

What's wisdom for?

Julie Allan *C Psychol.*

In June 2008 I presented a workshop at Cass Business School's Centre for Complexity, Conversation and Change. It was entitled *Can a Corporation be Wise? Leaders, Relationships and Wisdom*. Information about the rest of the innovative series of workshops can be found here: <http://tinyurl.com/c9x7wo>

Finding out about this workshop, and following a conversation with me at the memorial service for our delightful and deeply appreciated mutual colleague Gerard Fairtlough, Andrew Carey was later moved to write:

"Julie Allan. . . is currently working on, and researching, wisdom and its emergence in organisations. . . Sitting on top of the Systems Thinking hierarchy of data, information, knowledge, understanding, wisdom, it's a topic we've tended to leave to Solomon and the enlightened and I find it slightly shocking to see it discussed in day-to-day organisational terms. . . 'a wise organisation' seemed to me such an improbable creature." (Carey 2008 pp. 138-139).

I can't disagree. But I have my reasons and some of them are expressed very neatly by James Birren and Laurel Fisher in the final paragraph of their chapter in *Wisdom: its nature, origins and development* (Sternberg 1990):

"It is hoped that research on wisdom will help develop useful tools to assist world and national leaders in the increasingly complex problems facing humanity. Many crucial decisions, from nuclear waste to water use, face leaders and policy makers each day. Thus, wisdom is not simply for wise people or curious psychologists; it is for all people and the future of the world."

The psychology of wisdom, unlike many other areas of human experience, has not been extensively engaged with empirically. Processes that may be regarded as components have been looked at separately, and the small amount of work done before the 1980s noted the integrating or integrative nature of wisdom. A seminal 1970s study, for example, held that wisdom comprises three interacting components: affect (emotion), cognition and reflective style/approach (Clayton 1976 in Sternberg 1990).

Work done primarily in the 1980s was reviewed in Sternberg's 1990 text. The book organised the contributions into three main approaches: the philosophical, the folk and the psycho-developmental. The 13 different definitions and concepts included in the book are shown in Table 1.

Chapter (Author)	Definition
2 (Robinson) Philosophical	<i>Three historical definitions</i> <i>Greek</i> : an intellectual, moral, practical life; a life lived in conformity with truth, beauty. <i>Christian</i> : a life lived in pursuit of divine, absolute truth. <i>Contemporary</i> : a scientific understanding of laws governing matter in motion.
3 (Csikzentmihalyi and Rathunde) Philosophical	An evolutionary hermeneutical approach to the study of wisdom suggests that wisdom is a <i>holistic cognitive process</i> , a virtue or compelling guide for action, and a good, desirable state of being.
4 (Labouvie-Vief) Philosophical	A smooth and balanced dialogue between two sets of attributes; outer, objective, logical forms of processing (<i>logos</i>) and inner, subjective, organismic forms (<i>mythos</i>).
5 (Baltes and Smith) Folk	Wisdom is <i>expertise</i> in the domain of <i>fundamental life pragmatics</i> , such as, life planning or life review. It requires a rich factual knowledge about life matters, rich procedural knowledge about life problems, knowledge of different life contexts and values or priorities, and knowledge about the unpredictability of life.
6 (Chandler and Holliday) Folk	Contemporary philosophy of science limits conceptualisation of wisdom to a technologic type of knowing. A more accurate description of wisdom may need to be well-defined, <i>multidimensional</i> , <i>prototypically organised competency descriptors</i> . It involves recovering age-old types of knowledge that have been forgotten.
7 (Sternberg) Folk	Wisdom is a <i>metacognitive style</i> plus sagacity, knowing that one does not know everything, seeking the truth to the extent that it is knowable.
8 (Orwoll and Perlmutter) Folk	A personologic study of wisdom suggests that wisdom is a multidimensional balance or <i>integration of cognition with affect</i> , affiliation and social concerns. An advanced development of personality together with cognitive skills is the essence of wisdom.
9 (Meacham) Psychodevelopmental	Wisdom is an <i>awareness of the fallibility</i> of knowing and is a striving for balance between knowing and doubting. Age is explicitly not a component of wisdom; in fact, one may lose it with age. Age is associated with changes in wisdom, from simple to profound manifestations.
10 (Kitchener and Brenner) Psychodevelopmental	Wisdom is an intellectual ability to be aware of the limitations of knowing and how it impacts solving ill-defined problems and making judgments, characteristics of <i>reflective judgment</i> .
11 (Arlin) Psychodevelopmental	Wisdom is closely associated with <i>problem-finding ability</i> , a fundamental cognitive process of reflection and judgment.
12 (Pascual-Leone) Psychodevelopmental	Wisdom is a <i>mode of symbolic processing</i> by a highly developed will. It is a dialectical integration of all aspects of the personality, including affect, will, cognition, and life experiences.
13 (Kramer) Psychodevelopmental	Wisdom is the organismic integration of relativistic and dialectical modes of thinking, affect and reflection; a <i>perspective on reality</i> developed within interrelationships.
14 (Birren and Fisher) Integration of approaches and viewpoints	Wisdom is the <i>integration of affective, conative, and cognitive</i> aspects of human abilities in response to life's tasks and problems. Wisdom is a balance between the opposing valences of intense emotion and detachment, action and inaction, and knowledge and doubts. It tends to increase with experience and therefore age but is not exclusively found in old age.

