

PRACTICE WISDOM



# An Inquiry Into Practice Wisdom

Phillip Dybicz

## ABSTRACT

Social work is unique among the social sciences in adopting the term practice wisdom. Why was the word wisdom chosen? Why didn't the terms practice knowledge or practical experience arise in its stead? This article examines various definitions of practice wisdom that have been previously offered. Then, turning to the work of Socrates, it examines the nature of wisdom. This leads to considering that the application of social work values, over that of efficacy of interventions, is what lies at the heart of practice wisdom.

Practice wisdom has long held a peculiar status in the field of social work: It is both simultaneously recognized and ignored. It is a term with which every social worker is familiar, and practitioners will readily admit that they draw upon it often. Yet it has often remained beneath the notice of the educational and research community, as if underserving of attention. One example of this lack of notice is the fact that *The Social Work Encyclopedia* (Edwards & Hopps, 1995) contains no entry for practice wisdom.

Fortunately, *The Social Work Dictionary* (Barker, 1999) contains a definition that serves as a useful starting point for an inquiry. It is curious to note, however, that the heading is enclosed in quotation marks, as if the term were a less than valid concept and is thus included with reluctance:

**"practice wisdom"** A term often used by social workers to describe the accumulation of information, assumptions, ideologies, and judgments that have seemed practically useful in fulfilling the expectations of the job. Practice wisdom is often equated with "common sense" and may or may not be validated when subjected to empirical or systematic analysis and may or may not be consistent with prevailing theory. (pp. 370–371)

One aspect of note in this definition is how practice wisdom is viewed within the framework of epistemology: It is placed in a role subordinate to that of empirical analysis. Another feature of interest is that there is no distinction between practice wisdom and practice knowledge (i.e., knowledge gained from practice experience). There is no entry for practice knowledge, and the above definition seems to imply that practice wisdom and practice knowledge are one and the same.

Searching *Social Work Abstracts*, I could find only a single article (Klein & Bloom, 1995) whose major focus concerned defining practice wisdom. However, over the past 20 years, 32 articles were found that dealt with the topic in a significant manner. Of these, 18 roughly conformed to the above definition of practice wisdom as being equivalent to knowledge. Six related, yet distinct, definitions of practice wisdom arise from the remaining 14 articles (Azzarto, 2001; Deroos, 1990; Dolgoff & Skolnik, 1996; Goldstein, 1990; Gowdy, 1994; Imre, 1984, 1985; Kayser, 1995; Klein & Bloom, 1995; Raynor, 1984; Scott, 1990; Sheppard, 1995; Tyson, 1994; Zeira & Rosen, 2000). This article seeks to examine and then expand upon these definitions by exploring what is meant by *wisdom* in the term *practice wisdom*. It is my intention to explore the ethos

of wisdom as captured by the figure of Socrates (depicted in the writings of Plato). This wisdom, when applied to the concept practice wisdom, will hopefully yield some useful distinctions between practice knowledge and practice wisdom.

Ironically, for Socrates, wisdom is the ability to recognize his ignorance: "I seemed likely therefore to be wiser than him [a public figure reputed to be wise] by virtue of a small thing, this very point, that what I didn't know I didn't think I knew either" (Plato, n.d., 1997 trans., p. 49). By recognizing his ignorance, Socrates created an internal dialogue that served to guide his inquiry into matters. McAvoy (1999) adeptly describes the nature of this process:

He can divide himself up into two Socrates who are continually at loggerheads, one a violent questioner who seems to know and not know, the other a gentler creature who seems to be forever in perplexity, but who is prepared to endure it and the attendant abuse, in the reasonable belief that he might be benefited by it. (p. 21)

Thus, adopting the spirit and method of Socratic inquiry, I begin this inquiry by stating that I don't know what practice wisdom is. Hence, I will not be stating any conclusions in this introduction, but rather, raising questions. It is my intention that this paper serve as a medium to conduct this inquiry in a public space, and therefore, invite dialogue rather than debate. To reflect this sense of dialogue, I will often use the personal pronouns *I* and *we*. Finally, as noted by McAvoy (1999), a key aspect to this line of inquiry is that one's professing of ignorance is truly sincere; otherwise, the method simply becomes an artifice to reach a predetermined conclusion. Of course, the organization needed to write a paper makes the following effort more of a recreation of a line of inquiry, rather than the actual effort undergone before writing this manuscript. However, my sincerity still remains; it is not something, I believe, that need be lost through revisiting the inquiry.

