Is knowledge enough? The case for research that leads to a better world

28th ANZAM Conference, “Reshaping Management for Impact”, 3-5 December, 2014 Sydney, Australia

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Abstract
This paper draws on phronesiology to reflect on an empirical study of wisdom and its contribution to management decision-making. Phronesiology is a wisdom-based research approach to management and organizational studies that contrasts with traditional epistemic methodologies. By reflecting on a recently completed empirical research project, this paper seeks to make the case that research can, as a matter of principle and choice, serve the purpose of building a better world. The paper concludes with phronetic reflective questions for the consideration of organizational and management researchers.

Keywords
Wisdom, Knowledge, Phronesiology, Reflection, Methodology, Grounded theory

Introduction
Academic research in any field aims to enhance human knowledge; and therefore, epistemology is critical to any theoretical or empirical study. Research studies emphasize the significance of the contribution of the study to the development of knowledge in the field. The research problems, objectives and significance are usually identified by the researcher in such a way that the research can be justified by highlighting a (knowledge) gap in the literature. Organizational and management studies are no exception in terms of this epistemological emphasis and the value of empirical studies in organizational and management fields, relies more than anything else on the extent to which the study adds to the discipline’s body of knowledge. Accordingly, the methodologies that are adopted to
conduct a study are mainly epistemic ones which are chosen to best meet the epistemological expectations of academia.

Although developing knowledge for the sake of knowledge is a virtue, organizational and management studies are also expected to positively impact and improve practice. This emphasis on knowledge and practice means the quality of research is primarily assessed on the degree to which 1) the study contributes to the extant literature and 2) offers implications for practitioners at the individual or organizational levels. Accordingly, the value of a study does not go beyond its contribution to knowledge and practice at the individual and organizational levels to, for example, wisdom (phrònēsis, φρόνησις) or well-being, which is widely called for to handle the challenges of the current turbulent, complex, and unstable business world (Bierly III, Kessler, & Christensen, 2000; Jashapara, 2004; Marker, 2013; Maxwell, 2012, 2013; McKenna, Rooney, & Liesch, 2006; Melé, 2010; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2011; Pless, Maak, & Stahl, 2011; Rooney, McKenna, & Liesch, 2010; Rowley & Gibbs, 2008; Small, 2004; Yang, 2013). For instance, Rooney et al. (2010) argue, “a better future [than the one resulting from relying completely on limited cognition, relative knowledge, perception and truth] is possible if we look beyond the accumulative assumptions about knowledge (and technology) to wisdom” (p. 17). The accumulation of information and knowledge does not necessarily enhance wisdom (Intezari & Pauleen, 2013; Pinheiro, Raposo, & Hernández, 2012) and individual and organizational success does not necessarily lead to the well-being of individuals, organizations, and their surrounding environment and society. The dominance of epistemology in organizational and management studies, we believe, has led to an under appreciation of the value of wisdom in these disciplines.

In the world today where the volume of information is growing exponentially, and knowledge and information technologies are continuously and dramatically developing, humans have not yet managed to prevent global environmental catastrophes and financial crises. Business problems and challenges are dealt with based on egoistic and power-seeking choices (Pantzar, 2000). Information and knowledge and their related technologies that are assumed to help humans make better decisions
have not necessarily done so, and the world is still struggling to solve the issues that are most significant to people (Intezari & Pauleen, 2014).

The mutual impact of organizations and their surrounding environment and society requires taking an approach towards conducting studies that intermingles the individual, organizational, and societal levels in a holistic perspective. Wisdom as one of the highest capabilities of humankind (according to both Western and Eastern traditions, epitomized by the most well-known thinkers, Aristotle, Plato, and Confucius) (Solansky, 2013), engages knowledge and practice (Frické, 2009), and enhances human’s well-being (both for oneself and for others) (Lombardo, 2010). Rooney (2013a) argues that to address current financial and environmental crises (e.g. global poverty, destructive business practices, and planetary unsustainability) organizational research must actively and directly contribute to positive changes in our living conditions, rather than merely contribute to the stock of knowledge.

