter-Grühn, Wiest, et al., 2009). Establishing a partnership is considered a primary task of young adulthood (“I long to be a famous actress”) and career advancement in middle adulthood (“I want to move through the ranks for higher responsibility”). Older age groups were more likely to report family-related life longings (“I long to be reunited with my daughter”), consistent with a reorientation to non-work-related sources of purpose in life as people prepare for and make the transition from work to retirement. Sehnsucht may also frequently address past, perhaps unresolved developmental tasks. For example, partnership-related life longings were named by middle-aged adults as frequently as by younger adults (Kotter-Grühn, Wiest, et al., 2009). Establishing a partnership is considered a primary task of young adulthood, so it is not surprising that partnership is a frequent theme of Sehnsucht in this phase of adulthood. At the same time, not all middle-aged adults have achieved a partnership, or they may have realized that their partnership does not conform with their ideals; accordingly, partnership was shown to remain a frequent object of Sehnsucht in middle age.

Other aspects of Sehnsucht also appear to change as people get older. Adult age differences were found with regard to a sense of control over life longings. Compared to younger adults, older adults reported feeling better able to regulate their experience of life longings, but less able to translate their life longings into goals and goal-related action (Scheibe et al., 2007). These findings conformed with evidence from emotional and
The Interplay Between Sehnsucht and Goals

An important question in our research has been how Sehnsucht differs from goals, and how both concepts relate to each other from the broader perspective of developmental regulation. Like life longings, goals are representations of positive outcomes; both can give directionality to life. Importantly, however, goals operate primarily at the behavioral level: people strive at attaining their goals by formulating specific implementation intentions and by engaging in goal-relevant behaviors. Life longings, in contrast, are utopian and unattainable in principle; they work mainly at the level of imagination and fantasy (Boesch, 1998; Scheibe et al., 2007). In Oettingen’s (2012) theory on future thought and action regulation, Sehnsucht would overlap with future fantasies and daydreams that by themselves do not drive goal pursuit, unless they are coupled with high expectations of success and are transformed into goals. Consistent with this view, a study comparing personal life longings and goals found that goals were reported to be more concrete and controllable (that is, one knows the steps necessary for their achievement) than life longings, and to have a stronger influence on the structuring of everyday life (Mayser, Scheibe, & Riediger, 2008). Life longings, in contrast, were rated to be more emotionally bittersweet (painful and pleasurable at the same time), utopian, and long-term oriented than goals. Both goal and life longing characteristics were related to individuals’ life satisfaction, yet, in line with the stronger role of goals in structuring everyday life, the association between goals and life satisfaction was stronger than that between life longings and life satisfaction.

Recent research investigating one specific domain of incompleteness—the wish to have a child in middle-aged childless women—shows that goals and life longings emerge under different conditions (Kotter-Grühn, Scheibe, et al., 2009). When the wish for children was intense and at the same time perceived as attainable (as might be the case for relatively young heterosexual women with a partner), women tended to describe this wish as a goal (“I do everything to fulfill my wish for a child”). However, when the wish for children was intense and long-lasting (as might be the case in older women past the developmental deadline of childbearing), women tended to describe this wish more as a life longing (“My wish for a child often makes me think a lot about the meaning of my life”).

We assume that Sehnsucht and goals are reciprocally linked in the process of developmental regulation. Life longings can be transformed into action-relevant goals, but goals can also be transformed into life longings. Major theories of developmental regulation propose uniformly that successful development requires that individuals select and pursue developmental goals in line with current opportunities and constraints, and disengage from developmental goals in cases where these turn out to be unattainable or
too costly to pursue (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2000; Heckhausen et al., 2010). In particular, Heckhausen et al. (2010) contend that the life span is composed of a series of action cycles, in which a goal-selection phase is followed by a goal-engagement phase, followed by a goal-disengagement phase.

