

# Constructive-Developmental Theory and the Integrated Domains of Wisdom: Are Post-Conventional Leaders Really Wiser?

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**Abstract:** How leaders experience wisdom is important to our understanding of leadership behavior as well as to our overall understanding of leadership. The article explores qualitative findings that may advance academic discourse and research at the intersection between leadership, wisdom, and constructive-developmental theory. The present study examined how 12 executive leaders who assessed at the conventional and post-conventional stages of adult development experience wisdom. It is significant in that it addresses a gap in the literature between wisdom and constructive-developmental theory. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to determine how executive leaders understand their leadership role in terms of the cognitive, reflective, and affective domains of wisdom. Contrary to research that defines and operationalizes wisdom as the integration of these domains, findings indicate that participants experience wisdom in one or more of the domains of wisdom. Participants were also assessed for their meaning-making capacity to determine their stage of development using the SCTi-Map instrument. Contrary to research in constructive-developmental theory that suggests that post-conventional levels of development may equate to higher levels of wisdom, findings also indicate that there was no significant difference between how leaders describe their propensity for wisdom and their measured adult stage of development. Leaders who assessed at both the conventional and post-conventional stages of development described a propensity for wisdom. Analysis of participant responses suggests that the wisdom, in all its complexity, has its own trajectory and therefore necessitates inquiry into the lines of human development to include integral perspectives associated with spiritual, emotional, and psychosocial measures. The results of this study indicate the potential for additional research that explores wisdom in the context of both adult lines *and* adult stages of development to determine if specific correlations do exist.

**Keywords:** Constructive-developmental theory, human development, leadership, stages of development, wisdom.

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## Introduction

Wisdom is an important construct for effectively dealing with the complexities of our modern society (McKenna, Rooney, & Boal, 2009). It is also considered an essential element of outstanding leadership (Rowley, 2006; Sternberg, 2007; Yang, 2011). Constructive-developmental theory is a useful construct in broadening our understanding of the meaning-making systems of leaders (Cook-Grueter, 1999; Torbert & Associates, 2004) and how they may experience wisdom.

While there has been extensive research in wisdom theory as well as the intersection between adult development and leadership, there has been little research that explores the direct linkage between wisdom, constructive-developmental theory, and leadership. The present study examines how 12 executive leaders who assessed at the conventional and post-conventional stages of adult development experience wisdom. It is significant in that it addresses a gap in the literature between wisdom and constructive-developmental theory.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to determine how executive leaders understand their leadership role in terms of the cognitive, reflective, and affective domains of wisdom (Ardelt, 2000, 2003, 2004a; Clayton & Birren, 1980). Contrary to research that defines and operationalizes wisdom as the integration of these domains (Ardelt, 2003, 2004a), the results of this study indicate that participants experience wisdom in one or more of the above domains; the integration of all three domains was not always present.

Participants were also assessed for their meaning-making capacity to determine their stage of adult development using the SCTi-Map instrument (Cook-Greuter & Associates, 2008). Contrary to research in constructive-developmental theory that suggests that post-conventional levels of development may equate to higher levels of wisdom (Barbuto & Millard, 2012; Cook-Greuter, 2005), findings also indicate that there was no significant difference between how leaders describe their propensity for wisdom and their measured adult stage of development. Thematic analysis of participant responses indicated that leaders who assessed at both the conventional and post-conventional stages of development described a propensity for wisdom. Based on these findings, the present study suggests that wisdom, in all its complexity, has its own trajectory and therefore necessitate inquiry into the lines of human development to include integral perspectives associated with spiritual, emotional, and psychosocial measures. The results of this study indicate the potential for additional research that explores wisdom in the context of both adult lines *and* adult stages of development to determine if specific correlations do exist.

## The Relationship between Wisdom, Leadership, and Constructive-Developmental Theory

The recent socioeconomic crisis, including unstable fluctuations in the market and the complexity of an uncertain global economy, has challenged organizational leaders to reevaluate how they do business. Additionally, the distinct features of a networked society in the age of information require that leaders must now consider how they take action in the context of globalization and rapid fire communication (Bennis, 2007). As more and more organizations place greater emphasis on ethical and environmental issues, social responsibility, bottom line

sustainability, and knowledge management, leaders are being held more accountable for their actions (Maak & Pless, 2006). In a global stakeholder society, for example, leaders are not only expected to be fiscally accountable to shareholders. They are also accountable to a range of stakeholders for the broader economic, environmental, and societal impact of their organization (Wade, 2006). Such high levels of diverse accountability require the integration of wisdom, creativity, and intelligence (Rowley, 2006; Sternberg, 2007). There is a far greater need for excellent judgment, insightfulness, and higher levels of strong moral character (McKenna, et al., 2009).

Wisdom, as an evolving construct, is now, more than ever, relevant to how leaders make key decisions for the common good (Sternberg, 2007). While there is no one agreed upon definition of wisdom, theorists contend that it is important to our understanding of leadership (Bennis, 2007; Yang, 2011). Wisdom enhances a leader's overall ability to make moral and ethical choices (Lloyd, 2010) and increases the capacity for complex decision-making. Constructs related to wisdom include organizational wisdom (Kessler & Bailey, 2007), leadership wisdom (Yang, 2009; 2011), and wisdom management (Allen, 2008). From a practical perspective, greater understanding of wisdom and these related constructs have the potential to offer valuable insight into other aspects of organizational behavior that can potentially generate higher levels of business performance and success among leaders thereby influencing their overall ability to impact society (Bennis, 2007; Sternberg, 2007, Yang, 2011). The implication is that social responsibility is an essential component of leadership-related wisdom (Yang, 2011). Wise leaders are committed to the long-term welfare of both immediate stakeholders and humanity in general (McKenna et al., 2009; Sternberg, 2007).

In order for organizational leaders to more fully demonstrate a capacity for such transformative action, leading theorists contend that leaders can and should develop higher levels of wisdom (Barbuto & Millard, 2012; Sternberg, 2007; Yang, 2011). Principles of wisdom are particularly relevant to this time in history because wisdom is characterized by flexible, intuitive methods. The underlying premise therein is that if the basic tenets of wisdom are understood, leaders can also be evaluated according to robust criteria based on the principles of wisdom (McKenna et al., 2009). Leadership effectiveness can no longer be measured by organizational performance and profits alone.

While theorists suggest that wisdom is a key to how leaders effectively deal with complexity and in how they obtain a competitive advantage in the marketplace (Bierly, Kessler, & Christensen, 2000), it is worth noting that neither the construct of wisdom within organizations nor the processes associated with the cultivation of wisdom have received much attention in management and leadership discourse (McKenna et al., 2009; Rowley, 2006; Small, 2004).

While many definitions and research methodologies abound in the field of wisdom theory, one aspect of wisdom is often expressed. Wisdom, in all its complexity, represents the pinnacle of human development (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Kramer, 1990; Labouvie-Vief, 1990; Orwoll & Perlmutter, 1990; Pascual-Leone, 1990). As such, research linked to the study of wisdom is on the rise (Barbuto & Millard, 2012; Webster, 2007). While its relevancy to leadership and constructive-developmental theory is still unfolding, future research in this area promises an alternative approach to understanding the complexity of human development.

Ongoing and consistent research in the field of constructive-developmental theory has the potential to at least partially bridge the gap between leadership and wisdom. Leading theorists in this field continue to broaden our understanding of how leaders at differing stages of development engage in the transformational process of leadership. One underlying assumption of constructive-developmental theory suggests that leaders who demonstrate later stages of development have perspectives and insights that may also purport to greater levels of wisdom (Cook-Greuter, 2005). Barbuto and Millard (2012) further propose that as one transitions from one developmental stage to another, development will coincide with progression in wisdom development. The findings of this study suggest that wisdom can be experienced within earlier and later stages of development, albeit in different ways. I will more fully explicate these findings in the discussion sections of this article.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Wisdom Theory**

The theoretical framework for the present study is situated at the intersection of leadership, wisdom theory, and constructive-developmental theory. While references to the construct of wisdom span ancient teachings from Sumerian to Hebrew cultures, empirical studies within the psychological sciences only began to emerge in the late 1970s (Birren & Svensson, 2005). The literature includes paradigms of wisdom that have been debated since the field began to more fully emerge in the 1980s and '90s: (a) theological and philosophical perspectives on wisdom, (b) wisdom and the sciences, (c) the nature of wisdom in complex environments, and (d) the ongoing debate between explicit and implicit theories of wisdom. From this review, two major psychological wisdom paradigms emerged as relevant to the present study: wisdom as an expert system of knowledge (Baltes & Kunzmann, 2004; Baltes & Smith, 1990, 2008; Baltes & Staudinger, 1993, 2000) and the wise person theory (Ardelt, 2000, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, Clayton & Birren, 1980).

Since the focus of the study was on how conventional and post-conventional executive leaders experience wisdom, the present study is situated within the implicit theories of wisdom. More specifically, the present study aligns with the research on the wise person theory of wisdom because it is a first-person interpretative approach that aims to examine the real life experience of leaders. Greater emphasis was therefore placed on attributes of wisdom as an essential component of leadership (Ackoff, 1989; Jeannot, 1989; Jones, 2005; Prewitt, 2002) and as a positive result of human development (Kramer, 1990; Labouvie-Vief, 1990; Orwoll & Perlmutter, 1990; Pascual-Leone, 1990).

### **Major Debates in the Field**

Within the context of explicit and implicit theories of wisdom, debates in the field are divided by two main ways to conceptualize and study the construct. The first approach is based on a traditional view of ancient writings of Western philosophers wherein wisdom is studied as a theory of knowledge, judgment, and advice about difficult and uncertain matters of life (Baltes & Kunzmann, 2004; Baltes & Smith, 1990; 2008; Baltes & Staudinger, 1993). The second approach is based on Asian philosophy and addresses wisdom from the perspective of *wise*

*persons* (Ardelt, 2000, 2003, 2004a). Western explicit theories of wisdom most often focus on knowledge and analytic capabilities, whereas Eastern implicit theories tend to emphasize the embodiment of the cognitive, reflective, and affective domains of wisdom (Ardelt, 2004a; Takahashi, 2000). These three domains as set forth in Table 1 served as a first-person interpretive lens in examining the wisdom experience of participants in this study.

