

SOPHIA'S WINDOW: PRACTICE WISDOM AND SELECTING BETTER PATHS

LA VENTANA DE SOFÍA: SABIDURÍA PRÁCTICA Y SELECCIÓN DE MEJORES VÍAS

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RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta nuevas perspectivas sobre la sabiduría práctica, reconocida desde hace muchas décadas en el trabajo social. El artículo sugiere que las definiciones tradicionales son inadecuadas y que definiciones más contemporáneas que incluyan nuevas maneras de reconocer el significado de la narración, así también como las contribuciones de la neurociencia cognitiva, ampliarán la comprensión profesional de la sabiduría práctica.

ABSTRACT

This article presents new perspectives on wisdom in general and on social work practice wisdom in particular. It is argued that current conceptions of practice wisdom are inadequate and that definitions which include pattern recognition and narrative as well as cognitive neuroscience can revitalize our understanding of practice wisdom.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Sabiduría práctica y trabajo social, Conocimiento narrativo, Buen juicio y trabajo social.

KEYWORDS: Practice wisdom in social work, Narrative knowing, Judgement in social work

It is in youth that genius blossoms and with age wisdom emerges. Wisdom develops with maturity and experience, well cultivated awareness, and expanding knowledge. As it increases so do the possibilities of doing our most finely crafted work. Our understanding of practice wisdom, that form of wisdom peculiar to our craft, has languished and we forget its benefits. Providing a new perspective on social work practice wisdom, suggesting there is more to learn and appreciate, is the purpose of this article.

Although we implicitly recognize wisdom, we rarely spend time thinking about it. What we now know as wisdom was *Sophia*, a feminine concept, in the early Greek world. The theologian Marcus Borg (1995) likened *Sophia* to a window that enabled people to see the essential 'nature of things' (p. 100). Also, in the early Greek world both Plato and Socrates identified *phronesis*, or practical reasoning, as an intellectual virtue.

Practical, or practice, wisdom that is peculiar to our profession develops through the experience of doing our craft in the context of our professional relationships and the social circumstances in which they are played out (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The foundation of wisdom, generally, is acquired by keen students of the whole of life and enhances our cognitive capacity for making sense of things—for narrative knowing “...the brain naturally weaves wordless stories about what happens to an organism immersed in an environment” (Damasio, 1999: p.189).

Our minds consciously and unconsciously weave stories based on the circumstances of our work and our lives. Experience, narrative knowing, and shared associations inform us, in our present and our hindsight, how circumstances shape the trajectories of lives and events. Wisdom utilizes that experience and knowledge as we seek the best paths to the best ends and weave our way into the future.

SOCIAL WORK AND PRACTICAL WISDOM

The human capacity for some form of practical wisdom is probably, to varying degrees, nearly universal. The Social Work Dictionary in the United States describes practice wisdom peculiar to our craft as

A term often used by social workers to describe the accumulation of information, assumptions, ideologies, and judgments that are practically useful in fulfilling the expectations of the job. Practice wisdom is often equated with 'common sense' and may or may not be validated when subjected to empirical or systematic analysis and may or may not be consistent with prevailing theory (Barker, 1999: 370-1).

Barker's definition does not posit practice wisdom as a specific ability, but rather as a 'term'. The 2003 version of the dictionary modified the 1999 definition by removing the reference to “a term used by social workers” and offers something briefer. The more recent definition speaks of ‘accumulation’, but still says little about how the components of practice wisdom interact or more tellingly, how practice wisdom is useful in making professional decisions.

In an article about practice wisdom, Dybicz (2004) voiced his concern about the 1999 Dictionary definition. He noted that it ‘curiously’ put the term in quotation marks,

...as if the term were a less than valid concept and is thus included with reluctance....one aspect of note in (the) definition is how practice wisdom is viewed within the framework of epistemology: it is placed in a role subordinate to that of empirical analysis. Another feature of interest is that there is no distinction between practice wisdom and practice knowledge. There is no entry for practice knowledge, and the above definition seems to imply that practice wisdom and practice knowledge are one and the same. (p.197)

The comments about knowledge and the subordination of practice wisdom to empirical analysis are important to consider because they imply that politics and fashion within the profession shape our concepts and definitions. While the quotation marks were removed in the 2003 edition, and the language slightly modified, the dismissive tone and ambiguity about the distinction between knowledge and wisdom has not evaporated.

