Gold Medal Award for Life Achievement in the Application of Psychology: Bruce E. Wampold

Citation

“For achievements in documenting the benefits of psychotherapy and understanding how psychotherapy works. Bruce E. Wampold has examined psychotherapy from the perspectives of psychology, history, anthropology, evolution, and placebo studies to develop a model of how psychotherapy produces beneficial outcomes. His scholarship has documented how humans have evolved to use social means to heal and that psychotherapy makes use of the therapy relationship to promote change. His contextual model of psychotherapy, which is an integration of common factors and specific ingredients and which applies to all forms of psychotherapy, provides a means to improve the quality of mental health services through therapist skill acquisition.”

Biography

Bruce E. Wampold was born in Olympia, Washington, in 1948, a relatively great distance from his father’s birthplace in Natchez, Mississippi, but not far from his mother’s residence in Tacoma, Washington. His father Simon, the first in his family to attend college (“Roll Tide” was a fervent exclamation on Saturdays) and law school, was sent by his parents to check on his sister in Seattle, and he then decided not to return to the South. Simon was an assistant attorney general of the State of Washington with responsibility for labor law when Wampold was born; in that role, he was responsible for opening the first hospital for injured workers in the United States, patterned after Department of Veterans Affairs hospitals for injured soldiers (President Truman attended the ribbon-cutting ceremony). His father’s commitment to serving those facing challenges was a value clearly expressed by his father’s actions throughout his life. Wampold’s mother, an artist, died when he was 5, leaving his father to care for him and his two older brothers. This event and the subsequent family disturbances greatly influenced his development. His maternal grandmother and Anna, the immigrant from Ireland with a third-grade education who was hired during his mother’s illness as “domestic” help, provided him with the nurturance to survive these events.

Wampold’s path to psychology was anything but straightforward. He was mostly interested in mathematics and science, majoring in mathematics, with a minor in mathematical economics, at the University of Washington. He did not take a psychology course, wishing to avoid thinking about various personal issues as well as a general disinterest in the subject. During his undergraduate studies, campuses, including the University of Washington, were saturated with social and political issues, including the Vietnam War, civil rights, and Richard Nixon’s administration. He and his fellow student who were involved in those issues wanted to avoid being complicit in evils perpetrated by various institutions, which limited career opportunities. He considered actuarial science, graduate training in mathematics, and law school (which became a family tradition, in his immediate family, and in the Wampold family in the South, with his father as the model). Having not to worry about the military draft due to an athletic injury (not bone spurs), and due to political, social, and personal turmoil, he decided in his senior year of university to obtain a teacher’s certificate so that he could teach for a year or two while deciding on a career path.

His first teaching position was as a math and science teacher at a junior high school in rural Washington State, serving children from blue-collar families working mostly in the logging industry, and children from the nearby Native American reservation (Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe). It is safe to say that this was a challenging position, as the
students faced a plethora of family, social, economic, and racial issues. He felt unprepared personally and professionally, but persisted and learned much, about himself, society, and children and their families. Being single, desiring a more urban environment, and having a desire to see more of the world than Washington State, he acted on the suggestion of a colleague at the school, who had taught in several places around the world, including Hawai‘i, and applied to private schools there. Punahou School was searching for a mathematics teacher/wrestling coach and offered Wampold this position.

Punahou School (yes, Barack Obama’s alma mater) presented different challenges than the junior high school, yet many of the issues were similar. Punahou students were from the Hawai‘i elite, working class but achieving families, as well as students on scholarships, resulting in a rich and racially diverse student body. Wampold, with his fellow coaches Ken Mayo and Bob Tam, took pride in the development of the wrestlers, personally as well as athletically. Those who chose to join the wrestling team typically were a bit socially isolated, lacking self-esteem, and introverted. Wampold was impressed that the wrestlers chose to endure a year or two of being “used to wipe the mat” and then become skilled wrestlers and confident humans due to their efforts to improve with the support of their teammates. He, along with his fellow coaches, led several wrestlers to league and state championships. Wampold maintains relationships with many of his former wrestlers, and the wrestlers attribute their personal successes to lessons learned on the mat. Indeed, Wampold began to realize he liked people as well as numbers.

