

WORKING PAPER NO: 506

**Wise Organizations?
Aggregated and Distributed Wisdom in Organizations**

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Year of Publication – March 2016

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Abstract

This working paper explores wisdom in organizations. Experiences vital to understanding mediating functions and flows in open systems have seldom been the focus of attention. This paper aims to highlight some challenges inherent in wisdom and applying wisdom, knowing and related research within organizations. It aims to unravel gaps in literature and frame a new research worthy problematique. In doing so, the paper also discusses why unraveling and filling these gaps has been challenging. Wisdom in organizational settings has often been regarded as an oxymoron, because it has been difficult to conform to conventional notions and ideals of wisdom. This paper takes a practical wisdom (*phronesis*) perspective. *Phronesis* is useful in wisdom research, because it encompasses contextual and situational complexities as well as perspectives. To understand this contextuality, open systems framework is invoked to cater to ever changing dynamics to understand how wisdom manifests in organisational functioning through positive and negative capabilities, imaginations, assumptions, hopes and wishes of roleholders in their actual rolesets. The paper concludes that for organisations to be “wise”, understanding is needed of how boundaries and primary tasks within open systems mould and create perceptions, effects, experiences and practices that bring new insights into what *phronesis* is or could be about and that we need to look at wisdom as a property of groups as well as individuals and building increasingly on phenomenal contracts and weak ties.

Keywords: wisdom, open systems, boundaries, *phronesis*, understanding, experiential learning, phenomenal contract.

1 Introduction: Wisdom Revisited

“That is the sort of world we live in – a world of circuit structures – and love can survive only if wisdom (i.e., a sense or recognition of the fact of circuitry) has an effective voice.”

Gregory Bateson, 1972, p. 146

What is it to be wise? When are we wise and who can be wise? These and many other wisdom related questions have puzzled countless thinking persons, civilizations and researchers since antiquity. Throughout history, there have been many different wisdom traditions which draw from variety of experiences, stories and practices.

The narratives regarding wisdom bring to the mind’s eye a person, female or male, who in some ways is outside the normal hurly-burly of everyday life - A person able to dispassionately examine and contemplate the situation and often give an answer by telling a story (old wise storytellers), a *kōan* (Zen Masters), a riddle or advice that triggers contemplation and reflection as a prelude to change. From a gendered historical perspective, men have been seen as wise and women sages often as witches (many wise women were considered witches for their use of healing practices, such as Wicca), for the ability to reason as a cognitive supremacy is attributed more to men and mysticism as earthly emotional body connect more to women. The Delphic Oracle, Pythia, was a woman, but interpretations of her messages were controlled by men. The Archetype of Pallas Athena hailing broadly from the same era, was likewise a feminine figure with strong male attachment in her role as the defender of Athens, goddess of wisdom, warfare and knowledge. This suggests interesting connections regarding the nature of knowing processes, and relates to 20th century Jungian rediscovery of importance to connect the male *animus* and the female *anima* within oneself to become whole or to reach individuation (Jung, 1964). Doing this requires the 'wise' to work with the part of ourselves which Jung (1964) called the shadow – the part we would not wish to recognize in us. One part of being wise is thus not about cognitive supremacy, but ability to reconcile different aspects of being (-in-the-world).

Wisdom as a concept can be used in various ways: as an adjective (e.g. learned, sagacious), noun (way of proceeding, manner) or verb (make wise or knowing) (Online Etymology Dictionary, Accessed 7/7/2015), thus bringing its own dynamics. In the European thinking tradition, wisdom is one of the four Cardinal Virtues and also the later set of seven virtues, thus bringing in the thought that wisdom is the most important virtue, because it moderates the other ones. The increasing frequency of scandals, high stress levels and general uncertainty in the world reminds us of foolishness and how much the notion of wisdom merits revisiting.

1.1 Wisdom as practical

Individuation or knowing oneself has long been one of the trademarks of wisdom. The most often cited quote referring to wisdom is from Socrates (Plato, Apologia 20d-21a) when he says that he is wise because he knows that he does not know – i.e. has awareness of his ignorance in a ‘positive sense’. This implied being able to fathom one’s limitations when pursuing aims, or in today’s language, either substantive or procedural bounded rationality within a frame (Mistri, 2008; Simon, 1976). Wisdom was regarded traditionally as ephemeral, difficult to attain and even more difficult to sustain.

The notion of ‘Phronesis’ (practical wisdom by Aristotle and sound/practical judgment by Plato) was highlighted by Plato as well as Aristotle in their respective philosophies. While Aristotle is usually seen as the influential source (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008; Grint, 2007; Schwartz et al., 2007; Tsoukas & Cummings, 1997), it is Plato who took this discussion forward especially in considering good governance in the Statesman. What Plato brings in, is that a phronetic person needs both cognitive and relative qualities – no statesman can rule only with knowledge of universals, but also needs to look at particulars, which he refers to as ‘diversity’ in people. Stern (1997, p. 267) highlights this in the following way: “*This lack of understanding of the implications of human inequality or diversity can be traced to a characteristic shared by young Socrates’ mathematical orientation and the diaeretic method used by the Stranger in the first part of the dialogue.*” (ref to Statesman). Therefore the need for “cognitive capacity, wisdom” is essentially needed for recognizing gaps between universals and particulars (Stern, 1997, p. 268). Wisdom in this dialogue can be seen as rule without the law – because law due to its nature is necessarily limiting – but in want of wise people, better than nothing.

Wisdom could be thought as being “higher” or ‘above’ general thinking or as an ‘ideal’. However, in the Greek traditions, philosophers tried to look at wisdom from a praxis-oriented perspective. For Plato, a decision was wise (or *phronetic* in its sound judgement sense) if and when it was based on knowledge and was rational (Gk. *Logistikon* – pertaining to reason, *logos*, or mind in Plato's ideal of tripartite soul), i.e. in accordance with the ‘whole’ or ‘ideal’ in a harmonious, balanced way. For him, a life well lived was spent in trying to obtain needed knowledge and understanding about the Good as the highest human goal. However, he also highlighted that it is important, for a wise person, to acknowledge that not everything is known. This positive ‘ignorance’ was acknowledgement that a wise person learns all the time, is able to reflect and use this learning, thus knowing more. Rationality seemed to him a way of clarifying one’s own thinking *vis-à-vis* others, but it also

reflected his thinking on the hierarchy of knowing from images to understanding (Republic, Divided Line, 509d–511e). By engaging with one's thoughts it was possible to examine them and also examine particulars related to wholes (see for instance the Statesman dialogue).

In everyday life, it is not uncommon to hear someone saying that 'if you are wise, do' or 'it would be wise to do X or not do X'. For example, a lawyer may advise a client not to persist with a case because it is not 'wise' to do so; fellow employees may say that it would be 'wise' to do as has been told or decided; a government official may emphasize the 'wisdom' of a particular decision etc. Here wisdom is presented in a somewhat negative sense or in a grey area, since all of them exhibit forms of power, contextual interpretation and possible intimidation by invading a person's self-authority space. Wisdom or being wise is thus used in a negative sense of influence (to do the opposite would be considered 'unwise') within contexts or groups, which seems to differ greatly from the possibility of changing one's mind freely or without pressure, as most philosophers have assumed. Plato was no exception, regardless of his own actual experiences when trying to create an ideal rule in Syracuse. Pressure brings in questions of power, hierarchy and competition in others, in the group, in organizations or in other larger entities, and brings forth its dynamics of 'moral' as a habit, routine or *sensus communis*. Therefore, we also need examine whether there can be "wisdom of the herds" (Casti, New Scientist Online, May 24, 2010) or whether herds are just unmanageable (Freud, 1915) – and from what point of view.

