

Exploring Solomon's Paradox: Self-Distancing Eliminates the Self-Other Asymmetry in Wise Reasoning About Close Relationships in Younger and Older Adults



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Abstract

Are people wiser when reflecting on other people's problems compared with their own? If so, does self-distancing eliminate this asymmetry in wise reasoning? In three experiments ($N = 693$), participants displayed wiser reasoning (i.e., recognizing the limits of their knowledge and the importance of compromise and future change, considering other people's perspectives) about another person's problems compared with their own. Across Studies 2 and 3, instructing individuals to *self-distance* (rather than *self-immense*) eliminated this asymmetry. Study 3 demonstrated that each of these effects was comparable for younger (20–40 years) and older (60–80 years) adults. Thus, contrary to the adage “with age comes wisdom,” our findings suggest that there are no age differences in wise reasoning about personal conflicts, and that the effects of self-distancing generalize across age cohorts. These findings highlight the role that self-distancing plays in allowing people to overcome a pervasive asymmetry that characterizes wise reasoning.

Keywords

aging, close relationships, emotional intelligence, perspective taking, psychological distance, self-distance, wisdom, open data, open materials

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The way of a fool is right in his own eyes. . . .
—Solomon, Proverbs 12:15 (American King James Bible)

King Solomon, the third leader of the Jewish Kingdom, is often portrayed as a paragon of wisdom, famed throughout his kingdom for his sage judgment. People traveled far and wide to seek his counsel. Yet, when it came to the most important decisions in his own life, Solomon lacked insight, a phenomenon that contributed greatly to his kingdom's demise (Parker, 1992).

Almost 3,000 years later, Chief Judge Solomon Wachtler suffered a similar fate. Though he wrote landmark judicial opinions that set the standards for protection from spousal abuse and for antidiscrimination law, Wachtler is perhaps best known for his failure to exercise wisdom in his own life: He pleaded guilty to harassing his ex-mistress and threatening to kidnap her daughter—charges that led to an 11-month prison sentence.

These examples highlight a phenomenon that we refer to as *Solomon's paradox*, and that we suggest is a common habit of mind: People reason more wisely about other people's social problems than about their own. This article examines whether this proposal is true, and whether aging and psychological distance from the self, which we refer to as *self-distancing*, allow people to overcome this tendency.

Wise Reasoning

Although there are many ways of defining wisdom (Staudinger & Glück, 2011), a growing consensus suggests

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that wisdom involves pragmatic reasoning that helps people navigate challenges that are endemic to social life, for example, conflicts between groups and individuals (Grossmann et al., 2010). Forms of such reasoning include recognizing the limits of one's own knowledge, becoming aware of the varied contexts of life and how they may unfold over time, acknowledging other people's points of view, and reconciling opposing viewpoints (Basseches, 1984; Grossmann, Na, Varnum, Kitayama, & Nisbett, 2013; Staudinger & Glück, 2011).

A common feature underlying different facets of wise reasoning is that they require people to transcend their egocentric viewpoints (Kross & Grossmann, 2012; Staudinger & Glück, 2011). For example, awareness of viewpoints outside one's own is associated with recognizing the limits of one's knowledge, which may facilitate the development of more complex representations of situations, including information about how they will unfold, and the recognition that circumstances may change in the future (Grossmann et al., 2013). Processing information egocentrically contributes to social-cognitive biases (people recognize others' shortcomings better than their own; e.g., Pronin, 2008; Ross & Ward, 1995) and reduces the likelihood of focusing on the broader, long-term consequences of one's actions (e.g., Yovetich & Rusbult, 1994), both of which may further undermine wise reasoning. These observations suggest that people may reason more wisely about other people's problems than about their own problems. Our first goal in the experiments reported here was to test this hypothesis.

Prior research indicates that shifting focus away from the self and toward another person can promote effective conflict resolution (Arriaga & Rusbult, 1998). Moreover, recent evidence indicates that people who are cued to reason about personal issues from an ego-decentered, or self-distanced, perspective reason more wisely than people who are asked to reason about the same issues from an egocentric, or self-immersed, perspective (Kross & Grossmann, 2012). These findings are noteworthy because when one reasons about someone else's problems, the target that one is reasoning about is someone other than, and thus psychologically distanced from, the self. If people are wiser when they reason about someone else's problems, compared with their own, because self-distance is greater in the former condition, then cuing them to reason about their own problem from a self-distanced perspective should reduce this asymmetry in wise reasoning. Our second goal was to test this hypothesis.