Dybicz (2004) does a good job of detailing a history of the concept's usage in US social work literature. There are strengths and limitations in his work. His clear and concise exposition of the search for the meaning and importance of the concept of practice wisdom in our literature is the strength of his work; his limitation results from trying to elicit clear conceptual ideas from a limited body of literature. Dybicz's (2004) history of social work's conceptualization of practice wisdom identified several distinct yet evolving ways of looking at it. He begins his examination of practice wisdom with the thought of Socrates and fixes on the need to account for one's own ignorance. While most people have some areas of knowledge, what lies outside their boundaries is ignorance. It is in dealing with ignorance or the unknown that Dybicz sees utility for wisdom. Wisdom helps guide our paths as we move into uncertain territories.

When Dybicz (2004) describes his difficulty with the dictionary definition of practice wisdom, he takes issue with sources that generally equate wisdom with practice based knowledge. In spite of the definition, they are not interchangeable—wisdom is a complex cognitive attribute and knowledge is but one component. In his examination of practice wisdom he included dictionary definitions of *intelligence* and *knowledge* but oddly overlooked dictionary definitions of *wisdom* itself. And, while he makes use of the thought of Plato and Socrates, he did not delve into their conception of *phronesis* or 'practical wisdom'.

The term wisdom is applicable and useful for social work practice. Neurologists such as Goldberg (2005) who study wisdom and pattern recognition readily note a specific variant of general wisdom, "wisdom of the group", as a form of knowledge that "is the collection of skills and competencies possessed by a group of individuals with shared background, which allows them to perform complex tasks, daunting to most people, in a relatively effortless fashion (p. 97)". Given the existence of such information in the broader literature, the seeming reluctance of some writers in social work to venture outside the boundaries of our literature to consider the general concept of wisdom and its cognitive and experiential underpinnings is puzzling.

As Dybicz (2004) notes, practice wisdom has been linked to tacit or implicit knowledge. Practice-linked knowledge, is seen as a process of 'incipient induction', as involving processes or actions, including knowing-in-action and reflection-in-action. He mentions little about general conceptualizations of wisdom and thus his definition is constrained but the limitations of the published thought he builds on. For Scott (1990) practice-linked knowledge involves reflection, includes the use of one's 'heart', is a bridge between empirical and practical knowledge and includes the translation of scientific findings into practice principles. Practice wisdom also is involved in spontaneous ethical decision making (though most sources which address wisdom refer to moral rather than ethical issues). Applied decision-making recognizes the interaction between one's knowledge and what one needs to know to foray into areas of ignorance. Scott's (1990) discussion ends with yet another definition derived from previous efforts and a sense of caretaking ethics: "competency in the application of social work values and guidelines to the helping process in which the social worker and client engage (p.202)".

COMPONENTS OR 'GUTS' OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE WISDOM

Briefly, the component parts of wisdom identified in the Social Work Dictionary include *information*, *assumptions*, *ideologies*, and *judgments*. It is unclear how these constituent

parts were elicited and how they are defined and incorporated in situations social workers deal with—that is, how are they mixed and ‘mated’ in specific situations. Those parts, individually or interactively, are deemed to be useful in “fulfilling the expectations of one’s job”. How? Also, one logically presumes that variations in our collective practice results in special sub-types or variants of practice wisdom. Since we have a profession that includes very diverse types of work there must be both a core of general knowledge, skills, and artful abilities and variations due to specializations within the profession. Thus, ‘practice’ wisdom logically includes a common core of attributes and permutations of wisdom resulting from peculiar circumstances.