**Table 1: Definitions and operationalization of wisdom as a three-dimensional personality characteristic.**

Domain of Wisdom	Definition	Coded to Assess How Leaders
<b>Reflective</b>	Different ways participants reflect; the qualities of reflection; how participants overcome subjectivity and self-projection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– reflect on adversity in life</li> <li>– reflect on differences in others to include social/cultural values</li> <li>– reflect on the essence of their work</li> <li>– reflect on themselves in relation to people and situations</li> <li>– reflect on multiple perspectives of other</li> <li>– gain self-insight and reflect on own capacities/strengths</li> <li>– reflect on spiritual and religious aspects of life</li> <li>– reflect on wisest self in relation to phenomenon and events</li> </ul>
<b>Cognitive</b>	How participants structure experiences and make meaning from them. What is the logic behind their perspectives of self in relation to world? Desire to know truth and attain deeper understanding of life.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– describe adversity in life</li> <li>– accept ambiguity and uncertainty</li> <li>– describe essence of work in relation to purpose or calling</li> <li>– balance adaptation of environment with interest of the common good of society</li> <li>– integrate complex thought, action, and feeling</li> <li>– make important decisions in midst of uncertainty</li> <li>– take opposing views into consideration</li> <li>– describe themselves in relation to larger system</li> <li>– describe the construct of wisdom</li> <li>– increase own capacity for wisdom</li> </ul>
<b>Affective</b>	Different aspects of emotion demonstrated in behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– respond to adversity</li> <li>– respond to ambiguity</li> <li>– demonstrate empathy and compassionate love for others</li> <li>– balance empathy and goal achievement</li> <li>– feel and act on behalf of greater good of organization</li> <li>– demonstrate humility</li> <li>– use humor to offset challenges</li> <li>– create results in dire situations</li> </ul>

Adapted from Ardel (2003 and Clayton & Birren (1980).

## Wisdom as an expert system of knowledge vs. the wise person theory

In the early 1980s, the Max Planck Institute for Human Development and Education (commonly referred to as “The Berlin Group”) developed what is still the most widely used explicit model of wisdom. Introduced as the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm (Baltes & Kunzmann, 2004; Baltes & Smith, 1990; Baltes & Staudinger, 1993), wisdom is defined as a high level of exemplary expertise in dealing with the fundamental problems related to the meaning and conduct of life (Kunzmann & Baltes, 2003). Examples of such fundamental problems include complex life and death issues, career moves, family conflicts, and life-span transitions such as aging or loss of a loved one.

As the preeminent leaders in wisdom research, Baltes and his associates set forth the premise that such pragmatics of life address wisdom within the context of life planning, life management, and life review (Baltes & Kunzmann, 2004; Baltes & Smith, 2008). Additionally, wisdom-related or expert knowledge is researched and assessed according to five wisdom criteria: rich factual knowledge, rich procedural knowledge, life-span contextualism (strategies, judgment, advice concerning matters of life), value relativism (differences in values, goals, and priorities), and uncertainty (Baltes & Kunzmann, 2004; Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2005). Expert knowledge about the meaning and conduct of life approaches wisdom when all five criteria are present. The criteria are designed to reflect a balance between intellect and character and thereby offer an integrated perspective of wisdom.

The Berlin Group offers a stringent perspective on wisdom as a knowledge-based construct that emphasizes the functional consequences of wisdom over *how* one acquires it. While these theorists do take into consideration the cognitive, emotional, motivational, and virtuous aspects of the individual (Ardelt, 2004a; Baltes & Kunzmann, 2004), they are juxtaposed against research on wise people claiming that such individuals are an imperfect illustration of wisdom (Baltes & Kunzmann, 2004). Wise sages as we know them (e.g., Buddha) are, therefore, recognized as carriers of wisdom-related knowledge rather than the road to understanding the construct of wisdom. The contention herein is that most wise individuals move through several reconstructions and purifications. Because they are fallible and imperfect, they cannot reach an ideal level of wisdom (Baltes & Kunzmann, 2004). The Berlin Group therefore contends that research should focus more on wisdom as a body of knowledge rather than on implicit studies of wise persons.

Within the context of adult-developmental theory, however, one underlying premise of the present study is that the road to wisdom *is* paved with reconstruction and purification. While the Berlin Group’s research on wisdom as an expert system of knowledge is important and vital to our understanding of wisdom, it is a non-hierarchical model that does not recognize aspects of developmental movement (Alexander, Druker, & Langer, 1990). It therefore fails to acknowledge potential for the transformative processes associated with such movement and higher stages of consciousness. Developmental theory contends that each stage of development is more complex than the previous stage because as the person evolves, he/she is able to integrate and differentiate previous stages of development into a more complex understanding and experience of life (Cook-Greuter, 2005; Torbert, et al., 2004). This ability to integrate and differentiate may translate to higher levels of wisdom (Barbuto & Millard, 2012; Cook-Greuter,

2005). The Berlin Group, however, does not acknowledge later stages of development that encompass and reorganize based on earlier stages of development (Alexander, Druker & Langer, 1990). Further, as a cognitive model (Ardelt, 2004a; 2004b), it eliminates perspectives associated with reflective thought and higher states and stages of consciousness.

The wise person theory of wisdom expands upon wisdom as an expert system of knowledge by acknowledging that even the most profound wisdom literature, e.g., the Bible or the ancient Vedic texts, remain intellectual or theoretical knowledge until the wisdom associated with that knowledge is realized by a person (Ardelt, 2004a; 2004b). Wisdom is therefore more than an intellectual construct. It is the experience of knowledge as it is re-transformed into the person's ability to arrive at some deeper understanding or meaning-making about a situation or life event. Interview protocols that seek out the wisdom experience of an individual's own life situation offer a unique perspective in that they align with an important premise linked to the construct of wisdom: the value and importance of interpretive knowledge (Kekes, 1983).

To have an understanding of the pragmatics of life without being able to adequately apply that knowledge to one's own life circumstances does not equate to wisdom. Interpretative knowledge, therefore, does not refer to an intellectual interpretation of facts but to a paradigm shift in knowing. Wisdom is not a state of perfect knowledge (Baltes & Kunzmann, 2004); it is a state of *being* (Ardelt, 2004b). This state of being is realized through reflection on one's life experiences and how those experiences transform the individual (Ardelt, 2004b; 2005). This state also encompasses the knowing or cognitive capacity of the individual as well as how the individual affectively responds to others; it should therefore be measured by assessing the wisdom experience of people rather than by the wisdom of their knowledge. Wisdom is therefore perceived as a property of the individual and the integration of the cognitive, reflective, and affective characteristics of that individual (Ardelt, 2000; 2004a; 2005).

In keeping with this paradigm of wisdom as an implicit theory that measures the wisdom experience of people, this study was designed to elicit the personal experience of individual executive leaders and to determine how, if at all, those experiences may have transformed them as individuals.

## **Constructive-Developmental Theory**

In her pioneering work on ego development, Loevinger (1976) postulated that there is an order to stages of development. In essence no order or stage can be skipped; each stage is more complex than the previous, and each stage is based on the preceding stage and therefore prepares the individual for the stage to follow (Loevinger, 1976). The present study focused more specifically on the framework of constructive-developmental theory that encompasses the specific body of work linked to neo-Piagetian paradigms. These theories are deemed such because they expand the early work of Jean Piaget beyond the scope of childhood cognition to include the transformational processes and emotions associated with stages of adult development (McCauley et al., 2006). These stages of development set the foundation for work by later researchers such as Torbert (1987; 2004), and Cook-Greuter (1999).

Constructive-developmental theory, or what some theorists refer to as adult stage development, is positioned as constructive in that it explores how individuals construct or interpret their life experiences. Similarly, the theory is positioned as developmental in that it explores how those interpretations can change and become more complex over time (McCauley et al., 2006). The theory contends that a person's growth and development is a process whereby the individual adopts more complex ways of making meaning of life experiences (Kegan, 1982; Cook-Greuter, 2000; Torbert, 1987). Each stage of development is more complex than the previous stage because as the person evolves, he/she is able to integrate and differentiate previous stages of development into a more complex understanding and experience of life. Accordingly, McCauley et al. (2006) states that: "Constructive-developmental theory concerns itself with two primary aspects of development: (a) the organizing principles that regulate how people make sense of themselves and the world (orders of development) and (b) how these regulative principles are constructed and re-constructed over time (developmental movement)" (p. 636).

Developmental theorists divide the spectrum of human consciousness into four main tiers: pre-conventional, conventional, post-conventional, and transpersonal (Cook-Greuter, 2004, 2005). Every stage has the potential for strengths and weaknesses, and each stage offers specific characteristics associated with impulse control, character development, interpersonal relations, and conscious preoccupation to include self-concept—none of which can be measured separately because they are so intimately intertwined (Loevinger, 1966; 1976). For over two decades, theorists in the field of leadership and management have looked to stage development theory as a way to better understand how leaders think, take action, and make meaning out of their experience of leadership. Since the field of constructive-developmental theory is the stage development theory most often associated with leadership and management (Cook-Greuter, 2004; McCauley, Drath, Palus, O'Connor, & Baker, 2006), it is one of the core theoretical frameworks for the present study.

With this most important premise of human development at the forefront, the present study offers a deeper understanding of wisdom through the experiential lens of executive leaders in the context of their adult stage of development. What they *say* about their experience of wisdom will add to the body of knowledge of first-person descriptions of *how* executives live out aspects of wisdom as primary leaders in their respective fields.

Constructive-developmental theorists contend that individuals who measure at the post-conventional levels have a greater capacity for integration of complex thought, action, and feeling (Cook-Greuter, 2004). While the research is not yet fully defined on how this integration may interrelate with theoretical perspectives on wisdom, leaders who measure at post-conventional levels are deemed more successful at positioning their organizations through change and in adapting to complex environments (Cook-Greuter, 2000; Fisher, Merron, & Torbert, 1987; Merron & Torbert, 1987). By contrast, the conventional levels of development are viewed as the stages more associated with linear perspectives. Leaders who measure within these stages, for example, may demonstrate wisdom via analytic logic. However, they would not necessarily recognize their capacity to construct meaning.



In discussing the intersection between the theoretical frameworks on wisdom and constructive-developmental theory, the focus of this study is limited to categorical descriptors associated with the conventional and post-conventional stages of development as defined by Cook-Greuter (2005) and Torbert & Herdman-Barker (2013).

The conventional stages refer to three developmental stages: the Diplomat/Conformist (3.0), Expertise/Self-Conscious (3.5), and Achievement/Conscientious (4.0). These three stages pertain to developmental levels of most individuals after the age of 12; approximately 80% of the population measures within these ranges, with most individuals indicating a transition from the Expertise/Self-Conscious stage to the Achievement/Conscientious stage. For example, thirty-percent of people in a mixed sample of 4510 profiled at the Achievement/Conscientious action logic (Torbert & Herdman-Barker, 2011).