Another quality ascribed to Socrates is that he often would quibble on little things. If one begins with the assumption that one does not know, there must be some reference or starting point in which to begin one's inquiry. Thus, Socrates would engage someone at length to secure an agreed-upon definition of supposedly innocuous terms before proceeding to the inquiry of main concern. Following his example, I will begin this inquiry by adopting definitions of both knowledge and intelligence. Webster's Dictionary (1989) contains the following entry under *knowledge*: "1. acquaintance with facts, truths, or principles, as from study or investigation;... 3. acquaintance or familiarity gained by sight, experience, or report;... 6. that which is or may be known; information." From these definitions, I am assuming that knowledge (i.e., as information) is substantive in nature in that it can be recorded/captured (in a book, memory, etc.) and consequently given/communicated to another (as information). It is also information that the possessor understands (i.e., acquaintance with, not a meaningless set of data).

Webster's (1989) defines *intelligence* as follows: "1. capacity for reasoning, understanding, and for similar forms of mental activity; aptitude in grasping truths, facts, meanings, etc." From this definition, I assume that intelligence is used to grasp information, make it understandable to oneself, and thus convert it into knowledge. (Intelligence may be more than this, but I am taking it as being at least this). Thus, if intelligence is taken to be the ability to grasp information and make it understandable, then wisdom must be something different.

As practice wisdom is focus of our inquiry, I do not offer a tentative definition for wisdom at this time. Beginning with the above definitions, I am instead ready to begin with a question for us to consider: "Is practice wisdom the same as practice knowledge?" This seems like a good question to lead our inquiry into what others have to say concerning practice wisdom.

## A Debate in Epistemology

As far back as the 1950s, practice wisdom was being described via its juxtaposition with empirical research. Boehm (1958) commented as follows:

The scientific base of social work consists of three types of knowledge: (a) tested knowledge, (b) hypothetical knowledge that requires transformation into tested knowledge, and (c) assumptive knowledge (or "practice wisdom") that requires transformation into hypothetical and thence into tested knowledge. (p. 11)

According to this definition, practice wisdom is seen as equivalent to knowledge (i.e., assumptive knowledge). Practice wisdom is also viewed as a lesser form of knowledge, subordinate to the validated claims of empirical research. Thus, this view of practice wisdom is in alignment with the definition offered by the current edition of *The Social Work Dictionary*.

With the advent of postmodernism, however, positivism fell under a steady barrage of criticism in the field of social work, and a heated debate on epistemology has ensued in our profession. As part of that debate, a number of authors began to critique the subordinate role in which practice wisdom was placed in relation to empirical research (Heinman, 1981; Imre, 1984; Raynor, 1984; Ruckdeschel & Farris, 1981). Buoyed up by the movement to validate other ways of knowing, practice wisdom began to receive greater notice within the research literature, and six new definitions have arisen. These six new definitions are most clearly explicated by the following authors: DeRoos (1990), Goldstein (1990), Gowdy (1994), Imre (1985), Klein and Bloom (1995), and Scott (1990).

One definition that has been offered describes practice wisdom as tacit knowledge (Imre, 1985; Scott, 1990). Drawing upon the work of Michael Polanyi, Imre (1985) explored the role of tacit knowledge in social work, by contrasting it with empirical knowledge. She described knowledge as follows:

Knowledge can be seen to contain focal, or explicit content, of which the knower is clearly aware, and subsidiary, or tacit, content which is being used to give coherence and meaning to the focus which is the center of attention. (p. 139)

Although she never directly defines practice wisdom, Imre clearly implies that tacit knowledge is practice wisdom: “There is a need for ... a perspective which would not disparage either the kind of knowledge often meant by practice wisdom or that which can be known through empirical techniques” (p. 137). Thus, with this definition, practice wisdom is still equivalent to knowledge; however, it is a little more than simply conscious knowledge gained from practice experience. And yet, on the fringes of her description of tacit knowledge is the hint that it involves not only knowledge, but also its application. Imre uses the example of a piano player to illustrate the concept of tacit knowledge; while playing, he is not concentrating on all the technical components of making music: “What his hands are doing is one of the tacit components of meaningful piano playing” (p. 139).

