

January 2014

## Wisdom in the Counseling Relationship

Linda C. Osterlund

Associate Dean, Division of Counseling and Family Therapy, Regis University, [losterla@regis.edu](mailto:losterla@regis.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe>

---

### Recommended Citation

Osterlund, Linda C.. "Wisdom in the Counseling Relationship." *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 3, 2 (2014). doi:-.

This Scholarship is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarly and Peer-Reviewed Journals at ePublications at Regis University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal by an authorized administrator of ePublications at Regis University. For more information, please contact [epublications@regis.edu](mailto:epublications@regis.edu).

## Wisdom in the Counseling Relationship

Linda C. Osterlund  
Associate Dean, Division of Counseling and Family Therapy  
Regis University  
([losterla@regis.edu](mailto:losterla@regis.edu))

### Abstract

The counselor's wisdom, expressed through the self-of-the-counselor, will potentially transform the counseling relationship. The purpose of this phenomenological pilot study was to define wisdom from the counselor's perspective and describe the lived experience of wisdom in the therapeutic working alliance. Several descriptive themes emerged as distinct aspects of the wisdom of the counselor; a reflective attitude, the ability to gain insight from experience, emotional intelligence, cognitive ability, real-world skills, and concern for others. The holistic description of wisdom which materialized has important implications for counselor education and supervision, since it can be intentionally incorporated into counselor training programs from admission, to training and evaluation.

“It is unwise to be too sure of one's own wisdom. It is healthy to be reminded that the strongest might weaken and the wisest might err.”

Mohandas K. Gandhi

To err is human. Yet, our mistakes are related to wisdom, because wisdom is gained by the human being's ability to learn from mistakes, to remain open and self-reflective, and to maintain a sense of humor.<sup>1</sup> In counseling, a wise counselor has gained insight from critical life experiences and intuitively utilizes life skills to help another person. Counselors in essence become wounded healers; individuals with the courage to recognize the suffering of the heart, and in their own woundedness, they become a source of life for others.<sup>2</sup>

In counseling, wisdom is shared between the counselor and another person in the context of a healing relationship. The relationship is based on mutual trust and deep understanding, with the counselor giving voice to another person's experience. This healing context of the therapeutic relationship is representative of the contextually-based model of treatment. The contextual approach to psychotherapy is based on common factors effective in treatment, which means that the various types of psychotherapies achieve equal benefits because of a common core of curative processes.<sup>3</sup> The counseling relationship, known as the therapeutic working alliance, is a significant common factor critically impacted by the person-of-the-counselor.

Norcross indicated that the characteristics of the counselor have a significant contributing effect on the therapeutic working alliance.<sup>4</sup> It is the characteristics of the counselor that determine, in large measure, the counselor's ability to establish a working relationship with a client, the ability to come to an agreement on tasks and goals with the client, and [the ability] to inspire the client to complete the tasks necessary to accomplish the goals of psychotherapy. Wisdom is a construct which comprehensively describes the human abilities contributing to the therapeutic working alliance. Wisdom is defined as a set of cognitive, affective, and reflective personal characteristics that are interactive, as well as both interpersonal and intrapersonal in nature.<sup>5</sup> These factors are organized into categories based on the research literature, which include cognitive ability, real-world skills, insight, reflective attitude, and concern for others, as well as emotional intelligence.<sup>6</sup>

Wisdom has been suggested as a necessary component for effective psychotherapy, as well as an essential ingredient for multicultural competence in psychotherapy.<sup>7</sup> The wisdom of the counselor and its presence in the counseling relationship is an area of research which needs further exploration. The purpose of this

qualitative research study is to define wisdom traits from three counselors' perspectives and describe the experience of wisdom in their counseling relationships. Research Questions:

Q1: How do counselors define wisdom from their perspective?

Q2: How do counselors describe wisdom in the context of the counseling relationship?

## Literature Review

In this review of the literature, the contextual approach to psychotherapy is highlighted, specifically in terms of the person-of-the-counselor and the therapeutic working alliance. Wisdom is a construct to describe the traits of the counselor which are beneficial in the counseling relationship. The literature on wisdom and its relationship to the counseling working alliance is reviewed and synthesized. The traits of cognitive ability, real-world skills, insight, reflective attitude, concern for others, and emotional intelligence included in the construct of wisdom are described as they relate to the person-of-the-counselor and the counseling relationship.