1.2 Structure of this paper

Above issues raise many questions which this paper addresses: One is, can an organisation really be "wise" in its most strict notion; two, we need to also examine how it relates to being a "fool"; thirdly, can foolishness induce "stigmas" (Goffman, 1963) when the organisation's examined or unexamined, hidden or visible, conscious or unconscious identity, meaning making processes or dynamics become questioned by expectations of the inner or the larger system(s) in a stakeholding pattern. If it is difficult for a person to become aware of dysfunctional sides in oneself, what about organisations with various numbers of people and no soul to sell? Examples can be found in how whistleblowers, organizational change agents, new entrants, people from different areas and backgrounds, collaborators and competitors have been received and treated – the 'court' is often quite ready to sacrifice its 'jester'. Ultimately, societies within themselves and increasingly across their borders are engaged in 'wisdom' discussions trying to balance wishes and expectations with horizons which are difficult to grasp or conceptualize only rationally.

In this paper, the possibility of wisdom in organisations is discussed in the context of open systems theory, and specifically examining the idea of boundaries. Much of the wisdom has to do with recognizing and experiencing boundary conditions as data or information which is felt, thought and acted upon. The paper presents four considerations, which are then discussed towards the end as managerial implications. These considerations have been discussed e.g. by Leach (1961) as “inspired guessworks” and as “working hypotheses” by Bion (1961). Thus the paper explores and highlights difficulties of catching such ephemeral and fleeting notions as wisdom, but tries to argue why wisdom and wisdom processes are important in organisations. To do this, we will first turn to open systems approach.

2 Wisdom in context - experiencing open systems

In these deliberations, wisdom is mostly connected to individuals. Herein lies the paradox: if all people individually within an organization are considered wise, does that make the organization wise? We may like to think so, but if one looks at research on groups and group phenomena, it often seems the opposite or at least questionable if and when the well-examined group dynamics perspectives and experiences are ignored. Beginning with Le Bon’s (1896) studies on crowds and crowd behavior, wisdom of groups have remained ephemeral or unreachable when groups are not able to rise to engage with hermeneutic primary task and remain stuck in the wilds of phenomenal primary task. This makes the study of organizational wisdom intriguing.

Many corporate scandals and mistakes have shown companies being vulnerable to decision making that was either ethically questionable or unwise. In many cases outsiders viewed choices that promoted *showing* higher profitability as denoting wise decisions – while this *de facto* was a result of ‘cooking the books’. Likewise, many in Enron may have thought that Whistleblower Sherron Watkins was being ‘unwise’ by risking her reputation, position and career within the company and beyond it. Was it wise, before the oil spill, for British Petroleum (BP) to seek exemption from environmental assessment (based on NEPA, 2009) and was it wise for the US Interior Department to accept it? (Eilperin, Washington Post Online, May 5, 2010). In order to understand wisdom, do we also need to juxtapose it with un-wisdom – how organisations as groups become victims of groupthink (Janis, 1972) in which their phenomenal wishes and hopes get tunneled in a quest for omnipotence, or as presented as organisational illusions and phantasies (Bion, 1961, 1970; Chattopadhyay, 1999; Mathur, 2006; Kets de Vries, 2001, Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984). How may we address situations where ‘wisdom’ becomes bounded and only reflected in a narrow selfish sense? To overcome some of these problems, the Aristotelian emphasis in Nicomachean Ethics on *phronesis* as practical

knowledge building on character strengths has gained ground. While *phronesis* refers to horizontal knowledge processes (interacting contexts, goals, and virtues), wisdom in the traditional sense refers to vertical process.

In terms of different approaches to phronesis one can distinguish between wisdom as humility (Socrates saying that he knows he does not know); knowledge (person has extensive know-how or know-why over something) and practical knowledge (knowledge and action combined). As Henry David Thoreau (1839/1983, p. 125) noted in his journals, “*all this worldly wisdom was once the unamiable heresy of some wise man*”, pertaining to a thought that a wise *man* sees further or is regarded in some way unfit by the community; and that wisdom may carry a gendered connotation. In addition, many people have been seen as fools (rather than wise) when bringing out issues contra to norms or wishes of the group (e.g. discussions of privacy and confidentiality versus new, presumably time/money saving measures), or the dominant sub-groups; and many are seen fools over time, until the wisdom in the approach is revealed. Organizational fools (Kets de Vries, 2003) are thought to create checks and balances. But, as Kets de Vries, 2003, p. 66) noted, it is risky to point out hidden agendas, even for the fool/sage (examples being whistleblowers, who in many cases have lost their lives). Organizational caves may be as difficult to navigate as the one in Plato's Republic (Allegory of the Cave, Republic, Book VII, 514a-521d). This connects to Jungian thought on shadow and why the shadow is so difficult to address even by individuals.

What insights can open systems approach or systems thinking bring into the complex world? One is that any theory is only a conceptual understanding of the forces, activities and experiences lived in this world. Through examining our life-worlds or “*Lebenswelt*” (Husserl, 1936/1970) it is possible to construct, conceptualise and review experiences – and perhaps change some of them. These experiences, when put in context, tell us about ourselves, our relations and relationships, norms and values, hidden and expressed sides etc., but may also give glimpses of the state of the world. Some insights drawn from these can be viewed as increasing our collective wisdom. For this to happen, open systems theory and subsequent psychoanalytical understanding of group processes has provided one outlet through the “Mad Hatter”ⁱ experiences – something that seemingly does not provide an answer but can be captured in the phenomenal grid of multiplicity of experiences as a fleeting insight, captured and brought into the awareness of a community of people and worked through.

Roots of open systems thinking as presented here, and as used in the organizational dynamics literature, go back to two theorists, namely economist Kenneth E. Boulding (discussed in Section 2.2) and biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy, according to whom all systems must have either spatial

or dynamic boundaries, and that these boundaries evolve all the time (Bertalanffy, 1968, 1972). Bertalanffy pointed out that open systems, such as whole nations or collectivities, interact through giving and taking with other systems, and with time become more complex (Bertalanffy 1968; Miller and Rice, 1967). Although the ideas of open systems predate Bertalanffy, he contributed in conceptualising it in a way that gave rise to many methodological advances. Subsequently the approach has been strong in social psychology, management and organization studies, since open systems by default have boundaries. Katz and Kahn (1966) define these as what belongs inside and what outside a system, group or organization. The various open system boundaries and their limits are discussed in the following section.

2.1 Open systems in the context of wisdom

Open systems theory is taken as a background for this study, because it introduces how influences and exchanges affect parts of a whole, and vice versa in a continuous cyclical movement. For the purpose of this paper, open systems and learning are seen in the context of wisdom. Many a time, the difference between a wise decision and an unwise decision has dealt with boundary setting and boundary management – such as in the case of BP Oil Spill disaster. The question raised is: how to negotiate boundaries within horizons that seemingly provide endless growth possibilities? Where do we draw a line when drawing it is defined or perceived as competitive advantage or opportunity lost? Is wisdom possible at all in an open system or does it need a closed or semi-open system?