This paper asks the question, what is the value of developing wisdom (in addition to knowledge) in organizational and management studies and what is the role of researchers in this process? The paper draws on Rooney’s (2013a) suggestion of phronesiology, and Intezari’s (2014) research of the relationship between wisdom and management decision-making (henceforth, the wisdom research), and provides a phronesiological reflection on the wisdom research. The paper is organized as follows.

Phronesiology is discussed in the first section. In the second section the wisdom research is introduced, and then reflected on through the lens of phronesiology. The paper concludes by suggesting some phronetic reflective questions for organizational and management researchers to assess studies.

**Wise methodology: Phronesiology**

By taking the supposition that making good decisions and judgments, and taking good actions do not automatically happen in management, McKenna et al. (2007) underline the criticality of wisdom in the contemporary turbulent world, and propose that “wisdom be established as the ideal of organizational practice and that practices be measured against that ideal” (p. 84). In consonance with McKenna et al.’s (2007) argument of the criticality of wisdom in practice, Rooney (2013a)
emphasizes the vital role that practical wisdom has to play in human life and management and organizational research towards fostering wisdom in practice and building a better world. Rooney (2013a) calls for organizational research methods to be shaped by practical wisdom (phrónēsis) and suggests a wisdom-based research approach to management and organizational studies, phronesiology, which is in contrast to traditional epistemic methodologies. He argues that to address the challenges of the current turbulent world where wisdom is urgently needed, management and social research needs revitalization, and that the revitalization is facilitated by integral wisdom-based research methods.

The importance of organizational wisdom research relies on the integrative framework that wisdom provides for the complex inter-relationship between organizations and various other aspects of life including stakeholders’ interests. Rooney (2013b) writes: “organizational wisdom research is important because it can address the problem of the lack of integration across a number of important areas of organizational life and between organizations and the rest of reality. Wisdom research is also important because wisdom brings a focus to larger issues that go beyond the narrow, short-term interests of managers and shareholders” (p. 34). This is emphasized in Blasi’s (2006) comment on the necessity for shifting academic research goals from short-term programs and outcomes to long-term development that positively shapes the future:

“The competition in research, the pressure from society to transfer scientific knowledge from research to application as quickly as possible, the constant quest for new research funds, and an unstable work situation, confine researchers’ activities within strict time schedules and tempt them to choose short-term research programmes. To produce the knowledge necessary to shape the future, universities therefore have to set up explicit structures and procedures that counter-balance the ‘tight time ideology’ by creating space for the long-term development of the diverse forms of knowledge that transcend the need for immediate applicability. The university must be a place for ‘free and fundamental research’” (p. 407).
This concern is echoed by Rooney (2013a) stressing the need for the coherent and meaningful integration of axiology, ontology and epistemology. Rooney (2013a) highlights the five principles of Social Practice Wisdom (SPW), and asserts that these have a role in wisdom-based research. SPW is an inter-disciplinary-driven theory of the practical application of wisdom in the world towards the excellence of oneself and others. The principles of SPW, according to (Rooney et al., 2010, p. 37; Rooney, 2013a, p. 83) are 1) wisdom is a reason- and observation-based quality. That is, rationality is a part of wisdom, although wisdom is more than just rationalism. 2) Alongside intellectually disciplined thinking, wisdom also has transcendent and subjective elements, and incorporates non-rationality into judgment. 3) Wisdom leads to virtuous outcomes. 4) Wisdom is aesthetic and intrinsically rewarding. In this sense, emotion is central to the practices of wisdom. The last discipline 5) refers to wisdom as praxis. That is, wisdom is practical in nature and pursues long-term well-being for one-self and others.

To sum up, phrónësiology is not studying wisdom, but studying for wisdom through wisely conducted research for practically wise ends. In the following section a study of wisdom is introduced and is then reflected on from a phronesiological perspective.