Our final goal was to explore whether this hypothesized self-other asymmetry in wise reasoning extends to older adults. Psychologists have long speculated that experience-based gains across the life span promote wise reasoning (e.g., Baltes, 1993; Erikson, 1984). Central to this prediction is the idea that adults acquire experience

dealing with situations involving social conflict over their life span (including distributional information about the base rates of behavior in such situations). Therefore, older adults should be better equipped to reason about such situations than their younger counterparts are. Supporting this view, recent research indicates that older adults reason more wisely than young adults about non-personally relevant social conflicts (i.e., conflicts involving foreign groups or individuals for which participants have no situation-specific information; Grossmann et al., 2010; also see Kramer & Woodruff, 1986). To the extent that older adults have more experience dealing with personally relevant social problems, this work suggests that they should reason more wisely about both their own problems and other people's problems compared with young adults.

An alternative view suggests that age may not be a cure for the self-other asymmetry in wise reasoning. When reasoning about a given situation, individuals may either rely on distributional information about the base rates of behavior in similar situations or focus on situation-specific information (i.e., case-based information; Kahneman & Tversky, 1973). A number of studies indicate that people discount information about base rates when case-based information is available (e.g., Buehler, Griffin, & Ross, 1994; Epley & Dunning, 2000). Thus, when case-based information is available (e.g., when reasoning about the self or a close friend), older adults may discount experience-gained distributional information. If so, older adults and younger adults should be equally vulnerable to the self-other asymmetry in wise reasoning.

Overview

We examined these issues in three experiments. Study 1 examined whether an asymmetry in wise reasoning characterizes the way people reason about personally relevant events. Study 2 tested whether self-distancing eliminates this asymmetry. Study 3 was a conceptual replication of Study 2 and also examined whether aging moderates people's vulnerability to this asymmetry in wise reasoning.

Study 1

Participants who were in a long-term romantic relationship were randomly assigned to reflect on a situation in which either their romantic partner cheated on them (*self condition*) or their best friend's romantic partner cheated on their friend (*other condition*). They were then asked to reason about how their relationship or their friend's relationship, respectively, would unfold in the future and to answer questions designed to measure wise reasoning.

Table 1. Wise-Reasoning Questions Used in Studies 1 Through 3

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1. Recognition of the limits of one's own knowledge
 - a. In order to understand the situation better, how important do you feel it is to have more information about the circumstances of the experience you thought about? (Studies 1 and 2)
 - b. In order to understand this event better (including your thoughts and feelings about the experience), how important do you feel it is to have more information about the context of the issue you thought about? (Study 3)
 - c. Please, think about your answers from before. How certain are you in your statements? (reverse-coded; Studies 2 and 3; asked at the end of the questionnaire)
 2. Search for a compromise
 - a. How important is it for you to try to search for compromise? (Studies 1 and 2)
 - b. When experiencing something like this, a person should generally be ready to put the well-being of the relationship over their personal interests. (Study 2)
 - c. Issues like this one sometimes concern many close others, hence one should be generally ready to consider the well-being of these people over one's own personal interests. (Study 3)
 - d. When searching for a resolution to this issue, it is important to recognize the interests of different people involved in this issue I just thought about. (Study 3)
 3. Consideration of other people's perspectives
 - a. How much did you consider the perspectives of the other people involved in the conflict? (Studies 1 and 2)
 - b. How much did you think about how other people were impacted by this experience (including their thoughts and feelings about this experience)? (Study 3)
 - c. Thinking about this experience, to what extent do you feel like you were trying to understand the different viewpoints of the people involved in the experience? (Studies 2 and 3)
 4. Recognition of change/multiple ways the events may unfold
 - a. Thinking about how the events with regard to this conflict will unfold in the future, how many different outcomes do you see? (Studies 1–3)
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Note: Responses to Item 1c were not included in Study 3 analyses because of low convergence between this item and other items in the scale.

We hypothesized that participants would show greater wisdom when reasoning about their friend's situation than when reasoning about their own because distance from the self would be greater in the latter situation.

Method

Participants. On the basis of our previous work (Kross et al., 2014; Kross & Grossmann, 2012) and the convention in the field, we aimed at a sample size of 50 participants per condition. A random sample of 1,000 University of Michigan students, provided by the Office of the Registrar, was invited to participate in the study for \$10. Prospective participants were informed that in order to participate, they had to be a native English speaker and in a romantic relationship. All students who responded to our e-mail participated in the study, which resulted in a sample of 104 students (67 females; mean age = 20.35 years, $SD = 1.86$). All participants were in a monogamous heterosexual relationship.