**Table 2: Differentiations between Categorical Descriptors and Scoring of 3 Developmental Models.**

	<b>Torbert Action Logics</b>	<b>Cook-Greuter Ego Development Stages</b>	<b>Scoring</b>	<b>O'Fallon StAGES Model</b>	<b>Scoring</b>
				Illumined	6.5
	Ironic	Unitive	6	Universal	6.0
				Transpersonal	5.5
	Alchemical	Construct-Aware	5/6	Construct-Aware	5.0
<b>Post- Conventional</b>	Strategic-Systems Oriented	Autonomous	5	Strategist	4.5
	Values-Oriented	Individualist	4/5	Individualist	4.0
<b>Conventional</b>	Achievement- Oriented	Conscientious	4	Achiever	3.5
	Expertise-Oriented	Self-Conscious	3/4	Expert	3.0
	Diplomatic	Conformist	3	Diplomat	2.5
	Opportunist	Self-Defensive	2/3	Rule-Oriented	2.0
<b>Pre- Conventional</b>	Impulsive	Impulsive	2	Opportunist	1.5
				Impulsive	1.0

Adapted from Cook-Greuter (2002) and Torbert (2013). Note: O'Fallon (2014) has identified three stages within the earlier stage identified as Unitive by Cook-Greuter and Torbert. In light of this data, O'Fallon also views the Construct-Aware Stage as the first Post-Conventional Stage. Additionally, Cook-Greuter and Torbert do not score for the Rule-Oriented stage.

The post-conventional stages refer to the three developmental stages: the Values-Oriented/Individualist (4.5), the Systems-Strategic/Autonomous (5.0), and the Alchemical/Construct-Aware stage (5.5). At the first post-conventional level, people begin to realize that the meaning of things is dependent upon their own perspective and interpretation (Cook-Greuter, 2005).

Table 2 represents the linguistic diversity between the Ego Development Model as expressed by Cook-Greuter (2002) and Torbert's Action Logics (2011, 2013). The StAGES model (O'Fallon, 2014) is also represented as the latest stage development model. Since it can be somewhat cumbersome and confusing to move between the various linguistic descriptors set forth by Cook-Grueter and Torbert, I will utilize the StAGES numerical scoring for the range of stages represented in this study. The significance of the StAGES model will be more fully explicated in the discussion on Future Research.

## **The Study**

### **Research Design**

The reasoning and processes involved in describing how someone experiences wisdom can be more challenging to detect via quantitative methods (Yang, 2011). The study was therefore designed as an exploratory qualitative study that involved a 1<sup>st</sup>-person interpretative approach to investigating leaders in their natural settings. In-depth semi-structured interview questions were designed to elicit the candid responses of 12 executive leaders and to determine how those responses related to their adult stage of development. The SCTi-Map was the instrument used to determine those stages.

### **Methodology**

#### **Selection and Recruitment**

Executive leaders were purposefully recruited and selected via the researcher's corporate database and nominations from other leaders. The criteria for selection centered on mid-to-senior-level executives engaged in government, corporate, or non-profit settings (to include educational and religious entities) who had undergone a form of major transformation in their organization within the prior 5 years. For purposes of this study, major transformation is defined as corporate downsizing, loss of client base, loss of profits, or any self-identifying factor that has constituted a major shift in systems, processes, policies, or the infrastructure of the organization, to include leadership strategies. Every effort was made to secure a diverse population to include religious affiliation, gender, age, and ethnicity. The objective was to select executive leaders within these environments who scored within the conventional or post-conventional stages of adult development based on the results of the SCTi-Map.

#### **Sample Population**

The age of participants ranged from 44-70 with the median age at 60. Religious affiliation was only moderately represented by one atheist and one participant in the Hindu faith. Since the

focus of the study was on executive leaders who measured at the conventional and post-conventional stages of development, this limitation was not a factor. The sample population was comprised of 8 males and 4 females. The private sector was represented by 41% whereas the public sector was represented by 16% of the population. Four of the participants (33%) were from non-profit organizations, and one participant was from a private foundation. The education level of participants ranged from Bachelor's Degree to Doctorate Degree and included two participants with Juris Doctor Degrees. Executive level positions included 50% of respondents at the Founder/President or CEO/COO level, 2 senior-level pastors from a large mega-church environment, 2 equity partner attorneys, 1 managing partner of an international medical technology company, and 1 technology consultant. Annual operating budgets ranged from \$400,000 to \$175M.

## **Procedure**

The study involved two methods of data collection: the administration of the SCTi-Map (Cook-Grueter, 2008) and semi-structured interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Contact summary sheets and analytic memos were also utilized to reflect on preliminary themes that rose from the initial interviews and to capture ideas and relationships between codes during the process of coding and analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

A pseudonym was assigned to each participant prior to their taking the SCTi-Map assessment. The SCTi-Map responses for each individual were then scored by an independent rater who has been trained according to the standards and protocols of Cook-Greuter and Associates. In an effort to minimize transformational bias (Cook-Greuter, 2011) toward any one specific stage during the analysis process, participants' scores were withheld from the researcher until after completion of the first coding and analysis cycle. Participants stages ranged from 3.0 to 4.5. Since Cook-Greuter's instrument depicts the 4.5 stage at the post-conventional level, no additional recruitment was deemed necessary. However, it should be noted that this decision proved to be a limit to the study in that some researchers view the 4.5 stage as a transitional stage to the post-conventional levels.

All participants were interviewed for 60-90 minutes. Three participants were interviewed over the phone due to distant locations. The remaining 9 interviews were conducted face-to-face by the researcher. Interviews were tape recorded and 10 of the 12 interviews were transcribed by an independent professional. The additional 2 interviews were transcribed by the researcher to protect anonymity of two of the participants who are very well known. Each recorded interview was transcribed verbatim and proofread word-by-word by the researcher.

The semi-structured interview questions related to the leaders' perceived role within the organization, personal wisdom experiences, wisdom as a construct, values and beliefs, the essence of their work, and responses to adversity.

## **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2009) involved two separate and distinct coding cycles. The first cycle involved multi-phases of analysis to ascertain rich, thick descriptions (Maxwell, 2005) of

the leaders' responses. This initial phase was important to determine if their responses indicated a propensity for wisdom. Interview responses were coded into key aspects of general wisdom theory (Baltes & Smith, 1990, 2008) and personal wisdom theory (Ardelt, 2000, 2004a, 2005). Once the data and initial findings from the first cycle of analysis were clearly delineated, the results of the SCTi-Map were revealed to the researcher.

### **First Coding Cycle: Analysis, Coding, and Emergence of Leaders' Experiences of Wisdom**

The first coding cycle was divided into four separate phases.

#### *Phase 1: review of transcripts*

Phase 1 was aimed at understanding how the participants construct and make meaning of their wisdom experience (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Consistent with a data-driven approach to analysis, the first six interviews were reviewed for preliminary code development. Each transcript was coded and analyzed using a multi-step iterative process of thematic analysis as set forth by Boyatzis (1998). This process involved the categorization of data, analysis of narrative structure and contextual relationships, the integration of themes, and the interpretation of major themes and descriptions (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2005; Newman, 2003). The researcher systematically reviewed and analyzed over 15 hours of interview transcripts. This process allowed for insight into the overall theme of each transcript and how the theme might compare to contact summary sheets that were written post-interview of each participant.

A second review of the transcripts involved pre-coding methodologies (Saldaña, 2009) that identified key statements and helped determine patterns of expression. Those patterns of expressions were then compared and contrasted with one another to determine emerging codes. To ensure consistent quality of codes, a code book was developed to ensure that the definition and description of the codes would be accurately applied to future coding. The initial six transcripts were reviewed a third time and coded against the emerging themes to determine consistency of judgment.

#### *Phase 2: code transcripts*

The raw data of the final six interviews was then used to further validate the emerging themes. Once consistency of judgment was determined with respect to the emerging codes, the researcher reviewed the conceptual framework, the interview protocol, and the research question as a guide for articulation of meaningful themes. Additional codes were then developed to allow for responses within the individual domains of wisdom. To test the wise person theory of wisdom, responses were then subjected to an additional level of analysis to determine how they corresponded to the coding within the separate domains of wisdom, the reflective, cognitive, and affective. Research indicates that wisdom is a real-life phenomenon that can be recognized by others without much difficulty (Baltes, Staudinger, Maercker, & Smith, 1995). Based on this assertion, the researcher analyzed all 12 transcripts again and identified 847 "wisdom" responses within the three domains of wisdom.

Content from all 12 transcripts was then analyzed via a first cycle of descriptive coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldaña, 2009). This level of coding was chosen as a form of analysis because it is well suited to studies with a variety of data forms. As an iterative process, this level of analysis involved repeated review of raw data. Codes were then expanded or collapsed accordingly.

#### *Phase 3: interpretation of data*

This phase involved review of all analytic memos to identify key learning points from the first cycle of descriptive coding. A summary of each code was written, and summaries were arranged into clusters to determine higher levels of abstraction and how themes might emerge or converge (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Summaries were also analyzed in terms of the integrative domains of wisdom.

#### *Phase 4: finalization of themes*

This phase involved a return to the raw data to determine if the coded segments of the interview did in fact correspond to the emerging themes. Themes were refined as the data were repeatedly analyzed to ensure accurate representation. This repeated immersion in the interview transcripts allowed for rich, thick data to emerge and for a deepened understanding of the phenomenon. A final stage of clustering resulted in the organization of themes based on the domains of wisdom. Each theme was then named and tagged with an exemplar.

### **Second Coding Cycle: Analysis and Coding of Domains of Wisdom in Relation to Stages**

Since the study was designed to elicit the wisdom experience of executive leaders who scored within the conventional and post-conventional stages of development, it was important to engage in a second coding cycle once the SCTi-Map scores were revealed. The purpose of this cycle was to analyze and code participant responses to determine if there was a relationship between their stage development score and their responses within each of the integrative domains of wisdom. This process involved reentry into the originally coded data. Patterning and clustering of the data was used to determine the descriptive responses of the participants and how those responses corresponded to the three domains of wisdom and their individual stage of adult development.

#### *Phase 5: analysis of responses across the integrative domains of wisdom*

Participant responses previously coded into the cognitive, reflective, and affective domains of wisdom were divided up by participant and analyzed to determine their primary domain of wisdom. Responses included all data previously coded in the subcategories of the coding schema as defined in Table 1. This table represents the definition and operationalization of wisdom as an integrated three-dimensional component of personality. These definitions were adapted from earlier research (Ardelt, 2003; Clayton & Birren, 1980) in an effort to accommodate a more qualitative and interpretative approach to the research. Clayton and Birren (1980) originally determined these domains through a multidimensional scaling process of 12 wisdom attributes (Ardelt, 2005).

The purpose of this level of analysis was to determine if participant responses were integrated across all three domains or if the participants described their experiences from a primary domain (e.g., cognitive, reflective, or affective). Because cognition is required in order to experience the reflective or affective aspects of personality (Wilber, 2000), the categorical responses were divided according to the cognitive, cognitive/reflective, cognitive/affective, and the cognitive/reflective/affective domains of wisdom.