One approach for a wise organisation in an open system suggests that we need to examine power, influences and exchanges as sources, enablers or disablers for wisdom or *un*-wisdom. Some forms of power have long puzzled researchers, because these produce imbalances and affect systems due to lack of apparent transparency or dominant views. In the stakeholder approach, relatedness between humans themselves to their surroundings and each other are examined for various signs, but rarely for power: for example in cases of organisational blocks it could be anxiety, stress, defences, structural problems and management processes which may refer to sub-systems becoming blocked or semi-closed. Since defences are often beyond awareness, hidden and subject to powerplay which may or may not be easily observable, it may take time for the organization to realise that non-functional parts are actually defences or powerplay, not just bad routines, policies or practices. Learning to examine socio-technical systems as living organisms (Trist & Bamforth, 1951; Trist & Sofer, 1959) we can explore the underlying – often unconscious - dynamics, habits and rationalisations which may actually drive an organization – its ‘microbes’ and ‘DNA’. To examine this, we turn to discuss learning in the context of open systems.

2.2 Wisdom and learning in open systems

Lewin (1947 a; 1947b) introduced action research thinking and his insights on experiential learning and force-field are helpful in understanding where it is possible to fathom the 'whole', because it is 'bounded' by real or imagined organizational boundaries and produces pressures which are not always understandable from outside. This not only on cognitive level, but as felt (body, space, time) and emotionally experienced (as frustration, anger, love, hate, envy etc.). Bion (1961) argued that while adults learn best through experiences, they hate this form of learning, because often such experiences are first interpreted as "negative" - painful and unpleasant. When we mature as persons, more of the learnings are reviewed through existing experiences and changing these might involve behavioral or attitudinal changes. However, mere pain does not mean it is a learning worth having: we need to also ask what kinds of learnings people really have in organisations and what is it they learned through these, before deciding what wisdom is in organizations. Memories of various 'learnings' may trigger other, earlier, memories and phantasies (Klein 1985, 1987), which have their own unintended consequences when triggered. How learnings are interpreted and made sense of in the interpretative system (Daft and Weick, 1984) of an organization, remains open if not addressed.

As explained above, open systems can be characterised as presenting multi-level complexity which is often beyond one person's capabilities and possibilities to comprehend (system-in-the-mind). Going further, Bauman (2005) argues that since today's societies are in a phase of "liquid modernity" (light and liquid versus earlier heavy and stationed), changes happen quickly and unannounced. Such liquidity may also be seen to increase environmental turbulence and unpredictability (e.g. reference to recent earthquakes, environmental catastrophes, airline disasters, ethical and financial problems, environmental challenges etc.), which need to be examined as sources of ethical problems. It refers to the constant flux, fleeting moments and continuous change which have replaced pictures-in-the-mind of more control focused, fixed and rationality oriented structures. This makes it more difficult to approach issues with expectations of certainty.

2.2 Various open systems approaches in the context of wisdom

Boulding (1956) introduced the classic division of nine levels of complexity, where open systems are the fourth level and socio-cultural systems the eighth. Boulding (1956) sees the ninth as philosophy, religion and the highest as transcendental, which could be equated with conventional notions of wisdom. Bateson (1972, p. 465) referred to mental systems with higher complexity than what he called as elementary cybernetic thought: "*In principle, if you want to explain or understand anything in human behavior, you are always dealing with total circuits, completed circuits*". Morgan (2006)

characterises open systems as exchange and influence: having input, output, feedback, and prone to homeostasis, entropy and negative entropy. In contrast, Pondy and Mitroff (1979, p. 7) point out that many organization theorists regard open systems as “*control systems*” producing “*uniformity*”, rather than “*internal differentiation (resisting uniformity)*”.

According to Pondy and Mitroff (1979) an organisation responds to the variety it is exposed to in its environment. If an organization sees itself as a highly complex and evolving system, but finds its surroundings lacking (or vice versa) in complexity, such an organisation often adjusts. This question arises, for example, in environments where systems of doing business and its laws do not support behaviour learned in another system. For wisdom this poses a challenge, because what is considered as ‘wisdom’ would be partly defined by the system in which it is used, its morals, normative rules, practices and routines as a historical process in which all societies are.

This process is referred to by Gadamer (2000) as modes of being and tradition (as historical process) being experienced in the here-and-now that define how notions of wisdom change and reflect the now. Open systems present an enigma. An organisation needs to be in touch with its environment, but not totally defined by it, which in open systems is a challenge. If rationality needs more ‘bounded systems’ to function properly, the more complex surroundings require new approaches and new ways of reasoning, as Pondy and Mitroff (1979) suggest.

Consideration One: A wise person/organisation can examine experiences without becoming defensive or overpowered by it, and is able to let different interpretations of these exist plurally and independently and view itself in relation to its surroundings thus living in reciprocal sense.

3 From Open Systems to Social Systems Occupied by People

Why are open systems relevant in wisdom research? Firstly, In today’s discussions about stakeholders (e.g. Freeman, 1984), where multiple actors and actor groups are considered beyond the organisation *per se*, or in contractarian business ethics (highlighting the social contract view; see e.g. Wempe, 2008), we take a society-person point of view. Organisations are thus seen from the perspective of “being made” from some forms of social contracts pertaining to certain defined environments being also a nexus of internal or external contracts (Reve, 1990). These social contracts explicate authority systems, powers, rights and sometimes responsibilities, and it becomes an issue whether members can choose or change such contracts. Such “hidden” social contracts and their outcomes through organizational experiences and habits are often referred to as basic values or

beliefs of the organization and experienced as its culture. We express these in our judgements of how things appear to us or have been understood by us. Whitehead and McNiff (2006, p.71) define such standards followingly: “*making judgements about the quality of practice means making value judgements, in terms of what you find valuable in the practices. Value judgements then become standards of judgement. You judge things in terms of what you think is good*”. In a social system we need to ask who sets those standards, how are they set and why the outcomes are the ones that are experienced.

Secondly, notions of wisdom may change over time. This is also important to acknowledge when we seek advice from the past. Not acknowledging context and its influence to at least some aspects of wisdom, would result in anachronisms. The past experiences were always had with a different set of people in different value bubbles, with different sets of expectations and understandings of how the world was constituted. In some sense we can draw from the past but need to be careful with interpretations, since all information is filtered through our present mindsets. This comes out in art, where interpretations of symbols painted on canvas do not easily lend themselves to interpretations unless one is familiar of what these symbols mean. An example of this could be Hieronymus Bosch (15th century) whose pictures (e.g. Garden of Eartly Delights) present symbols at levels that no longer speak to people in the same way they did when he was alive. Even then, putting ourselves in the shoes of people of the past is difficult, because the past is always in some sense a 'dead past'.