Procedure. After a lab computer randomly assigned participants to the self ($n = 51$) or *other* ($n = 53$) condition, standardized audio instructions guided them to

imagine a situation in which your [your friend's] partner admitted being unfaithful. You have [your friend has] been in a serious relationship, and now

you [your friend] suddenly learn that your partner [learns that his/her partner] had sex with your [your friend's] close friend. Please, spend a few moments thinking about this scenario.

Participants were asked to vividly ponder the event unfolding in their imagination and spend a few minutes thinking about how their relationship, or their friend's relationship, would develop in the future (see Supplemental Appendices in the Supplemental Material available online for excerpts from the instructions in this study). They then answered items assessing wise reasoning (Table 1). These items were taken from a set of scale measures that we developed to capture previously established qualitative dimensions of wise reasoning (Grossmann et al., 2013; Kross & Grossmann, 2012): recognition of the limits of one's own knowledge, search for a compromise, consideration of other people's perspectives, and recognition of change and the multiple ways that events may unfold. Responses to the first three types of items were on a scale from 1, *not at all*, to 7, *very much*; responses to the change item were scored by condition-blind judges who counted the number of outcomes participants listed ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.08$).¹ Principal component analysis (PCA) and a scree plot provided evidence for the reliability of these four aspects of wise reasoning and their coherence along one factor, which accounted for 42% of the variance (for PCA loadings and

Table 2. Hypothetical Thought Processes in the Four Conditions of Study 2

Perspective	Target	
	Self	Other
Immersed	I put myself in this situation. Why am <i>I</i> feeling this way? What are <i>my</i> thoughts and feelings?	I put myself in my friend's shoes. Why am <i>I</i> feeling this way? What are <i>my</i> thoughts and feelings?
Distanced	I put myself in this situation. Why is <i>she</i> feeling this way? What are <i>her</i> thoughts and feelings?	I put myself in my friend's shoes. Why is <i>she</i> feeling this way? What are <i>her</i> thoughts and feelings?

zero-order correlations, see Table S1 in Supplemental Method and Results, in the Supplemental Material).

Both before and after this reflection task, participants responded to affect and arousal questions. In addition, following the task, they wrote essays to describe the stream of their thoughts as they reflected on the assigned scenario. Participants in the two conditions did not differ in affect at baseline, which suggests that random assignment was successful. Analysis of the use of third-person versus first-person pronouns in the essays revealed a significant effect of condition in the expected direction. Moreover, change in mood and arousal from the beginning to the end of the experiment suggested that the scenarios participants reflected on were emotionally meaningful to them. (For further details on these measures and analyses, see Supplemental Method and Results, in the Supplemental Material.)

Results

As we predicted, participants in the *other* condition scored higher than participants in the *self* condition on the composite score of wise reasoning (i.e., score on the first principal component; $M = 0.49$, $SD = 0.69$, vs. $M = -0.51$, $SD = 1.03$), $F(1, 102) = 33.87$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .25$. (For additional analyses concerning subdimensions and gender, see Table S2 and Supplementary Results in Supplemental Method and Results, in the Supplemental Material.)

Study 2

After establishing the asymmetry in wise reasoning, we aimed to replicate it, using the same infidelity scenario as in Study 1, and to test the conditions under which it occurs or can be avoided. We focused on the role of self-distancing in eliminating the asymmetry in wise reasoning using a 2 target: (self vs. other) \times 2 (perspective: immersed vs. distanced) design. We randomly assigned participants to (a) reason about their own problem from an immersed perspective (*self-immersed condition*), (b) reason about their friend's problem from an immersed

perspective (*other-immersed condition*), (c) reason about their own problem from a distanced perspective (*self-distanced condition*), or (d) reason about their friend's problem from a distanced perspective (*other-distanced condition*; see Supplemental Appendices in the Supplemental Material for verbatim instructions). We manipulated perspective by instructing participants to use either first-person pronouns (immersed conditions) or their own name and third-person pronouns (distanced conditions) when reflecting on the scenario (see Table 2 for the expected reasoning processes in each condition).

Method

Participants. The recruitment strategy was identical to that used in Study 1. The final sample consisted of 120 native-English-speaking University of Michigan students (80 females; mean age = 19.63 years, $SD = 1.32$) who were in monogamous heterosexual romantic relationships. They received \$10 for their participation.