**An empirical research of wisdom and its contribution to management and business practitioners**

The phronesiological reflection provided in this paper is based on an empirical research (a PhD research) of wisdom that has been carried out in New Zealand. The research objective was to investigate the role of wisdom (which engages information, knowledge, experience, reasoning and emotion) in managerial decision-making and to find out how wisdom can help with making better quality managerial decisions, taking ‘wise actions’, and building a better world. Despite the vital role of decision-making in management and organizational success (Nutt & Wilson, 2010; Stewart, 2006), the increasing technological- and politico-socio-economical-driven complexity surrounding decision-making (Ahmed, Hasnain, & Venkatesan, 2012) that has made management decision-making a challenging task; and despite the increasingly growing attention in management towards wisdom (Edwards, 2013; Hays, 2013; Intezari & Pauleen, 2012; Intezari, 2012; Küpers, 2007; McKenna,
the literature of management is still lacking empirical research that provides a clear understanding of how managerial decision-making can benefit from wisdom (Melé, 2010). To address the issue, the research question that the research aimed to answer was `what is the relationship between wisdom and management decision-making?`.

The research was an interpretive exploratory research using the classic Grounded Theory approach (Glaser, 1978, 1998, 1999, 2007). A semi-structured interview format was used as the data collecting method. Through five phases and with a selective sampling, 37 CEOs and senior managers from both the public and private sectors in New Zealand were interviewed. The participants were asked about their understanding of the concept of wisdom and its relationship with managerial decision-making. The collected data (interview transcripts) were analysed using open, axial, and selective coding. The interview questions were amended and more theoretically sensitive questions were developed over the data collecting and analysing phases. Following the fifth phase, and once the theory was initially developed, the first findings were sent to the participants to comment on (member checking). Participants’ suggestions were incorporated and the final theory was developed.

According to the data analysis four main sub-core categories were identified by participants to be in association with making wise managerial decision-making. The categories include: Multi-perspective Consideration, Cognitive-Emotional Mastery, Self-Other Awareness, and Reflexivity. The qualities and their inter-connection corresponded to the basic social process (core category), praxio-reflective integration. The findings showed that wise managerial decision-making is a praxio-reflexive integrated process through which multiple perspectives are brought into consideration during decision-making (Intezari, 2013). The Multi-perspective Consideration relies on the integration of the critical intra- and inter-personal qualities of Cognitive-Emotional Mastery, Self-Other Awareness, and Reflexivity.

Multi-perspective Consideration refers to the extent to which different perspectives are integrated in making a decision. The findings indicated that in wise managerial decisions, consequences of the decision are anticipated, alternative points of view are taken into account, and ethical codes are
considered. Findings also indicated that wise managerial decision-making requires a high level of Self-Other Awareness. Self-Other Awareness refers to the amalgamation of the decision maker’s awareness of his/her personal aspects such as attitudes, strengths, weaknesses, (in)abilities, and knowledge; as well as awareness of surroundings which include circumstances, others’ values and beliefs, (in)abilities, and knowledge.

Cognitive-Emotional Mastery was another quality that is associated with wise managerial decision-making. According to the findings wise managerial decision-making requires the decision maker to be cognitively and emotionally master. Cognitive mastery refers to the degree the decision maker has appropriate (relevant and reliable) knowledge and experience, the ability to implement the knowledge and experience and to think critically when making decisions. Emotional mastery, on the other hand, means neither being ignorant of nor overly influenced by emotions (Birren & Fisher, 1990). Cognitive-Emotional Mastery is the integration of both Cognitive and Emotional Mastery, which, supporting Birren and Fisher’s (1990) argument, implies the multidimensional nature of wisdom as the mixture of cognition, affect and conation (volition).

Multi-perspective Consideration, Self-Other Awareness, and Cognitive-Emotional Mastery, are supported and integrated by reflexivity. Reflexivity is the questioning of one’s underlying assumptions, attitudes, thought processes, and habitual actions, in relation to both ones’ own way of being and doing, and to others (Bolton, 2010; Edwards & Küpers, 2014). As the findings suggested, reflexivity leads managers’ decision-making practice to manifest in and be achieved through praxis, as right conduct, socially responsible, morally committed, embodied experiences, reflections and actions (Kemmis, 2012; Küpers & Pauleen, 2013; Russell & Grootenboer, 2008). Praxis as Kemmis and Smith (2008) emphasize is the distinctive action to phronesis (practical wisdom), which is concerned with the rightness and properness of what is done in practice.