During his 5 years at Punahou, Wampold became interested in the students’ lives, how their family and cultural values influenced their achievements, their development, and their choices. Wampold eventually understood that he needed to know more about psychology to work effectively in schools. While teaching, he earned a master’s degree in school counseling at the University of Hawai‘i. Yet he became restless with knowing the limitations of his knowledge and decided to further his education.

Wampold left Punahou to matriculate in the doctoral program in counseling psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), a choice influenced by a friend from the master’s program, Mike Furlong, who had entered the UCSB program the year before. He was quite naïve about what graduate training in psychology involved and had not realized that UCSB was not APA accredited (in truth, he did not know what APA accreditation conferred). His advisor Don Atkinson was committed to providing psychological services to culturally and ethnically diverse clients, a commitment that Wampold has strived to maintain. His fondness for numbers and his training in mathematics were fostered by the mentoring of the brilliant statistician Larry Hubert. During his graduate training, Wampold developed statistical methods to analyze sequences of behaviors and applied them to couple interactions, collaborating with Gayla Margolin, who was at the time a faculty member at UCSB. Soon he realized that an academic career might allow him to nurture his investigative nature and his commitment to serving those with challenges. Fortunately, the UCSB program in counseling psychology received APA accreditation before (just before) he graduated.

Wampold began his academic career at the University of Utah, and then took a position at the University of Oregon, desiring to be closer to family in the Northwest when his children were young. Due to chronic financial issues in higher education, the position at the University of Oregon became untenable and he applied for a position at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. He had only been to the Midwest once, for a conference in downtown Chicago, Illinois, in the spring. He was scheduled for an interview, which was to take place on December 1, 1990. During dinner with Pat Wollete, a professor in the program who become a mentor to Wampold, it began to snow . . . and snow. Pat, being from Northern Minnesota, told him not to worry, as she was used to driving in the snow. She felt a bit embarrassed when they became stuck in the snow on way back to the hotel. It snowed 17 in. that evening and night and the university was closed for only the second time in its history. So despite not having a proper interview (he did meet with the dean and a few others), he was hired. Madison would become his home for the remainder of his academic career. When he was awarded a “named professorship” by the University of Wisconsin in 2011, he chose the name The Patricia L. Wollete Professor of Counseling Psychology to recognize Pat’s mentorship as well as her fierce adherence to evidence and honesty in all aspects of life.

Wampold had an academic decision to make upon arriving at Wisconsin in 1991. He was dedicated to understanding the benefits of psychotherapy. He had personally benefited from psychotherapy as a means to understand the effects of his mother’s death when he was young and the events that followed, and he had seen, in his clinical roles, how clients benefited from psychotherapy. However, he was not well connected with the psychotherapy research community, his work was not in line with funding agencies, psychotherapy research was expensive, and publicly available data sets were few. One of the tenets of counseling psychology was that interpersonal relationships are critical in a variety of human activity, so Wampold decided to study the social environment of science laboratories. Wampold had known many mathematicians and scientists and had never understood the attribution that scientists were not social, although his experience was that their social interactions were quite different from those of nonscientists. After gaining access to two world-class chemistry laboratories, he administered several psychological and vocational
instruments to the scientists, interviewed lab members, and spent many hours observing their social interactions within the laboratory. The results were similar to Wampold’s expectations: The scientists were indeed quite social (social interaction was dense), but the interactions were constrained primarily to tasks rather than to emotions. The groups attempted to address interpersonal conflicts by searching for task solutions, for example, by rearranging offices and assignment of experiments to avoid conflict. The results of these studies had implications for diversifying scientific communities, as the focus on tasks rather than interpersonal relationships creates a climate that might not be comfortable or beneficial for women or various cultural or ethnic groups.