Practice wisdom, according to the social work dictionary, includes the notion of “*common sense*”. One senses from the language that common sense, like assumptions and ideologies, is treated a bit blithely and dismissively. That dismissal suggests an air of shallowness to the concept. But, common sense clearly deserves a deeper examination and consideration. Contrary to the Social Work Dictionary’s definition, other definitions of wisdom do not equate it with common sense but assert that common sense is itself a complex concept and an essential as well as instrumental component of wisdom. The relationship between common sense and wisdom is not what the definition suggests.

The Dictionary definition suggests that practice wisdom is to be subjected to, or can be trumped by, “empirical or systematic analysis” but gives not a clue about the basis for that assertion or how that might be accomplished in the immediacy of one’s work. Finally, the Social Work Dictionary definition observes that wisdom may or may not accord to “prevailing” theory. That, at best, is vague and beside the point and does little to help us understand what practice wisdom truly is.

ABOUT WISDOM, GENERALLY

We need a detailed and broader consideration of wisdom if we are to rethink the more specific concept of ‘*practice*’ wisdom. What becomes of one’s cognition and abilities after years of life and engagement in a particular vocation? If we presume that our cognitive processes and effectiveness changes with experience, as do our skills, then what becomes of our metaphorical imagery, analogical thought and imagination, our perception and our emotional intelligence? How is ‘wisdom’ itself conceived? How is that single concept, wisdom, woven from many separate threads? A deeper understanding of wisdom can be extrapolated and related to the peculiarities of social work.

Wisdom itself has several characteristics and a dictionary definition can be useful here:

...knowledge, and the capacity to make due use of it; knowledge of the best ends and the best means; discernment and judgment...(having) common sense in an uncommon degree is what the world calls wisdom (Coleridge)...in ‘strictness of language’ says Paley, ‘there is a difference between knowledge and wisdom. (that) far from being one, they have off times no connection. Knowledge dwells in heads replete with the thought of other men; wisdom, in minds attentive to their own (thought)...wisdom always supposing action, and action directed by it...insight...wisdom implies the union of high mental and moral excellence.’ <http://dict.die.net/wisdom/>

In the past it was more commonly accepted that aging and life experience brought wisdom to some. In fact, wisdom was dependent upon aging and experience. Wisdom was associated loosely with the ability to foretell how things might go—how different courses of action would affect future events. But the notion of wisdom and maturation and experiential knowledge and their benefits have been neglected in favor of a fixed notion of innate intelligence and a preference for rationality. That neglect has meant that we don't clearly see the process and benefits of refining and augmenting one's cognitive abilities as we mature. We understand the need to add more knowledge to what we have but that's akin to imagining a bigger library—more information but little understanding of how to make it more than the sum of its bits and pieces. We need to understand how it is different from general intelligence and how it is artfully used.

Of late, aging is more often associated with cognitive loss than gain. This trend mirrors views that beauty and desirability are best in youth and decline with age. However, those who study wisdom (Goldberg, 2005) suggest that as we grow older some cognitive faculties can grow stronger. Our brain function changes form and we grow new neural pathways. Cozolino (2006) observes that "...aging correlates with an increasing fund of knowledge, an improvement in the comprehension of meaning, and a preservation and even improvement in our narrative abilities ...and involvement (with others) and curiosity shapes us for wisdom later in life (p. 340)." In other words, our minds change over time and certain abilities strengthen—those most associated with wisdom.

In the past, our profession employed more mentoring and modeling. We observed people and accepted that some practitioners who cultivated good habits of mind, who were cognitively and emotionally intelligent, could grow increasingly proficient at their craft. Those practitioners had mastered the hard work of 'being there' or being present in their work and the capacity for immediate coping (Varela, 1999). They were also discerning and used knowledge and commonsense and unconscious thought (Dijksterhuis, 2006) in concert. They developed an increased capacity for utilizing knowledge of all types. And, in time, they increasingly developed practice wisdom.