Scott (1990) also used the term *tacit knowledge* to describe practice wisdom: “The tacit form of practice knowledge, or what social workers traditionally have called practice wisdom ...” (p. 565). Again, this defines practice wisdom as knowledge, either a subsidiary of or equivalent to practice knowledge. The focus of her article is a call to extract testable propositions from practice wisdom. However, on the fringes of her argument is also a view of practice wisdom as something more than just a product (i.e., knowledge). She refers to practice wisdom as a process of induction, and hence, a process that generates knowledge: “However, practice wisdom is better understood as a process of incipient induction” (p. 564). Thus, with these two authors, new territory is staked out for practice wisdom at opposite ends of the spectrum: as the generation of knowledge and as the application of knowledge. The commonality, however, is that they both hint toward practice wisdom involving a process, rather than just being knowledge.

DeRoos (1990) and Gowdy (1994) started from the point of practice wisdom being tacit knowledge, yet each then moved to directly emphasize tacit knowing rather than knowledge, and hence, each described practice wisdom more as a process than a product (i.e., knowledge). DeRoos writes the following:

Our knowing is ordinarily tacit, implicit in our patterns of action and in our feel for the stuff with which we are dealing. It seems right to say that our knowing is in our actions.

In social work practice, the basis for this kind of knowledgeable, effective action is sometimes called “practice wisdom.” (p. 282)

DeRoos went on to describe practice wisdom as being composed of two components: knowing-in-action and reflecting-in-action. Both these elements of practice wisdom reflect an effort at problem solving: “If knowing-in-action refers to our practice habits, reflecting-in-action refers to our ability to recognize the uniqueness of each situation and to adjust our problem-solving accordingly” (p. 284). Thus DeRoos defined practice wisdom as simultaneously having knowledge and applying it to solve the problem at hand: “Practice wisdom is realized when the social worker, operating through the practice model, is able to discern what is common and unique in a practice situation and to adequately resolve problems for which there is no preexisting solution” (p. 285). Hence, here we have a clear distinction between practice knowledge and practice wisdom: Practice wisdom involves the application of practice knowledge.

And yet, is the application of knowledge considered wisdom? Or is it considered intelligence? Thinking of an ordinary example, if someone is given a math test in school to determine their knowledge of the subject, a high score is commonly interpreted as a mark of intelligence, not wisdom. Also, the process of applying knowledge would seem to fit with the definition of intelligence we adopted earlier—that of grasping information. If one understands information, and thus has knowledge, one should be able to demonstrate that understanding by applying one’s knowledge. DeRoos himself seemed to be of this mindset, using a quote referring to intelligence—“‘Intelligent’ cannot be defined in terms of ‘intellectual’ or ‘knowing how’” (Ryle, 1949; quoted in Schon, 1983; quoted in DeRoos, 1990, p. 281)—to introduce his section labeled “Practice Wisdom.”

However, as before, on the fringes of this description of practice wisdom, there seems to be a hint at something more. In describing the process of reflecting-in-action, DeRoos spoke about recognizing the limitations of one’s knowledge:

However, our knowledge is tentative. Lacking omniscience, we do not know if the available knowledge applies. We simply assume it does. We do not know if the available knowledge is true. We assume it is. Thus, however knowledgeable we may assume we are, every act we perform is a trial with the possibility of an error in outcome. (p.283)

DeRoos saw the above as a step in the problem-solving process; but he adopted a broad definition of problem solving. As he stated in his conclusion,

At the heart of this process of developing practice wisdom is a process that is more basic than formalized methods of learning and problem solving; it is a process of discovery and action related to one’s living effectively in the world. (p. 285)

Thus, according to DeRoos, in addition to applying knowledge, practice wisdom involves recognizing the limitations of

one's knowledge. In addition, he offered a vaguely defined notion of "living effectively." As our inquiry proceeds, I hope that it will flesh out more fully this notion offered by Deroos.

