

Training to Wisely Navigate Social Conflicts

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Social conflicts, from policy debates to family disagreements, can easily devolve into angry words and personal attacks.

A better approach to resolving interpersonal disagreements, according to new research published in the journal [Psychological Science](#), is to train yourself in advance to reason about interpersonal conflicts in a wiser manner.

“People typically fail to reason wisely when facing social conflicts, so we designed an intervention to help them,” said Igor Grossmann, director of the Wisdom and Culture Lab at the University of Waterloo, Canada, and the lead author on the paper. “Our fundamental idea was to train people to see situations from a more detached, third-person perspective. This approach enables people to recognize the limits to their knowledge, acknowledge different ways the conflict may play out, and consider and balance multiple viewpoints.”

The researchers’ intervention is based on a rhetorical device called “illeism”—the practice of referring to oneself in the third person. Rather than saying “I feel hurt and angry,” a person might tell themselves, for example, “He feels hurt and angry.”

According to the researchers, by switching perspective from the first to the third person, a person becomes better able to evaluate their own knowledge and appreciate alternative views.

“A third-person viewpoint, however, is not the typical default position during a conversation or interaction,” said Grossmann. “We believed that through practice and training it can be possible to slowly inculcate this more wisdom-centered approach into a person’s conflict-resolution techniques.”

To test their hypothesis, the researchers conducted two field experiments.

In the first, participants were given an initial in-lab assessment to gauge their thoughts about a hypothetical social-conflict situation. They were then instructed to keep a month-long daily journal in which they wrote about each day’s significant events. One group of participants wrote about their reflections in the first person. A second group did the same but in the third person.

At the end of the month, the participants were given a second in-lab assessment to see if the writing exercise impacted their reflections about another hypothetical social-conflict situation. The results revealed that the third-person writing group had developed a more wisdom-centric approach to how they thought about conflict. The first-person writing group showed much less change.

The second experiment involved a similar one-week writing assignment and evaluation, but it added a third group of participants who were given no instruction on how to write about their experiences. The results of the second experiment supported the conclusions of the first.

“Our research demonstrated effectiveness of the illeist diary writing for a change in wisdom compared to first-person and no-instruction diary reflections,” said Grossmann. “After the intervention, distanced self-reflection led to incremental shifts in wise reasoning about personally challenging interactions.”

The data suggest that this increase in wise reasoning occurred in part because distanced self-reflection broadened people’s typically narrow self-focus.

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Reference

Grossmann, I., Dorfman, A., Oakes, H., Santos, H., Vohs, K., & Scholer, A. (2021). Training for wisdom: The distanced-self-reflection diary method. *Psychological Science*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797620969170>