We suggest that Sehnsucht comes into play in two of these major action phases and accordingly has two important developmental functions (Baltes, 2008; Scheibe et al., 2007, 2011). First, Sehnsucht can aid goal selection by providing a general orientation and directionality to development. In our work we refer to this as the directionality function of Sehnsucht; a sample item to assess this function is “My longing shows me clearly what really matters in my life.” By making people reflect on aspects of their life that are incomplete on one hand, and events and experiences that would make life more complete on the other, life longings can guide them to select and pursue the goals that are most suited to promoting a sense of well-being and meaning. Indeed, study participants with high-level expressions of life longings reported that their life longings functioned as a vision or overarching goal from which more concrete goals were derived (Scheibe et al., 2007, 2011). In other words, life longings can give rise to developmental goals, which people pursue by engaging in goal-relevant behavior. Interestingly, this directionality function was more strongly endorsed by younger than by older adults, and by Americans than by Germans (Scheibe et al., 2011).

Second, Sehnsucht can aid goal disengagement by helping people to come to terms with blocked goals, losses, and incompleteness. Unattainable goals may be transformed into life longings. That is, people can withdraw from active efforts to pursue these goals without relinquishing them completely. At the level of fantasy and imagination, people can nurture aspects of their ideal life that they have to do without in objective reality. In this sense, life longings may serve as a mechanism of managing conditions of loss, failure, and unattainability. In our work, we refer to this as the managing non-realizability function of Sehnsucht; a sample item to assess this function is “Through my longing I keep alive my memories of something in my past.” The managing non-realizability function was more strongly endorsed by older than younger adults, although age differences were less strong in Americans than in German participants (Scheibe et al., 2011). Certainly, later stages of life bring more and more threats to the realization of personal goals, as aging is associated with accumulating losses (Baltes et al., 2006) and a shortening in remaining lifetime (Carstensen, 2006). Therefore, using life longings as a strategy to manage loss and unattainability appears to become increasingly important with advancing age. Yet, the function of managing non-realizability is also relevant in younger ages, particularly when persons are confronted with constraints or blocked goals in important, self-defining life domains. This is consistent with the notion of action cycles throughout life where periods of goal selection, engagement, and disengagement alternate for different developmental goals (Heckhausen et al., 2010).

We investigated the assumed transformation process from goals to life longings during the goal-disengagement phase for an important life goal that is shared by many people but cannot be attained by everyone: the goal to have children (Kotter-Grühn, Scheibe, et
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al., 2009). Based on their responses, middle-aged childless women were assigned to hypothetical stages of the transformation process from goal to life longing. Women who were classified as having passed the transformation process (i.e., they reported a weak goal, but a strong life longing to have children) were older and their child wish was less attainable, both subjectively and objectively, than women classified to be before the transition (reporting a strong goal, but a weak life longing to have children) or in transition (reporting a strong goal and a strong life longing to have children). These women no longer reported deriving much directionality from their life longing to have children, yet they strongly felt that their life longing helped them to deal with their lack by nurturing fantasies of having a child.

The Relationship Between Sehnsucht and Indicators of Successful Development

As discussed previously, life longings were shown to have at least two important functions for developmental action regulation. Accordingly, one may assume that high-level expressions of Sehnsucht have beneficial consequences for a positive development. At the same time, it is unlikely that life longings directly translate into high levels of happiness. Having frequent and intense life longings is likely to be associated with a high degree of incompleteness of life and the perception that important aspirations were not and never will be reached. Indeed, we found that life longings have costs in the hedonic aspect of subjective well-being. Specifically, we found that persons with high-level expressions of life longings reported lower happiness and psychological well-being, more desire for change, and higher negative affectivity (Kotter-Grühn, Scheibe, et al., 2009; Scheibe et al., 2007, 2011). These negative associations were, however, moderated by the degree to which persons reported a sense of control over the onset, course, and end of life longing-related thoughts and emotions. When a high degree of control was reported, negative correlations reached the range of zero or even positive associations. Among childless women, transforming the blocked goal to have a child into a life longing seemed to be beneficial for well-being when women had high control over the experience of this life longing and when other self-regulation strategies (goal disengagement and reengagement) failed. Such findings reinforce the important role that a sense of control plays in the conduct and evaluation of life (Lachman, 2006).