The process involved a review of the coded data for each participant to ensure that the response in each domain was in fact appropriately coded according to the definition as outlined in the coding schema. A percentage of responses for each domain was then determined (Appendix A) to ascertain the primary domain of wisdom described by the participant. For example, 25.96% of the overall responses in the cognitive domain were expressed by Participant 1. Those responses were separated out from the remaining participant responses. Each of his 28 cognitive responses were then analyzed line-by-line to ensure they fit into the cognitive domain. Responses that reflected a direct cognitive response, according to the definition, were separated out and assigned a percentage rate. For example, Participant 1 indicated 19% of his responses in the cognitive domain. Responses that indicated more of an integration of the three domains or of the cognitive/reflective, cognitive/affective domains were separated out into those categories and given a percentage rate as appropriate. Participants' primary domain of wisdom was then determined by their highest percentage rate. For example, Participant 1 indicated 48% of his responses in the primary wisdom domain of the cognitive/affective category.

#### *Phase 6: analysis of responses across the stages/action logics*

The purpose of this level of analysis was to determine if there was a relationship between how participants experienced wisdom, via their primary wisdom domain, and their stage of development or action logic (Torbert and Herdman-Barker, 2013). Participants' responses previously coded into the three domains of wisdom were analyzed and coded against the action logic lexicon for each stage of development. For example, if a cognitive response aligned with the lexicon and understanding associated with the 3.5 action logic, that response was coded at the Expertise level. Responses were then mapped across several action logics as appropriate for each participant. This detailed level of analysis involved coding representative of each action logic against the single or integrated domains of wisdom. For more information regarding the outcomes of this detailed level of analysis, see Spano (2013).

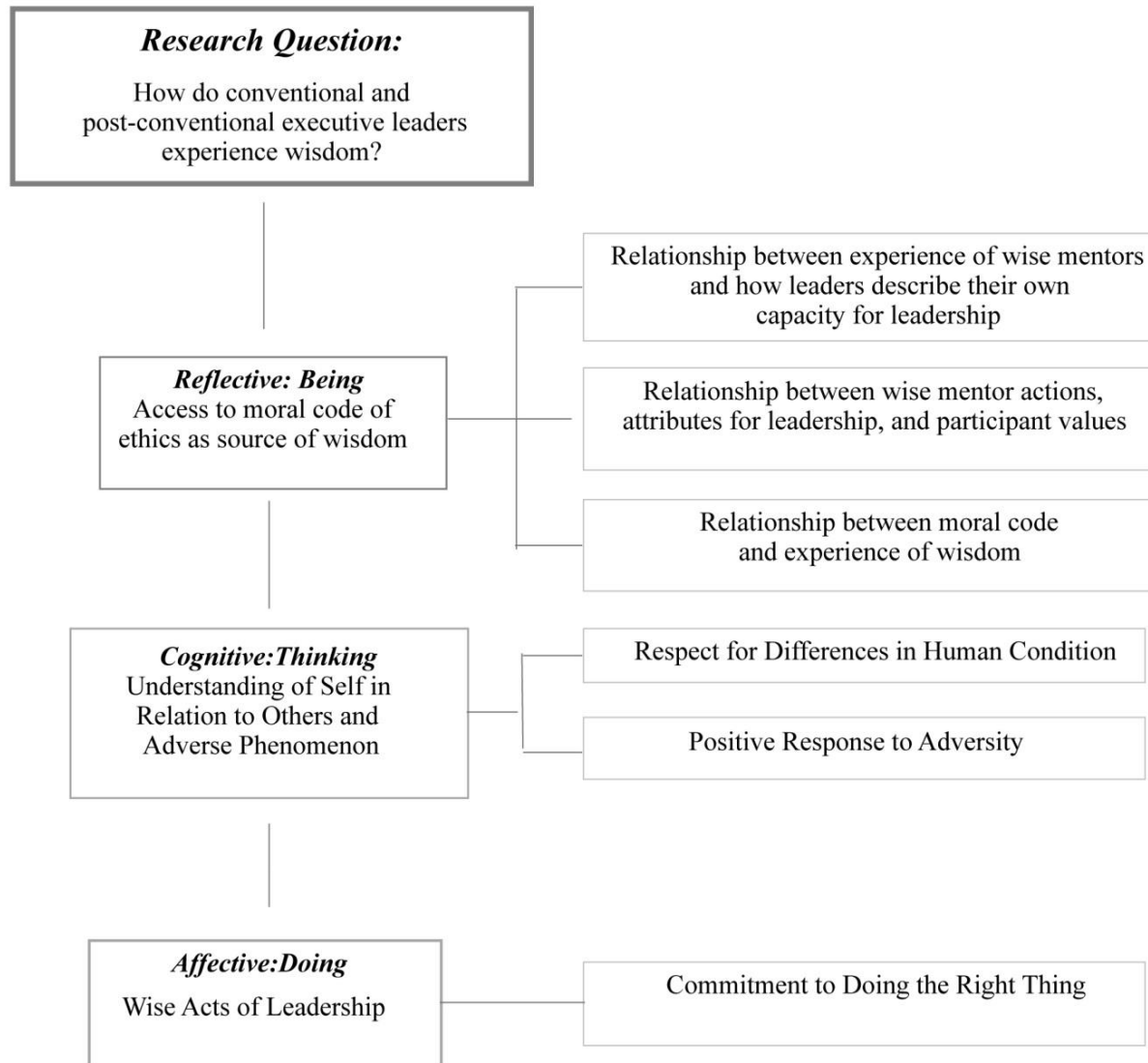
## **Key Findings**

Based on the literature on wisdom and constructive-developmental theory, it initially seemed probable that leaders who measured at the conventional stages of development might fail to indicate a propensity for wisdom beyond a linear, cognitive perspective. Similarly, it seemed probable that those who measured at the later or post-conventional stages of development would indicate integration of the three wisdom domains. Key findings, however, suggest otherwise.

The initial cycle of analysis was necessary to determine if the leaders presented as "wise" based on the definition of wisdom as it corresponds to the three domains of wisdom outlined in Table 1. It was anticipated that participants who lead within more linear, analytic disciplines, e.g., attorneys or engineers, might demonstrate a propensity for wisdom, if at all, only within the

cognitive domain of wisdom. However, this did not prove to be the case. Based on thematic analysis of the initial data, all 12 of the respondents indicated a propensity for wisdom albeit in different ways. The significance of the initial key findings that emerged within each of the domains of wisdom emphasized the complexity of human development and the elusive nature of wisdom.

The process of thematic analysis as outlined above revealed the major themes depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Themes and Key Findings First Cycle of Analysis.**

A brief overview of the findings from the First Cycle of Analysis will be now be discussed.

## **First Cycle of Analysis**

### *Reflective: Access to Moral Code of Ethics as Source of Wisdom*

From a reflective stance, all participants access a strong moral code of ethics as a source of wisdom. They may, however, do so from introspective practices such as prayer and meditation or through more cognitive processes. The reflective component of wisdom speaks to how participants move beyond knowledge and skill and what they know for certain through the process of logic and formal reasoning to understanding issues of knowing in the face of uncertainty (Kitchener & Brenner, 1990).

Responses indicated that all 12 participants were able to move beyond knowledge to levels of “knowing” by accessing a moral code of ethics. This moral code is embedded in who they are. It stems from societal and religious norms that have been impressed upon them in early developmental years. This moral code was also formulated by early career experiences with someone they described as a wise mentor. How they construct meaning within the context of this moral code is one aspect of how they experience wisdom. This system of morality or code of values guides choice and actions. Wisdom is not something they do as all decisions and resultant outcomes are not perfect; it is, however, part of their existence or way of being. These findings indicated that the participants are wise leaders, each in different and unique ways; this individual way of being is reflected in the way they live out the day-to-day experience of wise leadership.

### **Cognitive: Understanding of Self in Relation to Others and Adverse Phenomenon**

#### *Respect for differences in the human condition*

Wisdom is manifested in our understanding of differences and the multiple perspectives of others (Ardelt, 2000; Kitchener & Brenner, 1990). Consistent with this premise, all participants demonstrated a deep understanding of themselves in relation to others and a surprising respect for differences in the human condition. This respect was described in relation to employees, clients/customers, and in some instance, the greater society.

Participants expressed appreciation of employee differences within an underlying theme of respect, care, and/or responsibility. This appreciation, however, was expressed differently based on the organizational sectors represented. For example the public and private sector respondents expressed client appreciation via a more cognitive response of solving problems for the client, increasing the bottom line for the company, and being accountable to a board. While these differentiations may seem obvious responses from anyone in a leadership role, participant knowledge and ability is strongly engulfed in a passionate desire to make a difference for their clients. Wisdom is therefore expressed via their ability to provide information and advice on the pragmatics of life such that their clients can make the best decisions for their businesses.

Leaders from the non-profit organizational sector, however, offered a more altruistic approach that included a systems perspective beyond the client or immediate needs of the community. Both the pragmatic and altruistic approaches to wisdom require some integration of the reflective, cognitive, and affective domains; however, this process is lived out or expressed at different levels. For example, in the pragmatic levels described above, wise leaders may reflect



from rational thought or logic; they rely on facts. Those who engage in reflection from a broader systems perspective, however, seem to arrive at more altruistic levels of respect and appreciation beyond the scope of the individuals they directly serve. Such expression of service often extends beyond the organization, for example, to the global society.

Such acts suggest understanding and acceptance of the positive and negative aspects of human nature (Ardelt, 2005) as they relate to the construct of wisdom. The diversity of these responses, however, also indicates that how leaders experience wisdom within the integrative domains of the cognitive, reflective, and affective aspects of personality is not a clear path of discovery. The interrelationship between the domains of wisdom is complex and requires exploration into the multidimensional aspects of the spiritual, emotional, and psychosocial measures of an individual in order to more fully understand how leaders fully live out their experience of wisdom. Questions related to the phenomenon of adversity were therefore explored in the hopes of gaining some level of insight into the more complex aspects of the participants' meaning-making systems.

### *Positive response to adversity*

Research indicates the importance of examining wisdom within the context of adversity (Ardelt, 2005; Kekes, 1983; Kitchener & Brenner, 1990). This aspect of wisdom also includes how individuals understand themselves in relation to the inherent limits of knowledge and how they understand and accept the unpredictability and uncertainty of life (Ardelt, 2005). Adversity can be expressed as any negative misfortune or crisis that results in calamity or distress for the individual. Depending on the meaning-making systems of the person, to include perception, interpretation, and levels of wisdom, even a minor infraction can be viewed as adversity. One clear aspect of adversity is that it is part of the human experience. How individuals maneuver their way through such moments of misfortune is often determined by their theological, philosophical, or psychological approach to life.

