Asking the Right Questions for a Wisdom Culture

Dr Bernard McKenna

University of Queensland Business School, Brisbane, Australia

Email: b.mckenna@uq.edu.au

ABSTRACT *If organisations are understood as committed to eudamonia (human flourishing), then it is crucial that we ask the right questions of its members. This paper briefly outlines a notion of Social Practice Wisdom, and then argues for its role in a Wisdom Culture. The paper concludes by suggesting the sort of questions that would be most appropriate to ask of people in a wisdom-based organisation.*

Keywords: communities of practice; episteme, eudaimonia; nous, social practice wisdom; technē, wisdom culture

INTRODUCTION

Wisdom is now becoming established as a topic of interest in management and organisation theory (Bierly III, Kessler, & Christensen, 2000; Kessler, 2006; McKenna, Rooney, & Boal, 2009). While this is a pleasing trend it would be disappointing if wisdom were simply to become another management fad to be discarded when something shinier and brighter comes along. To limit that possibility, this paper proposes a model of Social Practice Wisdom that is founded on philosophical and psychological principles (McKenna et al., 2009; D. Rooney, B. McKenna, & P. Liesch, forthcoming-b), and then considers how organisations might go about implementing a wisdom culture in organisations by asking the right questions of its members.

SOCIAL PRACTICE WISDOM

Wisdom is difficult to define because of its complexity and instability. Even Aristotle's explanation of practical wisdom is difficult to pin down. Testifying to this difficulty is that scholars vary considerably in defining practical wisdom/*phronesis*. Halverson (2004) presents three different but widespread views of it. *Phronesis* is translated variously as practical wisdom, prudence, practical reasoning, moral discernment, moral insight, and even common sense (Noel, 1999). Aristotle's *phronesis* provides the foundation of this model of social practice wisdom (Figure 1).

Social practice wisdom does not imply a perfect world, perfect knowledge, or perfect contentment. According to Kant, perfect contentment would be to live in a "deedless rest and stoppage of the motive springs, or blunting of sensation and activity connected with it" (Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View, VII: 234-5 in Meld Shell, 2003, pp. 220-1). The real goal of wisdom is to pursue and achieve something good and worthwhile rather than being stupefied with satiation. Thus, Kant also says; "Life only has value on the basis of the use made of it, the ends to which it is

directed." (VII: 239 in Meld Shell, 2003, pp. 220-1). The critical point, though, is to *strive* for wisdom acknowledging that we are imperfect people who live and work in a difficult social world and that few people will fully obtain the loftiest standards of wisdom.

[INSERT FIGURE ONE HERE]

In this model, social practice wisdom moves through five phases, ideation and integration, constructions, balancing and weighing, action, and effect. Within the model, **soul** is the life-force, the essence that, in a non dualistic way, combines body and mind. It accounts for any biological factors, including the boundedness of rationality, human cognitive limits, and other important issues like bodily health. Central **sensorium** is the capacity for social awareness or sense of place and belonging in a culture, and of being connected socially to ideas in larger discourses or communities of practice. We might call this the phenomenological background of culturally or socially distributed knowledge, assumptions, or ideas. Through our senses, we accumulate knowledge, then more so an understanding of our own environment as well as alien environments. To accumulate relevant knowledge, we must use all our senses to apprehend what is around us and to integrate this into a continually evolving schema that is intelligent, alert, and willing to change. The soul and central sensorium permeate the whole system at either an individual or organisational level. **Ideation and integration** is the first phase in the model. In it, *nous* (insight and imagination that are central to common sense) mediates between *sophia* (*a priori* theory, contemplative thinking) and *episteme* ('scientific' or factual knowledge). Wisdom then moves to the **Constructions** phase. Here aesthetic capability (forming communicable ideas that draw on emotional and sensory feel) mediates between *techné* (craft) and *poiesis* (poetics, constructions). The links between these first two stages are not so much linear as recursively and cyclically linked. The **Balancing and Weighing** phase, which is also in a recursive interplay with the previous phase, uses prudence (*a posteriori* experience ethical imagination, character) and artifacts (texts, utterances, other forms of semiotic production) to produce actions in *praxis*, which then produce the effect of *eudaimonia* (the good life). Each of these phases feeds back into and draws from the central sensorium and soul. The overall process producing this effect is social practice wisdom.