Procedure. As in Study 1, participants were instructed to imagine that their partner or their best friend's partner admitted being unfaithful (for excerpts of the instructions, see Supplemental Appendices in the Supplemental Material). In the immersed conditions, participants were asked to approach their "thoughts and feelings by taking a first-person perspective." They were asked to close their eyes and either "put yourself in this situation" (self-immersed condition) or "put yourself in your friend's shoes" (other-immersed condition). They were then instructed to ask themselves, "Why am *I* feeling this way?" and to "use the pronouns I/me as much as possible" as they tried to understand the thoughts and feelings that they or their friend was experiencing. In the distanced conditions, participants were asked to approach their "thoughts and feelings by taking a third-person perspective." They were asked to close their eyes and "put yourself in this situation" (self-distanced condition) or "put yourself in your friend's shoes" (other-distanced condition), and "ask yourself, 'why are you [is he/she] feeling this way?'" They were further instructed to use their name



Fig. 1. Mean score on the first principal component from the analysis of wisdom-related responses in Study 2 as a function of target (self vs. other) and perspective (immersed vs. distanced). Error bars represent ± 1 SEM.

(self-distanced condition) or their friend's name (other-distanced condition) "as much as possible" as they tried to understand the thoughts and feelings they or their friend was experiencing (for further details on this method, see Kross et al., 2014). Participants spent a minute thinking about "this scenario from the first-person [third-person] perspective" (for verbatim instructions, see Appendix S4 in Supplemental Appendices, in the Supplemental Material).

To enhance measurement reliability, we supplemented the wisdom questions used in Study 1 with additional questions (see Table 1).² The new and previously used items were significantly correlated in the case of the items assessing search for a compromise and consideration of other people's perspectives (compromise: $r = .42$, $p < .001$; perspectives: $r = .55$, $p < .001$), so these items were collapsed into separate indices. The old and new items for recognition of the limits of one's own knowledge were marginally significantly correlated ($r = .17$, $p = .07$) and yielded similar patterns of results when analyzed separately. Therefore, we collapsed them into a single index for parsimony. As in Study 1, independent raters tallied the number of alternatives participants described for how the future would unfold to index recognition of change ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 1.06$). As in Study 1, the four aspects of wise reasoning loaded on a single factor, which in this case accounted for 49% of the total variance (for PCA loadings and zero-order correlations, see Table S1 in Supplemental Method and Results, in the Supplemental Material).

As in Study 1, participants responded to affect and arousal questions and wrote essays to describe the stream

of their thoughts as they reflected on the assigned scenario. Self-reported affect and arousal did not differ across conditions at baseline, which suggests that random assignment to conditions was successful. Analysis of the use of third-person versus first-person pronouns in the essays yielded a significant effect of condition in the expected direction, with participants in both distanced conditions using more third-person pronouns than participants in the self-immersed condition. Change in mood and arousal from the beginning to the end of the experiment suggested that the scenarios participants reflected on were emotionally meaningful to them. (For further details on these measures and analyses, see Supplemental Method and Results, in the Supplemental Material.)

Results

We performed planned contrasts, guided by our aims to replicate prior research and extend it by testing the boundary conditions of Solomon's paradox. To replicate Study 1, we contrasted participants in the self-immersed condition (self-immersion is a chronic tendency in North American samples when thinking about the self; Grossmann & Kross, 2010)—with participants in the other-immersed and other-distanced conditions combined (Contrast 1).³ As Figure 1 illustrates, we replicated the results from Study 1: Participants in the other-immersed and other-distanced conditions showed higher levels of wisdom than participants in the self-immersed condition, $t(113) = 3.93$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$. Extending prior research on reasoning about societal events (Kross & Grossmann, 2012), we next tested if people in the self-distanced condition reasoned more wisely about relationship conflicts than participants in the self-immersed condition (Contrast 2). This was indeed the case (see Fig. 1), $t(113) = 2.73$, $p = .007$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. We also tested whether reasoning about other people's problems benefits from additional distance and found that participants in the other-distanced condition did not differ from participants in the other-immersed conditions (Contrast 3; see Fig. 1), $t(113) = 0.56$, n.s., $\eta_p^2 = .003$; we return to this finding in the General Discussion.