'Practice wisdom' is a simple sounding term, but one that belies complex habits of mind. It is an eminently practical cognitive ability, a means of 'seeing' courses of action through a lens of knowledge, pattern recognition, and experience. It improves and substantiates our judgment, complements our thought and knowledge, hints at preferred courses of action, and improves the outcomes of our work. It uses conscious and unconscious mental processes or deliberation with and without attention (Dijksterhuis, 2006). 'Practice wisdom' utilizes a sense of time and narrative structure—how things play out over time and how the courses of events are shaped. But, what are other perspectives on wisdom and what can we learn about how its components work? If we set out to understand how to improve our chances of growing wise, what would we concentrate on?

CONSIDERING VARIOUS FACETS AND COMPONENTS OF WISDOM IN MORE DETAIL

There are many ways of framing wisdom. This framing perspective can be illustrated by the thought of Marcus Borg (1995). Borg refers to *conventional* wisdom as being what most commonly comes to mind when wisdom is conceived. It is based on common understandings and worldviews—accumulated experiences—knowledge that is acquired by immersion in particular cultures at particular times. To some extent, conventional wisdom

is sagacity about the customariness of life, a keen sense of the best way to reason and proceed in particular circumstances. There is, however, an alternate form of wisdom that Borg terms *alternative or subversive wisdom*. The second form arises when conventionally framed concepts are deconstructed and the wise person becomes aware of how habitual ways of framing things blind us to other possibilities (Varela, 1999).

When we wonder about the unseen we begin to be curious about what is being missed. Alternate or subversive wisdom is premised on seeing what has been missed, on what might be, on seeing paradoxes and possibilities. Such ways of seeing without blinders are acquired from aphorisms, parables and, in this author's view, by an analogical imagination that finds fertile ground in our narrative consciousness and sensitivity to relationships. Subversive wisdom is useful in helping others see and imagine their lives and situations in new ways using new eyes. Conventional wisdom focuses on making best decisions and judgments in a conventional world. Alternate wisdom ponders notions of justice and betterment and wonders how to best change the accepted order of things.

Siegel (2007) suggests that we increasingly develop neurological mechanisms that recognize and respond to patterns in events and relationships we've experienced. These mechanisms increasingly

...shape our awareness of ongoing experiences ... (we) make summations, create generalizations, and initiate behaviors based on a limited sampling of incoming data that have been shunted through the filters of these mental models. Our learning brains seek similarities and differences, draw conclusions, and act (Siegel, 2007: p.135).

But, when such top—down filters are too dominant and we are unaware of their influence, they coax us toward seeing in predictable ways, they limit our perceptions, and limit the extent of our wisdom. In such circumstances we see some things clearly but are blind to many alternatives. We have limited capacity for seeing imaginative and subversive possibilities. In Borg's (1999) view of conventional wisdom, "We look but do not see... (we are) prey to being quite judgmental about ourselves and others...our thoughts...[and].our attention...[are] 'enslaved' (by unconscious and habituated patterning) (p. 136-7).

Such remarks are similar to the logic of critical social theory, but while excess reflection that relies on habituated thought can produce poor decisions, too little self reflection can likewise affect our wisdom. Too much rationalizing or too little can be normative, productive, and helpful but not necessarily wise or imaginative. We have alternatives to conventionality if we adopt mental habits of seeking the optimum level of critical self—observation, reflection, and if we expand our awareness of the critical place of emotions in human thought and human affairs. Too much thought with too little regard for emotion makes one's work unwise. Wisdom allows us to see what might otherwise be missed.

Our practice wisdom may also be conventional or it can be emancipatory when we include consideration of issues with moral and fairness implications. Wisdom presumes action. It is suggested that

...a wise (or virtuous) person is one who knows what is good and spontaneously does it (italics added)...actions such as these do not spring from judgment and reasoning (alone) but from immediate coping which is far from (being) simple or reflexive. (Varela, 1999: p.4-5).

Thus, wisdom and morality are not simply the product of deliberation but are available to us in the immediacy of our work.