This largely Aristotelian understanding of social practice wisdom differs significantly from modern notions of scientific and epistemic prowess. By contrast, contemporary rationalist epistemologies, which infuse dominant management practices, find non-rational processes such as intuition and other transcendent forms of cognition difficult to accommodate in their epistemic framework and ideology. This wisdom model is transcendent in the sense of going beyond common sense and science to appreciate a dynamic system of knowing and doing that includes metaphysics and ethics (Lonergan, 1957: 635). Wise managers have a different attitude in practice that is more capable of dealing with every-day life than is to be found in the attitudes of a reductionist, controlling, disengaged, short-term focused, values-free, abstract pseudo-science. Going further, Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde (1990) argue that science and other forms of intellectual specialization might bring clarity, but that this specialized clarity can be deceptive. In organisational practice, the notion that 'if you can measure it then you can control it' (Miller, 2001) would not be an effective framework for a practical wisdom practice. Furthermore, the burgeoning of different knowledge domains creates the problem of confusing knowledge and wisdom (Ackoff, 1989), of combining knowledges effectively (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1990, pp. 31-2), and of simply making sense of so much information. Specialized knowledge is narrowband while wisdom is broadband. Wisdom uses the full range of resources available to the human mind, both individually and at the group level, with a view to providing both specific and broad benefits.

BUILDING A WISDOM CULTURE IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Although wisdom (or lack of it) is too often associated only with leaders, effective wise organisational practice must be built on the day-to-day practices of the organisational members if an organisation is to flourish. That is, organisational members must be allowed to exercise wise judgment and practice to the extent that they are capable of achieving, and that capability needs to be enhanced as much as possible. Wisdom must be built into the culture of an organisation. Schein's (1992: 12) notion of culture works well in this sense: culture is

> a pattern of shared basic assumptions that a group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and,

> therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems.

This definition allows us to think of organisations from a "communities of practice" [CoPs] perspective (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, & Clark, 2006; Iverson & McPhee, 2002). Three key elements of CoPs, therefore, are mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and joint enterprise. They provide a means to develop and maintain long-term organisational memory. They produce positive social capital. These communities are connected through time and space in communicative processes that constructs knowledge in a purposive manner (Rooney & McKenna, 2008). Far from being mesmerized by the current imperatives of change, a wisdom culture tries to establish durable routines and procedures that are known to maintain a necessary consistency, identity, and common direction in a social system (David, 1994). However, a successful culture also replicates, modifies, and passes on lessons of successful adaptation or change strategies and capabilities from the past (Gregory, 2006; Hall, 2005). Here we begin to more clearly see institutions as dynamic rather than as static (or inert) because they play an active role in producing identity, functionality, coherence, and change. Institutions are not inert structures they actually do things. Institutions have inherent processes and structures for effecting change. When an organisational culture is being "based on shared or partly shared patterns of meaning and interpretation" (Soderberg & Holden, 2002: 112), it means that there will be diversity and unity, agreement and disagreement, and what might be called phenomenological turbulence or complexity (Hearn, Rooney, & Mandeville, 2003). A wisdom culture, then, avoids the existential crisis that many managers experience of having to change for change sake rather than seeing change as adaptation within a stable, coherent, and widely understood framework.

OPERATIONALISING A WISDOM CULTURE

So far, so good. There is probably little said so far that most management and organisational scholars, nor many experienced and humane managers, would disagree with. But the question is: how would you actually go about producing such a culture in practical terms? To answer this, I firstly define what wisdom is and then consider ways in which psychologists attempt to measure wisdom. The definition of wisdom is provided by Rooney, McKenna & Liesch (forthcoming-a). The way that psychologists

define and measure it is affected by whether they are explicit or implicit theorists. An explicit theory of wisdom is used by The Berlin School (e.g., Baltes, Staudinger): constructions of wisdom are devised by expert theorists and researchers rather than laypeople, and emphasise advanced cognitive functioning. They define wisdom as "expert knowledge in the fundamental pragmatics of life that permits exceptional insight, judgement, and advice about complex and uncertain matters" (Paul B. Baltes & Staudinger, 2000: 132). More specifically, these pragmatics include "insight into the social nature and incompleteness of human existence, the variability of life goals, knowledge about oneself and the limits of one's knowledge, and insight into how knowledge is translated into behaviour" (Staudinger & Pasupathi, 2003: 240). By contrast, implicit theorists consider how wisdom is ascribed by others to people (Montgomery, Barber, & McKee, 2002; R. J. Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2004).