While not all adversity leads to greater levels of wisdom, research indicates that the ability to cope with crisis and hardship may not only be a hallmark of wise individuals, it may also be one of the pathways to wisdom (Ardelt, 2005; Pascual-Leone, 2000). Wisdom theory therefore suggests that leaders would be fully capable of dealing with any crisis and obstacles they may encounter (Ardelt, 2005; Baltes & Kunzmann, 2004; Kekes, 1983; Kunzmann & Baltes, 2003).

Findings indicated that 11/12 of the participants expressed an ability to endure and persevere through extreme measures of adversity. One participant did not feel he had experienced adversity because in his estimation adversity is greater than the day-to-day challenges of life. Daily challenges, in his estimation, are simply problems to solve. Since he had not experienced loss of family, income, or extreme illness, he did not view adversity as part of his life experience.

Consistent with the literature on wisdom and adversity, participants engaged in *active coping* as set forth by Ardelt (2005) in several specific ways: (a) reframed the situation to make the best of it; (b) demonstrated the ability and willingness to take control of the situation based on their own experience, skills, or talents; (c) came to the understanding that one doesn't always have control over external circumstances; (d) accepted that adversity is part of life and that life is

unpredictable and uncertain; (e) accepted that death or loss is a part of life; (f) expressed a trust in the benevolence of others and, in some instances, God.

The aforementioned findings suggest that how leaders handle adverse circumstances may have an impact on how they develop their own capacity for wisdom. Participant responses indicated that adversity is viewed as an opportunity to gain insight and wisdom about self and others. Through adversity, participants learned to embrace challenge, have faith in their own experience and/or God, and to make better and wiser decisions.

### *Affective: Wise Acts of Leadership*

The ebb and flow of how participants reflect and think about daily organizational life is translated into affective behavior, the *doing* aspect of wisdom, or what can be deemed as “wise acts” of leadership. While participants did not expressly describe their actions as “wise,” the process of thematic analysis revealed interesting differentiations in how they deliver products and services. Responses were coded according to thoughts or actions specific to client needs versus those for the greater good of the organization or those set forth on behalf of the common good of society. All 12 participants expressed a commitment to doing the right thing. Twelve of the executive leaders described affective responses specific to their clients. Additionally, all 12 expressed actions for the greater good of the organization. However, only 6/12 responses demonstrated affective behaviors for the common good of society.

The significance of these initial findings was not fully realized until the SCTi-Map scores were revealed. While the first cycle of analysis indicated that there were differentiations in how participants described their commitment to doing the right thing, the second cycle of analysis indicated that there was no significant relationship between stages of adult development and how the participants demonstrated affective behavior towards either the client or the great good of the organization or society at large. Leaders who measured at both the conventional and post-conventional levels of development described affective behavior for the common good of society.

In conclusion, these “wise acts” of leadership are focused on that which is right and just for the client/customers served, the overall good of the organization, or the overall common good of society. In either instance, wise decisions are made based on what is “right and just” for someone or something outside and beyond self. There was little to no evidence of egocentricity in the responses of these executive leaders.

These initial findings further emphasized the complexity of wisdom and the need for greater understanding of the participants’ spiritual, emotional, and psychosocial development. While each of 12 participants indicated a propensity for wisdom, they did so in unique and different ways. Findings from the First Cycle of Analysis did indicate, however, that they do so within the broader scope of a strong moral code, an understanding of self in relation to others and adverse phenomenon, and in their commitment to doing that which is right and just for their organizations, the people they serve, and, in some instances, society-at-large.

Their propensity to experience wisdom in unique ways within the context of their adult stage of development was further substantiated by findings of the Second Cycle of Analysis.

## Second Cycle of Analysis

The second cycle of analysis was important to ascertain if the leaders experienced wisdom within the integrative domains of wisdom, and, if so, how that experience related to their adult stage of development. Since the findings were surprisingly contradictory to existing theories on wisdom and constructive-developmental theory they are presented in support of my argument that wisdom has its own trajectory and therefore necessitates inquiry into the lines of human development as well as the stages of adult development.

### *Results of the SCTi-Map*

The SCTi-Map scores denote each respondent's primary stage or center of gravity (Cook-Greuter, 2005; Torbert & Herdman-Barker, 2013). Participants' individual scores ranged from 3.5 to 4.5 and are representative of the Total Protocol Rating which indicates the statistical measure and qualitative appraisal of the SCTi-Map protocol as scored and assessed by Cook-Greuter. What this essentially means is that the TPR rating is a combination of the statistical score from the inventory, and it also includes the qualitative judgment of the rater. For example, if a participant scores within a statistical range of 4.5, the expertise of the rater might also discern that the respondent's sentence stems indicate an early or late stage of development within that range; hence the plus and minuses depicted in Appendix A. Note that Participant 9 indicates a score of 4/5-. This score indicates that this particular participant has only recently transitioned to the 4.0 stage; she is in the early stage of this level.

The results of the SCTi-Map indicated that eight of the participants measured within the conventional ranges of development: three measured at the 3.5 level, and five measured at the 4.0 level. The remaining four participants, measured at the post-conventional stage 4.5. It is also worth noting that three of the four participants who measured at the post-conventional level were women.

While these scores are representative of the participants' center of gravity (Cook-Greuter, 2005; Torbert & Herdman-Barker, 2013), it is not unusual for the dynamic of development to include a pull toward later stages of development. Under the right conditions and depending on the person's state of consciousness, e.g., the concrete, subtle, causal, and nondual tiers (Wilber, 2006) an individual may indicate meaning-making capacities and actions within later stages of development or vice versa. For example, a person may have a peak spiritual experience at the earlier concrete state of consciousness, however, that peak experience does not necessarily mean they have moved to a later stage of development.

The complexity of this developmental movement can perhaps best be described as a "rocking back and forth" (O'Fallon, Personal Communication, 2014) as individuals experience themselves in transition between earlier and later stages. The results of the SCTi-Map for this specific population, therefore, also indicated a range of responses from earlier to later stages. This range represents the nuanced dimensions of the meaning-making capacity of the individual. A participant may indicate scores in earlier stages just as readily as he may indicate scores in later stages of development.

As further evidence of this premise, five of the participants who scored within the conventional range of 4 also indicated SCTi-Map responses in the 4.5 range. Three out of the four participants in the post-conventional range of 4.5 indicated assessment responses in the 5.0 stage. After the results of the SCTi-Map were revealed, the second cycle of analysis further supported the propensity for these specific participants to gravitate toward later stages of development.

### **Analysis of Wisdom across the Stages/Action Logics**

The second level of analysis also involved mapping participant interview responses across multiple stages of development according to the lexicon of stage-development theory as recently set forth by Torbert and Herdman-Barker (2013). The reason for shifting from the SCTi-Map lexicon to the Action Logic lexicon at this point of analysis was to ascertain how participants' wisdom experience corresponded with the leadership perspectives set forth by Torbert & Herdman-Barker (2013). Torbert's latest model, The Global Leadership Profile was not yet available at the time this study was conducted.

This second level of analysis indicated that it was much easier to map the conventional level responses across one, two, or even three action logics. In most instances, these responses mapped either one level below or beyond the respondents' center of gravity score. Participants who scored at the later post-conventional action logics, however, expressed more complex responses that mapped across 3-4 levels. For several, these responses were even two stages beyond their center of gravity score.

This element of the study is indicative of the ebb and flow of human development and the "pull" toward later action logics. Participants who scored within the later action logics more specifically indicated a movement and transition toward a deeper understanding of self and the ability to more fully self-integrate into frameworks beyond their center of gravity. This aspect of the analysis was important in that it pointed to a possible relationship between how participants mapped across multiple stages of development and how they might experience wisdom within the integrated domains of wisdom.

### **The Integrative Domains of Wisdom**

The results of this study did not indicate a significant relationship between the integrative domains of the cognitive, reflective, and affective aspects of personality and how participants experience wisdom. Additionally, there was no significant relationship between participants' adult stage of development and how they experienced the domains of wisdom. The significance of these two findings will be more fully explicated in the following discussion.

### **Summary of Key Findings**

Key findings of the overall study suggest that wisdom can be experienced and expressed in both the single and integrated domains of wisdom. Participants from every level of development expressed responses that correspond to one or more domains. The integration of all three domains is difficult to measure because cognition is so closely related to the domain of

reflection. This study can only point to what each participant revealed about their reflective processes. This factor presents a limitation to the study in that there is no way to fully determine how, if at all, participants access the reflective domain to include the full integrative domains of wisdom as defined in this study. One can cognitively experience wisdom in the moral decision-making process as readily as one can access wisdom in moments of deep introspection which may ultimately lead to deeper and more meaningful experiences of life and conduct toward others. The integrated domains are not necessarily accessed by an individual all the time. Sternberg (1985; 1998; 2004) reminds us that even wise individuals are not always wise. One can be wise in a variety of situations and in a variety of ways.

With respect to stage development theory, Appendix A indicates that wisdom can be experienced within multiple stages of development. For example, an individual who measures within the 3.5 range may experience the cognitive/affective domain of wisdom at 48% just as readily as a participant who measures within the 4.5 range does at 49%. The literature suggests that wisdom occurs more readily at the later stages of development because individuals at these later stages have a greater propensity to engage in thought processes or “empty mind” experiences that allow for more complex perspectives such as a deeper understanding of self in relation to the world and systems-at-large (Cook-Greuter, 2005). This overriding premise suggests that developmental movement includes a movement toward wisdom that involves increasing balance between differentiation and integration.

While the literature clearly points to the deep and profound meaning-making systems of individuals at these later stages, it is not clearly identified with any specific definition of wisdom. The study-at-hand, however, has analyzed a small, yet specific population of leaders within the context of the integrative domains of wisdom, and findings suggest that wisdom can and does occur within multiple stages of adult development. .

In conclusion, key findings indicated that:

- Wisdom can be experienced at both the conventional and post-conventional levels of development.
- Wisdom can be experienced within one or more of the multidimensional domains of the cognitive, reflective, and affective aspects of personality.

## **Discussion**

Findings of the present study suggest that the complexity of wisdom necessitates inquiry into the lines of human development to include the integral perspectives associated with spiritual, emotional, and psychosocial measures because stage development theory, while vital to our understanding of human development, offers a limited understanding of how leaders experience wisdom. Further, the cognitive, reflective, and affective domains of personality may be influenced or affected by an individual’s spiritual, emotional, and psychosocial lines of development. Finally, the relationship between lines, states, and stages of adult development in the context of wisdom can provide a deeper understanding of how leaders effectively engage in behaviors associated with wisdom.