So far, little attention has been paid to the relationship between Sehnsucht and personal growth. Here, positive associations can be expected. Life longings entail the imaginary anticipation of highly positive psychological states that surpass the status quo and elicit processes of self-critical reflection about oneself, others, and life in general; hence, they may promote self-insight, creativity, and wisdom. Such links have been suggested in previous theoretical writings on Sehnsucht (Boesch, 1998; Hogrebe, 1994). Future research should explore the links between life longings and topics like self-concept complexity, self-insight, creativity, wisdom, and generativity.
Conclusions and Future Directions

In this chapter, we have emphasized that personal development across the life span involves a striving for growth and perfection that occurs within a reality of constraints, losses, and incompleteness (Baltes, 1997; Baltes et al., 2006). Reflecting this notion, our goal within a positive psychology has been to understand how gains and losses, the positive and the negative, are interrelated. Adversity and negative life events eventually may facilitate personal growth, and positive life events may have negative consequences after all (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003). Wisdom and Sehnsucht are two concepts that are ideally suited to address these complexities. Both concepts deal with positivity in its most radical form: that is, psychological utopia. At the same time, however, they reflect an awareness that life inherently is incomplete and imperfect. Therefore, wisdom and life longings do not directly promote a hedonic life orientation or sense of happiness. Neither the insight that life is incomplete (wisdom-related knowledge) nor the experience of this incompleteness (Sehnsucht) seems to be compatible with feelings of joy, enthusiasm, and happiness. Nevertheless, we argue that they contribute to a meaningful and satisfying life. In this chapter, we reported initial supporting evidence for these predictions. Specifically, our findings suggest a positive correlation between wisdom-related knowledge and developmental outcomes reflecting an interest in self-actualization and helping others grow. There is also evidence suggesting that life longings have important developmental functions, including the provision of directionality in life and the management of loss and unattainable developmental goals.

One avenue for future research is to study the links between wisdom-related knowledge and life longings on one hand and multiple developmental outcomes on the other hand more systematically and from a process-oriented perspective. For example, in what ways do the experience of life longings and the availability of wisdom-related knowledge help people deal with concrete life situations characterized by uncertainty and incompleteness so that they will grow themselves and help others grow?

Future research should further examine the possible interplay of life longings and wisdom in promoting positive development. Wisdom-related knowledge about the potentials and constraints of life may help adults develop mature and adaptive forms of life longings. For example, knowledge about the contexts, limits, and uncertainties of life may help to put one’s own ongoing subjective experiences in perspective and may make it easier to accept that one cannot have everything in life, thus facilitating more positive feelings toward one’s life longings. Vice versa, personally experiencing the potentials and constraints of life may promote the acquisition of more abstract and general wisdom-related knowledge. In other words, dreaming about ideals and highest potentials on one hand and experiencing the impossibility of their (complete) fulfillment and the limits of life on the other may help persons to acquire knowledge about the potentials, contexts, limits, and uncertainties of life. This type of knowledge does not remain purely theoretical but is connected with emotionally meaningful personal experiences. In fact, wisdom
researchers have argued that wisdom can be acquired only through learning from one’s own experiences, not “vicariously” through reading books or through others’ instructions (e.g., Sternberg, 1998). Given this reciprocal relationship, it is likely that personally experiencing the potentials and constraints of life (life longings) and knowing about the potentials and constraints of life (wisdom) may jointly foster positive development, particularly personal growth.

Studying concepts such as wisdom and Sehnsucht forces us to acknowledge that human nature and life span development is inherently complex and involves positive and negative aspects that interact in multiple and time-lagged ways. From our point of view, disentangling and understanding this complexity should be at the heart of the field of positive psychology. Approaching this fascinating endeavor from different perspectives and scientific disciplines will eventually lead to a more comprehensive understanding of human life and life span development.

**Future Questions**

1. How do individuals apply their wisdom-related knowledge to real-life problems requiring complex and consequential decisions?
2. Under which conditions is the experience of incompleteness of life (life longings) beneficial for individuals’ development?
3. Can wisdom and life longings, the knowledge and the personal experience of the potentials and constraints of life, jointly foster positive development, particularly personal growth?

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**Notes:**

(1) The German word *Sehnsucht* has a unique meaning that is not fully carried by any words in the English language; it can be roughly translated as “life longing.” Both terms will be used throughout the chapter.

(2) By “utopian,” we mean idealized or perfect; that is, something that goes beyond the usual levels of functioning and that cannot be fully reached.

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