Table 1 (adapted from Birren and Fisher in Sternberg 1990, p. 325, italics retained)

In her foreword to *A Handbook of Wisdom: Psychological Perspectives* (Sternberg and Jordan 2005), Monika Ardelt, points out that while the 1990 book contained almost all the

research then being done, the 2005 text could no longer do so. This more recent book is differently organised, with sections on:

- Theories of wisdom across time, culture and peoples
- The development of wisdom across the lifespan
- Wisdom and the person (a paper each on personality and emotion)
- Wisdom in society
- The absence of wisdom.

Here is a table from that text, giving four more recent definitions from the research world:

Christine A Bates Bates (1993)	It is no longer meaningful or sufficient to see wisdom as a singular phenomenon or as a kind of entity, or as a body of knowledge that would be prone to generate a particular set of responses. Now the notion of wisdom must incorporate a process of arriving at a truth, which fits the needs and context of individuals, a community, a nation, or a people.
Gerard Brugman Brugman (2000)	(Wisdom is) expertise in uncertainty. It encompasses a meta-cognitive, an affective, and a behavioural component.
Howard M Chandler (Chandler 1991)	The Vedic psychology of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi . . . proposes that the unified source of all knowledge and experience, including affect and cognition, is a transcendental field of pure consciousness (the Self) that can be known by direct experience (Self-knowledge). Wisdom is described as a state of enlightenments in which stabilised Self-knowledge results in a fully integrated personality.
William Randall and Gary Kenyon Randall and Kenyon (2001)	<i>Ordinary wisdom</i> is about finding meaning in life and suffering (spiritual-mystical dimension). It is about accepting, owning, and valuing our lives and our life stories, including both our un-lived lives and our untold stories. <i>Extraordinary wisdom</i> includes six dimensions: (a) the cognitive dimension involves a degree of intellectual understanding, (b) the practical-experiential dimension has to do not only with abstract ideas or theories but with everyday life, (c) the interpersonal aspect to wisdom entails a perception of the larger story we live with, (d) the ethical-moral dimension is concerned with what the ancient Greeks referred to as 'knowing and doing the good,' (e) the idiosyncratic-expression, concerns the appearance of as many faces of wisdom as there are human beings, (f) the spiritual-mystical dimension of extraordinary wisdom, or the special experience of, and/or insight into, the nature of the cosmos and the human place within it.

Table 2 (Recent definitions of wisdom. Birren and Svensson in Sternberg and Jordan 2005, p. 18)

One main difference between the two cited texts is the appearance of cultural and of collective/societal considerations in the 2005 list.