Gowdy (1994) extended this concept of reflecting-in-action by describing it as being dependent upon two elements: bodily knowledge and participating consciousness. Gowdy saw bodily knowledge as equivalent to knowing-in-action, which in turn was described previously as relating to the application of tacit knowledge. Even more directly than Deroos (1990), Gowdy (1994) stated knowing-in-action as a form of intelligence: "Knowing-in-action holds that intelligence resides within the act of using one's body and mind together to meet some challenging or changing aspect of the environment" (p. 364). Hence, if application of knowledge is a form of intelligence, as it seems reasonable to assume, wisdom must have a different role if it is to be more than mere intelligence or knowledge, a role we have not yet identified.

Gowdy views participating consciousness as something quite different than the application of knowledge:

Participating consciousness recognizes that the universe and all that is in it is alive and interrelated and that people come to know their world through full immersion, participation, and identification with the world ... [excerpt from *The Little Prince*]... This excerpt paints a vivid picture of participating consciousness: Coming to know as unique any aspect of the world is a process in which the heart, as much as the actions of the mind, participates. (p. 365)

As with DeRoos (1990), there is talk of recognition as a part of practice wisdom. For Gowdy (1994), it is recognition of interconnection in the universe. In addition, she offered the idea that one's heart has a role in the use of practice wisdom. As with DeRoos' (1990) offering of "living effectively," however, Gowdy (1994) did not elaborate upon the exact nature or role of the heart in practice wisdom. Thus, as a concept, it is left vague. Clarity in this area is still needed.

As hinted at earlier by Scott (1990), there is also the possibility of practice wisdom involving the generation of knowledge. This is the avenue that Klein and Bloom (1995) chose to explore. They developed a model in which practice wisdom serves as a bridge between scientific/empirical knowledge and practice knowledge. They described two types of output that this interaction yields: "translation of value-driven practice experience into communicable terms" (p. 802) and "translation of scientific findings into practice principles" (p. 802). Thus, Klein and Bloom also viewed practice wisdom as a process (that yields knowledge) rather than something equivalent to practice knowledge: "The result of this transaction is tentative, often unarticulated knowledge ..." (p. 799).

Yet once again, I think we need clarification between what is intelligence and what is wisdom. Earlier, we defined "intelligence" as the ability to convert information into knowledge (i.e. understandable information). In addition, it would seem that knowledge application and knowledge generation are

inextricably linked. The application of knowledge creates experience, which is in turn converted into new knowledge. Thus it seems logical that the same quality—intelligence—guides both the acts of knowledge application and knowledge generation.

Yet, although not reflected in their model, in their definition of practice wisdom, Klein and Bloom seek to capture more than just knowledge generation: "Practice wisdom is defined as a personal and value-driven system of knowledge [generation] that emerges out of the transaction between the phenomenological experience of the client situation and the use of scientific information" (p. 799). Thus, Klein and Bloom seek to strongly underscore the role of values within practice wisdom, best captured by the following quote:

Central to this system of knowledge is a set of principles that incorporates values of the worker and the professional and serves as rules to translate empirical knowledge, prior experiences, and other forms of knowing into present professional actions. (p. 801)

This talk of values may take us into the same territory to which Gowdy (1994) referred when she talked about the heart being involved in practice wisdom, and to which DeRoos (1990) referred by his term "living effectively." It is also noteworthy that talk of values and the heart take us a step away from considerations simply of epistemology.

The final article to be examined in our inquiry is one by Goldstein (1990), in which he advocated for a greater recognition of the role that the humanities play in social work. Goldstein referred to practice wisdom in terms of competency. If we take competency to mean the ability to do something well, it fits well with our current line of inquiry into practice wisdom as a process. By referring to it as a competency, it takes an action-oriented verb (i.e., process) and converts it to a noun—which is how practice wisdom is ordinarily used. Hence, if we now consider practice wisdom to mean the ability to do something well, the question then becomes, "What is the something?" Goldstein describes practice wisdom as an "accretion of knowledge, insights, skill, and values" (p. 41).