Finally, we tested whether self-distancing reduced or even eliminated the wise-reasoning bias. Elimination of this bias would be reflected by a nonsignificant difference between the self-distanced condition and the composite of the other-immersed and other-distanced conditions (Contrast 4). Reduction in the bias would be reflected in a smaller effect for this contrast than for Contrast 1 (self-immersed vs. other-immersed and other-distanced conditions). Results indicated that participants in the other-distanced and other-immersed conditions did not differ from participants in the self-distanced condition, $t(113) = 0.64$, n.s., $\eta_p^2 = .004$. Thus, self-distancing

Table 3. Demographics of the Younger and Older Adults in Study 3

Demographic	Younger adults (20–40 years)	Older adults (60–80 years)
Sample size	267	202
Gender		
Female (%)	54.31	58.40
Male (%)	45.69	41.58
Education		
High school diploma (%)	14.34	12.31
Some college (%)	42.25	34.36
College degree or above (%)	43.41	53.33
Ethnic background		
Caucasian (%)	82.33	88.12
African American (%)	10.15	9.41
Latino (%)	7.52	2.48

Note: Prior work suggests that some Asian groups show a habitual tendency to self-distance (Cohen, Hoshino-Browne, & Leung, 2007; for a review, see Grossmann & Na, 2014). Therefore, and because the proportion of older Asian American crowd-sourcing workers is small, we excluded interested respondents who identified themselves as Asian. Sample size differed slightly between the age groups because of oversampling.

eliminated the self-other asymmetry in wise reasoning to the level of nonsignificance (effect-size difference: $\eta_p^2 = .116$).

The results were largely consistent for subdimensions of wise reasoning (see Table S3 and Fig. S1 in Supplemental Method and Results, in the Supplemental Material; additional results concerning the subdimensions of wise reasoning and gender are reported in the Supplementary Results section of Supplemental Method and Results).

Study 3

Whereas in Study 2 we tested the psychological mechanism of self-distancing as a boundary condition for the asymmetry in wise reasoning, in Study 3 we explored how aging-related individual differences may affect both the effectiveness of self-distancing in promoting wise reasoning and the asymmetry in wise reasoning itself. We focused on older (60–80 years) and younger (20–40 years) Americans sampled from the community, asking them to reason about a different type of personal dilemma—one that involved betrayal rather than infidelity, which would be more meaningful to our older-adult sample. By using a different scenario, we also gauged the robustness of the effects observed in Studies 1 and 2.

Method

Participants. We aimed to replicate Study 2 and to test whether the observed effects extend across two distinct

age groups; thus, the projected sample was four times the size of the Study 2 sample. We recruited adults from a crowd-sourcing Web site with a user population similar to the overall Internet population in the United States (Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010). After prescreening 690 interested respondents for age and ethnicity criteria, and excluding respondents who were not native English speakers, we achieved a final sample of 469 U.S. adults (see Table 3 for demographic information),⁴ who took part in the study for pay (\$0.50). We stopped collecting data when both age groups had sample sizes above 200.

Procedure and materials. We used the same general procedure as in Study 2 (see Supplemental Appendices in the Supplemental Material for excerpts from the instructions). Because Study 3 concerned a different relationship topic with a focus on friends or family members, we adjusted the wisdom measures (see Table 1). Both the items about search for a compromise and those regarding consideration of other people's perspectives were significantly correlated (compromise: $r = .39$, $p < .001$; perspectives: $r = .58$, $p < .001$), and these items were collapsed into respective indices. The items assessing recognition of the limits of one's own knowledge were not correlated ($r = .04$, $p = .39$). The item measuring uncertainty in one's responses was either not correlated or negatively correlated to the other wisdom items ($-.12 \leq r \leq .08$) and therefore dropped from subsequent analyses. As in Study 1, independent raters tallied the number of alternatives participants described for how the future would unfold to index recognition of change ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 1.32$). As in the earlier studies, the four aspects of wise reasoning loaded on a single factor, which in this case accounted for 44% of the total variance (for PCA loadings and zero-order correlations, see Table S1 in Supplemental Method and Results, in the Supplemental Material).

Before and after the reflection task, participants rated their happiness. They also completed essays describing the stream of their thoughts during the task. The absence of an effect of condition on baseline affect suggests that random assignment to conditions was successful. Analysis of the use of third-person versus first-person pronouns in the essays yielded a significant effect of condition in the expected direction, with participants in the other-distanced condition using more third-pronouns than participants in the self-immersed condition.⁵ Also, participants in the self-distanced condition showed a trend toward using more third-person pronouns compared with participants in the self-immersed condition. Change in mood from the beginning to the end of the experiment suggested that the scenarios participants reflected on were emotionally meaningful to them. (For further details on these measures and analyses, see Supplemental Method and Results, in the Supplemental Material.)