UNCOMMONLY GOOD COMMON SENSE AND WISDOM

Wisdom requires common sense but to an uncommon degree. However, many people only vaguely comprehend common sense and probably know little about what it is, how it functions, or how it is acquired and expanded. Unlike the Social Work Dictionary assertion that practice wisdom is equated with common sense and practice knowledge (interchangeability), it is more accurate to say that while practice wisdom necessarily incorporates a large amount of knowledge and common sense, they are not interchangeable. Wisdom integrates common sense with experience and other elements. Both the definitions of practice wisdom and general wisdom include notions of 'common sense' but frame and emphasize it in significantly different ways. Common sense, at a minimum, refers to what people sense in common or to

...beliefs and propositions that in their opinion they consider prudent and of sound judgment, without dependence upon esoteric knowledge or study or research, but based upon what is believed to be knowledge held by people 'in common...'. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_sense

Thiele (2006) writes in detail about practical wisdom, neuroscience, and narrative and addresses the issue of common sense. He says we have many 'common senses' in the form of tacit knowledge that assumes the form of "know-how" (p. 130). He describes common sense as (p. 95-6) "...the most basic, and perhaps most important, product of our lived experience." Common sense defies a straightforward definition. "None who have tried to corral it conceptually have met with much success." Thiele says that

Arendt's definition is as good as any: common sense is only that part of our mind and that portion of inherited wisdom which all men have in common in any given civilization'... common sense is a widespread if not universal perceptual and cognitive ability that facilitates our quotidian navigation of the world (Arendt, in Thiele, 2006, p.95).

Thiele (2006) continues, stating that

Common sense is not innate. It develops over time, as a product of experience...Common sense is not simply instinct doing its work...To have common sense is to have learned lessons that human beings are predisposed to learn. It is, in this respect, something that we share with others..." (Thiele, 2006, p. 96).

It should be added that common sense is increased by well honed observational skills and sensitivity to people and situations. It gives us sensitivity to both similar and varied ways of framing things, to the products of varied life experiences. Common sense is an

essential ingredient of wisdom and is essential for action. Without it we share no frame of reference or no analogous associations, with others. We would know little about framing itself. Without it we could not share our past in the making of our future.

Most definitions of wisdom suggest that wise people have common sense but to an uncommon degree. Practice wisdom would, by that definition, mean that wise practitioners not only have and utilize common sense but have it and employ it to a considerably greater depth and range than others. It is this notion of having it 'to an uncommon degree' that is particularly interesting. How does one acquire an uncommon degree of common sense? If this can be achieved, then we can increase the odds of acquiring (practice) wisdom, and reap the benefits that accrue from it.

The inclination to be discerning and to keenly know people and the workings of the world suggests that wise people are curious and uncommonly good at being present or living in-the-moment. They develop greater apprehension of the nuances of peoples' strivings, mannerisms and behavior. Wise people quickly grasp what other people think, how others reason and what they believe. They notice subtle peculiarities and how they affect larger outcomes. Wise people are unusually keen and practiced observers of relationships and the human condition. In keeping with another social work phrase 'start where the client is', they would likely be unusually sensitive to 'where the client is' and would have learned the art of engaging (wisdom implies action) in the narrative flow of events. Wise people know how to help others make sense of things.

DISCERNMENT AND WISDOM

Discernment is another facet of wisdom and is concerned with the quality of "being able to grasp and comprehend what is obscure" (<http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/discernment>). In other words, wisdom of all kinds, including practice wisdom, necessarily includes the ability to perceive and comprehend subtle or obscure behavior, relationships, and thought as well as embedded patterns in disparate situations and events over space and time. We need to notice and consider fine details, and make those subtle distinctions in our actions that influence the course of events. Clearly, good practice requires discernment and practice wisdom includes the ability to look intimately at facts and feelings, relationships, and shadings of things until parallels are educed. What is needed is discerned and judgments made and acted upon.