To simplify, I will provide the Rooney et al definition of wisdom, and then briefly survey the implicit theorists' methods to test wisdom.

Definition of Wisdom

The five characteristics of wisdom that we define, based on the Western philosophical tradition and recent psychological research are (Rooney et al., forthcoming-b, ch. 3):

1. *Wisdom is based on reason and observation.*
2. *Wisdom incorporates non-rational and subjective elements into judgment.*
3. *Wisdom is directed to authentic humane and virtuous outcomes.*
4. *Wisdom is articulate, aesthetic, and intrinsically rewarding*
5. *Wisdom is practical*

Measuring Wisdom using Implicit Theories

Bluck & Glück (2005) identify the two dominant "implicit" theorists as Monika Ardelt and Robert Sternberg. However, the most important earliest work is Holliday & Chandler (1986) whose research is built on large samples. Ardelt (2004) is particularly critical of explicit theories. She argues that the notion that ' the body of knowledge and skills related to wisdom … [are] … too large and complex to be stored in one individual's mind' (Staudinger & Baltes, 1996: 748) is misguided because it logically precludes anyone being wiser than the contemporary circumstances. She also argues that

wisdom is expressed at an *experiential* level, and not just an intellectual level (Ardelt, 2004: 260).

However, Sternberg (2004b) is more conciliatory:

> Baltes et al … have defined wisdom primarily in terms of expert knowledge. Ardelt has defined it as a property of a person, in particular, as an integration of cognitive, reflective, and affective characteristics. I think both are not quite right. (p. 287)

Ardelt (2004: 274), building on Clayton and Birren (1980), proposes a 'relatively parsimonious model of wisdom, as an integration of cognitive, reflective, and affective personality characteristics'. She presents these as three dimensions (Cognitive, Reflective, Affective), then defines and operationalises them. The empirical results of her wisdom theory is provided in Ardelt (2003).

Sternberg's Balance Theory of Wisdom (R. J. Sternberg, 1998; R.J. Sternberg, 2003) sees wisdom as 'the application of intelligence, creativity, and knowledge to the common good' (R. J. Sternberg, 2004b: 287). Elsewhere, Sternberg (2004a) defines wisdom as

> the use of one's intelligence and experience as mediated by values toward the achievement of a common good through a balance among (1) intrapersonal, (2) interpersonal, and (3) extrapersonal interests, over the (1) short and (2) long terms, to achieve a balance among (1) adaptation to existing environments, (2) shaping of existing environments, and (3) selection of new environments.

Sternberg's (1985) study characterises the wise person as

> has much the same **analytical reasoning ability** that is found in the intelligent individual.
>
> … a certain **sagacity. …** He or she **listens** to others, knows how to **weigh advice**, and can **deal with a variety of different kinds of people**. In seeking as much information as possible for decision making, the wise individual **reads between the lines** as well as makes **use of the obviously available information**.
>
> The wise individual is especially able to **make clear, sensible, and fair judgments**, and in doing so, takes a **long-term as well as a short-term view** of the consequences of the judgments made. The wise individual is perceived to profit from the **experience of others**, and to **learn from others' mistakes**, as well as from **his or her own**. This individual is not afraid to **change his or her mind** as experience dictates, and the **solutions** that are offered to complex problems tend to be the **right ones**.

These three orientations to wisdom are outlined in Table 1 although there are terminological issues that can't be dealt with here.

What I argue here is for organisation to reconsider measures of organisational performance. If we were to begin with the purpose of organisations being conceived in eudaimonic terms, then we are likely to ask different questions of organisational members when we have a reflective time each year. Currently, performance reviews vitiate wise organisational cultures for three reasons. Firstly, they are founded on positivist assumptions that humans are capable of being measured and of easily conforming to rule-based structures (Swanson, 2001; Townley, 1993). Secondly, such evaluations increasingly demand conformist subjectivity (cf. Beatty, Huselid, & Schneier, 2003) as evidenced in selection procedures that use psychometrics and personality testing. Thirdly, there is a creeping expectation that organisational members must continually give more, particularly their time (Wharton & Blair-Loy, 2002), thereby producing an 'iron cage' (Barker, 1993) .