It is interesting to note that Goldstein (1990) also mentioned the role of values, along with a number of other things. This quote, I think, serves to highlight one of the challenges involved in defining practice wisdom—separating out the many items that are often attributed to it (as a result of the term currently being loosely used), which are not a mark of wisdom but rather intelligence, or something else. And as of yet, we are still left with the question, "What is the relationship of wisdom to intelligence and practice knowledge?"

It must be said again that, except for Klein and Bloom (1995), none of the above authors set out to define practice wisdom as the main focus of their article. Their main focus was to question the dominance of positivism by seeking to legitimize a form of knowing different than empirical findings. Practice wisdom was defined as a step toward achieving this goal. Thus, rather than reflecting research efforts to define elements of wisdom,

practice wisdom has been sucked into the whirlwind of debate that has arisen in social work over epistemology and used as a rallying standard for those advocating alternative ways of knowing. Even Klein and Bloom frame practice wisdom within this debate. However, there has also been talk of values, the heart, and living effectively. Consequently, what appears to have been neglected (ironically, while also being hinted at) is the proposition that practice wisdom transcends the realm of epistemology to include questions of axiology. Socrates (as depicted in the writings of Plato) spoke of values, the heart, and living effectively when inquiring into the nature of wisdom. Examination of his method then, seems like an appropriate venue to continue our inquiry. Although there is a wealth of philosophical thought to be derived from Socrates, one Socratic scholar (McAvoy, 1999) speaks specifically to the relationship between wisdom and epistemology.

### Socrates: Wisdom Through Professing Ignorance

Socrates left no writings of his philosophy. In modern jargon, he was solely a practitioner, not an academic. He would station himself in the agora (marketplace) and engage anyone he met in a dialogue regarding whatever concerned them. His reputation as a philosopher grew, culminating with the oracle at Delphi proclaiming that Socrates was the wisest man in all of Greece. McAvoy (1999) relates that this proclamation puzzled Socrates, as he consistently professed his ignorance on such matters as virtue, wisdom, and care of the soul. His interpretation of this proclamation led him to the following conclusion: If he was wise it was because “what I didn’t know I didn’t think I knew either (Plato, n.d., 1997 trans., p. 49).” So what then was the source of Socrates’ wisdom? One aspect, it seems, is recognizing the limitations of one’s knowledge.

However, according to McAvoy (1999), it is more than simply that:

But we should turn to Socrates and to what he is seeking, which he says is wisdom.... He, like most of his contemporaries, considered it absurd to think we could ever know the total number of stars or grains of sand, but we think we are wiser in being able to approximate. Indeed, the danger is greater for us, for we tend to be more doubtful about the limits of our knowledge, than the extent of our ignorance. (p. 18)

From this description, it appears that recognizing the limits of one’s knowledge (i.e., what one knows and does not know) and recognizing one’s ignorance may be two different things. In philosophy, this view stems from the proposition that while one may know fact, theories, observations, et cetera, one can never know Truth; that is, knowledge cannot capture Truth, only approximate it. McAvoy goes on to state, “Drowning in a swamp of information, we struggle for more solidly grounded genuine knowledge, while ignorant of the wisdom to cope with what we have” (p. 19). So, from this

view, wisdom is the ability to cope with having incomplete knowledge. What does this coping look like? For McAvoy, it is the state of mind that arises through the interaction created between recognizing one’s knowledge and its limitations, and recognizing one’s ignorance. As quoted in part earlier,

[t]his condition of aporia is one Socrates regularly creates and exists in, referring to it as a situation where he cannot agree with himself. He can divide himself up into two Socrates who are continually at loggerheads, one a violent questioner who seems to know and not know [recognizing one’s knowledge and its limitations], the other a gentler creature who seems to be forever in perplexity [recognizing one’s ignorance], but who is prepared to endure it and the attendant abuse, in the reasonable belief that he might be benefited by it. (p. 21)

The important dynamic is how these two elements interact. A stance of just recognizing one’s knowledge leads one down the road of hubris. A stance of just recognizing one’s ignorance leads one to inaction. Thus, as McAvoy notes, “Socrates is concerned to chart a middle course between hubris and servility, for wisdom requires it.... [I]gnorance unrecognized represents the greatest limitation to wisdom, for it prevents one from desiring it” (p. 18).