Common-factors research has shown that the therapeutic working alliance, including characteristics of the counselor, which accounts for 30% of the client's outcome in psychotherapy.<sup>8</sup> Only 15% of the client outcome has to do with the selected method of treatment, while another 15% is contributed by the client's hope or placebo effect of psychotherapy, and the remaining 40% is related to the environment and the context of the client. The environment and context of the client includes the client's symptoms and diagnosis, lifestyle and life circumstances, relationships, culture and historical background and all that entails.

### The Therapeutic Working Alliance

The therapeutic working alliance is defined by mutually agreed upon goals, tasks necessary to accomplish the goals, and the quality of the bond between therapist and client.<sup>9</sup> If 30% of client outcome, is based on the quality of the therapeutic working alliance, then this relationship between the client and counselor needs to be researched further to investigate what can be accounted for by the person-of-the-counselor.<sup>10</sup> When

researchers know more about how the counselor contributes to the relationship, there could be potential training implications for counselors. Norcross advocated for "research based-conclusions that can lead, inform, and guide practitioners toward evidence-based therapy relationships and responsiveness to patient's needs."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, research is needed to examine the counseling relationship specifically in terms of the therapist's contribution to the therapeutic working alliance.

Horvath and Bedi agreed with Wampold on the importance and clinical usefulness of information regarding therapist variables. They concluded "research on the therapist's interpersonal variables as they affect the therapist's ability to develop the alliance are slowly emerging, but are not yet at the stage where the evidence could be considered empirically reliable."<sup>12</sup> Winter and Aponte observed that counselors are most effective when they use their individual qualities for client and personal advancement.<sup>13</sup> They describe growth in the counseling process, in which the personal development of the counselor parallels their effectiveness in counseling. Therefore the development of the counselor as a person is important to the therapeutic alliance and the effectiveness of the counseling experience.

### The Person-of-The Counselor

While research has suggested the counselor's personal traits are necessary for effective counseling, few researchers have studied the therapist characteristics which contribute to client outcomes.<sup>14</sup> Horvath and Bedi identified the therapist qualities that contribute to the development of a good working relationship, such as interpersonal skills, communication-related skills, empathy, openness and exploration, experience and training.<sup>15</sup> These characteristics of the counselor contribute to the counselor's ability to establish a working relationship with a client. While a variety of therapist traits which contribute to the therapeutic relationship have been identified, researchers have not studied a holistic conceptual construct, such as wisdom, as a basis for these traits.

### Wisdom and the Person-of-the-Counselor

Wisdom is a construct which has been studied in human development from implicit theoretical

approaches. Implicit theories of wisdom are the everyday or common-sense definitions people describe in their life experience. Sternberg noted that the discovery of these meanings occurs by simply asking people what wisdom means to them.<sup>16</sup> Clayton and Birren found three distinct factors, specifically defined as cognitive, affective, and reflective dimensions of wisdom.<sup>17</sup> In his research, Sternberg found six-components of wisdom; reasoning ability (problem-solving skill), sagacity (understanding and concern for others), learning from ideas and the environment (perceptive, learns from others mistakes), judgment (acts within limits, sensibility), expeditious use of information (experienced, seeks information), and perspicacity (intuition, can see through things/read between the lines).<sup>18</sup>

Some researchers have introduced the idea that the trait of wisdom can provide a rich context for exploring the complexity of therapist skills and qualities in forming a therapeutic relationship with the client.<sup>19</sup> In terms of the therapeutic relationship, the construct of wisdom provides a valuable lens from which we can view and develop insight into the intra and interpersonal qualities of the counselor. Hanna and Ottens suggested that intelligence, coupled with wisdom, to be a necessary feature of the effective therapist. Further, they distinguished wisdom from intelligence clarifying that the two modalities were described as complimentary, ideally operating in unison and not in opposition to each other.<sup>20</sup> Wisdom includes intellect, yet it requires more than the ability to understand cognitively, therefore, the wisdom of the counselor includes the ability to understand self and the client both cognitively and affectively.

While various components of wisdom have been identified in research, there are conceptually fewer categories which can be identified.<sup>21</sup> The categories of wisdom are identified as cognitive ability, real-world skills, insight, reflective attitude, concern for others, and emotional intelligence.<sup>22</sup>

Cognitive ability is defined by the intelligence necessary for problem-solving, including logical thinking and good reasoning ability, as well as tacit or implicit knowledge and life experience.<sup>23</sup> The cognitive abilities identified above are realized through real-world skills. Real-world skill requires

judgment, the tolerance of ambiguity, as well as the ability to think about thinking, known as metacognition.<sup>24</sup> Insight is defined in terms of perspicacity, or the ability to see through the obvious and grasp underlying meaning. Insight involves self-knowledge and reflection on one's own ideas and motives, as well as using intuition to understand another's perspective and motives.<sup>25</sup>