Based on the findings a theory was developed that offers an explanation of the relationship between wisdom and managerial decision-making; the Theory of Praxio-Reflexive Integrated Decision-Making (PRIDM). The theory suggests that wisdom in managerial decision-making is achieved
through an integration of Multi-perspective Consideration, Self-Other Awareness, and Cognitive-Emotional Mastery; and that the integration is fostered by reflexivity and praxis. PRIDM also suggests that wisdom of the decision maker is developed through and manifests in reflexivity and praxis.

The following section reflects on this research of wisdom from a phrenesiological perspective.

**Phrenesiological reflection**

As far as the wisdom research is concerned, phrenesiology provides an appropriate approach to reflect on a study that brings to the fore praxis and reflexivity. Based on a phrenesiological approach, the main elements of a research study, including the research problem, objectives, and significance, must be evaluated on its contribution to human well-being as well as human knowledge (information). Phrenesiological reflection requires, as its cornerstone, a deep understanding of the impacts of the research implications on others, society, and the environment. Rooney (2013a) asks a critical question regarding the phrnetic value of organizational research: “what is the value to society of organizational (wisdom) research and do our research practices deliver that value?” (p. 95).

The wisdom research adds to knowledge (*episteme*), as PhD research should. For example, it contributes to the fields of management wisdom, decision-making and research methodology and journal articles have been published based on its findings. In this regard, it was a successful PhD. The study has been awarded the 'Dean’s List of Exceptional Theses' at Massey University, New Zealand (www.massey.ac.nz). However, from a phrenesiological perspective a PhD research would be evaluated not merely based on the number of the articles that have been pulled out of the dissertation, but also based on the extent to which the research contributes to the improvement of self and others’ well-being of life. Thus, the fundamental reflective question would be, to what extent does the research foster management wisdom (*phrónēsis*), and an important secondary question would be to what extent has the research contributed to the wisdom of the researcher (in addition to his/her knowledge)?
According to phronesiology, the basic motive for management and organizational research is to foster wisdom in the business world and towards building a better world. This motive resonates partly with the wisdom research, as its main objective is primarily focused on the concern that management decisions due to their potential impacts (either positive or negative), not only on the organization but also, on the wider community have become more challenging than ever. The diversity of the factors that must be considered in decision-making has led management decisions to become ever more complex in the current unstable business environment. Even simple decisions and actions may lead to unintended and uncertain consequences, which affect both decision makers and stakeholders (Intezari & Pauleen, 2014). Inherent in the research problem and objective was the pursuit of wisdom, albeit indirectly.

Rooney (2013a) reiterates that phronesiology posits that in both objective and subjective versions of reality (in a wisdom-based research the two versions are not considered as being opposites or exclusive): “wisdom-based research methods […] are, in part, a way of socially constructing knowledge grounded in observation and interpretation of empirically real processes, places and people” (p. 87). In the same vein, Rowley and Gibbs (2008) argue that practical wisdom, relying on the particular, contextual and subjective, goes beyond rational and objective understanding, and what is already known. Therefore, in respect to the first two SPW principles; i.e. wisdom is based on reason and observation, and wisdom incorporates non-rational elements into judgement, the grounded theory methodology that has been used in the wisdom research allowed for both rationality and non-rationality in judging and analysing the collected data. According to the second discipline, “it is the subjective-discerning-imaginative ability in us that enables us to step over gaps in knowledge, and to create new ideas and new possibilities without having to observe an empirical incarnation of an imagined, non-existent reality” (Rooney, 2013a, p. 87). Grounded theory incorporates imagination into the analysis through the researcher’s interpretation of the data. For instance, writing theoretical and analytical memos as a key technique in grounded theory allows the researcher to document the ideas that comes through the researcher’s mind (Glaser, 1978, 1998). The ideas may be systematic-thinking-driven, or just purely intuitive. In vivo coding, which refers to naming codes and categories
the same as the way they appear in the raw data, as another grounded theory technique reduces the researcher’s potential bias (Elliott & Higgins, 2012), and in turn by further grounding the findings in the field data enhances the degree to which observation is incorporated into the research study.

