Wisdom in Public Administration: Looking for a Sociology of Wise Practice

This article explores a sociological account of practical wisdom in public administrations. Very little research on contemporary applications of wisdom exists, and what research there is has a cognitive bias, largely ignoring sociology. For public organizations to create the conditions for wise practice within themselves and within individual administrators, an understanding of the social relational structures and processes that build and sustain practical wisdom is crucial. Furthermore, given that there is an aesthetic dimension to practical wisdom, an aesthetics-based approach to sociology of organizational wisdom provides a useful starting point in this sociological project. Aesthetics raises important issues of communicative action and discourse that address social relations and their structures and processes. Finally, a research agenda that explores these structural and processual issues in public administration is canvassed.

Though wise public administrators exist, and public administration research circles around wisdom, little has been said about wisdom or the wisdom studies literature. Though wise public administrators exist, and public administration research circles around wisdom, little has been said about wisdom or the wisdom studies literature. For example, Parsons (2004) attacks the intellectual shortcomings of post–World War II public sector management because of its instrumental and rationalist assumptions about governance. Scott (1998) points to the mistakes of high modernist ideology in the failure of some states to provide for well-being. Hummel (1987) asserts the well-established criticism that bureaucracies are impersonal, technocratic machines that are incapable of wisdom. Bardach (1998) is concerned that the lack of conceptual coherence across policy domains creates policies that are potentially inconsistent with each other. Behn (1996), asking whether public management should strive to be art, science, or engineering, concludes that public management is a blend of each. Consequently, public sector managers must improve their ability to produce results by finding the right blend, using this to make sound judgments with their accumulated wisdom. Design, style, creativity, and aesthetics are, therefore, important to the task of doing public management.

Virtue, values, ideals, and ethics have been prominent in recent public administration discussion. Such discussions include questions about intellectual ethos. For example, Denhardt and Catron (1989) are concerned about bureaucratic and democratic ideals that characterize public administration ethos. These are important concerns because administrative roles are increasingly politicized and rule oriented in ways that challenge the ethical judgment and values of public officials such that they threaten the democratic
legitimacy of their administrations. Bailey’s (1964) concerns about intellectual dispositions and ethics in public administration are still pertinent. In particular, the issues he raises about the tensions faced by public officials in balancing their own ideas with the interests of others to represent the public “will” are still significant (Selden, Brewer, and Brudney 1999). Intensifying the pressure on public administration are political and economic contextual factors such as accountability for performance (Acocin and Heintzman 2000), the enfeebling effect of internationalization on national administrations (Peters and Pierre 1998; Strange 1996), and the neoliberal retreat of the state in deference to the private sector (Peters and Pierre 1993). Sowa and Selden (2003) examine discretion, values, and beliefs in coming to balanced outcomes.

More directly considering wisdom in public administration is Estheredge, who highlights the importance of wise leaders, intellectual wisdom, and political wisdom in policy making. He argues that there is a need for “good judgment about important matters” with a “genuine commitment to the well-being of individuals and society as a whole” (2005, 297). Lynch, Omdal and Cruise (1997), following Simmons and Dvorin (1977), question the secularization of public administration because of the removal of the links between spiritual wisdom and public values in the course of pursuing a supposedly value-neutral positivism. This is an important issue for intellectual labor in public administration because administrators need to use the full range of intellectual, moral, and public-spirited capabilities in their deliberations (Lynch, Omdal, and Cruise 1997). Moreover, Lynch, Omdal, and Cruise argue that a sense of social purpose is easily lost when rationalism prevents us from accessing “the accumulated spiritual wisdom developed over centuries of human experience” (1997, 475). Korac-Kakabadse, Korac-Kakabadse, and Kouzmin are concerned about the value of wisdom in shaping the qualities of a “well-governed city” (2001, 207). The wisdom that leading public officials need, they say, must include intellectual vision, emotional sensitivity, moral vision, maturity, empathy, and humility. Such factors accord with Aristotle’s ethical philosophy, which, being directed toward “the good life,” requires intellectual and moral excellence. Excellence is achieved when “the best disposition or hexis or capacity of everything … has some use or ergon” (Nicomachean Ethics 1218b37–1219a1), where ergon is a worthwhile teleology, or purposeful outcome (Hutchinson 1986, 20–21). Clearly, Aristotelian wisdom principles have a vital role in shaping the practice of public administration.