Before discussion on the reasons for these contentions, it is important to reiterate that participant responses associated with this study are but one aspect of how leaders construct meaning of their wisdom experience. While there is some indication that several of the participants (6/12) indicate more cognitive responses, it is presumptive to conclude that responses at another point in time would not indicate more integrated perspectives. Even within the more cognitive stance, participants indicate an ability to respond to people, life situations, and the overall pragmatics of life with wisdom. The participants in this study make good decisions based on a strong moral code of ethics, demonstrate empathy and compassion towards others, and exhibit positive responses to adversity. How they reflect and make meaning of those situations may extend beyond the cognitive responses offered in this study; this study is limited to responses of a small sample population at one given point in time. Additionally, it must be noted that this study does not represent participants from the later stages of development, namely, 5.0 and beyond. It is possible that participants who measure at these later stages may indicate a greater propensity for the more integrated domains of wisdom.

## **Constructive-Developmental Theory and How Leaders Experience Wisdom**

My first contention that stage development theory offers a limited understanding of how leaders experience wisdom can be substantiated in two specific ways:

- Depending on the operationalized definition of wisdom, progression in human development may or may not coincide with progression in wisdom development.
- Based on the findings of this study, wisdom can be experienced at both the conventional and post-conventional levels of development.

With respect to this first contention, the underlying premise for this study was based on research in constructive-developmental theory that indicates that later stages of development correspond to higher levels of wisdom. As one transitions to later stages of development, higher levels of wisdom emerge (Barbuto & Millard, 2012; Cook-Greuter, 2005).

In an overview of Kegan's Orders of Consciousness, Barbuto & Millard (2012) offer a significant perspective on the relationship between the stages of development and how such development coincides with a progression in wisdom. In this synopsis, the highest order of development corresponds to wisdom via an individual's awareness of self-limitations and openness to the complexity of issues, the ability to connect multiple perspectives, and a willingness to adapt to the uncertainty of life. Other leading constructive-developmental theorists indicate that higher levels of differentiation and integration within the post-conventional stages indicate higher levels of wisdom (Cook-Greuter, 2005). Additional empirical studies (Yang, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2011) proposes a process view of wisdom arguing that when leaders exert positive influence to promote good lives for themselves, members of their organization, and society in general, wisdom is displayed through their leadership. Wisdom is therefore viewed as a positive real-life process that encompasses core competencies of cognitive integration, a vision for a good life, and the action required to embody that integrated thought and the positive effects of the action on self and others (Yang, 2011). As one of the most recognized constructive-developmental theorists in the field of leadership, Torbert, et al., (2004) views wisdom as an

ongoing integration of 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> person inquiry in the midst of action with others. Such wisdom involves the integration of being, knowing, doing, and effecting in a timely manner.

While each of these theorists point to the relationship between constructive-developmental theory and wisdom, the findings of this study suggests that the relationship between adult development and how leaders progress in wisdom may be more complex than previously understood. Based on review of the literature on constructive-developmental theory at the outset of this study, it was anticipated that leaders who measured at the earlier stages of development would fail to indicate integrated responses within the three domains of wisdom. However, when the results of the SCTi-Map scores were revealed, a surprising result emerged. Leaders who measured at the conventional and post-conventional stages, as demonstrated in Appendix A, indicated integrated responses within the primary domains of wisdom, e.g., the Cognitive/Affective and the Cognitive/Reflective. These slight, but important differentiations in the data, point to the complexity of human development in relation to the multidimensional aspects of wisdom and indicate that progression in human development may or may not equate to a progression in wisdom development, again, depending on the operationalized definition of wisdom. Without further inquiry into the spiritual, emotional, and psychosocial lines of development, it may be presumptuous to assume that progression in stages of development equate to a progression in wisdom.

Additionally, findings also suggest that it cannot be presumed that leaders who measure at later stages of development experience wisdom more readily than those at the earlier stages. For example, Participant 1 who measured at the lowest SCTi-Map conventional score indicated 48% of his responses in the primary domain of the Cognitive/Affective. However, with 33% of his responses falling within the Cognitive/Reflective/Affective domains of wisdom, he was also the only participant to indicate integration in all three domains (Appendix A). Constructive-developmental theory would suggest that someone who measures at this level might experience wisdom purely from a cognitive level that relies on external norms and standards and an express level of expertise from external sources (Barbuto & Millard, 2012). While it is difficult to ascertain the nuances of these measures within a small sample population, in-depth thematic analysis suggests that additional lines of development that might include spiritual and emotional perspectives are worthy of consideration.

## **The Integrative Domains of Wisdom and How Leaders Experience Wisdom**

My second contention that the cognitive, reflective, and affective domains of wisdom may be influenced or affected by an individual's spiritual, emotional, and psychosocial lines of development is exemplified by the fact that participants indicated responses within one or more multiple domains of wisdom.

Research indicates that respondents who scored high on cognition utilizing the 3DWS (Three Dimensional Wisdom Scale; Ardel, 2003) also scored high on the reflective and affective domains of wisdom (Ardelt, 2004b). Wisdom is therefore described as the integration of these three dimensional personality characteristics (Ardelt, 2004a; 2004b). The reflective component is emphasized as an important aspect of wisdom (Ardelt (2000, 2004a, 2004b).

Table 3 indicates the average percentages of the overall categorical responses in each domain in relation to the stages/action logics represented in the study. None of the three representative stages indicate a high percentage in the integrative cognitive/reflective/affective domain. However, participants' responses do indicate percentages within the multiple domains of cognitive/reflective and cognitive/affective.

**Table 3: Wisdom Domains and Action Logics.**

Action Logic	No. of Participants	Average Percentages In Integrative Domains			
		C	C/R	C/A	C/R/A
Expertise	3	34%	21%	30%	15%
Achievement	5	57%	14%	23%	3%
Values Oriented	4	37%	15%	37%	10%

Note: The categorical domains are represented as Cognitive, Cognitive/Reflective, Cognitive/Affective, and Cognitive/Reflective/Affective (Ardelt, 2000) and are based on data code sets.

Table 3 further indicates that participants within the Expertise, Achievement, and Values-Oriented action logics had lower response rates in the Cognitive/Reflective domain. Research on constructive-developmental theory points to the probability that people who score in the later stages of development, 5.0 and above, might have a greater propensity for higher levels of self-awareness and reflective engagement (Barbuto & Millard, 2012; Cook-Greuter, 2005; Torbert & Herdman-Barker, 2013); they might therefore experience more significant levels of wisdom based on their integration of all three domains. One of the limitations of this study is that none of the 12 participants assessed within these later stages of development. For more detailed exemplars of how participants experienced wisdom within the domains of wisdom, see Spano (2013).

Findings suggest that the three-dimensional domains of wisdom are present in the meaning-making systems of these participants albeit in different forms. For example, those participants who measured at the 4.5 range indicated an average percentage range (37%) in the cognitive domain that is not too dissimilar from that expressed by the those who scored within the 3.5 range at 34%. While this percentage is balanced with their cognitive-affective domain (37%), it cannot be presumed that their wisdom experience is more integrated than those who scored within the 3.5 range and indicated a higher percentage rate of 15% in the cognitive/reflective/affective domain. However, even this percentage in the integrated domain as expressed by the Expertise level is skewed due to the high 33% responses of Participant 1. Appendix A indicates that two of the participants actually scored higher in the cognitive domain. These differentiations in percentages point to the complexity of this construct and further suggest that wisdom can be experienced within the single and integrated domains of wisdom.

One of the most comprehensive studies on wisdom in recent years exemplifies the many complex nuances of wisdom as a construct. In examining exemplars of wisdom, Krafcik (2011)



points to the significance of inquiry into the spiritual, emotional, and psychosocial lines of development. His study involves quantitative and qualitative measurements of exemplars' perceived levels of stress, life satisfaction, state and trait anxiety, personality traits, generativity, mindfulness, humility, ego development, spiritual perspectives, and potential for subclinical narcissism. As Krafcik hypothesized, exemplars indicated adult development scores that exceeded the highest conventional stage of 4.0; the study did not include exemplars within the earlier stages of development.

Additionally, one pertinent result of the Krafcik study indicated that among exemplars of wisdom, spirituality exceeded the normative score on the Spiritual Perspective Scale by 15.7%. Spirituality, as its own line of development (Wilber, 2006), is important to our understanding of wisdom (Ardelt, 2004; Kramer, 1990).

One of the limitations of the present study (Spano, 2013) is that, without a measurement of perspectives on spirituality, it is difficult to ascertain how the cognitive, reflective, and affective domains of wisdom are affected by participants' spiritual development. This line of reasoning can be further explicated in a third contention as follows.

### **States, Stages and Lines of Development**

Finally, the third contention is that the relationship between lines, states, and stages of adult development in the context of wisdom can provide a deeper understanding of how leaders effectively engage in behaviors associated with wisdom. The findings of the present study suggest that without analysis of the complex interrelationship between states of consciousness and stages and lines of development, it is challenging to determine precisely how leaders experience wisdom. Stages and states of consciousness overlap in complex ways. A leader may experience a peak mental state within any stage; this state is interpreted based on his or her current stage of development (Wilber, 2006). The interrelationship between states, stages, and lines of development produces a variety of interpretative experiences that may or may not result in the experience of wisdom.

This relationship between states, stages, and lines of development was more significantly realized as the present study unfolded. Findings indicated that participants each had access to a moral code of ethics as their source of wisdom. This moral code of ethics evolved from positive and meaningful experiences with mentors early in their career paths and from societal and family norms over time. With the exception of one self-declared atheist, each participant expressed some level of spiritual or religious understanding. Several participants were selected for the study because they are known to be wise spiritual leaders in their community. Participants described behaviors often associated with higher levels of spiritual development, e.g., consistent acts of prayer and meditation, acts of generosity and benevolence, compassion, empathy, a deep and profound belief in something beyond self, an abiding love for others, and so forth. Two of the pastors from an evangelical mega-church, for example, were interviewed because of their philosophical and spiritual perspectives on the meaning of life and their ability to impact global societies. Findings indicated, however, that both of these participants scored in the 4.0 range and that they experience wisdom within the primary domain of the cognitive (Appendix A).

Krafcik (2011) indicates that an individual's state of spiritual development can override their stage of development. Such nuances add to the complexity of human development. For example, in contrast to the 4.0 scores of the two spiritual leaders, it is worth noting that the self-professed atheist scored at the later 4.5 stage with 49% of her responses in the Cognitive/Affective domain. States of consciousness represent the space in which developmental lines arise (Wilber, 2006). Depending on the different states of consciousness, developmental lines increase in complexity. Research that examines how these interconnections relate to wisdom can also prove invaluable in determining how leaders transition from early to later stages of development and how they experience wisdom. For example, the male Hindu participant in this study who measured at a post-conventional level expressed a higher state of consciousness via his daily meditative practices. Exploration into how such individuals' lines of development are affected by such higher states could be useful to our understanding of how leaders' experience wisdom.