At the time Wampold was studying social relations in scientific groups, he was teaching about psychotherapy. Through these lessons, he was informing students that there were some treatments that were indicated for some disorders, particularly behavioral and cognitive-behavioral treatments for various anxiety disorders, and teaching them to deliver these treatments. He was also teaching a course on the research on individual mental health interventions. In that class, students were assigned various chapters and articles, some of which made claims about the superiority of some treatments. As well, each student was required to read the original research on which the conclusions were based. The student papers and presentations reached a similar conclusion: The claims for superiority were exaggerated; for the most part, there was no evidence that any particular treatment was superior to any other treatment, if the comparison treatment was intended to be therapeutic.

Unwarranted claims of superiority upset Wampold for two reasons. First, as a scientist, he fervently understood that evidence should be privileged and treatments should not be privileged despite evidence. He recognized that the philosophy of science showed that progress in a domain requires absolute loyalty to evidence. Second, he passionately believed that clients and therapists should have the right to choose the therapy that accords with their beliefs, preferences, culture, and attitudes unless there is clear evidence that a treatment is superior to another. He witnessed clients experiencing benefits from a variety of treatments and remarkably effective therapists delivering a wide range of therapies. He personally had benefited from psychotherapy that would not appear on a list of evidence-based treatments. However, he was clear that this preference should be abandoned if scientifically it was shown that his preferred treatment was inferior—as long as that determination emanated from good science.

Wampold and the students in the class set out to answer the question about whether one treatment was superior to another. This is basically a test of the dodo bird conjecture: “All [therapies] have won and all [therapies] must have prizes,” as the dodo bird in Alice in Wonderland declared. This conjecture was first stated by Saul Rosenzweig in 1936 and examined by others, including Lester Luborsky, David Schapiro, Gene Glass, and Mary Lee Smith. However, there were methodological improvements to be made and new studies to be included. The students searched for all studies reporting the results of comparisons of two treatments intended to be therapeutic. Again, Wampold developed new statistical methods to test pertinently this conjecture. The evidence was overwhelmingly consistent with the dodo bird conjecture. There was no evidence that any treatment intended to be therapeutic was superior to another. In answer to criticisms that the conjecture should be specific to a particular disorder, the conclusion was replicated by his students and others for posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety disorders, substance use disorders, eating disorders, and disorders of children and youth, among others.

After publishing the dodo bird meta-analysis in Psychological Bulletin in 1997, Wampold again was at a crossroads, wondering what direction to follow. Meta-analysis was a method that did not require collection of data from patients nor grant funds, but meta-analysis does not a career make. Serendipity occurred when Lane Akers knocked on Wampold’s door. Lane was a senior editor at Lawrence Erlbaum Press and had been the editor of a statistics textbook that Wampold had published early in his career. Lane did not know that Wampold was at the University of Wisconsin, until wandering the halls, he saw Wampold’s name on his door. After knocking and talking for a while, Lane asked, “So Bruce, do you have any ideas for another book?” Not having thought about a book, Wampold had an epiphany about a book summarizing the evidence for a contextual model of psychotherapy emphasizing what various therapies had in common. Lane and Larry Erlbaum endorsed the idea that birthed The Great Psychotherapy Debate.

Signing a book contract and producing an article, however, are different things. Wampold soon realized that there were several important gaps in the scientific evidence that needed to be filled before such a book could be relatively complete. Foremost was the topic of therapist effects, which had been addressed most prominently by Paul Crits-Christoph. Wampold immersed himself in the psychotherapy literature on this topic as well as the statistical literature on random effects models. Baffled by some of the issues, Wampold consulted with Ron Serlin, a professor of educational psychology and statistician extraordinary at the University of Wisconsin. Ron, according to Wampold, was one of the most brilliant and thoughtful persons he had ever met. Together they collaborated to model how random effects, such as therapist effects, inflate estimates of main effects, which led to an article in Psychological Methods on this topic. Another gap to be filled was a review of dismantling studies in psychotherapy. Wampold and his student Hyun-nie Ahn conducted a meta-analysis of such studies and found that
removing specific ingredients of a treatment did not attenuate the effectiveness of the treatment. During this time, Wampold also voraciously interrogated social science research in domains other than clinical and counseling psychology/psychotherapy, including evolution, entomology, placebo studies, anthropology, neuroscience, social psychology, and the philosophy of science that would inform the contextual model of psychotherapy in the book. Wampold is of the opinion that the benefits of psychotherapy involve human processes that have evolved to foster healing in social contexts and that understanding how psychotherapy works requires a synthesis of knowledge from many domains.