To better understand wisdom, we begin by discussing the philosophical roots of practical wisdom theory, which provides five guiding principles for wise practice, primarily based on Aristotle’s philosophy of eudaimonia, “the good life.” Because aesthetics inheres in this broadly conceived notion of the good life (Nussbaum 1994, 15), and because it speaks of communicative action that informs social relations and social learning, it is an appropriate place to begin developing a philosophical grounding for a sociological account of the structures and processes that build and sustain wise practice. A sociology of organizational wisdom is needed because, as social systems, public administrations can be understood in terms of the social structures and processes, including symbolic and cultural codes, that affect their capacity to act wisely.

A Philosophy of Being Wise

As a starting point, we discuss four tenets of wisdom in Hellenic philosophy. From Socrates, we take two tenets: the timeless transmission of wisdom, and respect for public officials’ commitment to the common weal. From Plato, we incorporate the importance of ethical contemplation beyond mere knowledge acquisition. From Aristotle, we acknowledge the role of balance in applying wisdom to idiosyncratic circumstance.

Socrates provides an important starting point by raising the idea that virtue is timeless. In this respect, he says that love, character, harmony, beauty, and truth contribute to wisdom and that in order to be wise, we must avoid faddishness by seeking timeless truths (Birren and Svensson 2005; Robinson 1990). Socrates’ timeless view of wisdom accords with evolutionary psychological research (Campbell 1974), which considers wisdom a meme containing a nucleus of meaning that is transmitted relatively unchanged over generations, providing direction for thought and behavior that facilitates the adaptation and survival of communities. Furthermore, Socrates argues that expertise, knowledge, and wisdom are sources of power that should be used well for “practical” and “political” purposes to bring about well-being (Sherman 1997, 8–9). Respect for the nature of the office, therefore, is required in government for expertise, knowledge, and good judgment to be publicly beneficial (Osbeck and Robinson 2005).

Plato adds that wisdom is not simply idle metaphysical contemplation; rather, it must be sought in thoughtful and ethical judgment. Such judgments, he says, involve the “soul,” which is made up of desire, spirit, reason, and harmony; balancing these is essential for wisdom because there should be no conflict between the components of the soul. Extending the notion of balance and developing a more complex construct, Plato recognizes that wisdom exists in the form of phronesis (the practical and prudential wisdom of the prudent statesperson and lawyer), sophia (contemplative, esoteric, or philosophical wisdom), and episteme (scientific or “cognitive” knowledge) (Robinson 1990).
Aristotle builds on this tradition. The Aristotelian wisdom concepts of concern here are phronesis (prudence), balance, virtue, and aesthetics. Aristotle proposes phronesis as the form of practical wisdom and sophia as the form of philosophical wisdom, both of which are needed to inform wise action (Ke kes 1995, 16). It is crucial that we understand Aristotle’s meaning of phronesis, which is “intuition and scientific knowledge” (Nichomachean Ethics 1141a19). By intuition, however, Aristotle means more than “gut feeling,” Discernment (Schuman 1980, cited in Noel 1999, 279–80) and insight (Dunne 1997) are vital to a balanced approach to practical deliberation. This is particularly important in public administration because, as Flyvbjerg says, phronesis is the process “by which instrumental rationality is balanced by value rationality” (2004, 285). Dynamic balance is central to Aristotle’s practical wisdom, a view shared by Sternberg (2001) in his psychology-based views of wisdom. To be wise, then, we have to balance, weigh, integrate, and coordinate, ethically, dialogically and dialectically, the inner and outer, objective and subjective, and processual and organismic resources at our disposal (Labouvie-Vief 1990). In doing this, we need to draw on experiential richness, a creative and imaginative fluidity, and logical coherence and stability. Intellectual excellence, therefore, requires theoretical reasoning tempered by intuition and inference, as well as practical reasoning done with “craftsmanship” (cf. Mills 1959).

Ethical action is central to wise practice. Aristotle argues that to contribute to community well-being, one must acquire and practice intellectual and moral excellence (the virtues comprised by inner good). To act prudently, according to Aristotle, one must be infused by virtues such as humility, courage, temperance, and justice; one should do “what one does just because one sees those actions as noble and worthwhile” (Hughes 2001, 89). Thus, for Aristotle, the wise person acts virtuously when dealing with the shifting contingencies of life and situations. To deal with these contingencies, we must be reflexively intuitive and driven by human(e) instincts that are deeply embedded in our judgment. However, these emotions must be open to scrutiny. While anyone can be angry, wise people identify its source—for example, injustice (Ke kes 1995, 10). Thus, achieving what is right may be balanced but not necessarily dispassionate (Eflin 2003; see also Sherman 1997, chap. 2).