Such value systems and their changes bring in societal aspects and values which are in-built in the role-holders' social contacts and authority systems, such as features, structures, laws, rules, norms, practices, preferences and institutions of inclusion and exclusion, and familial ties. Thus these are often embedded in the way we do things (and experience these as ‘the right way’). Such interpretations are becoming increasingly problematic across diverse systems, since thinking is organised to benefit limited groups, organisations and people that reside within a certain area with specific expectations of boundary conditions. Problem related issues such as justice and impartiality may arise. This aspect is highlighted by Sen (2009) who asserts that just institutions are not enough without just people: we need open impartiality – the possibility of accepting the other beyond boundaries – and not closed impartiality such as one’s own state or community alone. Sen reminds us that Adam Smith had noted that we need to adhere to other views as well (which Smith in his Theory of Moral Sentiments termed as sympathy) – also the ones beyond our immediate system. Therefore, one cannot think of contemporary or future *phronesis* without thinking of the concept of justice, since *phronesis* in itself already carries connotations of ethics and morals and is linked to the

so called ‘Cardinal Virtues’ of *justice, wisdom (or prudence), courage (or fortitude) and temperance* presented both by Plato (e.g. Republic) and Aristotle (Nicomachean Ethics). We may need to revisit this list and contemporalise it.

3.1 Open systems as social systems in the context of wisdom

Open systems are also social systems (Ackoff & Emery, 1972; Bertalanffy, 1968) of relatedness, relationships and relations. These systems build on primary tasks (Barnard, 1938; Miller & Rice, 1967; Rice, 1963; Selznick, 1957) which introduce forms of boundaries (e.g. Chattopadhyay, 1999; Hirschhorn & Gilmore, 1992; Mathur, 2006; Mattila, 2008) around these tasks which have important functions in organising life experiences within and across groups. Social systems, the stakeholding patterns designed and acted out in and across such systems, and human experiences, wishes and hopes within these, constitute a living multidimensional matrix of life where organisations try to navigate and out of which they draw their life.

The collective of individuals occupying organisations produce effects beyond immediate roles members occupy. Such processes point to significance of experiential learning (Bion, 1961; Kolb, Rubin & McIntyre, 1984; Joutsimäki, 2006; Mathur & Mattila 2007, Mattila, 2008), importance of roles in constituting selves (Moreno, 1964) complexity in organisational learning (Antonacopoulou, 1998, 2001, 2004) and how tasks (Miller & Rice, 1967; Rice, 1963), defences (Argyris, 1990; Bion, 1961) and capabilities (Nussbaum, 2001; Sen, 1985) enmesh.

3.2 Open systems as experiential learning platforms in the context of wisdom

Experiential learning relies on various processes which are literally ‘felt’ and expressed through behaviors, practices and relations. Due to various unrecognized motive bases, emotions and aspects beyond awareness, the notions of conscious and unconscious processes (Bion, 1961, 1970; Edwards & Jacobs, 2003) are part of any practice. Experiential learning refers to different “traditions” (e.g. John Dewey, Kurt Lewin and Wilfred Bion, respectively). Using such approaches as workshops, role plays, temporary learning institutions (TLIs, Mathur, 2006) or temporary educational institutions (TEIs, Trist & Sofer, 1959) can facilitate in grasping ‘real-life’ experiences in safe surroundings.

The experiential movement started with Lewin (1947a, 1947b) and Bion (1961). Lewin realised that creating double-loop type of learning enhances learning possibilities in a group, because by the participation cycle, people become co-owners of the process. There are three groundbreaking approaches on how groups organise themselves. The first approach was through Bion’s (Bion and

Rickman, 1943) work with the British War Office Selection Board during World War II, where it was examined in small groups how authority was taken and who took it. Bion developed a whole new way of thinking about leadership capabilities through study of small groups from the perspective of process of how its members bonded to function (Bion, 1961; Harrison, 2000). Both influenced action research methodology (Fraher, 2004; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). The second was the two Northfield Experiments (Harrison, 2000), where casualties of war were treated. The third were the self-organising groups in Calico Mills, Ahmedabad, India, in the 1950s (Rice, 1963). Later these were used in Volvo's Uddevalla factory in Sweden where autonomous workgroups were used from the 1970s (this has since been discontinued).

Thus, one part of experiential learning is experimentation. This relies on participant experiences before, during and after the event and tries to form linkages between what exists (previous experiences), the "here-and-now" (what is being experienced) and future (what is being formed on the basis of an experience with time). In this sense, there is a hermeneutic learning cycle and a process of creating a mental container for openness to future experiences. However, such experiential learnings are hard to measure, but not impossible. While learning is partly ambiguous and also personal, in most cases it must be measurable with some parameters, which may be set by the individual, group or organization. One such parameter is ability to reason and revisiting hermeneutic primary task. In a similar manner, wisdom as a here-and-now event or practice are also difficult to quantify and define.

All these showed that a group, regardless of its composition, has capability to organise itself in relation to its surroundings, and thus also possesses some capabilities from which members may distil wisdom to do so effectively. Of the Calico Mill experiment, Rice (1963, p. 32) noted how "toleration of initial chaos" may later help in establishing "permissive and collaborative relationships". The problem, which Pondy and Mitroff (1979) also point out, is that this process is not static, but ongoing, regardless of whether people spend their cognitive time on it or not. Group memberships change, people come and go across boundaries and dynamics of the group change. The 'environment' or the total system so to speak, undergoes constant change in some forms, if not all. For this reason, the notions of primary tasks and boundaries offer one window into how *phronesis* may be experienced, constituted and captured.

Consideration Two: A wise person/organisation should be able to comprehend how boundaries organise or disable functions, emotions and practices.

4 Primary tasks and boundaries in the context of organisation

If wisdom, and to be wise, relates to capabilities such as to note, recognize, connect, to view, to distinguish, to draw from, to reflect and form new understandings, notions of tasks and boundaries need revisiting. Systems are made up of collectivities – persons, organisations and their co-existence within certain parameters and are based on tasks and emotions. These systems (such as an organisation) have structures that enable that very function in some predictable way by using persons to engage with managing processes involving primary tasks and boundaries these bring with them. The problem is not about knowing this but about acting on some issues raised based on this.

What happens when wisdom of the system is replaced with transactions which treat boundaries not as reflection points but as barriers? What to do when agreement is seen more beneficial than disagreement in search of personal support over organizational purpose? When technical correctness is more valued than ability to translate? From psychodynamic studies in organizations we have learned that the organization-in-the-mind (Armstrong, 2005) and earlier experienced authority structures (Klein, 1985) have strong influences on how these questions are approached and answers attempted – if at all.

Previously, the system at its widest meant ‘near’: village, community, state. It was something easily graspable. Systems had “clear” boundaries (as borders) and any violations of these boundaries were solved either peacefully or violently, as Foucault presents in his account of the history of punishment (Foucault, 1975). In doing so, social “power” sometimes has physical dimensions (Bateson, 1979, p. 219). While it would be pretentious to claim that the whole system can at times be fully and wholly reviewed, it is possible to ascertain some aspects of the system’s “health” based on what we know of healthy systems (e.g. biodiversity, state of waterbodies, organisation functions and its responses in its system). System health, although not in these words, was one central aspect for Plato. He remained interested in the dynamic nature of our ratio (Gk. *Logistikon*) and the problems of interpretation (e.g. Statesman dialogue) and learning (e.g. Theaitetos dialogue) within a state.

Here, open systems are a cognitive and experiential whole, viewed as a flux, influencing, information, exchange, ontology, epistemology, and its ecology. These wholes and parts have boundaries and these boundaries give rise to possibilities to introduce an interpretation grid which enables ephemeral or fleeting intuitions be captured.