A reflective attitude involves learning from ideas and the environment, being receptive or open to new ideas, recognizing the importance of ideas, and learning from mistakes.<sup>26</sup> Concern for others is defined by sagacity, or the deep understanding of another, a sense of humor, kindness and interest in others, the ability to see another's perspective and understand the feelings of another person.<sup>27</sup> Finally, emotional intelligence is defined in terms of self-awareness or the ability to know one's emotions and self-management, which requires management of emotions and motivating oneself.<sup>28</sup> These wisdom traits have been related to qualities of an effective counselor.<sup>29</sup>

Although researchers have attempted to operationalize general perspectives on wisdom, the multiple dimensions of wisdom are most appropriately conceptualized as holistic and integrative in nature.<sup>30</sup> It makes sense to study the categories of wisdom proposed by Bluck and Glück, cognitive ability, real-world skills, insight, concern for others, reflective attitude, as well as emotional intelligence suggested by Hanna, Bemak, and Chung.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, it is valuable to further explore the implicit theories of wisdom by studying the lived experience of wisdom in counseling. As a result of this study, counselors, counselor educators and supervisors will have descriptive information for defining wisdom, and the importance of wisdom traits in the counselor and the counseling relationship.

## Methodology

The goal of this phenomenological research was to describe the essence of wisdom experienced in the context of the counseling relationship, namely the core aspects of wisdom that account for the counselor's experience.<sup>32</sup> Phenomenology is both the theoretical approach and methodology of this

study, which is rooted historically in interpretivism. Interpretivism is broadly defined as understanding the meaning of a phenomenon from the perspective of an individual in the real world.<sup>33</sup> In this study, the meaning of wisdom is described from the counselor's perspective of their lived experience in counseling. In order to gain the true essence of the phenomenon of wisdom, researchers must separate themselves from the phenomena they are studying. The intentional laying aside of current meanings of the phenomena is called "bracketing."<sup>34</sup> In order to bracket the meanings, interpretations, and understandings I have about wisdom, I am providing a description of my personal stance as a researcher of wisdom.

I am interested in wisdom as a researcher from my perspective as a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, as well as a Counselor Educator and Supervisor. I have practiced counseling with individuals, couples, and families for over twenty years. My approach to counseling is essentially contextually based, hence my specialization in marital and family therapy. My systemic relational stance as a counselor guides my interpretive experience of wisdom. I subscribe to the humanistic assumption that the healing in counseling occurs within the context of the counseling relationship, and the belief that people innately strive towards personal growth and self-actualization.

## Method

### Procedure

Qualitative researchers have been described by Merriam as "interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experience."<sup>35</sup> In this research study, I attempted to describe the phenomenon of wisdom from the counselor's perspective in the context of the counseling relationship. Since the research questions involve the descriptive experience of counselors and their perception of wisdom in their counseling relationships, the qualitative method I used in this research study was semi-structured interviews.<sup>36</sup>

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained following appropriate procedures.

Participants were contacted to participate in the study who are counselors teaching in a CACREP accredited Counselor Education Program and currently practicing counseling in the Rocky Mountain West region. I used critical case sampling, a type of purposive sampling, that is particularly useful in exploratory qualitative research, research with limited resources, as well as research where a single case (or small number of cases) can be decisive in explaining the phenomenon of interest. While statistical generalizations cannot be made based on critical case samples, logical generalizations can be carefully made.<sup>37</sup> Due to limitations of resources, five counseling faculty at the researcher's current university were individually contacted and invited to participate in the study. Personal contact with the participants was the most effective method in contacting these counselors because of personal relationships with them as fellow faculty members. The participants were asked about their interest in the study, and a follow up appointment was made with each for an interview. Out of the 5 participants contacted, 2 were unable to make time in their schedule for the interview, and 3 ultimately participated in the study.

The one-on-one personal interviews took place at the participant's convenience at the university setting in which the participant worked. The 60-minute interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder and transcribed word for word by the author. Following the interview, the author contacted the participants via e-mail to thank them for their participation in the study. In order to increase credibility of the study, member checks were conducted via an e-mail attachment of the transcription in which the participant was asked by the author to verify and/or clarify interview responses.<sup>38</sup> Out of the 3 participants, 2 chose to make corrections to clarify their responses.