Thus, the recognition of one’s ignorance does not speak to incapacity, but rather the opposite: “It is the bite or sting that wakes us from our complacency, arouses us to excellence, to learn and discover and inquire” (p. 19). Wisdom, as the interaction between knowledge and ignorance, forces one to respect the process of one’s search for answers. Consequently, this view of wisdom has much to offer in regard to our efforts to define practice wisdom:

Socrates, in seeking clarity and definition, refuses to allow us to ignore the limits [of knowledge], to dispense with the need for wisdom with knowledge. *We have tended to divorce ethics from epistemology* [my emphasis] and lost track of the sense that knowledge is virtue, or that ... recognition of ignorance can transform it [knowledge], and generate wisdom in itself, freeing us from unknown, unrecognized shackles, and making us more just and sound-minded. (p. 19)

As just noted, wisdom is the ability to cope with having incomplete knowledge. How does one cope? By respecting the process of one’s search for and application of answers. This respect arises out of ethics, or values, that guide one’s search. Socrates used the values of honesty and sincerity to guide his search into the meaning of virtue, wisdom, and care of the soul. Social workers seek answers in a search to resolve clients’ problems, and will engage clients in a dialogue to do so. And social work has a well-defined value base in which to guide social workers in this dialogue. Thus, let us now turn to our inquiry back to asking how wisdom (i.e., practice wisdom) operates within social work.

## What is Practice Wisdom?

As mentioned earlier, Deroos (1990) acknowledged that practice wisdom touches upon recognizing the limits of one's knowledge. This would appear to be the first half of the equation leading to a Socratic dialogue, the other half being the recognition of one's ignorance. Two of the articles examined earlier (Goldstein, 1990; Klein & Bloom, 1995) touched upon the link between social work values and practice wisdom. Above, values were seen as guiding this dialogue. Is there a similar dialogue at work within practice wisdom that leads to social work values and ethics arising out of practice?

A study by Dolgoff and Skolnik (1996) examining ethical decision making among social workers speaks loudly to the dynamic of value application arising from practice wisdom. Given an open-ended survey containing six ethical-dilemma vignettes, 147 social workers were asked in what manner they would resolve each (multiple sources for their decision were encouraged and accepted). For the purpose of the survey, the traditional definition of practice wisdom was chosen—knowledge gained from personal experience as well as experiences of supervisors and colleagues. For every single vignette, practice wisdom was cited the most often as the basis for their ethical decision making, receiving an aggregate response rate of 80%. The next closest response—referring to the *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers* [NASW], (1996)—only received an aggregate response rate of 38%.

Not only does this study serve to reinforce this idea that practice wisdom deals with the application of values, but it also helps to distinguish between wisdom and the intellectual application of values (i.e., referring to the *NASW Code of Ethics*). Intellectual application, as stated earlier, is oriented toward problem solving. In this instance, the ethical dilemma is viewed as a problem or crisis; knowledge is sought (*NASW Code of Ethics*) and applied to the problem to achieve a solution. Wisdom, by comparison, speaks toward respecting the process, with values used as a guide to achieve this; this is more reflective of a caretaking style of ethics, as noted by Abramson (1996). Consequently, through maintaining a dialogue geared toward respecting the process, competency in application of values arises. Wisdom itself is the state of mind created by this dialogue, through the interaction between recognizing one's knowledge (and its limitations) and recognizing one's ignorance.

We now have come to a clearer understanding of the interface between practice wisdom and social work values. Enough so that our inquiry at last seems to offer us a definition for practice wisdom:

**practice wisdom** Competency in the application of social work values and guidelines to the helping process in which the social worker and client engage.

This competency arises from a Socratic dialogue between the worker and client, created by the social worker's recognition

of both her or his own and client's knowledge (and limits) interacting with the social worker's recognition of her or his own ignorance.

