

# The (Paradoxical) Wisdom of Solomon

March 14, 2015

King Solomon, the third leader of the Jewish Kingdom, is considered the paragon of wisdom and sage judgment. It's said that during his long reign, people traveled great distances to seek his counsel. Yet it's also true—and much less well known—that his personal life was a shambles of bad decisions and uncontrolled passions. He kept hundreds of pagan wives and concubines, and also loved money and boasted of his riches. He neglected to instruct his only son, who grew up to be an incompetent tyrant. All these sins and misjudgments contributed to the eventual demise of the kingdom.

University of Waterloo psychological scientist Igor Grossmann has been studying the nature of human wisdom, and he uses this story to illustrate what he calls *Solomon's paradox*. It appears that people often reason more wisely about other people's social problems than about their own, though it's not clear why this would be, or what can be done to enhance wise reasoning in the personal realm. Grossmann has been trying to answer these questions, and he described some of his ongoing work this week at the first International Convention of Psychological Science in Amsterdam.

Grossmann defines wisdom as pragmatic reasoning that helps people navigate life's challenges. Such wise reasoning requires transcending one's egocentric point of view. This means recognizing the limits of one's own knowledge, acknowledging others' perspectives, and seeing circumstances in flux—all of which allow for more complex understanding of social situations. Grossmann wanted to explore the apparent asymmetry in wise reasoning. He also wanted to see if aging leads naturally to wiser reasoning—as is often assumed—and how wisdom might be enhanced in everyday experience.

He first wanted to establish that Solomon's paradox is indeed a common habit of mind. He recruited volunteers who were in long-term romantic relationships, and asked some of them to vividly ponder a situation in which their partner cheated on them. The others thought about their best friend's partner cheating on the friend. Grossmann then asked all the volunteers to reason about how their relationship (or their friend's) would unfold in the future. They also answered a dozen or so questions intended to measure wise reasoning: Do you need more information and context to really understand this situation? Is it important to you to look for a compromise? How much do you consider others' perspectives on the event? How many different futures can you imagine? And so forth.

Grossmann expected that subjects would show greater wisdom when reasoning about their friend's situation than when reasoning about their own, because they would have more psychological distance from the cheating and betrayal. And that's just what they found.

Having established a prevalent asymmetry in wise reasoning, Grossmann wanted to see if it's possible to avoid egocentric reasoning. Since wise reasoning appears linked to psychological distance, he suspected that deliberately distancing oneself might be tonic. To test this, he again used the infidelity scenario, and again some pondered their own partner cheating, and some a friend's. But this time, half of each group were told to reason from a first-person perspective—to close their eyes and totally immerse

themselves in the experience of being betrayed. Whether it was their own experience or their friend's, they asked themselves: Why am I feeling this way? What are my thoughts and feelings? Other subjects were told to distance themselves from the event by taking a third-person perspective, even when referring to the self: Why does he or she feel this way?

As expected, self-distancing reduced the asymmetry in wise reasoning. Those who distanced themselves from their own experience of betrayal—these subjects reasoned more wisely about relationship conflicts than did those who were immersed in their own feelings. Indeed, those who distanced themselves from their own experience were indistinguishable from those who were pondering a friend's situation.

What about aging? Older and wiser? Grossmann explored this in yet another experiment, much like the self-distancing study. He recruited both old (60 to 80) and young (20 to 40) volunteers, and asked them to reason about a different kind of personal dilemma—in this case one involving not infidelity but betrayal by a friend or family member. As before, the volunteers pondered their own or someone else's experience and answered questions to assess their wise reasoning about the situation.

The results were clear and a bit surprising. Contrary to the commonly held view that experience brings wisdom, older and younger adults in this study were indistinguishable in their wise reasoning—at least about personal conflicts. Older subjects were just as vulnerable to Solomon's paradoxical reasoning, and they were just as likely to become wiser if they practiced self-distancing. So wisdom does not simply accompany years of experience, but it appears to remain malleable even in older age.

*Wray Herbert is reporting this week from the first International Convention of Psychological Science in Amsterdam.*