### Participants

The participants were a purposefully selected combination of doctoral-level counselors, men and women (ages ranging from 51-64 years old), with extensive experience in counseling (ranging from 9 to 25 years), and a variety of professional affiliations; for example licensed social worker and licensed professional counselor. The theoretical stances of participants were varied, to give voice to potentially different interpretations of wisdom.

Ann identified herself as a 64 year old Caucasian female, Jungian analyst with 9 years of counseling experience. Betty identified herself as a 51 year old Caucasian female, Licensed Clinical Social Worker with 25 years of counseling experience. Betty identified her therapeutic approach to counseling as psychodynamic/depth psychology. Sam identified himself as a 54 year old Indian male, Licensed Professional Counselor with over 20 years counseling experience from a family systems narrative approach.

### Data Collection

Participants were made aware of their right to volunteer, procedures to insure confidentiality, and the general activities for which they are being asked to volunteer through the process of signing an informed consent. They were informed that their choice to participate would in no way influence their standing as faculty. All participants indicated their voluntary participation and understanding of their role in the study by signing and dating the informed consent document. In order to protect participant confidentiality, the participants selected a pseudonym, and the informed consent forms were collected and stored separately from the interview information. Although the participants were asked to reflect on their relationship with one of their clients, the client's identity was not revealed in any way, and the client was not a participant in the study. All of the data, including field notes and digital recordings from each of the interviews, were kept securely locked in the researcher's office.

After completing the informed consent, participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire in which they were asked identifying information, which included their name, pseudonym, gender, age, years of counseling experience, and theoretical preferences. Triangulation was used to increase data sources and the trustworthiness of the study. Based on the review of literature, the six wisdom traits, cognitive ability, insight, reflective attitude, concern for others, real-world skills, and emotional intelligence were listed at the end of the demographic questionnaire.<sup>39</sup> As a method of data triangulation, each participant was asked to rank the traits of wisdom in order of their perception of its importance in counseling.

Open-ended, semi-structured interview questions were used as an interview guide, moving from general definitions of wisdom to specific description of experience. Three questions were asked to each participant; 1) "How do you define wisdom from your perspective?" 2) How would describe wisdom as you experienced it in counseling?" 3) Can you give an example of time when you experienced wisdom in a counseling relationship? Specific data were required from all respondents, yet interview questions were used flexibly without predetermined wording.<sup>40</sup> The interviews took between 45-60 minutes. The focus of the interview was the counselor's definition of wisdom, as well as how each participant viewed wisdom in the counseling relationship. During the interview, I asked the participants to elaborate on or clarify their responses, and requested specific metaphors or examples to further illustrate his or her experience.

### Data Analysis

This study was based on the phenomenological approach to research, in order to describe the essence or basic structure of the phenomenon of wisdom.<sup>41</sup> Bracketing was used by becoming aware of my own assumptions about wisdom, as the researcher, so I could see wisdom from another person's viewpoint.<sup>42</sup> However, even though I attempted to set aside my perspective as described in the researcher's stance, I believe it is difficult to completely remain unbiased regarding the phenomenon of wisdom. In order to further describe the essence of wisdom, I used horizontal imaginative variation. Moustakas described, "the task of Imaginative Variation is to seek possible meanings through the utilization of imagination...approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions, roles or functions."<sup>43</sup> Throughout the interview process, I asked different participants for metaphors and specific examples of wisdom from their counseling experience. The goal was to describe the structure of wisdom; the underlying and precipitating factors that account for the experience of wisdom.<sup>44</sup>

The data were analyzed through an inductive process.<sup>45</sup> Inductive analysis is done in qualitative research studies by taking the specific data and forming general categories. After the interview

and transcription process, the data were analyzed to determine the broad categories through coding based on the names of the six traits of wisdom identified in the literature; cognitive ability, insight, reflective attitude, concern for others, real-world skills, and emotional intelligence. In addition, the data were examined for codes which were not consistent with the six identified traits of wisdom. During the data collection period, the six categories of wisdom remained intact.

## Results

For each interview transcript, definitions and descriptions of experiences of wisdom were coded into each of the six categories. A careful analysis of the data revealed that the six categories of wisdom were well represented by the data. Data were only coded into one of the six categories (not multiple categories) and there were relatively few data which could not be categorized into one of the six categories. The participants consistently ranked their experience of wisdom in terms of most to least important. Most important was reflective attitude, insight, emotional intelligence, cognitive ability, real-world skills, and lastly concern for others. Additionally, the concept of wisdom was viewed holistically within the individual (intrapersonal), in relationships with others (interpersonal), as well as a phenomenon which is transpersonal.

The following discussion includes a description of each category of wisdom and evidence from the data collected in this study.