Aristotle acknowledges the need for constructive work (poiesis), which operates according to predetermined processes and behaviors that create a durable outcome (a product or state of affairs) that “can be precisely specified … before the maker engages in his activity” (Dunne 1997, 9). Techné is usually possessed by expert makers who can give rational accounts of their activity—the knowledge of a crafts person “who understands the principles … underlying the production of an object or state of affairs” (Dunne 1997, 244). Hence, techné requires instrumental rationality (Flyvbjerg 2004, 287). Though essential to the ongoing activity of an organization, techné is inadequate on its own in an organization because it needs to be balanced by phronesis, virtue, and aesthetics.

Having already dealt with aspects of phronesis and virtue, it is now important to understand the role of aesthetics in wise organizational practice. First, from the wisdom perspective, our approach differs from the contemporary move toward a resource-based conception of organizational aesthetics, such as that of Schmitt and Simonson (1997), which values aesthetics as a resource that directly adds value to an organization. Nor do we adopt the assumption of Dickinson and Svensen’s (2000) Beautiful Corporations, that postmarket criteria such as beauty will be essential for corporate success. Again, we root our conception in Aristotle’s understanding of aesthetics as artfully constructed communicative action (a situated social practice), which draws on psychological and social processes that centrally include sensory-emotional dynamics. An important outcome of such processes is transcendent knowledge.

We do not, however, take the further step of assuming that aesthetics expressed as art provides universal truths about humanity and, with it, an implied ethic. Rather, we adopt the more minimalist position, which sees aesthetics in an organizational—rather than an artistic—sense as an “aesthetic a priori synthesis of feeling and image within intuition” (Croce 1995, 31) and as something that is “distinguished … from practical, moral, and conceptual activity as intuition” (49). This intuitive aspect accords with Strati’s understanding of organizational aesthetics. However, “there are not two distinct and independent forms of knowledge” (2000, 15), as the organizational Logos is imbued with both rational and “poetic” knowledge. Vico (1948), too, asserts this in his rejection of Cartesian rationalism. But these forms of knowledge are not symbiotic, for the “aesthetic approach emphasises that rational analysis neglects extremely important aspects of quotidian organizational practices” (Strati 2000, 16). This is not to say that the aesthetic understanding is more authentic than the rational but to assert that a more comprehensive understanding of organizational practice occurs when the rational and the aesthetic are both accepted as valid and complementary (if often
antithetical) ways of understanding. Thus, aesthetic understanding is intuitive (Strati 1996, 215).

Gagliardi, too, warns against a hierarchical dichotomy that valorizes "the exercise of the cognitive faculties of the intellect and its products (science and technology) [over] … contemplation and imagination" (2005, 310). It is important to remember that Aristotle does not make this dichotomy between the rational and the contemplative imaginary. His tenets of reason, contemplative speculation, and worldliness make Aristotle's thinking qualitatively different from contemporary science in that it does not valorize rationalism and "fact" to the exclusion of the other elements (for an excellent short account of the marginalization of Aristotle's concept of reason by seventeenth-century rationalism and its misapplication to organization studies, see Tsoukas and Cummings 1997; for fuller accounts, see also Toulmin 1992; Dewey 1929).

Consequently, we argue that aesthetic understanding invariably implies the sociological, or, as Hancock claims, one's "frame of reference is grounded within a profoundly cultural context" (2005, 39–40). In practical terms, this means that organizational artifacts, communication, habitus, and disposition can be read as an organizational aesthetic. Such a position holds regardless of whether one is considering the aesthetic of the glossy, sanitized corporate annual report or the habits of the mechanic in grimy overalls working at the local tire retailer. A decision maker with aesthetic aptitude has a capacity to identify and intuitively "read" aspects of his or her landscape to understand its meanings. Thus, a wise decision maker possesses discernment in knowing what to consider, intuition to detect the ineffable, semiotic skill to read the connotative, and good judgment to make sense of this within a context. This is what Aristotle means by transcendence, going beyond: "One can go beyond both common sense and present science, to grasp the dynamic structure of our rational knowing and doing, and then formulate a metaphysics and an ethics" (Lonergan 1957, 635).

Aesthetics and the Sociology of Wise Practice

For Aristotle, practical wisdom and aesthetics are linked to excellence in praxis (action itself). Praxis, according to Dunne, is "conduct in a public space with others in which a person, without ulterior purpose and with a view to no object detachable from himself, acts in such a way as to realize excellences that he has come to appreciate in his community as constitutive of a worthwhile way of life" (1997, 10). This provides a guiding principle for a humane and democratic public administration. For Aristotle, poetics is the art of creative, imaginative, speculative composition and expression that enables the social exploration of issues about life's tricky dynamics. In this respect, poetics and other aesthetic expressions produce innovations, are didactic, and, it is implied, have a social learning purpose. As Vico (1948) argues, these are important in imagining and creating useful social institutions. The aesthetic dimension of practical wisdom aims, therefore, to communicate and share ideas about ambiguities and uncertainties (Nahm 1947), and about serious or important social issues, to create well-being through reflexive thought that is animated by both reason and affect. Thus, given that public administration, as praxis, requires the work of wise and sensitive composition and expression in dealing with uncertain realities in relation to important and serious matters, this kind of aesthetic approach is clearly relevant.