While discernment and judgment are largely different concepts, their meaning overlaps when it comes to critical thought. Both have their roots in the Greek word *kritikos* and both, at their place of overlap, help the wise person settle upon the best means to the best possible ends. Both are nourished by keen perception, intelligence and knowledge. Wisdom, as the general definition notes, implies purposeful action. However, the social work's dictionary definition of practice wisdom only goes so far as to say that what we acquire from experience is "practically useful in fulfilling the expectations of the job".

JUDGMENT AND WISDOM

Judgment is generally considered to be the ability to make sound decisions, objectively form opinions, to think and act authoritatively, with good sense, and to use discretion. Also, it means to think or reach conclusions that consider the nuances of circumstances.

In other words, wisdom both includes and shapes judgment and thought. Wisdom is about actions that consider implicit knowledge including ‘know-how’ and ‘know-what’. Such judgments are “reflected in the artistry of practice and become evident in practical wisdom“(Goodfellow, 2002, p.5). Also, wisdom that is interwoven with judgment rests on the well honed ability to distinguish the workings of relationships between people and things (Fogel, 1993). It is based on discernment and the ability to make assessments, to plan our work, extrapolate alternate trajectories of events and relationships as they unfold in time, use practical reasoning, and reach conclusions.

Wise people are attuned to their own agency and factor themselves into the actions they take. But, as Thiele (2006) notes, judgment can degenerate into being judgmental. It can be overdone when separated from wisdom and humility. “Eagerness to blame is not practical wisdom. The good judge is not judgmental...the cultivation of empathy is required (Thiele 2006: 199)”. Thiele also acknowledges that people can be too obsessively rational and can rationalize poor behaviors. He knows that an over-reliance on rationality undercuts good judgment and blunts wisdom

...reason is wholly instrumental. It cannot tell us where to go; at best it can tell us how to get there ...emotions are important for judgment (and)...emotions prove to be crucial to the acquisition and retention of mental habits that facilitate sound judgment (Thiele, 2006: 197).

Extraordinary rationality is not wisdom. Thiele’s (2006) emphasis on the importance of emotion to good reasoning, decision making, and discernment reinforces Damasio’s (1999) contention that rational thought and choice making about courses of action are nearly impossible without the influence of emotion. Emotional intelligence and empathy are, thus, valued by the wise and the compassionate.

PATTERN RECOGNITION AND WISDOM

Thiele (2006) asserts that in addition to judgment and reason “...practical wisdom is the product of the (late maturing) cortical ability to integrate reason with the *intuitive* and *affective* capacities (p. 160)”. Critical to maturing into wisdom is cultivating a good narrative sensibility (Cozolino, 2006) and then becoming accomplished at using it and reflecting on it. Goldberg (2005), a neuropsychologist, observes that, with age, the number of real-life situations that require deliberate and effort-laden new mental constructs tend to diminish. The sense of novelty declines with age and experience. Very often, analogous situations and circumstances have happened before and cognitive work for problem solving takes the form of pattern recognition. Our brains increasingly create and store, and make use of metaphors, analogies, similes, and schematic story lines.

Ackerman (2004) observes that as the brain matures and copes with increasing experiences it files away information and routinely searches for patterns. The brain looks for subtle things, *discerns* clues, and both detects and creates patterns. The brain, she says, is “...a pattern mad...machine” and “we crave pattern and find it all around us (p.55)”. The young have a smaller ‘library’ of experiences and information to consider and fewer sources for detecting repetitive patterns, but as the informed brain ages it swells with knowledge and patterns which connect and it integrates what is stored.

Goldberg (2005) notes that

...with age we accumulate an increasing number of cognitive templates. Consequently, a growing number of future cognitive challenges is increasingly likely to be relatively readily covered by a preexisting template, or will require only a slight modification of a previously formed mental template. Increasingly, decision making takes the form of pattern recognition rather than problem solving...in neuroscientific literature, the cognitive templates that enable us to engage in pattern recognition are often called attractors. An attractor is a concise constellation of neurons... with strong connections among them...a very broad range of inputs will activate the same neural constellation, the attractor, automatically and easily (p.20) .