## Discussion

The participants gave descriptions of their experience or perceptions of having a reflective attitude, insight, emotional intelligence, cognitive ability, real-world skills and concern for others. Additionally, it was noted that the experiences of wisdom were revealed as both intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences. The construct of wisdom is holistic and interactive, therefore each part is necessary to building the whole concept.

### Reflective Attitude

A reflective attitude is exemplified by the ability to look back upon life experiences, to learn from those experiences and gain insight, which provides

a more expansive view of the world.<sup>46</sup> Hanna and Ottens described the experience of deautomatization, which is a person's conscious awareness of their cognitive, affective, and perceptual state which can only be gained through self-reflectivity.<sup>47</sup>

*Ann. We can have all kinds of life experiences but if we don't have the ability to reflect on it and gain insight and then move and grow from that, that's what makes the difference for the person who is wise or the person who is stuck in one way of being...*

*Betty. Wisdom involves having...the ability to reflect on experience and there is some form of objectivity. There is the ability to see the larger picture without being clouded by your own experience. You're able to see and understand things that are more expansive than your own personal experience.*

An experience of being stuck in time, or unable to move forward is described when someone is unable to reflect on their experience or open up to the possibility of new ideas. One participant gave the description of a client's anxiety experience, when the client believed he had a heart attack.

*Sam. I think your heart is actually attacking you and...it's making a lot of racket...and you don't know what it is saying to you...you don't know it's language, because you are not accustomed to thinking that your heart is an organ of perception itself that you can actually think through your heart...So that was an example of trying to give him the sense that he was going to be pretty stuck until he...could recognize the rhythm...the vibratory quality of his relation to the world...that he actually needs to pay attention to what his heart is experiencing.*

### Insight

Insight is self-knowledge gained through self-reflection, when a person uses the information they gain through life experience.<sup>48</sup> Hanna and Ottens describe insight in terms of perspicacity, which is acute perception, discernment or understanding.<sup>49</sup>

*Ann. I think...wisdom comes out of your own life experience and with being able to reflect on your life and have insight into your life and your relationships.*

*Betty. I think when I'm in the room with clients that I'm all the time relying on my skills around insights, personal intelligence...in particular being able to connect*

*the dots between experiences to be able to see the interrelated aspects of a client's story.*

Insight is used in counseling when the counselor is able to recognize the themes involved in the client's story and use interventions, such as creating metaphors, which connect the stories to real-world life experiences. One participant described a teen client who was dressed primarily in black, painted his bedroom black, and decorated his bedroom lamp with hooks and what looked like dried flesh.

Sam. *...this image just came to me. I was working with the teen, but I also saw the family...and I said...I think I know what is going on with him...he seems depressed, it looks like depression...but you know I think he is really trying to tell us something. I think he is really preparing us for something...that he really needs to go fishing.*

The insight was relayed to the client in such a way that the client was able to gain insight from his own experience. Wisdom was described as the voice of suffering in the world, which needs to be experienced and expressed in order to gain insight. This participant went on to describe how he helped the teen client use his own personal experience to gain insight.

Sam. *You are obviously a very deep and mysterious guy...and you have a certain wisdom in what you're doing and the wisdom will tell you what you need to tell your dad...I'm not going to tell you how.*

Sam went on to say that the boy and his father reported this was helpful. Sam concluded that maybe by telling him "*it's your own understanding and your own wisdom*" made it something the boy could hear.

### **Emotional Intelligence**

Emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize and differentiate one's own emotions and the emotions of others.<sup>50</sup> An individual who is emotionally intelligent has the capability of experiencing a range of emotion, both negative and positive. The experience of emotion can be regulated in such a way that emotional experiences can be identified and expressed without interfering with, but rather enhancing life functioning.<sup>51</sup>

Betty. *...it's an ability to understand a client's emotional world as well as my own and know the difference at all times...an ability to help people express their emotions...and my ability to be really conscious and present to whatever I'm emotionally experiencing as well as what the client is, so that I can hear the emotions that are running underneath the story that aren't being expressed, but somehow I am able to sense or intuit or hear those things as well.*

Ann. *I think it has a lot to do with listening, how one is able to really listen to a person and listen deeper than their words to see what is being spoken underneath...and listening long enough so that I'm not just reacting to that person...I'm really trying to respond to them.*

Sam. *...there's a big feeling...that I think wisdom is...the individualizing of feeling to the point that feeling isn't personal, and that feeling is actually the presence of... that differentiation that happens in the heart, that thinking is sitting and waiting for...Wisdom is coming through in a lot of grief...the wisdom of his heart (referring to client with anxiety)...wisdom in that situation was heartless, and saying "I'm not going to be used like this" (the client's heart speaking)...so I think a lot of wisdom is coming through in grief...in depression...*