We want to provide a sociological account of practical wisdom because much cognitive-based wisdom theory has little to say about the social structures and processes required to foster wisdom in organizations. The aesthetic dimension of practical wisdom alerts us to the role of communication: discursive structures, sense making, and meaning in the context of social relations, social structures, and social processes. Consequently, it is useful to develop an understanding of a sociology based on those insights that would show how to promote and support wise practice.

Essential questions in sociology deal with social relations and interactions, including communication and how interactions influence and are influenced by social structures and processes. As an aspect of practical wisdom, aesthetics points to particular kinds of agency, leadership, management interventions, and organizational processes that can foster wisdom in work. But how do these things become inscribed in cultures, discourses, and social practices, and what can managers do about them? From a critical poststructural perspective, Foucault’s theory of discourse holds that the episteme underlying historically situated knowledge is founded on "the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems" (1972, 191). This understanding of discourse is consistent with our wisdom theory, which understands the historical and cultural situatedness of social phenomena. A sharper picture of structures and processes that bring us closer to a sociology of wisdom is possible if we look more closely at culture.
generally. Knowledge and wisdom, which are carried or expressed largely through language and other symbolic systems, can, therefore, be described in terms of social and communicative structures and processes. The system of relations between signs, according to Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss, and Saussure, is central to understanding how the mind and knowledge work to produce collective representations that make society possible and are themselves derived from specific forms of social organization (McCarthy 1996). Similarly, Foucault (1973, 1979) shows how forms of social organization (e.g., asylums and prisons based on the notions of madness and criminality, respectively) can operate only because systems of discourse, authority, and relations of power create the conditions for their particular form. In other words, public administrators must share some common understandings of what asylums and madness, and prisons and criminality, are and how they relate to each other if asylums and prisons are to be built and maintained in particular ways. The quality or excellence of these shared or social understandings will help determine the extent to which well-being will result from those institutions and the activities conducted within them.

The idea that there is a powerful communicative (representational, expressive, and aesthetic) and communal element in the sociological life of knowledge is fundamental to developing a sociology of wisdom. In aesthetic terms, we must also consider that because many of the ideas dealt with in public administration are complex or abstract, they require sensitive and good judgment and intuition if excellent public service outcomes are to be achieved. Our knowledge or understanding of the world and ourselves comes not only through prosaic cognitions but also through aesthetic processes that do more than judge and elaborate beauty. More deeply, aesthetic processes help us make sense of the world and ourselves by bringing into conscious thought the deep structures and problems encountered in the social world (Inwood 2002). Aesthetics is needed in communication to convey what is abstract and difficult to communicate as explicit knowledge (Tsoukas 2005, 15). Aristotle points out the importance of a person’s capacity for “sensitivity” in understanding and making sense of the world. This is because wisdom cannot simply be a set of specifications: It requires judgment. Aesthetic sensitivity and judgment are linked because they contribute to our understanding of the value of a good and broad experience in life with which one can learn and discern. Extending this idea, Aristotle says that the soul is critical to all our bodily and mental capacities, including perception, imagination, and intellect, and is linked to the practical, worldly aspects of wisdom and to social systems. It is a “central sensorium” in which the senses converge, and that “sees, hears, imagines, desires, thinks, moves and acts” (Gallop 2001, 97). The soul is a unifying agent that creates a person who is more than the sum of his or her physical parts and creates the possibility of a society by bringing individual conscious and unconscious purposefulness, shared consciousness, and awareness of the benefits of collective action to us. Importantly for developing a sociological account of wisdom, the soul extends beyond the individual to a communal animating resource.

Organizational Development

What this means for managers wishing to create the space for wise practice in public administration is that they must apprehend their organization from a phenomenological perspective—that is, as discourse communities and communities of practice. In this way, public administration can be seen as containing a “system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience” (Rancière 2004, 13). Aesthetic “forms” can articulate that which codified “fact,” reason, and organizational process cannot or do not, potentially providing insights that might temper what administrative procedure would otherwise dictate. Rancière, like discourse theorists, argues that there is a distribution “of the sensible” (ideas we are predisposed to be alert to) that predisposes particular individuals and groups to participate in particular things, and to participate in particular ways. Thus, from a discourse perspective, it could be argued that the aesthetic realm provides the opportunity to rise above discursive constraint.