4.1 Primary tasks and organizational wisdom in the context of open systems

The basic difference between many other approaches and the approach here is that the conceptualisation of primary tasks takes into consideration phenomenal contracts (including spiritual ones), and not only psychological or social contracts. Also, because of tasks and boundaries, a person is always (contextualised) in space and time. Whereas social contracts are based on structures, psychological contracts become palpable in human experiences and especially deviations from expectations. Phenomenal contracts, on the other hand, refer to how we experience the universe we live in – namely our relationship with the life itself. Therefore, phenomenal contract is much wider and more impactful than the first two, because it is not only about a specific context.

To understand some of the problems related to wisdom and the phenomenal contract in the context of this paper, the framework of Four Primary Tasks (Lawrence, 1986, 1992; Mathur, 2006; Mattila, 2008) provides one key into understanding systems theory impacts. Based on experiences building on group dynamics, one can derive four basic primary tasks, which are: Normative Primary Task (NPT), which refers to the designed or discovered primary task that an organisation engages with to have reason for being; Existential Primary Task (EPT), or the primary task why persons become roleholders with an organisation, and what meanings they wish to derive from it; Phenomenal Primary Task (PPT) as the primary task actually pursued, consciously and unconsciously, as manifest in phenomena, parts of which always remain beyond awareness of the actors; lastly, Hermeneutic Primary Task (HPT), which is the primary task engaged with to make sense, diagnose, and derive deeper meanings about what really is happening (Mathur, 2006; Mattila 2008, 2009).

In the Weickian formulation (Weick, 2001), systems enact only on what they know – what is brought to their attention. Primary tasks therefore try to capture cognitive, behavioral, emotional and social phenomena including their interpretations that may become explicit through awareness or remain unnoticed, but affecting. Therefore, it is seen that wisdom in organisations derives from these being engaged with and being examined transparently. It is here the phenomenal contract provides conceptual understanding of the shadow elements of an organization. Where the problems arise, need to be examined not only as cognitive or information related, but as our fundamental ability to exist in spaces with various interacting boundaries.

4.2 Boundaries and organizational wisdom within the open systems theory

Boundaries for many mean that transparency is lost. Here, boundaries refer to spaces which constitute different cognitive, emotional and referential mind-spaces. Traditionally, open systems and their boundaries together with notions of primary tasks are a way to distinguish one organisation from another (Barnard, 1938; Miller & Rice, 1967; Rice 1963; Selznick, 1957). While organisations are far more than just ‘tasks and people’ (Pondy and Mitroff, 1979), they are also these. This distinguishing often relies not only upon more or less visible boundaries (such as walls, fences, gates, departments etc.), but on what is felt and understood or becomes experienced as a boundary. Such processes include (but is not limited to) occasions where one crosses a boundary; when one works at an edge of a boundary; when one is crossing, spanning, or breaking a boundary and it becomes an issue. All these inform the organisation and its people about the dynamics, practices and health of the organization, *if it is sensitive in finding these clues and proceeds to examine and act on them.*

This means taking the aspect in question beyond, but comprising also, linguistic formulations of perceived rationality – often termed as reality. These interpretations have inherent qualities and these qualities may define whether interpretations are viewed as wise or not. It is also noteworthy that not all interpretations are considered true, as Gadamer (2000) pointed out. Many of these interpretations are made in groups, for example in organisations, Facebook groups or other forms of collectivities with some level of organisation with systems of inclusion and exclusion – a form of power.

4.3 Manufacturing reality

Power as internalised authority structure and notions of boundaries as fixed entities present one problem which wisdom tries to examine. In view of many life-worlds it is important to distinguish between different processes in organized or manufactured reality. One problem between different interpretations and approaches arise from notions of “reality” and whether such notions even exist. Through his concept of Life-worlds, Husserl took this into consideration. Is there a reality one can refer to or are we speaking only from our interpretations of interpretations? Is there something to share which has some form of universal aspects? Husserl’s take on this is yes, there is something we all ultimately share which is not subject to our interpretations. While this phenomenologically informed meta-structural and meta-physical question is too large to be considered here in full, for the purpose here, reality is something one is socially, psychologically, cognitively and physically in touch with in one’s everyday life – what we individually, socially and in organisations experience. These experiences are not only linguistic, but also bodily and emotionally engaging. For organisations beyond persons as part of it, this can also be legally and structurally defined. Thus, I

take as a working hypothesis that there is some form of shared reality based on which one makes interpretations and against which we make assumptions of wisdom.

4.4 Different boundaries and their effect on organizational wisdom

If it is so that systems need to ‘know’ before acting, organisational wisdom is either impossible or it needs to be brought in by individual actions or individuals. One problem with knowledge and wisdom is who or what forces an organisation to apply either or both? Often it may be that organisations are by no means lacking in knowledge or wisdom, but they are lacking in carrying these out – action based on knowledge or wisdom is sidelined for reasons they consider more compelling.

Organization system boundaries relating to above primary tasks concern time, task, sentience, space and technology. The sixth boundary, understanding, was added by Mattila (2008), because in hermeneutic approaches understanding plays an important boundary linking other boundaries in the lived experience. Whether these also play part in wisdom or wise organisations, is explored here. A short explanation of each boundary is as follows (Mattila, 2008; 2009):

- 1) *Time boundary*: refers to mental constructs (how something is perceived or taken for granted) about periods and intervals. These constructs can be accounting year, festival days and calendars, assumptions about birth, death; time as resource, time as a dateline within which to achieve something, etc.
 - 2) *Space boundary*: refers to social, cultural and intergenerational assumptions about territories arising from where one lives, structures of family and society, notions of personal, private, social and collegiate spaces; location reserved by a task group for its work to be safely conducted.
 - 3) *Task boundary*: refers to the basis and logic of why task systems are organised for normative work around value creation for which a group coalesces and roles arise.
 - 4) *Technology boundary*: refers to technical means of doing useful things, labour use, distribution of work, skills needs, as assumptions of technological levels in another space, either overtly or covertly, and roles, task allocation and capabilities needed for task engagement, and task partitioning.
 - 5) *Sentience boundary*: refers to the quality of relatedness of group members in a group to each other and pictures carried about this affecting inclusion/exclusion and cultural distance when the other is perceived as Other.
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6) *Understanding boundary*: refers to the process where something is made explicit, into awareness and shared with the group in a way that the group can then engage with it and try to understand it. This aspect of understanding supplements and holds together the other five boundaries, because a need to have an interpretation element based on serving and sharing is present. In this boundary, the frames, shifts and expansions are most important.

Boundaries organize our perceptions, inform us of boundary conditions and crossings and provide emotional evidence on the status of self and the group. We as systems react to any boundary changes and that reaction is important in understanding how wisdom presents itself in organizations and how shadows are experienced.

4.5 The importance of boundaries in wisdom

Boundaries in open systems are supposed to be permissible and roles are multiple and changing, leading to both conscious and unconscious processes through various interactions. Boundaries, their rigidities and flexibilities, have been central in understanding task group challenges (Bion, 1961). Tentative “working hypotheses” (as reflection points) raised by persons, groups or organisations, can be researched and verified or refuted in practice. Unlearning and learning as processes are linked to capabilities that require changes in attitudes beyond mere skill enhancement: there is also a possibility of non-learning, since such process is by no means guaranteed, as Cook and Yanow (1993) and Antonacopoulou (1998, 2004) point out. Different boundaries are usually noticed when such boundary is met, crossed or at junctions of them – when there is a felt discomfort.