### **Cognitive Ability**

Cognitive ability is essential life knowledge gained from critical life experiences which gives a person reasoning ability, such that they are capable of finding and solving problems.<sup>52</sup> Hanna and Ottens include dialectical reasoning, which is described as the ability to understand multiple perspectives, rather than only one point of view.<sup>53</sup>

Ann. (Describing an elderly woman she identified as wise) *...she is a brilliant woman...just something alive...has come out of long years of life and challenges and suffering and joys and studies and she's very widely read.*

Betty. *The ancient Greeks used to talk about the evolution of the feminine as being a three-fold goddess: maiden, mother and crone and the difference between Mother and Crone mode is that the Crone is there to care for and attend to others, but without attachment to the outcome. So I think there's a real part of wisdom...that is the ability to impart knowledge, the ability to respond to others, but that our egos are far more detached in the sense that we're not as invested in what they do with this information...it's in boundaries, and a different concern for how things turn out.*



For Sam, wisdom is involved with knowledge when there is movement in the meaning. In the context of this part of the interview, Sam was describing how he moved away from the medical model of knowledge represented by physicians in his family, towards psychology as a career.

Sam. ...*I gravitated towards psychology because I sensed that it was capable of meaning, descriptive or open movement of meaning in life...* (Referring to his definition of wisdom)...*and the pervasive movement of meaning in the world...I think wisdom has something that is a full body form of perception...because meaning isn't something that happens through your thoughts solely, or through information or through thinking...thinking has qualities of death in it.*

### Real-World Skills

Real-world skills refer to a person's ability to utilize life skills to make decisions and choices which are beneficial to themselves as well as others.<sup>54</sup> Other researchers described metacognition and tolerance of ambiguity as wisdom traits. Metacognition is the ability to think about thinking, or to recognize the limits of knowledge.<sup>55</sup> Tolerance of ambiguity occurs when a person knows there are situations inherent in life for which there are not clear cut answers.

Ann. ...*that reminds me...that the more I know, the more I know I don't know. And certainly working with people in counseling we realize...you do know...you know a lot of things but there's an awful lot you don't know...even about the individual, there's still so much that you don't know.*

Betty. (Describing her work with a client with very different values than her own)...*I feel no judgment and I feel no need to take that away from him. My desire is to help him to fully understand, to become wise about his own choices...it actually becomes more than just events in your life...life is not a series of disconnected events...I really believe that no matter what our circumstances we have the choice about how we look at that and how we live.*

Sam. *You know, the tree has a quality of wisdom in it knows how to be a tree. In the way the weather moves things around and moves seeds around and creates atmospheres for beings to live in and all that is amazingly pervasive and complex...living in a*

*way...that is just constantly making me aware of the presence of wisdom.*

### Concern for Others

Concern for others emerges from all of the other traits of wisdom. A person's cognitive ability, real-world skills, insight, reflective attitude, and emotional intelligence allow relationships to form. Concern for others is defined as a person's ability to deeply understand another person's experience.<sup>56</sup> In terms of wisdom, a person is able to move beyond interpersonal understanding towards leadership and advocacy for the rights of others and the environment.<sup>57</sup>

Ann. *It's certainly relational...like in relationships with others...I think the majority of our life is in relationships, so ...I think much of our work in therapy is helping people to learn how to relate to others and to themselves.*

Betty. ...*There is something about a deeper soul...there is something about a way of connecting. Maybe it's the differences, maybe it's the emotional intelligence, it's a way of being with and aware of what's happening around them, and some people tune into that better...it's a connectedness.*

Sam. *So when I am with a person I'm particularly interested in the way they speak and that they care about themselves and their relationship to the world...I found myself sort of listening for the way that they show that they're in a relationship to the world that I can participate in.*

Webster identified humor as a wisdom characteristic, describing a self-effacing kind of humor which can put another person at ease.<sup>58</sup> Bluck and Glück identify humor in the category of concern for others.<sup>59</sup>

Betty. ...*joy and humor...people with a lot of wisdom have an incredible ability to see the humor in life, so I think its part of that distancing thing...they can see the humor in their own fallibility.*

### Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations of the study, including the limited number of participants, and lack of cultural diversity of the participants. Wisdom can be considered an ineffable phenomena, with interpretations based on cultural context. The cultural background of the participants likely impacted the description of

their lived experience of wisdom. Although bracketing was utilized to minimize the researcher's own bias, it is difficult to account for the researcher's own cultural context and lived experience of the wisdom phenomena.