Because the theory of communities of practice (CoP) is particularly concerned with organizational learning and effectively deployed corporate knowledge, it is appropriate for discussing a sociological understanding of organizational wisdom. Lave and Wenger (1991) propose that learning is situated within a process of engagement in a “community of practice” and that these are everywhere. A CoP is a set of people who “share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 2). Three key elements of CoPs, therefore, are mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and joint enterprise. CoPs are connected through time and space in a communicative process that constructs knowledge in a purposive manner around things that matter to people (Iverson and McPhee 2002). CoPs are a means for developing and maintaining long-term organizational memory. Social capital resides in CoPs, inducing behavioral change that enhances knowledge sharing (Lesser and Storck 2001; Zorn and Taylor 2001).

Thus, if we are to address concerns about epistemic limitations in public administration research in relation to intellectual processes, lack of conceptual coherence, instrumentalism, and an ideological overcommitment to rationalism, then a sociology that
incorporates discourse and communities of practice is a sensible framework. In other words, if a primary concern is that both dominant discourses and CoPs potentially limit the intellectual (epistemic issues) and emotional (subjective and ethical) range of public administrations, thereby hindering wisdom, then the formation of those discourses and their communities need to be examined (cf. Heracleous and Barrett 2001).

A point at which Aristotle and Ranciére differ is that Ranciére sees aesthetics as keeping us within the limits of dominant discourses, whereas Aristotle more clearly sees it as central to helping us to get outside and to break the bonds of discourse and its relations of power. Similarly, communities’ normative structures can resist change, holding an organization as a prisoner of its history (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002), resisting other ways of understanding or alternative ethics (Zorn and Taylor 2001). Importantly for a sociology of organizational wisdom, Lemke says that interdiscursive relations “determine what sorts of discursive objects (entities, topics, processes) the discourse can construct or talk about” and, significantly, “tell us what the alternative kinds of discourses are that can be formed in these ways and how they can be related to each other as being considered equivalent, incompatible, antithetical” (1995, 30). Wisdom involves the sort of insight that tells us when to reject the common knowledge and common sense of CoPs. Through its foresight, vision, and imagination, wisdom can transcend learned behavior; indeed, wisdom demands it when judgments are needed in difficult, ambiguous, and novel situations. A wisdom-based perspective on communities of practice, therefore, would seek to install in those communities the processes and structures that are needed for this ability to transcend the taken-for-granted when this is appropriate.

Discourse theory provides the basic conceptual tools for reconfiguring a wisdom-based community of practice. By analyzing the discursive dimension of communication, we can expose normative and mimetic processes of discourses in a workplace and their inherent relationships of power (Mizruchi and Fein 1999) that may hinder organizational wisdom. The organizational development challenge is to be able to get outside a limiting discourse and accepted practice, particularly when doing so assists in achieving excellent new practice. Doing this requires imagination and agency in wise intellectual leaders; Kant also makes this point (Crawford 2002). For wise intellectual leaders to thrive, organizations, including public administrations, need to embrace open-minded and curious decision makers, analysts, and managers at all levels. There still must be a role for frank and fearless advisors who reach beyond the narrow vocabularies of managerialism so detrimental to wisdom. That is, the social agency of insightful, curious, and open-minded people can be crippled within certain types of CoPs with limited organizational discourse. Because there is a natural tendency for organizational actors to be unconsciously corralled into acting “appropriately” in routinized processes, highly normative organizational cultures regulate institutional behavior. Creating tensions in public administration is that practical wisdom is dynamic rather than static, whereas organizational processes tend to be static because they attempt “to order the intrinsic flux of human action, to channel it towards certain ends, to give it particular shape” (Tsoukas and Chia 2002, 570). Wise managers need, therefore, to be “dynamic interpreters of their environments” because they are integral to the information processing and meaning construction where they operate (Malan and Kriger 1998, 245–46)—to know when stasis is appropriate and when it is not.

The issue of wisdom in public administration was recently analyzed in a report published by the Canadian Public Service Commission, The Getting and Keeping of Wisdom (Hammer 2002). Its approach to “wisdom management” is to see wisdom as integral to practical issues of organizational effectiveness. We analyze this report elsewhere (McKenna and Rooney 2005). Significantly, the organizational dysfunctions elaborated in the report identify much about contemporary organizational social and cultural conditions that works against wise practice and can be addressed by informed management.

In The Getting and Keeping of Wisdom, it is argued that experienced and effective senior public servants taking (early) retirement creates problems because the leadership, experience, knowledge, and wisdom needed to guide and supervise an effective bureaucracy is lost. Inappropriate work conditions that negatively affect work–life balance cause many public servants to retire early. The report argues that these problems could be ameliorated by facilitating intergenerational knowledge transfer, good recruiting, and mentoring processes and by providing better work conditions to make the workplace more attractive to wise senior people while enhancing service to the public. Striking a good work–life balance is critical to these goals.