How would I now reply if someone were to ask me, "What is practice wisdom?" I would answer, "I don't know." Then I would begin a dialogue with the person, seeking agreed-upon reference/starting points with which to begin the inquiry. But for the moment, let us take off the hat of a philosopher and put on that of a social scientist. If we were to choose the above definition of practice wisdom, we could then see how it plays out in a couple of typical dynamics at work in the helping process.

First, let's look at how this definition of practice wisdom might lead to the successful application of self-determination. Allowing clients the freedom to choose their own path is not normally a difficult value for a social worker to respect. However, it may become difficult when the client's choice runs contrary to what the social worker believes is the best course of action. The client may consequently be viewed as uncooperative. This can be a knotty problem for a social worker—the dilemma between autonomy versus beneficence. Autonomy taken too far can lead to professional neglect, whereas forays into beneficence can lead one into paternalism (as many examples in our history, especially early history, have taught us). This struggle, however, stems from the proposition that the social worker "knows" the best course of action.

But if the social worker is able to maintain a recognition of her or his own ignorance within the dialogue established with the client, then the social worker's belief does not become expert knowledge, or Truth; it simply remains knowledge, tentative and open to scrutiny. This does not mean that the social worker simply accepts the client's view of what is best—that would be ignorance operating alone (and lead to professional neglect). Along with not knowing, there is the desire to know. This will lead the social worker to continually explore with the client why the chosen action is believed to be best. Maintaining ignorance lends sincerity to this exploration, until mutual understanding is reached, at which point their line of dialogue is able to move forward. Adding another layer of complexity, we can examine the situation in which the client's involvement is involuntary. In this instance, the social worker's knowledge plays a strong role in communicating to the client what are the particular requirements of the relationship. Beyond this, however, the dynamic of practice wisdom already outlined still applies.

Not only values, but also successful application of guidelines that attend to the process arise from practice wisdom as well. For example, a common maxim in social work is "starting where the client is." As with the application of values, this is not an intellectual problem to be solved, it is something that requires respect for process. So how does practice wisdom help to achieve "starting where the client is?" First, the social worker recognizes her or his knowledge and its limits. Also of great importance is the recognition that the client has valuable knowledge, as well as limits. Finally, there is the recognition of ignorance by the social worker. (If the client achieves this as well, the process goes even more smoothly.) This recognition of ignorance forces the social worker to seek

a starting/reference point at which to begin a dialogue with the client. Thus, agreed-upon definitions of the problem become essential, and as a result of the effort to achieve this, the social worker is able to "start where the client is."

And as stated above, as one continues this dialogue with the client, this recognition of one's ignorance causes a respect for the process, helping one to apply social work values (e.g., self-determination, empowerment, respect for dignity and worth, etc.). In addition, maintaining a recognition of one's ignorance forces one to stay with the client and not move ahead in the inquiry alone (i.e., "This is what I have concluded needs to be done, but the client doesn't see it, or agree.") However, it must be remembered that practice wisdom is not the recognition of ignorance alone. This stance results in the social worker adopting only the client's knowledge of the situation, and thus limits the client's movement toward a problem solution. The social worker's knowledge serves to move the process along toward a problem solution, while also combining with a recognition of ignorance to create a dialogue with the client. Hence, the helping process is characterized by practice wisdom.

## Conclusion

An effective knowledge base is fundamental to any profession. However, in the social sciences especially, our knowledge remains far from absolute. As social workers, we operate in an environment full of unaccounted and unexplained variables. Earlier, McAvoy (1999) drew upon the metaphor of a swamp to illustrate being in an environment requiring one to cope with incomplete information. It is interesting to note that Gowdy (1994) draws upon the same metaphor, describing daily practice as a "swampy lowland":

Shall the practitioner stay on the high, hard ground where he can practice rigorously, as he understands rigor, but where he is constrained to deal with problems of little consequence? Or shall he descend to the swamp where he can engage in the most important and challenging problems if he is willing to forsake technical rigor? (p. 362)

Of all the social sciences, social workers have been the most ready to descend into the swamp. Perhaps this serves to explain why our profession has developed such a strong value base. It is our value base that, out of necessity, guides us under such uncertain conditions.