## Conclusion

Overall, the themes of wisdom identified by the participants were those identified by the traits described by the literature. The phenomenon of wisdom was valuable in describing the lived experience of the counselor in terms of the counseling relationship. Future research can study the construct of wisdom as a trait which comprehensively describes the characteristics of the counselor that are important in developing a therapeutic working alliance. The value of wisdom in counseling is essential, since the concept can provide the basis for further research in counselor education on the personal qualities of the counselor which contribute to the counseling relationship. Additionally, counselor educators can intentionally integrate wisdom concepts into counselor training curriculum both didactically and experientially. Ultimately, the client and counselor can grow wiser by their experience in counseling relationship. As one participant described:

*Ann. There is a place of wisdom...if a person takes life experiences and reflects on them and gains insight from them and uses his/her cognitive abilities to put things together and is aware of his/her own emotional intelligence...it's working with all that to cultivate...wisdom. HJE*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey D. Webster, "Measuring the Character Strengths of Wisdom," *International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 65 (2007): 163-183, doi:10.2190/AG.65.2.d.; Robert J. Sternberg, "Implicit Theories of Intelligence, Creativity, and Wisdom," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 49 (1985): 607-627. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.49.3.607.

<sup>2</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York: Doubleday, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> Bruce E. Wampold, *The Great Psychotherapy Debate: Models, Methods, and Findings* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> John C. Norcross, "Empirically Supported Therapy Relationships," in *Psychotherapy Relationships that Work: Therapist Contributions and Responsiveness to Patients*, ed. John C. Norcross (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 37-69.

<sup>5</sup> Robert J. Sternberg, "Implicit Theories of Intelligence, Creativity, and Wisdom," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 49 (1985): 607-627, doi:10.1037/0022-3514.49.3.607.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Bluck and Judith Glück, "From the Inside Out: People's Implicit Theories of Wisdom," in *A Handbook of Wisdom: Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Robert J. Sternberg and Jennifer Jordan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 84-109; Fred J. Hanna, Fred P. Bemak, and Rita Chi-Yang Chung, "Toward a New Paradigm for Multicultural Counseling," *Journal of Counseling & Development* 77 (1999): 125-134.

<sup>7</sup> Fred J. Hanna and Allen J. Ottens, "The Role of Wisdom in Psychotherapy," *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration* 5 (1995): 195-218; Hanna, Bemak, and Chung, "Toward a New Paradigm."

<sup>8</sup> Michael J. Lambert, "Psychotherapy Outcome Research: Implications for Integrative and Eclectic Therapists," in *Handbook of Psychotherapy Integration*, ed. John C. Norcross and Marvin R. Goldfried (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 94-129; Norcross, "Empirically Supported Therapy Relationships."

<sup>9</sup> Edward S. Bordin, "The Generalizability of the Psychoanalytic Concept of the Working Alliance," *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, and Practice* 16 (1979): 252-260.

<sup>10</sup> Adam O. Horvath and Robinder P. Bedi, "The Alliance," in *Psychotherapy Relationships that Work: Therapist Contributions and Responsiveness to Patients*, ed. John C. Norcross (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Norcross, "Empirically Supported Therapy Relationships," 14.

<sup>12</sup> Horvath and Bedi, "The Alliance," 12; Wampold, "The Great Psychotherapy Debate."

<sup>13</sup> Joan E. Winter and Harry J. Aponte, "The Family Life of Psychotherapists: Treatment and Training Implications," *Journal of Psychotherapy and the Family* 3 (1987): 97-133.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Barkham and John Mellor-Clark, "Bridging Evidence-Based Practice and Practice Based Evidence: Developing a Rigorous and Relevant Knowledge for the Psychological Therapies," *Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy* 10 (2003): 319-327; Norcross, "Empirically Supported Therapy Relationships."

<sup>15</sup> Horvath and Bedi, "The Alliance," 12.

<sup>16</sup> Robert J. Sternberg, "Wisdom and Its Relation to Intelligence and Creativity," in *Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins, and*

*Development*, ed. Robert J. Sternberg (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 142-159.

<sup>17</sup> Vivian Clayton and James E. Birren, "The Development of Wisdom across the Life-Span: A Re-Examination of an Ancient Topic," in *Life-Span Development and Behavior*, eds. Paul B. Baltes and Orville G. Brim (New York, NY: Academic Press, 1980), 103-135.