Boundaries circumscribe processes that enable and organise experiences. A task is focus of attention or action or both, and a boundary forms around it regardless of its time dimension. For example, a short term work group within organisation(s) will form its own NPT, EPT, PPT and HPT in relation to its home organisation, but these are not necessarily the same (Mattila, 2008). Each activity is slightly different even within the same organisation due to its people and their rate and focus of engagement. Therefore, each organisation may have multiple PTs functioning at the same time, creating layers of activities and meanings. These tasks can be given, discovered or experienced.

Until now, this paper has discussed what open systems may mean and how it can constitute experience and what in this experience can be explored and what are the existing frameworks. The next part of the paper tries to link this into why studies in wise organisations or wise leaders need to adhere to organisational behaviour as well. Following the lead of many people considered as wise (either practically or theoretically), people spend considerable time in reviewing and reflecting on

their experiences and knowledge through the process of introspection. This brings back the discussion whether by considering lateral knowledge only, wisdom can be acquired. In knowing processes (Polanyi, 1961), managing roles and self-authority plays a vital role.

Consideration Three: A wise person/organisation can examine, accept and work with phenomenal aspects and shadow elements.

5 Managing Roles and Authority

Having introduced boundaries, ‘authority’ and ‘activity’ as two related concepts, need revisiting. An organisation is populated by people with their respective tasks individually and in various groups, which may or may not span the so called organisational boundary. Any person is assigned and takes up a role within her/his role space and role-sets. Roles are assigned authority. While authority can refer to a status or position in the role set (Merton, 1957) or role space, here it is referred to as engagement with task in three ways: 1) Delegation of authority; 2) Taking up and using authority in relation to role(s) and task(s); 3) Holding authority or pushing it to others (often in relation to ‘management’ as a collectivity).

Delegation of authority happens in multiple levels from role specific authority to assigned short term tasks using systemic self-control and prudence. Taking up and using one’s self-authority refers to courage. Holding authority or pushing it to others refers to justice. Authority questions arise when boundaries are in question or when tasks need to be assigned. For example, when organisation is under pressure of reviewing its systems through new inputs. This may happen by inclusion of people with different role expectations or experiences that give the system a legitimate possibility to review its functions. From this perspective, a wise organisation reviews itself, its systems and structures which relate to primary tasks, boundaries and authority – not just roles related to these. It is an organisational ‘growth’ process not in quantity but in quality. In this respect, organisations need more capabilities (*phronesis*), not only skills (*techne*).

The call for self-authority to check realities that are differently constructed may lead to unexpected fears and insecurities. Initial chaos is a natural process, as Rice (1963) already noted. Self-authority then deals with this “chaos” described above and how uncertainty and ambiguity can be held or “contained” (Bion, 1961, 1970, 1985; Zinkin, 1989), by “negative capability” (French, 2001). This is related to being able to hold what Klein (1985) referred as “depressive position”. It is depressive, because a group or persons need to hold variety of feelings until these are resolved. An example of this is when an organisation becomes frustrated at the apparent lack of progress, but cannot really

pinpoint where this problem is. Such a situation is ambiguous (time, technology, understanding boundaries) and may evoke or precipitate anxiety, because organisation members are necessarily in touch with environments other than the organisation.

6 The Matrix of ‘Us’ and ‘Phronesis’

We consider here that illusions and fantasies are human properties brought in by seeming or real complexity. Roles, role spaces and role-sets all belong to the matrix of open systems without which task boundaries cannot exist in goal oriented (or seeking) organisations. Moreno (1964) interestingly sees roles as constituting one’s self, and not the other way round. In open systems where people influence each other, are being influenced, exchange feelings, emotions, words, material goods etc., defences, preferences, inclusions and exclusions arise. At times, these are hidden, sometimes explicitly expressed for example in form of wishes and hopes, values and beliefs – whether explicit or implicit. All in all, this points to a complex system of interrelations which may influence how phronesis is being interpreted.

6.1. Phronesis, virtues and organizational life

Phronesis cannot be discussed without reviewing what Plato wrote about the so called ‘cardinal virtues’: "Wisdom is the chief and leader: next follows temperance; and from the union of these two with courage springs justice. These four virtues take precedence in the class of divine goods" (Plato, *Laws*, I:631). What is noteworthy is that cardinal as a concept comes from *cardo*, a hinge or a turning point. Becoming “virtuous” is to engage with a turning process. Further, Plato distinguished between dialectics (method of inquiry) and rhetoric (method of persuasion), e.g. between his dialectic and the sophists. A phronetic person always inquires himself or dialectically with a person of knowledge, never believing only what is being told – however eloquently (through epideixis or show of praise or blame). Although in some matters the principle of insufficient reason (Bruns, 2002, p. 60 refers to Blumenberg) is unavoidably present, it is through the faculties that one reaches a judgement.

Practical judgement for Plato takes into consideration particulars - the changing, the ambiguous, the unreliable - based on the idea of ‘Divided Line’ (four different levels of knowledge/understanding). It is a way of being reason-*able* – able to reason. Plato, in many ways, saw phronesis from a pedagogic perspective, not necessarily theoretic. It is also noteworthy that Stern (1997) brings in the aspect that to be wise one needs to be aware of one’s need to know. Another perspective Stern (1997) brings in through the Statesman is the problem of wisdom or wise people in the community:

whether communities accept the wisdom of the wise, or whether the wise needs to limit her/his wisdom. This he refers to by stating that “*the reliance on the old, the trusted, and the ancestral requires the community to look askance at innovation of any kind, political or technological*” (Stern 1997, p. 272). If this process holds true with regard to wisdom, it might also present a problem for organizational renewal in organisations that are based on group identities.

Aristotle saw Phronesis as “practical wisdom” where knowing and doing were interconnected. Aristotle also divides wisdom into two: *sophia* and *phronesis*, where the first refers to episteme, the other to practical wisdom. This practical wisdom is also twofold, as *techne* (rule based knowing what is, or how to make) and *phronesis* (moral knowledge based on particular, case by case, situations). What Aristotle brings out is that regardless of unpredictability of situations, a phronetic person is able to choose right action and thus is being “practically wise”. But this “practical wisdom” denotes also morals.

6.2 Practical wisdom and hermeneutic understanding

Building on these thinkers, Gadamer (2000) re-introduced this important concept in his Philosophical Hermeneutics. This concept has two dimensions. (a) bringing forth the importance of practice, and (b) ethics. For Gadamer (2000; see also Bruns, 2002), phronesis is more of a mode of piloting than theoretical construction or instrumental control. It is a mode of being, an existential insight into a particular case. In this sense it is also a play, where a person enters, a theatre of ethics and values, where the “me” becomes the other in the event of experience. This brings together the Platonian and Aristotelian approaches by linking them into our being as persons with cognitive minds. The ontological nature of phronesis is thus always ultimately connected to others. For example, organisations do not exist in vacuum, and the notion of stakeholders (Freeman, 1984) need to incorporate ontological aspects as well. Still, one needs to consider practical wisdom also in the context of self-interest and what does self-interest really imply. Russell (1950) puts this succinctly in his Nobel Lecture of 1950: “*If men were actuated by self-interest, which they are not - except in the case of a few saints - the whole human race would cooperate*”. What he points out is that to be really interested in the self, one needs to take others into account too. If this is what self-interest is, we need to revisit our notions of altruism as well. Even with historical baggages and future hopes.