In social theory terms, it is noteworthy that the report identifies structural issues related to age and experience; leaders, work roles, and levels; and organizational capacity and process. Implicit in this mostly structural account is a phenomenological sociology and discourse theory that talks about the links among action, knowledge, problems, experience, leadership, and personal experience, and emotions. The report reinforces the proposition that responding with wise practice must be founded on linking the social, structural, and phenomenological elements in a balanced manner. That is, at the most general level, the report
indicates an organizational discourse that created a culture or a climate that is deeply dissatisfying intellectually, emotionally, and socially also created the wisdom-drain problem in the Canadian Public Service. In other words, the report identifies an administrative discourse and practice that mimics banal corporate discourse, which privileges efficiency, antisocial work conditions, and instrumental thinking.

Notwithstanding that the report questions managerialist discourse, it still appears limited to some degree by that same discourse. It is instructive to show which aspects of wisdom theory are more comfortably discussed in the report and, more importantly, what is left out. Using content and discourse analysis, our earlier research compares this report against five wisdom principles outlined in the following section, suggesting some important gaps.

**Principles of Wisdom**

Our Aristotelian and psychological foundations of wisdom have led us to develop a set of five principles that identify practical wisdom as based on reason but that specifically incorporate the nonrational, the humane and virtuous, practical action, and aesthetics. (These are more fully elaborated in McKenna, Rooney, and Boal, in press; Rooney and McKenna 2007). Wisdom comprises each of these principles in a dynamic balance; therefore, wisdom should not be too smart, try too hard, want too much (Ten Bos 2007), become too remote, or be too confident (Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde 1990). The five principles are as follows:

1. Wisdom is based on reason and observation. (Principles 1b and 1c are classified as metaheuristic; see Baltes and Staudinger 2000).
   1a. It makes careful observations to establish facts and draws sound inferences and logical deductive explanations.
   1b. It evaluates the salience and truth value of logical propositions when applying reason to decision making, using clear understandings of ontological categories that theoretically describe substance, process, and quality in order to demonstrate, through logical argument, correct conclusions.
   1c. It allows for an intelligent balance between reasonable doubt and justifiable certainty about knowledge claims, including self-critique.

2. Wisdom incorporates the nonrational and subjective in judgment.
   2a. It acknowledges the sensory and visceral as important components of decision making and judgment.
   2b. Wisdom has a metaphysical, even spiritual, quality that does not bind it absolutely to the rules of reason.

Importantly, it is the transcendent characteristics of practical wisdom that are not explicit or well accounted for in *The Getting and Keeping of Wisdom*, although it does briefly acknowledge the value of tacit knowledge and the importance of deeper and broader knowledge.

We now focus our analysis on the absences. The first of these characteristics (1b) not explicitly evident in *The Getting and Keeping of Wisdom* is that wise people can evaluate the salience and truth value of logical propositions by understanding the embedded, usually unarticulated ontology inherent in the propositional logic of decisions. The second missing characteristic (2a, the nonrational and subjective—sensory) is that which encourages decision makers to acknowledge the qualified validity of one’s senses and feelings in making decisions. The third missing characteristic (2b, the nonrational and subjective—metaphysical) is that which encourages wise people to think outside the bounds of rationality, using intuition and revelation. When Sternberg asserts that sagacity involves, among other things, “as much an attitude toward knowledge as knowledge itself” (1990, 157), he is essentially...
suggesting that we need to question the ontological and epistemic basis of propositions and that we should be more open-minded about what counts as a valid and useful mental faculty. We argue that this is especially so where propositions have unquestioned assumptions. Acknowledging that the sensory and visceral are important components of decision making, we do not mean that emotion should rule judgment. We point out that research in brain science, consciousness studies, and emotional intelligence supports the efficacy of visceral sensitivity in making judgments in certain circumstances.

While these transcendent elements of wisdom are central to Aristotle's metaphysics of speculative contemplation and ethics of social practice, from Aquinas's time they have been more clearly associated with the spiritual concerns of religion. In a public administration context, we can think of the spiritual and metaphysical as a set of essential and prevailing principles that are “felt” in one's conscience, guiding leaders to see through things and thereby achieving a greater good and serving a higher public purpose. While not necessarily spiritual in the religious sense, the notion of a “metaheuristic” (Baltes and Staudinger 1998) acknowledges that good judgment often requires that a person not be bound completely by the rules of reason. Public sector wisdom requires intuitive, experienced, ethical judgment that admits “gut” feelings about the right thing to do; however, such judgments would be difficult to justify in a hyperregulated system. In addition, ideas of spirituality in wisdom would admit a sense of empathetic caring in exercising judgment and choice.