<sup>18</sup> Robert J. Sternberg, "Implicit Theories of Intelligence, Creativity, and Wisdom."

<sup>19</sup> H. Grunebaum, "On Wisdom," *Family Process* 45, no. 1 (2006): 117-132.; Hanna, Bemak, and Chung, "Toward a New Paradigm;" Hanna and Ottens, "The Role of Wisdom."

<sup>20</sup> See Hanna and Ottens, "The Role of Wisdom."

<sup>21</sup> Bluck and Glück, "From the Inside Out."

<sup>22</sup> Hanna, Bemak, and Chung, "Toward a New Paradigm;" Deirdre A. Kramer, "Conceptualizing Wisdom: the Primacy of Affect-Cognition Relations," in *Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins, and Development*, ed. Robert J. Sternberg (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 279-313; Ute Kunzmann and Paul B. Baltes, "Wisdom-Related Knowledge: Affective, Motivational, and Interpersonal Correlates," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 29 (2003): 1104-1119, doi:10.1177/0146167203254506; Robert J. Sternberg, "A Balance Theory of Wisdom," *Review of General Psychology* 2 (1998): 347-365, doi:10.1037/1089-2680.2.4.347.

<sup>23</sup> Robert J. Sternberg, "A Balance Theory of Wisdom."

<sup>24</sup> Hanna and Ottens, "The Role of Wisdom;" Sternberg, "Implicit Theories of Intelligence."

<sup>25</sup> Sternberg, "Implicit Theories of Intelligence."

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ* (New York: Bantam, 1995).

<sup>29</sup> Hanna and Ottens, "The Role of Wisdom."

<sup>30</sup> Webster, "Measuring the Character Strengths."

<sup>31</sup> Bluck and Glück, "From the Inside Out."

<sup>32</sup> Clark Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994).

<sup>33</sup> Michael Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998).

<sup>34</sup> John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007), 59.

<sup>35</sup> Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 5.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods*, 97.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*.

<sup>46</sup> Monika Ardel, "Empirical Assessment of a Three-Dimensional Wisdom Scale," *Research on Aging* 25 (2003): 275-324, doi:10.1177/0164027503025003004; Bluck and Glück, "From the Inside Out;" Scott C. Brown and Jeffrey A. Greene, "The Wisdom Development Scale: Translating the Conceptual to the Concrete," *Journal of College Student Development* 47 (2006): 1-19, doi:10.1353/csd.2006.0002; Sternberg, "Implicit Theories of Intelligence;" Webster, "Measuring the Character Strengths."

<sup>47</sup> Hanna and Ottens, "The Role of Wisdom."

<sup>48</sup> Ardel, "Empirical Assessment;" Bluck and Glück, "From the Inside Out;" Brown and Greene, "The Wisdom Development Scale;" Sternberg, "Implicit Theories of Intelligence."

<sup>49</sup> Hanna and Ottens, "The Role of Wisdom."

<sup>50</sup> Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*; Hanna and Ottens, "The Role of Wisdom."

<sup>51</sup> Ardel, "Empirical Assessment;" Brown and Greene, "The Wisdom Development Scale;" Webster, "Measuring the Character Strengths."

<sup>52</sup> Ardel, "Empirical Assessment;" Bluck and Glück, "From the Inside Out;" Brown and Greene, "The Wisdom Development Scale;" Hanna and Ottens, "The Role of Wisdom;" Sternberg, "Implicit Theories of Intelligence;" Webster, "Measuring the Character Strengths."

<sup>53</sup> Hanna and Ottens, "The Role of Wisdom."

<sup>54</sup> Ardel, "Empirical Assessment;" Bluck and Glück, "From the Inside Out;" Brown and Greene, "The Wisdom Development Scale;" Hanna and Ottens, "The Role of

---

Wisdom;" Sternberg, "Implicit Theories of Intelligence,"  
Webster, "Measuring the Character Strengths."

<sup>55</sup> Hanna and Ottens, "The Role of Wisdom."

<sup>56</sup> Ardel, "Empirical Assessment;" Bluck and Glück, "From  
the Inside Out;" Brown and Greene, "The Wisdom  
Development Scale;" Hanna and Ottens, "The Role of  
Wisdom;" Sternberg, "Implicit Theories of Intelligence,"  
Webster, "Measuring the Character Strengths."

<sup>57</sup> Brown and Greene, "The Wisdom Development Scale;"  
Sternberg, "Implicit Theories of Intelligence."

<sup>58</sup> Webster, "Measuring the Character Strengths."

<sup>59</sup> Bluck and Glück, "From the Inside Out."