Once _The Great Psychotherapy Debate_ was published in 2001, Wampold again wondered what the next step would be. He received a call from Jeb Brown, one of the pioneers in measuring therapist outcomes in clinical practice. Jeb was a consultant to PacifiCare Behavioral Health, a managed care company in California that measured outcomes of all patients in their network. Jeb said he had “Googled” therapist effects and found Wampold’s name and that he and Ed Jones, Chief Clinical Officer of PacifiCare, wanted to fly to Madison to have lunch with Wampold. Wampold, Brown, and Jones had lunch, and PacifiCare offered Wampold an opportunity to examine outcomes of thousands of patients seen by hundreds of therapists. Finally, Wampold had his hands on a large set of psychotherapy data, which led to publications on therapist effects in naturalistic settings and on the effectiveness of psychotherapy in clinical practice. For example, these data led to several publications in _Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology_ with Jeb and Takuya Minami, Wampold’s doctoral student, that established that some therapists were consistently more effective than others and that therapists in clinical settings achieved remarkable success, comparable to that achieved in randomized clinical trials. Takuya’s project, which constituted his dissertation, involved developing statistical methods for benchmarking and conducting a meta-analysis, prior to applying these methods. At this time, there was an issue of whether common factors, such as the working alliance, predicted outcome because the therapist contributed to the factor or whether the patient had the capacity to engage in therapy. In 2007, Scott Baldwin, an intern at the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin, and Zac Imel, Wampold’s doctoral student, were the first to apply multilevel models to disaggregate patient and therapist contributions to outcome and found that it was the therapist’s ability to form alliances across a range of patients that characterized effective therapists. Wampold and Zac further developed the contextual model, established the importance of therapist effects in the quality of mental health, and revised _The Great Psychotherapy Debate_ in 2015. By this time, there was, according to Wampold, inconvertible evidence that the relationship between therapist and client is absolutely vital for psychotherapy to be successful.

Based on the fact that some therapists are more effective than others and that the more effective therapists have superior facilitative interpersonal skills, a result established by Tim Anderson, Wampold, and his colleagues Scott Miller, Rod Goodyear, and Tony Roumaniere began a program to improve therapy outcomes through the deliberate practice of skills that are employed by effective therapists, resulting in publication of the book, _The Cycle of Excellence: Using Deliberate Practice to Improve Supervision and Training_ (2017).

Although Wampold is perhaps best known for his scholarship, he is most proud of some of other aspects of his career that often receive less attention. He has mentored many doctoral students, postdocs, and colleagues around the world. His contributions to research and policy in various venues are as much a legacy as is his scholarly work. One of his collaborations was with Leigh McCullough, who was Director of Research at the Modum Bad Psychiatric Center in Norway. When Leigh became ill and passed away in 2012, Modum Bad asked Wampold to finish her project and to direct the Research Institute there, a position that has resulted in continued collaboration with colleagues at Modum Bad on innovative and clinically relevant projects.

Wampold retired from the University of Wisconsin in 2016 and remains affiliated with the Research Institute at Modum Bad as senior researcher. Wampold continues to reside in Madison with his wife Anna Gemrich, a former professor of Spanish, where he can, when not consulting with various organizations and collaborating with colleagues, enjoy cooking, sailing, and traveling. He remains passionate about increasing access to effective mental health services for those who desire to understand, to grow, and to change.

**Selected Bibliography**