In wisdom-based research, a meaningful and coherent integration of axiology, ontology, and epistemology is critical (Rooney, 2013a). In the wisdom research, axiology has not been explicitly integrated with the ontological, epistemological, and the methodological bases of the research. However, the inextricable interconnection of wisdom with ethics and values (Pasupathi & Staudinger, 2001; Statler & Roos, 2007) makes it almost impossible (in the wisdom research, and as probably with any other wisdom research) to examine wisdom without considering and engaging participant’s perception of ethics and values. It is worthwhile to mention here that the interrelationship between wisdom and ethics was evident in the findings of the research (Intezari, 2014).

In wisdom-based research, the research findings are not reified (Rooney, 2013a). Reification as Rooney (2013a) explains, happens when facts and reality become less important than theory, and are blamed for being wrong when there is a discrepancy between reality and theory. Developing a theory that is grounded in the field data insures that the research findings are not independent-of-context. The inductive nature of the classic grounded theory as well as the systematically applied set of techniques that the methodology offers minimizes generalising propositions and lead to more context-dependent understanding of the subject matter (Glaser, 1992).

To sum up, the wisdom research, although not an example of a pure phronesiology, represents some of the key aspects of phronesiology and wisdom-based research. The wisdom research gets closer to a phronetic research in two ways, 1) by incorporating some of the SPW disciplines, and 2) by contributing to our understanding of the nature of wisdom and how to integrate it into management field. It is hoped that the wisdom research epistemologically and phronesiologically adds to the body of knowledge, lends some insight into positive changes in the management field, and contributes to human flourishing.
Below (Table 1) some questions are offered that may be helpful for researchers who would like to apply phronetic reflection to their research.

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**Conclusion**

Reflecting on the whole process of an empirical research of wisdom that investigates the relationship between wisdom and management decision-making raises the questions: how does the research add to our wisdom as well as our knowledge? To what extent does it contribute to the development of wisdom in the decisions and actions that, either directly or indirectly, affect the social, cultural, political, economic aspects of our lives? Drawing on Rooney’s (2013a) suggestion of implementing wise methodology in management and organizational studies, this paper examines the wisdom research in terms of the contribution of the research to wisdom rather than to knowledge. By applying the five disciplines of SPW in the examination, we conclude that although the wisdom research has not primarily and explicitly adopted phronesiology, the research represents some of the key aspects of phronesiology and wisdom-based research. The wisdom research is a wisdom-based research study in the sense that the methodology that has been used in the research allows for the incorporation of some of the SPW disciplines into the study. Furthermore, the research facilitates the development and integration of wisdom into organizations and management, and organizational practices, as the research provides an understanding of wisdom that is grounded in in-situ practitioners’ perception of wisdom.

It must be noted that ensuring whether a research study has indeed contributed to human wisdom may not be possible by assessing a study before the findings have been put into practice. Nonetheless, phronesiological reflection gives a picture of how and to what extent a research might contribute to wisdom (in addition to knowledge), and then provides further direction for future studies. This paper sheds light on a new aspect of reflective assessment of research in the fields of organisations and management. It is hoped that the paper can help organizational and management researchers develop
scholars’ and practitioners’ wisdom towards, through and as the result of conducting wisdom-based research.
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Table 1: Reflective questions for guiding phronetic research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To what extent is axiology integrated into the ontology and epistemology of the research?</td>
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<tr>
<td>To what extent does the planned research aim to add to human wisdom in addition to human knowledge and information?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Will the methodology that is used in the research add to human’s wisdom?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent is the research problem associated with the well-being of human at the individual, group, organizational, and societal levels?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent would the research lead to human well-being and a better world? To what extent would the research direct practice towards the integration and fulfilment of individual, group, organizational and societal interests and values?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How can the research encourage future studies toward fostering human wisdom rather than just adding to human’s knowledge?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How do ‘I/we’ as the researcher(s), rather than ‘my/our research’, contribute to the research community, or to society?</td>
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