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS FOR A WISDOM CULTURE

If we reconceptualized the "analyzable, describable subject" (Burrell quoted in Townley, 1993) organisational member as a human being with multiple subjectivities, a life trajectory upon which they reflect, and with an internal set of experiences, cognitions, emotions, intuitions and aesthetics that may or may not be overtly expressed, and with a commitment to eudaimonic outcomes, then we would ask different questions of them. Only some of these can be considered here, and briefly so. Cognition, for example, might be considered in terms of the the difference between plastic and crystallized intelligence (Cattell, 1971) to best suit people to types of thinking and because of ageing implications [we lose plasticity but gain crystallized intelligence over time] (P.B. Baltes, 1993). I now consider three more characteristics arising from Ardelt, Rooney and McKenna, and Sternberg.

Reflection Ardelt's second category, Reflection, includes issues of balanced judgement:

> I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision [Perspective-Taking Scale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980)]

or with empathy

> When I'm upset at someone, I usually try to "put myself in his or her shoes" for a while.

On the other hand, Sternberg incorporates questions that seem to be more related to reflectivity:

Learns from other people's mistakes
Leams and remembers and gains information from past mistakes or successes
Changes mind on basis of experience

Affective The third category that Ardelt provides for is the affective. She provides for emotional empathy and compassion, as well as tolerance:

I can be comfortable with all kinds of people [Acceptance of Others Scale (Fey 1955)]

Sternberg asks whether a person: Displays concern for others

Sagacity Sagacity is defined as acuteness of mental discernment, aptitude for investigation or discovery; keenness and soundness of judgement in the estimation of persons and conditions, and in the adaptation of means to ends; penetration, shrewdness (*OED Online*). Questions might include

Understands people through dealing with a variety of people

Knows self best

Is a good listener

Is not afraid to admit making a mistake, will correct the mistake, learn, and go on.

Listens to all sides of an issue.

Acts within own physical and intellectual limitations.

A Complete Inventory Overall, I would argue that Ardelt's three categories are insufficient to provide for the factors that comprise wisdom. Two of Bluck & Glück's unused categories (Insight, Reflective Attitude, and Concern for Others) could be absorbed as follows: Insight into Sagacity Scale; Reflective Attitude into Reflective Scale. The two that are not accounted for are Concern for Others and Real World Skills. Concern for Others is covered in McKenna and Rooney's features (not elaborated above):

3. is directed to authentic humane and virtuous outcomes

3a. Because it is humane, wisdom is virtuous and tolerant through empathy, interpersonal insight, humility and social conscience leading to social action.

3b. Wisdom is founded on the authentic expression of good character and good desires

Sternberg also includes the component *Is fair* (-1.32). The presence of these elements in three of the researchers indicates that another category, Ethics, should be included.

As well, both Bluck & Glück and McKenna & Rooney add a practical component. Bluck & Glück identify Real-World Skills as a component. McKenna & Rooney have the following components:

5a. is prudent and practical, displaying a sensible worldliness.
5b. is exercised with an understanding of the community structures and processes within which it is practiced.
5c. is capable of independent thought and action to change the conditions of life.

Thus a Real World Skills component should be included in any consideration of wise organisational members. There is one further outstanding component from McKenna and Rooney:

2e.Wisdom is visionary because it has insight, can 'see' (imagine) possibilities in the future.

This visionary component might be best placed in the Sagacity category.

From this analysis, then, I would argue that there are six categories of Wisdom which each contain various components. They are: Cognitive Category; Reflective Category; Affective Category; Sagacity Category; Ethical Category; Real World Skills Category.

CONCLUSION: CAN THE MODEL BE OPERATIONALISED?