While not explicitly treating wise leadership and decision making as metaphysical, transcendent, and accessing deeper truths, the Canadian report does speak of the visioning of leaders, perspective-taking capacity, and personal and interpersonal insight (2c, respects experience and develops personal insight, and 3a, humane and empathetic) and clearly distinguishes long-range goals, hinting at what might be called the “seeingness” of wisdom (2c). In other words, the document suggests that being able to see past the quotidian and ephemeral features of any judgment and to envision the longer-term effects of alternative actions are important aspects of wise public administration practice. Developing aesthetic capacities—what Strati (2000) calls “poetic knowledge” and Vico (1948) calls “poetic wisdom”—is important in developing these abilities and communicating aesthetics-based knowledge.

This aspect of the report also relates to seeing ourselves (2c) and to the capacity for personal and interpersonal insight, acknowledging the benefits of apprehending who and what we are. We, as Plato and Aristotle did, suggest that one must not only know oneself and what others may feel; one must have a deeper understanding of one's perceived persona and social position and those of others to be wise. The capacity for deeply understanding how someone else experiences particular phenomena requires empathy and sensitivity, which is articulated through the aesthetic dimension of wisdom (5a). Here, the report acknowledges the intrinsically pleasurable rewards for oneself and others of seeking knowledge and experience and suggests that it is important for public administration leaders to articulate their understandings and values.

While it is commendable that the report acknowledges transcendent qualities such as visioning and insight, it could have been enhanced by directly addressing the discursive restraints within which it operated. Given that the report is concerned with changing dominant cultural patterns (such as managerialism and technocracy), implementation of its findings would be assisted by adopting an organizational sociological approach that incorporates the notions of discourse and CoPs. In this way, a goal would be to encourage employees to demonstrate intellectual, judgmental, and ethical excellence and to provide leadership that changes discourses in ways that are commensurate with practical wisdom.

A Research Agenda
The report identifies what it sees as important issues for wise practice when it introduces questions about time (age, experience and intergenerationality, history and tradition), location (situativeness), value (values, economy, outcomes, effectiveness), social structure (organizational hierarchy, politics, seniority), and intellection (culture, learning, tacit knowledge, judging, communication). A sociology of wisdom research program would explore all of these issues.

A good place to start empirical research, then, is to see how time, patterns of thought, values, and situation interact. Both Aristotle and the Canadian report acknowledge experience and the capacity to look both forward (prescience, long-term view) and backward (experience, tradition) in time as critical to wisdom. Thus, a sociology of wisdom has to account for historical antecedents and foresight as part of a larger structure of time. Second, a sociological research agenda must also link the social, organizational, and intellectual to place and geography. From a critical Foucauldian perspective, this would mean understanding that, within particular sites, at any particular moment, the dominant valorized discourses rest, just as any other discourse does, on various taken-for-granted truths (or doxa, as Bourdieu calls it; see Bourdieu and Eagleton 1992, 112), ontological structures, and normalized processes and practices. From a wider perspective, a rational-scientific approach tends to valorize knowledge that could be applied anywhere—that is, abstract,
generalizing thought and its decontextualized logical and objective processes (Labouvie-Vief 1990). This is evident in management’s contemporary enthusiasm for strategic thinking, where the imperative to create knowledge about the future (which is essentially speculative) is more keenly pursued than a century ago (Hitt and Tyler 1991). The effect of location in an era of globalization should also be considered particularly in regard to the normative tendencies of managerial discourse. Two aspects in particular might be considered: the tendency toward institutional isomorphism (McKenna, Rooney, and Liesch 2005; Newman and Nollen 1996) and the ideological creep of neoliberal assumptions particularly (McKenna and Graham 2000; Rooney 2005). Research into institutional isomorphism has largely concentrated on non-governmental organizations (e.g., Dacin 1997), but its impact on public policy production and implementation should also be considered. In addition, neoliberal assumptions have deeply affected public administration, even undermining its constitutional foundations (Du Gay 2003). Such neoliberal assumptions also infuse policy production. For example, in the crucial area of global media ownership, McChesney and Schiller argue that an underlying political force, neoliberal orthodoxy, “relaxed or eliminated barriers to commercial exploitation of media, foreign investment in communication systems, and concentrated media ownership” (2003, 6). Similarly, the crucial international debate on biodiversity has to negotiate scientific issues within an overarching neoliberal economic framework (Vogel, forthcoming).