In other words, we develop circuitry in the brain that resonates, immediately responds to metaphoric similarities or analogous situations or patterns, discerns details, notices differences, and melds facts and emotions. The aging brain searches its stored repertoire of templates which incorporate both similarities and distinctions and which then shapes our range of responses.

Goldberg (2006) also notes an exception to templates in the area of our social behaviors because "...certain types of situations never quite lend themselves to being forced into a finite number of patterns. To deal with them effectively, the individual must constantly improvise and rely on his or her 'sense' of the situation rather than on slam-dunk pattern recognition" (p. 211).

Based on its experiential history, our brains extrapolate possible courses of actions in narrative fashion. But, the artistry of practice includes the use of improvisational skills when only the inklings of patterns are available (Varela, 1999). Improvisational skills are essential for sensing and responding to complex and fluid situations in which patterns are not patently and immediately discernable. The wise practitioner intuitively grasps the better courses of action while others try to reason with too little conscious knowledge about facts and contingencies.

Our responses to situations, if they are to be comprehended by others, are premised on a sense of what we know in common. We sense how others think, use our empathy and mirror neurons to see how they feel, and frame situations accordingly. We use what we have learned, felt, and experienced and even dreamed to make narrative templates. Our minds use the templates to discern patterns in the world around us. To the extent we are wise and self-aware, we do not project patterns onto what we see but see them as they are embedded in the continual workings of the world around us.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Wisdom and practical wisdom are both complex and interrelated cognitive abilities that reflect learned behaviors, moment-to-moment attending skills or presence, empathy and sensitivity to the emotional states of self and others. Wisdom also comes about with the changes in brain functioning that comes with age. Practical and general wisdom make use of pattern recognition, common sense, discernment, self reflection, judgment, an analogical imagination, and other abilities. They incorporate sound knowledge and reason. Wisdom builds on our capacity for narrative logic and incorporates the dimension of time. It allows us to comprehend how story lines play out and what shapes them or throws

them off kilter. We are well reminded that it is the unexpected ending of a narrative plot line, or story, which entrains us and provides us with humor or a sense of intrigue. We find pleasure in seeing how story lines can go in unexpected and imaginative directions. In novels we are able to see how clues fall into place to affect outcomes and how unwarranted assumptions can lead us astray. Wisdom needs the prod of humility to be aware that it is not all powerful.

In life, if we are attentive and discerning, we also see how information is generated and how relationships and patterns of behaviors and events shape outcomes. With experience, we find commonalities, analogies, and metaphors that suggest how things tend to go and how narrative trajectories we see as fixed are instead tentative and malleable. We sense how things are connected and how they flow. We use accumulated information and wisdom and common sense framing to suggest choices and take actions to achieve certain ends using our narrative cognitive structures. We can seemingly do such things quickly and effortlessly http://www.livescience.com/humanbiology/07109_trust_instinct.html

Our brains come 'hard wired' to see patterns and commonalities and when we engage with others, and are aware of that, we can relate in ways that opens the possibility of good and imaginative change. We can work to either bring some measure of stability to peoples' lives or select from alternate paths that wisdom suggests might be possible. Analogical imagination allows us to see multiple, and different, paths to meaning.

The wise practitioner reflects on the moral import of his/her actions because wisdom presupposes actions and actions can serve both good and ill. The wise practitioner is 'present' in his/her work with others and seeks to do good. The wise practitioner is empathic and considerate. The wise practitioner is imaginative yet humble. And finally, the wise practitioner knows that wisdom does not always prevail. The wisest of plans and intentions can be foiled by imbalances of power and the pursuit of privilege by others.

As a profession, we can enrich our understanding of wisdom generally, and of practice wisdom in particular, by further study and thought. By doing so, we may find that wisdom does not develop simply as a happy accident, or as compensation for aging, but that it is an expression of human potential that can be reinforced and strengthened by self care and the good use of our minds. By looking more appreciatively at wisdom we may find that it is the perfect marriage of art and science, experience and maturity, and the well lived life. It is a practical gift that we as social workers can mature into and embellish.

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