I have argued that asking questions of organisational members that are founded on well established principles of wisdom is more likely to produce the eudaimonic organisation committed to human flourishing. But how well do these questions fit the Social Practice of Wisdom Model? The paper concludes with a first attempt at integrating our operationalized wisdom questions with the Model. The results are set out in Table 2

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

This preliminary attempt at linking a philosophical framework of practical wisdom to operationalisable questions leaves me with several questions

1. Is the model adequate?
2. Are the operationalized questions consistent with the model?
3. Do the questions provide useful information for an organisation committed to Practical Wisdom

By grappling with these questions, I hope to develop a more comprehensive Social Practice of Wisdom Model.

Figure 1. Model of Social Practice Wisdom

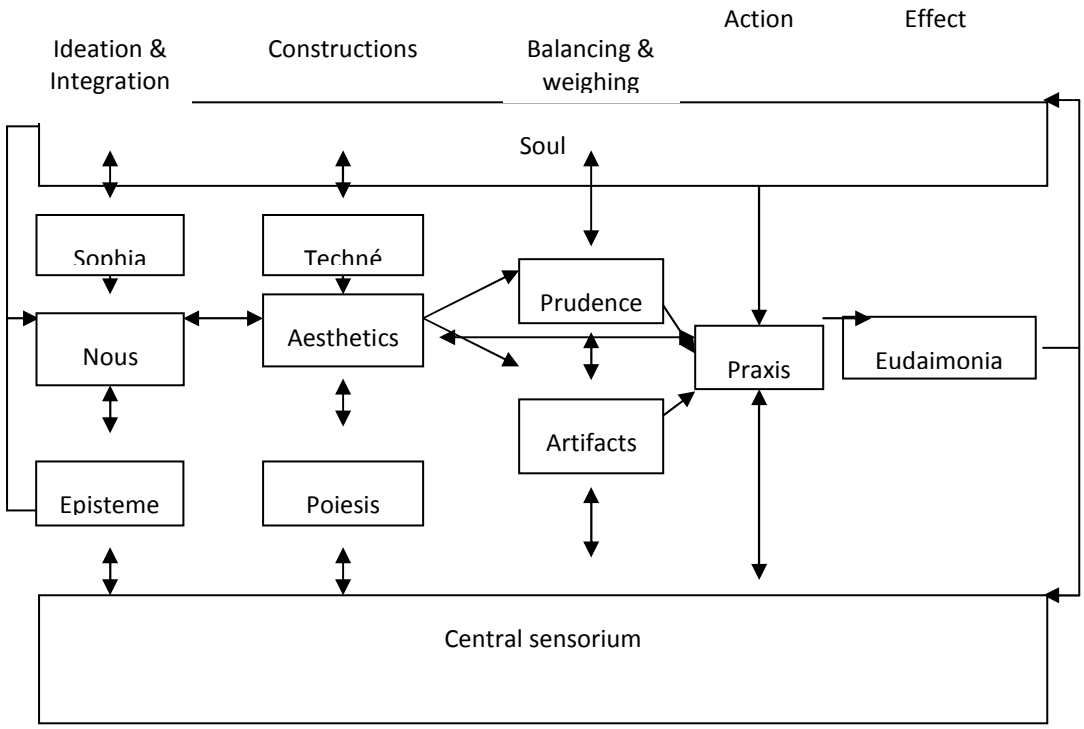

Table 2: Comparing SPofW Model with Operationalised Wisdom Questions

CATEGORY	OPERATIONALISED CATEGORIES
Episteme, Sophia, Techné	Cognitive Category
Praxis, Sophia	Reflective Category
Aesthetic, Nous	Affective Category
Prudence, Nous	Sagacity Category
Nous, Prudence	Ethical Category
Techné, Poiesis	Real World Skills Category

Table 1: Comparison of Wisdom Definitions

	Rooney & McKenna	Ardelt	Sternberg
Cognitive	Reasoning & Organising 'Facts'	Cognitive	Reasoning Ability Expeditious Use of Information
Reflective	Contemplative	Reflective	Learning from Ideas and Environment

Affective	Sensibly uses the non-rational, subjective, and experience	Affective	Concern for others
Sagacity[1]*	Humanity		Sagacity
Judgment			Judgment
Perspicacity			Perspicacity
Virtue	Virtue		
Articulate	Articulate		
Practical and Prudent	Practical and Prudent		

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[1] Displays concern for others; Considers advice; Knows self best; Is thoughtful; not afraid to admit mistakes; listens to all sides of an issue

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