For knowledge is power, whether it be grounded in empirical findings, other ways of knowing, or hard-earned experience. Beyond questions of effectiveness at problem solving is how we as social workers wield that power in the helping relationship. To do so in a just, sound, and compassionate manner requires wisdom. Our value base reflects such wisdom. I would argue that to competently apply these values—put them into practice within an ongoing relationship—is what lies at the heart of true practice wisdom.

Practice wisdom can and should be nurtured within the educational environment. As a form of caretaking ethics, it finds a ready home in any ethics class. Thus, time in an ethics class would be well spent in stimulating an appreciation for the role of ignorance when attempting to cope with incomplete knowledge. Recognizing one's ignorance while wielding knowledge is certainly an important lesson for any practitioner. The alternative risks that the student never sees the need to achieve this particular form of wisdom.

## References

- Abramson, M. (1996). Toward a more holistic understanding of ethics in social work. *Social Work in Health Care, 23*, 1–13.
- Azzarto, J. (2001). Teaching practice wisdom: What can we learn from family medicine? *Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work, 6*, 57–68.
- Barker, R. (1999). *The social work dictionary* (4th ed.). Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- Boehm, W. (1958). The nature of social work. *Social Work, 3*, 10–18.
- Deroos, Y. (1990). The development of practice wisdom through human problem-solving process. *Social Service Review, 64*, 276–287.
- Dolgo, R., & Skolnik, L. (1996). Ethical decision making in social work with groups: An empirical study. *Social Work With Groups, 19*, 49–65.
- Edwards, R. L., & Hopps, J. G. (Eds.). (1995). *The encyclopedia of social work* (19th ed.). Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- Goldstein, H. (1990). The knowledge base of social work practice: Theory, wisdom, analogue, or art? *Families in Society, 71*, 32–43.
- Gowdy, E. (1994). From technical rationality to participating consciousness. *Social Work, 39*, 362–370.
- Heinemann, M. (1981). The obsolete scientific imperative in social work research. *Social Service Review, 55*, 371–397.
- Imre, R. (1984). The nature of knowledge in social work. *Social Work, 29*, 41–45.
- Imre, R. (1985). Tacit knowledge in social work research and practice. *Smith College Studies in Social Work, 55*, 137–149.
- Kayser, J. (1995). Personal narratives and professional helping: Guidelines for writing autobiographical narratives. *Reflections, 1*, 66–68.
- Klien, W., & Bloom, M. (1995). Practice wisdom. *Social Work, 40*, 799–807.
- McAvoy, M. (1999). *The profession of ignorance: With constant reference to Socrates*. Lanham, NY: University Press of America.
- National Association of Social Workers. (1996). Code of ethics of the national association of social workers. Washington D.C.: NASW Press.
- Plato. (n.d.). *Apology of Socrates*. (M. C. Stokes, Trans.). Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips Ltd.
- Raynor, P. (1984). Evaluation with one eye closed: The empiricist agenda in social work research. *British Journal of Social Work, 14*, 1–10.
- Ruckdeschel, R., & Farris, B. (1981). Assessing practice: A critical look at the single case design. *Social Casework, 62*, 413–419.
- Scott, D. (1990). Practice wisdom: The neglected source of practice research. *Social Work, 35*, 564–568.
- Sheppard, M. (1995). Social work, social science, and practice wisdom. *British Journal of Social Work, 25*, 265–293.
- Tyson, K. (1994). Author's reply: Response to "social work researchers' quest for respectability." *Social Work, 39*, 737–741.
- Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language (1989). New York: Gramercy Books.
- Zeira, A., & Rosen, A. (2000). Unraveling "tacit knowledge": What social workers do and why they do it. *Social Service Review, 74*, 103–123.

**Phillip Dybicz** is a doctoral student in the Department of Social Work, University of Kansas. Correspondence concerning this article may be sent to pdybicz@ku.edu or 1904 Heatherwood Dr., Lawrence, KS, 66047.

Manuscript received: May 29, 2003

Revised: January 25, 2004

Accepted: March 16, 2004