In methodological terms, it is significant that contemporary wisdom studies research is dominated by psychology (e.g., Sternberg and the Berlin school) and that qualitative social science has had little influence on this very small field of research. Qualitative research is particularly useful in understanding a complex and dynamic phenomenon like practical wisdom. While our wisdom research program has been informed by discourse theory and analysis, there is a need for other methods, particularly phenomenological approaches, that can be deployed in the field and can generate grounded theory. Ethnographic research is clearly central to such a task as it provides instances of wisdom in practice. So, too, is action research, a collaborative approach between organizational members and research aimed at increasing fairness, wellness, and self-determination (Greenwood and Levin 2003, 145). Given that wisdom is concerned with practical outcomes, critical incident approaches (Nyuquist, Bittner, and Booms 1985) would also be useful for considering situations that produce organizational tension. For example, no one can be happy with the failure to prepare for Hurricane Katrina, to deal with the immediate crisis, or to use the disaster as a means of remediating long-term problems of racially discriminatory poverty, housing, and crime in New Orleans. Holistic analyses of incidents such as these and the 2004 tsunami should consider not just the efficacy of the techné of practice but also how phronetic, aesthetic, and ethical considerations need to be given equal weight. The overriding concern for this kind of research in answering questions relevant to wisdom in public administration is not to define wisdom but to understand how practice can become wiser, a question we know little about. We see a particularly important role for participant and observation-based studies (e.g., Sharpe 2004). No empirical organizational field studies of how wisdom works exist, and this lacuna requires urgent attention. A less interactive but important research approach is organizational discourse analysis (e.g., Alvesson and Karreman 2000; McKenna 2004).

It is important that the axiological, ontological, and epistemological foundations of wisdom research should be guided by wisdom theory itself. This means that although quantitative research will play a role, researchers cannot be limited to statistical analysis and hypothesis testing. They must get their hands dirty in the field, standing shoulder to shoulder with practitioners, and they must do their research as wise research practitioners who are able to operationalize their imaginations, emotions, ethical sensitivities, and logics simultaneously to produce excellent research that can be transformational.

Obviously, this implies qualitative research methods, which are primarily interpretive strategies (Denzin and Lincoln 2003, 9). Some qualitative research approaches might include using those that are unfamiliar in public administration and organizational studies, even to those who take broadly phenomenological approaches. Auto-ethnography (see Sudnow 1978 for a good example of phenomenological auto-ethnography) and adaptations of transpersonal psychology and anthropology research methods (for an overview, see Davis 2003; Laughlin 1994) are designed specifically for such research. These can yield rich information about peak experiences that deliver excellence, about the processes of transcendent insight, and about how to understand these kinds of phenomena as shared consciousness. Such research orientations open up more opportunities for deeply reflexive or insightful considerations using meditation and mindfulness techniques (Laughlin 1988) and are more adaptable to poststructural
concepts related to the fluidity of knowledge and subjectivity.

Conclusions
Wisdom guides excellent practices in public and private activities that achieve well-being. Given that public administration is essentially concerned with community well-being, wisdom should be welcome in public administration practice and research. While wisdom can be described and accounted for theoretically, it cannot be seen only as a concept; Aristotle demands that it be seen as a practice, excellent practice. As a way of being or practicing, wisdom should provide outcomes based on excellent practices that motivate social well-being. Wisdom is being able to know when to transcend the quotidian and prosaic and being able to bring about social transformations when transformation is needed. However, the processes, dispositions, and activities associated with practical wisdom are difficult to achieve and often at odds with technocratic, managerial, and rationalist discourses that dominate much of contemporary public administration thought and practice.

There is a role for public administration and organizational studies research to transform practice toward practically wise modes of operation. Research that examines history and place, the political economy of ideas, organizational culture, social hierarchy and organizational structure, organizational learning and knowledge, and discourse all fall within the scope of an organizational sociology of wisdom research program. Because being wise is a social practice and part of a discursive structure, we argue that a sociology of wisdom in public administration is enhanced by understanding how discourse works to structure knowledge, relationships, processes, and practices. We also argue that field research using participant and observational methods, such as those used in ethnography and action research, are useful in pursuing these research objectives. More radically, we suggest that research methods such as those employed in autoethnography and transpersonal research can also be used. Finally, we argue that a sociology of wisdom research should base its methods around ontological and epistemological foundations of wisdom theory itself. While it is impossible to present a complete exposition of a sociology of wisdom within one journal article, we have provided directions to stimulate and guide more research about a sociology of wisdom that will inform practices to assist the development of public administrations as wise organizations. The practice of public administration and research about it are too important in contemporary life not to take this opportunity seriously.

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References


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