In terms of understanding historical consciousness and tradition, which to Gadamer (2000) are ontological, practice can also be regarded as a part of experiential learning and action research traditions (Cassell & Johnson 2006; Costello, 2005; Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Reason & Bradbury,

2001). In action research, the “*fine texture, the tensions, the heat, the contradictory sensations, the subtle postures, the negotiations, the interconnections*” (Fineman, 2004, p. 724) become part of the researcher and researched as a whole.

Consideration Four: A wise person/organisation is able to examine and build hermeneutical insights into questions of value, experiences and interpretations.

7 Practical Wisdom and Experiences

In a previous research (Mattila, 2008), the author referred to the noteworthiness of some practices having their roots in experiential learning and psychotherapy (Reason & Bradbury, 2001), and “traditional knowledge” (Mathur, 2003) with its Guru-Chela traditions based on experiential learning and oral traditions (such as the Vedas). In oral traditions, written forms of expressed knowledge have been considered inferior, because they are necessarily stale, limiting, discrete and fixed in time (Mathur, 2003). These traditions have expressed what is considered ‘wise’ and who can be considered as such. Often, it has been superior knowledge as Gadamer (2000) puts it. In the times of the Vedas, superiority was linked to understanding life and its meaning from a holistic point of view and wise men and women were assumed to have knowledge that could help others lead ‘good life’. Concepts such as dharma, gave indications of what is wise (=leads to flourishing) and what is not (=leads to diminishing).

This concept in relation to wisdom/good is discussed at length in the Indian Epic Mahabharata, an epic which is about eight times the size of Illiad. In the Mahabharata, it is reflected what is wise and what is good when basic foundations of life have been violated but correcting them may invoke evils that no-one wishes to undertake. Are there just and wise decisions in cases where none of the choices are acceptable nor wanted? This discussion and its philosophical and real effects can be placed in most situations where wisdom of a choice is not easily found or easily defensible. The ‘good life’ discussions (as social relations) were still central in the Greek city state, but have been overcome by economical discussions (as economic relations). It seems that while the discussions do not get resolved by time, their context and relevance needs revisiting. In the 20th century, links between experiential learning and role of language affecting understanding of social systems gained attention, but at the same time, non-linguistic experience remained on the periphery. In this sense, an integrative approach (Follett, 1941), which refers to new solutions, can be taken to broaden our perspectives.

7.1 Wisdom, experience and practice

In group oriented action research, a researcher (or a group of them) uses “the Self” as an instrument or sounding board for feelings, ideas, images and metaphors to arise. If such a process is conducted by a leader/manager, and the goal is learning, then one would expect the leader/manager to be at least knowledgeable and at best wise. This is important in times when activities are still forming and where high levels of ambiguity exist (Mattila, 2008), and which Daft and Weick (1984: 291) bring out in their process of enacting in unanalysable, active environments. Also, while it is claimed that we live in post-industrialised, instrumental and secular world (Case and Gosling, 2007), this actually holds true for minority, i.e., for one, religion can be shown influencing many decisions, even in the so called secular societies; two, many societies are not secular when it comes to beliefs and values.

Audi (2009) emphasises that one needs to look at how societies are constructed e.g. in terms political philosophies to uncover processes that enforce or reduce rights, privacy etc. In abstract terms we may consider actions as “organisationally wise”, but the “wisdom outside” runs contrary to it. For any theories, it is important to bring in these values and beliefs as constituting the reality, which is to some extent based on traditions, to some extent constructed by new orientations, fads and rethinkings. Notions on wisdom will depend also on what is perceived as wise. For example, legends, epics and myths may still represent living expectations.

7.2 Wisdom, uncertainty and situations

The difference between ambiguity and uncertainty (or equivocality, Daft & Lengel, 1986; Daft & Weick, 1984; Weick, 2001) is important in such cases. Boundaries are needed to contain (Bion, 1970, 1985) ambiguity, which is a source of anxiety and stress. The aim is to invoke insights and dialogue based on “working hypotheses” raised by the researcher or participants in the here-and-now for mutual consideration and re-reflection. Researchers provide a medium for “external stakeholder articulations” (Carter et al., 2008, p. 94), and use themselves as bridges (Wenger, 2003) to disseminate knowing (Polanyi, 1961). Such research is context specific, may be transferable to other contexts, but is not generalisable in conventional ways.

How much is practical wisdom related to practice? If practical wisdom refers to situations where new solutions are created or new thinking is needed, there is little relation if practice is seen as routines and creating patterns, or “force for stability” as noted by Gherardi (2006). If, however, practice is seen as action and doing, then the relation can exist if there is a link to processes of knowing and

practising, learning and unlearning, and re-installing the idea of telos – a goal and purpose (Antonacopoulou, 2009).

8 Building Wisdom on Hermeneutic Processes

Examples show that those in strategic positions who can invoke these hermeneutic processes regardless of their structural pressures gain more in group and organisational learning (Mathur & Mattila, 2007; Mattila, 2008; Mattila & Mathur, 2009). Hermeneutic process thus addresses, but does not limit itself to double-loop learning (Argyris and Schön, 1978; critique see e.g. Rowley and Gibbs, 2008). What is different in hermeneutic primary task and double-loop learning, is the use of experiences as the mode of interpretations and use of working hypotheses. This process embraces both learning and unlearning, because insights that arise are not only ‘positive’ (conforming), but may bring out also aspects that the organisation wishes to cover. Therefore, the linkage between awareness (through bodily, emotionally and cognitive processes) and learning needs attention.

Another problem is reliance only on language. It is believed that language does not mirror reality, but enables reflections, since realities are in most part experiential (not abstract), where hermeneutic processes are open-ended. This means no experience is a definite one in the sense that one experience opens oneself to others. Language can function as a window, but this window as many human experiences show, may need cleaning from time to time; may get broken, changed or remoulded – it can also be blinded. Therefore, centrality of practice in hermeneutic endeavour is to find out what is happening – the state of the organisation, group or people (or any system). This enables access to those processes in the lived experience that are outside normative management behaviour and learning akin to Daft and Weick (1984) who regard an organisation as an interpretation system.

In management theorizing, the role of rhetoric as persuasion (e.g. Hartelius & Browning, 2008) has gained ground. It is important to note that while rhetoric is used in organisations, it often refers to a use of language with a goal. For this reason, Plato pointed to difference between the Sophists and his dialectics: the former as using language for their own purposes (achieving a goal for themselves, such as political power), the latter in gaining wisdom. This distinction is important to note, because Aristotle’s idea of Phronesis does not emphasise this. Plato’s notions rely on his description of different levels of “knowledge” (the Divided Line). But it is noteworthy that in the Gadamerian interpretation of rhetoric, it is a mode of responsibility, not purely a mode of knowledge. It is the situation that determines the rhetorics (Bruns, 2002). The dialogic approach Gadamer (2000) takes

includes actors in the action: hermeneutics is always, for him, at the same time ontological since reason is historically bound.