These findings are significant when interpreted through the lens of recent research that indicates that exemplars of wisdom do not recommend one spiritual path (Krafcik, 2011). Such differentiations point to the importance of further inquiry into the spiritual, emotional, and psychosocial lines of human development.

Stages and lines of development as positioned within the framework of constructive-developmental theory are relevant to the field of leadership in that organizational leaders preparing to meet today's challenges would be wise to consider the relationship between the overall system and the entire leadership practice, to include the leader's consciousness or stage of development, his behavior, and the domains of culture (Kübers & Weibler, 2008). The results of this study indicate the potential for additional research that explores wisdom in the context of both adult lines *and* stages of development to determine if specific correlations do exist.

## **Limitations to the Study**

This section identifies the limitations and delimitations of the present study to include aspects of the research design, sample size, sampling procedure, instrumentation, and researcher bias.

### **Sample Size**

As is appropriate for a qualitative study that examines the in-depth first- person experience of participants, the sample size was limited to 12 participants. This sample size is not sufficient for generalizations about the wisdom experience of executive leaders or the overall population. It is sufficient, however, to generate perspectives on how conventional and post-conventional executive leaders experience wisdom in the course of their daily lives. It may also help define future research questions and methodologies in the field of leadership, wisdom, and constructive-developmental theory.

### **Sample Procedure**

The sampling procedure created some limitations. Despite the desire to include participants from a variety of geographical areas, the researcher's national database now includes individuals who have transitioned outside of leadership roles due to the recent economic crisis. Despite

outreach to over 26 leaders, 10 respondents are key leaders in one geographical area. Another limiting factor was the decision to include two leaders from the same mega-church. This decision, however, was predicated on the unique aspects of this organization as a global entity and the fact that both leaders represent entirely different roles at a local and global level.

### **Sample Population**

The sample population includes 4 women and 8 men. While every effort was made to equally balance the gender factor, it was challenging to find executive-level women who were available to participate. Since women are still only 40% of the executive population, the researcher's data base includes a greater number of male leaders. Even though the study includes fewer women participants, it is worth noting that three of the executive-women scored at the 4.5 post-conventional level of development. This aspect of the study is interesting in that it posits the need for future gender based research that examines the differences between the wisdom experience of leaders from earlier and later stages of development.

Age was another factor of limitation in that many organizational settings include executive leaders in more seasoned stages of life (e.g., 40s and beyond.) The researcher did not have access to younger executive leaders who may be rising up in other fields, e.g., technology.

It should also be noted that the sample population criterion defined as "executive leaders," is limiting to the study. This specific limit responds to leaders whom, by the very nature of their status and role, may have greater capacity for wisdom. By focusing on this specific population, the study excludes responses from individuals in subordinate positions who might add to existing literature on wisdom and adult human development.

Another limiting aspect of the study involves the participants' stages of adult development. The SCTi-Map scores of the participants in this study indicated responses in the 3.5 stage to the 4.5 stage of development. Because it is somewhat difficult to locate participants in the later stages, more particularly within the corporate environment, the study excludes the wisdom experience of individuals who might score in these later stages. This factor presents a limitation to the study in that individuals who score within the later stages of 5.0 and beyond might offer a different perspective on how leaders experience wisdom within the integrative domains of wisdom.

Additionally, the study is designed to examine the interview responses of participants. This methodology presents a limitation to the study in that all data are self-reported and do not include third-party observations or other data points beyond the SCTi-Map scores. This factor points to the potential for participant self-bias and any proclivity to state their experiences from an subjective stance.

### **Instrumentation**

The SCTi-Map assessment instrument has been rigorously validated through the work of Cook-Greuter (1999) and Torbert (1987, 2004). However, it is but one instrument that proffers one perspective of human development on an individual at a specific point in time. Additional

instrumentation that measures and evaluates the construct of wisdom would also have been valuable to this study, e.g., the Three Dimensional Wisdom Scale (Ardelt, 2003).

### **Researcher Bias**

All participants were selected via the researcher's data base or via nomination from a mutual colleague. Every precaution was taken to avert potential bias via analytic memos and journaling. However, the study may have benefited more from a nomination process that allowed for involvement from participants completely unknown to the researcher.

## **Implications of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to elicit the wisdom experience of conventional and post-conventional executive leaders and to determine whether and how this experience related to the leaders' stage of development.

### **Implications for Leadership Development and Theory**

Any expressed linkage between how leaders experience wisdom and their adult stage of development can be meaningful to future leadership development processes. The results of this study do not offer a significant relationship between conventional and post-conventional stages of development and the participants' experience of wisdom; however, the findings are nonetheless meaningful because they suggest that leaders at both stages have the potential to live out the experience of wisdom in ways that positively impact the organization. They are also significant in that leaders who come to understand their own experience of wisdom in the context of their stage of development have the potential to access higher levels of both wisdom and developmental movement. Leadership development processes that encompass aspects of stage development theory and wisdom theory could prove beneficial to the overall effectiveness of leaders.

### **Implications for Wisdom and Constructive-Developmental Theory**

#### **Wisdom Theory**

The underlying premise of this study is that wisdom is vital to our understanding of self in relation to the world. How we respond to situations and people is dependent on our ability to exercise wisdom. Wise leaders are better equipped to handle the complexities of our global society.

This study is but one whisper in a large and still emerging conversation. Scholar/practitioners are only beginning to explore how wisdom can potentially impact leadership capacity and overall organizational development. The rapid changes in our society alert us to the fact that we must come to a better understanding of what it means to develop leaders beyond skills and competence. More comprehensive models of leadership that specifically align theory and practice are required. Scholar/practitioners can aid in these symbiotic efforts by "facilitating a more approximate fit between organizational context and the strategies and design of leadership interventions" (Zaccaro & Horn, 2003, p. 774).

The results of the present study suggest the importance of a leader's strong moral code of ethics as a source of wisdom. Somehow, in the midst of our chaotic environment, leaders must find ways to think and behave in more ethical and moral ways. The wisdom experienced and expressed by the executive leaders in this study represents a bridge between wisdom, leadership, and constructive-developmental theory. Implications of this study suggest that research must and should extend beyond the existing conversations of expert knowledge and the integrative aspects of wisdom to include the spiritual, emotional, moral, and interpersonal lines of development. Wise leadership is now becoming more critical to the future of our organizations, our environment, and our international societies. If we are to move leadership beyond the hierarchal model of authoritative power, control, and bottom-line results, we must come to understand what it means to live from value based perspectives that generate results for the greater and common good.

Wisdom theory, while still somewhat new as a psychological construct, demands that we access the hearts and minds of leaders such as the participants of this study<sup>2</sup> so that we can more clearly define that which they themselves take for granted: their unique ability to solve real-world problems in real time based on their own humble capacity to do that which is right and just – maybe not all of the time, but at the very least, much of the time.

### **Constructive-Developmental Theory**

Research and application of constructive-developmental theory continues to expand in the field of human and organizational development. The relationship between adult stages of development and wisdom represents a non-linear, spiral effect, meaning that whether wisdom or higher stages of development occur first is difficult to surmise.

Findings of the present study suggest the potentiality for a reciprocal relationship between these two constructs. Several themes are consistent between the two constructs: (a) the inclusion of the cognitive, affective, and social elements; (b) the developmental nature of both constructs; (c) the increased ability to deal with complexity; (d) the ability to be self-aware and reflective; and (e) the impact of challenging situations and dissonant events to trigger further development (Barbuto & Millard, 2012).

The significance of the present study is that it expands upon these conclusions by exploring the nuances and differentiations in how participants experience the *integrative* domains of wisdom. Findings suggest that the wisdom experience of these 12 participants, while unique to each individual, does not necessarily correspond to their stage of development. Due to the complex and multidimensional nature of both wisdom and adult stages of development, more research is needed before scholar/practitioners can unequivocally propose that the integrative domains of wisdom directly correspond to stages of development.

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<sup>2</sup> For rich descriptions of participants of this study, see Spano (2013).

## **Implications for Future Research**

The relationship between a leader's propensity for wisdom and his/her adult stage of development has profound implications for leadership development (Barbuto & Millard, 2012). Future research should be intentionally designed to advance developmental processes in both areas as follows:

### **The Leader/Stakeholder Relationship**

Responsible leadership and stakeholder theory expands the leader/follower relationship to include key stakeholders (Maak & Pless, 2006). Executive leaders who are interacting with multiple individuals within a variety of contexts will be better equipped to do so if they have developed a greater understanding of their stage of development and how, if at all, that level equates to their capacity for wisdom.

The participants of this study indicated that how they experienced their wise mentors impacted how they came to develop their own moral code of ethics and their own capacity for leadership. Much of the integration between their moral code and their leadership capacity occurred at a subconscious level. It wasn't until the participants had an opportunity to recall their memories that they came to fully realize the impact of this wise mentor on their lives. Most often, they were surprised to notice that they had come to emulate much of what they had experienced in this leader.

This finding has significant implications for research that involves the mentoring capacity of leaders. How leaders come to understand and explore their moral code and how they live it out in the day-to-day practicum of leadership could prove important to the leader/stakeholder relationship. Leaders have the potential to foster wisdom in their followers (Barbuto & Millard, 2012). Awareness of their own developmental stage and how their meaning-making systems impact their ability to effectively live out their role of leadership can potentially impact their capacity to influence the leader-follower relationship in positive ways.

### **Differentiation of Target Audiences**

The present study was designed to include executive leaders from diverse backgrounds. Greater emphasis was placed on the leadership capacity of the individual, however, than it was on their industry or the industry's role within society.

The relationship between the two constructs may be more expressly researched in terms of industry and/or disciplines. For example, findings suggest that those in the more analytical fields (engineer, attorney) may experience wisdom differently than those in the more humanistic fields of religion or social administration. Additionally, there was an apparent difference between the wisdom experience of leaders in corporate environments and those who exercise authority in not-for-profit organizations.

Finally, research into the wisdom experience of women leaders vs. men leaders would also prove invaluable. The study pointed to some interesting differences in the way women recalled

their experience of adversity and the wisdom gained versus that of their male counterparts. The women were far more straightforward in describing their experience whereas 4/8 male participants were very emotional in describing their adversity and what they learned from that experience. Even as they expressed emotion, the four male participants spoke to their need to be strong for others in these moments of loss. Literally caught off guard by their own emotions, it was as though the interview was the first time these men had spoken of their feelings on the matter. The women, however, expressed greater comfort and understanding of their story and how they came to resolution after a period of reflection.

