

Distance From a Conflict May Promote Wiser Reasoning

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If you're faced with a troubling personal dilemma, such as a cheating spouse, you may think about it more wisely if you consider it as an outside observer would, according to research forthcoming in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

"These results are the first to demonstrate a new type of bias within ourselves when it comes to wise reasoning about an interpersonal relationship dilemma," says psychology researcher and study author Igor Grossmann of the University of Waterloo in Canada. "We call the bias Solomon's Paradox, after the king who was known for his wisdom, but who still failed at making personal decisions."



Grossmann and Ethan Kross from the University of Michigan asked study participants, all of whom reported being in monogamous romantic relationships, to reflect on a relationship conflict. They were asked to vividly imagine a scenario in which either their partner or a friend's partner had been unfaithful, and were then asked to answer a set of questions about the scenario.

The questions were designed to tap into dimensions of wise reasoning, such as the ability to recognize the limits of one's own knowledge, search for a compromise, consider the perspectives of others, and recognize the possible ways in which the scenario could unfold.

Results from the experiments indicated that participants who were asked to reason about a friend's relationship conflict made wiser responses than those who were asked to reason about their own relationship conflict.

In a second experiment, Grossmann and Kross investigated whether personal distance might make a difference. The procedure was similar to the first experiment, but this time they explicitly asked participants to take either a first-person perspective ("put yourself in this situation") or a third-person perspective ("put yourself in your friend's shoes") when reasoning about the conflict.

The results supported those from the first experiment: Participants who thought about their own relationship conflict from a first-person perspective showed less wise reasoning than those who thought about a friend's relationship conflict.

But taking an outsider's perspective seemed to eliminate this bias: Participants who thought about their own relationship conflict through a friend's eyes were just as wise as those who thought about a friend's conflict.

Interestingly, results from a third experiment that compared data from younger adults (ages 20-40) and older adults (ages 60-80) indicated that, contrary to the adage that wisdom comes with age, older participants were no wiser in reasoning about their own relationship conflict than their younger counterparts.

Together, these findings suggest that distancing oneself from a personal problem by approaching it as an outsider may be the key to wise reasoning:

“We are the first to demonstrate that there is a simple way to eliminate this bias in reasoning by talking about ourselves in the third person and using our name when reflecting on a relationship conflict,” says Grossmann. “When we employ this strategy, we are more likely to think wisely about an issue.”

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