9 Wise Leadership or Wise Organisations or Wise People?

Consideration One: A wise person/organisation can examine experiences without becoming defensive or overpowered by it, and is able to let different interpretations of these exist plurally and independently and view itself in relation to its surroundings thus living in reciprocal sense.

This first consideration highlighted the problem that often organizations become overpowered by boundary conditions because there is little or no hermeneutic processes in place and the phenomenal world takes over the existential and primary tasks. In the phenomenal primary task that which we do not know or do not wish to acknowledge becomes the driving force.

Rowley and Gibbs (2008) introduce the idea of practically wise organisation building on the idea of phronesis and arguing that wise organisations necessarily need to emphasise also ethics. They practically re-present what Pondy and Mitroff (1979) and Daft and Weick (1984) wrote: need for higher level actions that are not rule based, e.g. do not rely on certainty. What all these scholars bring out is the aspect that some decisions and judgements do not have readymade paths to trod, but represent more an event of truth (or *aletheia* as Heidegger puts it), an opening. Therefore, Rowley and Gibbs (2008) argue, practical wisdom is needed, because it relies on the particular, contextual and subjective – not only rational, objective and known. However, it needs to be noted that “practically wise organisation” may mean many things, e.g. almost wise, practically oriented (praxis), and practical wisdom.

Consideration Two: A wise person/organisation should be able to comprehend how boundaries organise or disable functions, emotions and practices.

While it is known that persons have bodies and emotions along with cognitive, psychological and mental aspects, in competitive environments these are often subdued to limited notions of profit, value maximation or transactional values. Organizations need to examine also how to build on the notion of weak ties as well as strong ties (Granovetter, 1973). In many cases it is felt that strong ties are more important and relevant than weak ties, but organizations miss out on creative parts and new information in this process.

It is perhaps being in the “stillness” (Chatterjee, 2006, p. 155) of oneself, but at the same time connected with what already is being presented from the stillness. The aspects of relationality, unity in reality and attention (Chatterjee, 2006) are experiences that need to be looked at when speaking of wisdom and wise organisations, not just wise leaders. Stillness is being there, here, everywhere at an any moment. In this sense it is not following anything, it is.

Consideration Three: A wise person/organisation can examine, accept and work with phenomenal aspects and shadow elements.

The shadow of a person or an organization is an interesting way of depicting the underscurrents and the informal organization which in many cases actually drives the system. It is almost like a parasite infecting a host which then becomes driven by the parasite, and not by itself. However, in the case of organization, the shadow is a part of the whole which is not recognized and is outside the awareness of most.

What kinds of organisations are called wise? A wise organisation should embrace what Antonacopoulou (2009) sees as co-creating actionable knowledge. Perhaps it should be a self-aware system that reflects on its actions and results of its actions to itself and others. Pondy and Mitroff (1979: 3) recall that at some point direction was drawn away from “*higher mental functions of human behaviour that are relevant to understanding organisation*”. One such higher mental function is wisdom.

In Plato’s and Aristotle’s time, modern organisations did not exist beyond the army and the administration. We can only hypothesise what e.g. Plato could have thought of modern, liquid societies. His experiences in Syracuse (see the Seventh Letter) could offer some initial thoughts. For one, it seems based on this letter that Plato considered wisdom to be part of any leader’s repertoire; Two, he underestimated the power of influence, greed and desires – the forces of hardcore survival instincts and power structures. Plato’s efforts in turning Syracuse into a state led by a true philosopher king failed miserably. One cannot only concentrate on leaders, whether just or not; nor does deep learning always occur. The whole system needs attention and cannot be done by only one person. This goes beyond considering only “culture”, “values” or other implicit or explicit implications into making interpretations and then reflections based on these.

Consideration Four: A wise person/organisation is able to examine and build hermeneutical insights into questions of value, experiences and interpretations.

Hermeneutical insights build on the systems capability and capacity to work with even painful insights which help it to grow, change and reflect. Instead of being driven by outside expectations, the system is able to unravel its own design in dialogue with its environments.

The same idea can be seen in Freire's (1970) notion of action-reflection, which needs both to be present for balanced activities. According to Freire (1970), action without reflection produces activism, and reflection without action produces verbalism. Based on this, wise organisations could be seen engaging in both. In this way, dialogical approaches are central for any organisation, which calls itself wise.

While organisations might be ready to engage with positive aspects of phronesis, they may not be able to really engage with the intense darkness of human behaviour and forced decision making processes. In understanding what corrupts processes or primary tasks (Chapman and Eastoe, 2006, p. 119) – and not only people – one needs from time to time step out of the comfort zone or become an organisational fool. We also need to review the role of environments in and across systems: It is highly unlikely that one organisation can embrace what we call wisdom in isolation if this wisdom cannot be sustained. The role of trust in intergroup relations is important, but cannot be built only through meetings (Mathur, 2007).

Conclusion

One of the problems concerning wisdom has been that it has mainly dealt with individuals and not collectivities. Only lately, there have been attempts to look at larger entities, mainly through virtual collectivities and groups. This has resurfaced the question whether a collectivity can in true sense be wise or do we also need to change our understanding of wisdom as a property belonging to an entity. It is also important to build on the understanding of shadow in groups and that understanding has been the focus of much of the psychoanalytic understanding of group processes. Therefore, the above discussion on boundaries contributed to examine where and when we get information about possible processes we need to become aware of.

Phronesis as practical wisdom in organisations can be studied with action research methods with reference to managing boundary conditions and making sense of them. Open systems that build on notions of primary tasks and boundaries are a potential arena to understand how experiences take shape, are captured and raise possibilities for us to examine what belongs to the system, what does not, and what can be a basis of that which we may call “wisdom”. Through this we may expand the notion of capabilities to include negative capabilities too. Boundaries and primary tasks are not

panacea to solve all problems related to wisdom, but these offer one way of distinguishing where, when and in what way problems may arise.

Another aspect of wisdom is the problem of morals. While wise people are expected to act morally, often that wisdom does not come from existing *sensus communis*, but from the non-conventional approach. Wise people may be organizational mystics, geniuses, gurus or fools. Are they expected to be uniform in confirmity? It is difficult to imagine wisdom without non-conformity, because if everyone agrees to what is being said by a “wise person”, is s/he wise or just a person? What I find problematic here is the expectation that “everyone should be like me”. Taking the open systems framework, one needs to highlight that wise organisations also need wise environments to avoid the so called crab mentality. There are multiple processes that need to be addressed in organisational reality (as the everyday experience), such as transference, projection and introjection processes. There is a need to discuss what wisdom means or could mean in a society run by consumerism, wants and desires, where organisations play a significant part.

And finally, wisdom requires a different kind of contract, namely phenomenological one, where the relationship with what is, is tempered with a relationship of possibilities. More often than not wisdom in organization does exist but it has difficulty surfacing. There we need communities of support which practice the kind of hermeneutical understanding processes that were the focus of this paper.

This Working Paper builds on a Conference Paper presented at EGOS 2010 Colloquium in Lisbon. The author wishes to thank all those who provided feedback in the Wisdom Stream. She also wishes to thank Professor Ajeet Mathur, Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad, for his valuable comments. This Working Paper is part of an ongoing research project on Wisdom and Knowing in Organizations financed by IIM Bangalore.

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ⁱ Mad hatter (from Alice of Wonderland) experiences refer to those moments which are experienced as absolutely absurd.