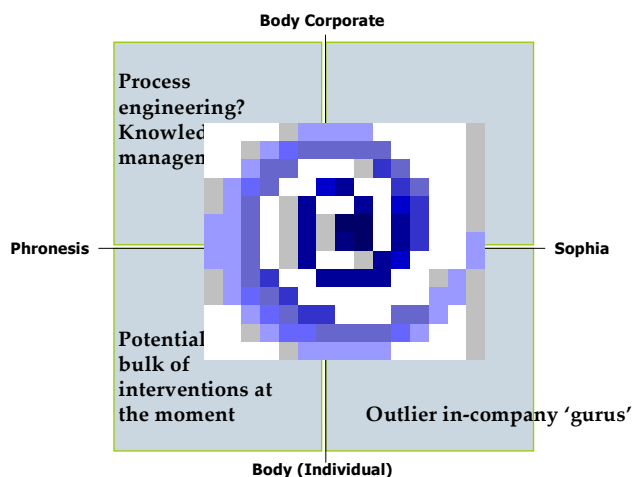
Studies have tended to concur, incidentally, that wisdom does tend to come with age, but not necessarily!

To prompt discussion, my Cass Business School Workshop in 2008 juxtaposed a number of frameworks and ways of thinking, including poetry, adult lifespan development theory, narratives, complexity, the properties of organisations, and existing research on wisdom.

It seems to me likely that wisdom is a genuinely complex phenomenon (or series of phenomena), with the attendant challenges posed in particular by emergence, co-evolution and co-adaptation with - rather than simply adaptation to - non-linearity. The inclusion of 'relationships' in my workshop title reflects my view that wisdom is relational in all sorts of ways, for example psycho-social, intra-psychic, inter-personal, and may emerge through relational practices.

In my research I have been testing out previously proposed views of wisdom in current organisational contexts, with the kind and necessary support of those engaged in shaping the life of their organisations. In so doing I have developed a quadrant model of 'Corporate WQ' that is useful in mapping the current state of organisations and may in due course assist in developmental intervention.

Mapping Organisational WQ ALLAN 2008



Quadrant 1 (top left) is an organisational/group quadrant concerning practical/applied wisdom (*phronesis*). Here, the organisation is seeking enhancement through processes of various types.

Quadrant 2 (top right) is an organisation/group quadrant concerning discernment and universal truth (*sophia*). Here, the organisation is seeking fundamental principles and underlying bonds.

Quadrant 3 (bottom left) is an individual quadrant concerning practical/applied wisdom. Here, the organisation is seeking enhancement through investing in individuals' knowledge and skills.

Quadrant 4 is an individual quadrant concerning discernment and universal truth. Here, the organisation is seeking to support or benefit from individuals' capability or capacities in revealing fundamental principles and underlying bonds.

While there are approaches and activities that would fit in the upper right quadrant of the model, social dreaming being an example, they are not extensively used in corporate contexts.

More work is needed and is being done. Conversations are starting to work across knowledge areas in order to spark the necessary juxtapositions and integrations needed for such an endeavour - exploring the relationship between this work, organisational change processes and Cultural Theory (Thompson 2008) is one example.

I am always looking for more volunteers inside companies who are well-placed to assist in this ongoing wisdom research and who are able and willing to be interviewed. Quite simply you need to be somebody whose primary role is to influence/change/lead your organisation.

Further wisdom-related comment and resource can be found on my company website at http://www.irvingallan.co.uk/wisdom_and_the_emerging_future.phtml

© Julie Allan December 2008
www.irvingallan.co.uk

*Julie Allan was a colleague of Gerard Fairtlough (and was a co-author, with him, of **The Power of the Tale** <http://tinyurl.com/bzwhcq>). She is currently a Partner in Irving Allan, a consultancy that works - through coaching, workshops and other learning events, and its Managed Change™ methodology - to change the way that change happens in organisations.*

She is a chartered occupational psychologist, consultant, coach and supervisor to coaches and consultants. She is the ethics and social policy officer of the British Psychological Society's Special Group in Coaching Psychology and sits on the BPS Ethics Committee. Julie has a successful prior career in publishing and many years' experience in working with organisations and individuals to achieve change across sectors including automotive, finance, pharmaceuticals, media, governmental departments and charities.

References

Burren J and Fisher L (1990) In Sternberg R (Ed) *Wisdom: its nature, origins and development*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK.

Carey A (2008) *Inside Project Red Stripe. Incubating Innovation and Teamwork at The Economist*. Triarchy Press, Axminster, UK.

Sternberg R J and Jordan J (2005) *A Handbook of Wisdom: Psychological Perspectives*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

Thompson M (2008) *Organising and Disorganising: A Dynamic and Non-Linear Theory of Institutional Emergence and its Implications*. Triarchy Press, Axminster, UK