Such nuances may suggest that women may have a greater propensity to move beyond the cognitive level of wisdom to the more integrative reflective and affective stances that equate to wisdom.

Additionally, this study focused on the wisdom experience of leaders who measured within the 3.5 range to the 4.5 range of development. Further research is needed to determine if leaders who measure within the earlier or later stages of development might experience wisdom more within the integrative domains of wisdom than findings of this study indicate.

### **The Spirituality of Wisdom**

The relationship between the human experience of spirituality and wisdom is so complex that it warrants specific research in its own rite. The nature of business is transformed when viewed and experienced from a spiritual-based context (Delbecq in Miller & Miller, 2006). Delbecq further states that “one of the most striking features of the spiritual-based context for wisdom leadership is that the primary purpose of business and of wisdom leadership is spiritual fulfillment and service to society” (Miller & Miller, 2006, p. 9).

This study has encapsulated the leadership of these participants in the context of their moral code. For some, this moral code includes a high level of spirituality, but spirituality conjures up all kinds of definitions and experiences in the human mind. Based on findings associated with the Spiritual Perspective Scale, Krafcik (2011) indicates that higher levels of wisdom are correlated with increases in openness, humility, and the importance of spirituality. Future research that more clearly defines how spirituality impacts a leader’s propensity for wisdom could enhance meaningful life/work experiences for leaders.

From the perspective of constructive-development theory, spirituality presents even more complex dichotomies. For example, two of the leaders in this study are deeply spiritual men, yet, even so, they measured at the 4.0 conventional level of development. On the other hand, three of the leaders who measured at the 4.5 post-conventional level professed no specific spiritual beliefs or practices.

### **Wisdom and Differentiation-and-Integration**

The experience of wisdom within the context of stage development theory may be more significantly understood through the lens of differentiation and integration than through the integrative aspects of existing wisdom theories. Development is defined as the purposeful

transformation toward higher levels of simultaneous differentiation and integration (Cook-Greuter, 2005). Differentiation refers to an increased understanding of the specificity of concepts held in one's knowledge of the world (Zaccaro & Horn, 2003). Development and cognitive psychologists characterize the beginning of cognitive growth in terms of increased differentiation in schemas, knowledge structures, and ways of understanding (Kegan, 1994; Piaget, 1954; Zaccaro & Horn, 2003). Integration refers to the understanding of assumptions (Cook-Greuter, 2004) and a linking of unrelated concepts through higher order abstraction (Zaccaro & Horn, 2003). Differentiation begins in the conventional stages of development and increases toward higher levels of integration at the post-conventional stages. While this study inadvertently explored the nuances of differentiation and integration, analysis was not intentionally pointed in this direction since the greater emphasis was placed on the integrated domains of wisdom.

Research that explores how leaders differentiate and integrate their experiences could be perhaps the most vital to our understanding of how leaders' experience of wisdom corresponds to their stage of development. Barbuto & Millard (2012) contend that the connection between constructive-developmental theory and wisdom could have profound implications for future leadership developmental processes and for wisdom development in followers.

### **Life Experience and Adversity**

The interview protocol of this study was designed to elicit the meaning-making systems of participants via semi-structured, open-ended questions. While every participant expressed the viewpoint that wisdom comes from life experience, future research into the depth of such experiences could prove meaningful to our understanding of how individuals from all walks of life grow and develop their capacity for wisdom.

The literature clearly indicates that a person's capacity to positively maneuver through the many aspects of adversity may enhance one's capacity for wisdom (Ardelt, 2000). Adversity, however, is a broad and ambiguous construct within its own rite. This study was designed to elicit responses about wisdom in the context of adversity; however, adversity was not the sole focus of this body of work. Future research that deals more specifically with the many aspects of adversity would expand our understanding of wisdom. Specific areas worthy of consideration include how wisdom precisely correlates to life experience, how one learns from mistakes and poor life choices, how one acquires wisdom via the adversity of personal tragedy, or how one experiences wisdom from hazardous occupational settings or from being exposed to life-threatening conditions.

### **The StAGES Model**

The more recent StAGES Model set forth by O'Fallon (2014) offers up a great opportunity for future research in that her extensive longitudinal studies have further delineated the Unitive/Ironist or 6.0 post-conventional stage of the earlier models. This body of research depicts three later stages more expressly described as Transpersonal (5.5), Universal (6.0), and Illumined (6.5).

The significance of this model lies in the fact that it synthesizes earlier ego development theory, the concrete, subtle, and causal tiers, and an understanding of later stages of



development, all of which are embedded in the Integral Theory AQAL Model (Wilber, 1996, 2000, 2006).

In experiencing the many complex premises underlying the StAGES Model directly within the Pacific Integral Community, I found this particular model to offer a deep and profound understanding of the complexities of human development. Further research that explores the StAGES Model in conjunction with Wisdom Theory may prove instrumental in deepening our understanding of how leaders experience wisdom in the context of their internal, external, and collective worlds.

## Conclusion

The study was designed to explore the wisdom experience of conventional and post-conventional leaders. The intention is to open scholar/practitioner discourse between three significant fields of research: leadership, wisdom, and constructive-developmental theory. While the aforementioned qualitative findings are interesting and meaningful, they suggest the need for additional research that explores wisdom in the context of both adult lines and adult stages of development to determine if specific correlations do exist. As with every academic endeavor, more questions arise than answers.

Recent shifts in the global economy and the many challenges associated with a networked society in the age of knowledge and information suggest the need for leaders who are self-reflective and self-aware. Additionally, today's leaders must be capable of engaging in complex levels of differentiation and integration of multiple ideas and solutions. A hundred plus years of leadership theory points to a shift from early quantitative research on traits, behaviors, power and influence, leader-follower relationships, and situational theory (Yukl, 2010) – each emphasizing leadership effectiveness – to now include equal focus on qualitative research, to include cognition and perception, e.g., phenomenological studies (Bass, 2008).

Constructive-developmental theorists have offered a plethora of research that helps us understand how individuals construct meaning and how that meaning equates to effectiveness and overall positive outcomes. The many facets of wisdom have been explored and researched from a philosophical, theoretical, and psychological perspective since man began to ponder the meaning and significance of life. Each of these disciplines has contributed to our understanding of the human condition. While we have come to understand a great deal about how leaders construct meaning and how they may or may not engage in behaviors associated with wisdom, we still have a limited understanding of the relationship between those meaning-making systems and their states, stages, and lines of development.

At the outset of this study, I quietly presupposed that leaders who measured at the later stages of development would indicate a greater propensity for wisdom within the integrated domains of wisdom. Findings indicated otherwise. There was no significant relationship between participants' stage of development and their propensity for wisdom. Leaders measured within the single and multiple domains of wisdom at both the conventional and post-conventional levels. The findings suggest that, depending on the operationalization and definition of wisdom, the

progression in human development may or may not coincide with a progression in wisdom development.

The significance of these findings lies in my contention that wisdom, as a complex multidimensional construct, requires further inquiry into the spiritual, emotional, and psychosocial lines of human development. Exploration into the interrelationship between how a leader thinks and the possible underlying source of that meaning-making system, e.g., lines of spiritual or emotional development, is necessary if we are to more fully comprehend how leaders construct meaning and engage in behaviors associated with wisdom.

It would be easy to review the findings of this study and reduce them to a cliché about the essence of leadership or what it really means to embody wisdom. Halfway through the process of analysis, I found myself asking, what does it matter, after all, if a small select group of leaders presented themselves not as perfect, but as experienced, good solid individuals who were engaged in purposeful work? So what? Would these findings add anything to that which we already know? As the data began to reveal a group of leaders who exhibited focus, passion, and an overall desire to do the right thing, my thoughts deepened.

As a society, we anticipate the promise of good leadership. Unfortunately our daily experience with corporate debacles and Wall Street narcissists alerts us to the dangers of leadership gone awry. How do we do that which is right and just when up against deceitfulness, deadlines, and the unscrupulous and egocentric behavior of others? How do we create positive results in our personal and professional lives with those who are at different stages of development than ourselves? With those who may be more or less wise?

The significance of this study goes beyond the findings of any first-or- second-cycle of analysis. The significance lies in the hearts and minds of 12 executive leaders who dared to share their stories. Among the global chaos that has enveloped much of our society, they offer the promise that leaders can and do cultivate wisdom; they can do that which is right and just for the greater good of all. Extensive and repeated qualitative analysis of their transcripts, their voices, offers unique perspectives on wisdom than cannot be captured via statistical data alone. These leaders represent all that is possible for every leader, every society. Each of these leaders has described an ability to actively cope with adversity and this ability to cope has moved them to significant levels of understanding about themselves and others. They exercise wise acts of leadership not because they should but because it is who they are. They get up each day, passionate about the work they do, and they make the hard choices. And in the midst of all their challenges and frustrations, they do their best and hope that it is good enough. Each leader, from the early conventional level of 3.5 to the later post-conventional stage of 4.5 indicated an ability to be selfless and self-aware. For them, wisdom represents a quest to reach our highest potential. But this quest is quiet, unheralded by the things we accomplish. It is less about what we do and more about whom we become along this journey called life.

In the grand and vast valley between theories, this study fills a small but meaningful gap. It serves to remind us that no matter the horror of the evening news, the goodness of leaders such as these will prevail. As scholar/practitioners, it is why we do the work we do. It is why leadership matters.

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## Appendix A: The Integrative Domains of Wisdom

Domains of Wisdom								
P	Score	Primary Action Logic Orientation	Profession	Cognitive	Cognitive/ Reflective	Cognitive/ Affective	Cognitive Reflective Affective	Primary Domain
1	3/4	Expertise	Real Estate Attorney	19%	-	48%	33%	C/A
2	3/4+	Expertise	COO /Transportation Authority	42%	18%	34%	6%	C
3	3/4+	Expertise	Environmental Engineer	41%	45%	8%	5%	C/R
4	4-	Achievement	CEO/Philanthropist	48%	14%	33%	-	C
5	4-	Achievement	Senior Pastor	75%	15%	10%	-	C
6	4-	Achievement	Worship Pastor	47%	28%	21%	-	C
7	4	Achievement	CEO/Disability Organization	21%	14%	49%	14%	C/A
8	4	Achievement	Engineer/Business Leader	98%	-	2%	-	C
9	4/5-	Values	Real Estate Attorney	37%	12%	49%	2%	C/A
10	4/5	Values	CEO/ Transportation Authority	61%	1%	36%	-	C
11	4/5	Values	Technology Consultant	24%	37%	15%	22%	C/R
12	4/5	Values	President/Advocate	26%	11%	46%	15%	C/A

Note: Percentages are based on number of overall responses in cognitive, reflective, and affective domains of wisdom.