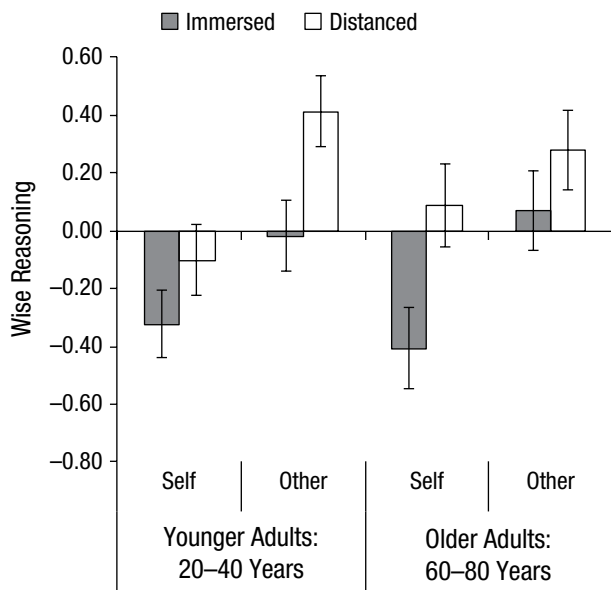


Fig. 2. Mean score on the first principal component from the analysis of wisdom-related responses in Study 3 as a function of target (self vs. other) and perspective (immersed vs. distanced). Results are shown separately for younger (20–40 years) and older (60–80 years) adults. Error bars represent ± 1 SEM.

Results

As Figure 2 illustrates, the results largely replicated our findings in Study 2. Specifically, people displayed more wisdom when reasoning about a friend's or family member's problems than when immersing into and reasoning about their own problems (Contrast 1), $t(442) = 4.91$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. They also reasoned more wisely about their own problem when they adopted a distanced perspective than when they adopted an immersed perspective (Contrast 2), $t(442) = 2.61$, $p = .009$, $\eta_p^2 = .015$. Results for Contrast 3, however, did not directly replicate Study 2. Whereas in Study 2, participants in the other-distanced condition did not differ in their levels of wisdom from participants in the other-immersed condition, the corresponding Study 3 analysis revealed a significant difference between the two conditions,⁶ $t(442) = 2.87$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .018$. Participants in the other-immersed and other-distanced conditions differed only marginally from participants in the self-distanced condition (Contrast 4), $t(442) = 1.81$, $p = .071$, $\eta_p^2 = .007$ (recall that in Study 2, this contrast was nonsignificant); self-distancing reduced the self-other asymmetry in wise reasoning to the level of marginal significance (effect-size difference: $\eta_p^2 = .043$).

Next, we examined whether age moderated the self-other asymmetry in wise reasoning. Prior work has demonstrated that older adults generally show greater wisdom than younger adults when reasoning about a stranger (Grossmann et al., 2010; also see Kramer & Woodruff, 1986). In contrast, we observed that the older and

younger adults in Study 3 were virtually indistinguishable in their reasoning about situations in which case-based information was available: a personal dilemma (self-immersed condition), $r_{\text{age}} = -.02$, n.s., or a dilemma of a close friend or family member (other-immersed and other-distanced conditions), $r_{\text{age}} = -.002$, n.s. Older and younger adults also showed a similar asymmetry in wise reasoning, as indicated by the nonsignificant Contrast 1 \times Age Group interaction, $t(442) = 0.27$, n.s. (see Fig. 2 and Tables S4 and S5 in Supplemental Method and Results, in the Supplemental Material).

Meta-Analysis Across Studies 2 and 3

To quantify the overall role of self-distancing in reducing the self-other asymmetry in wise reasoning, we conducted a random-effects meta-analysis (see Supplemental Method and Results, in the Supplemental Material, for the statistical formulation of the model) of the planned Contrast 4 (self-distanced vs. other-immersed and other-distanced conditions) across the three samples in Studies 2 and 3: college students (Study 2, infidelity scenario) and younger and older adults (Study 3, betrayal scenario). The results indicated a nonsignificant effect size, $Z = 0.26$, $p = .80$, 95% confidence interval = $[-0.98, 1.28]$, $d = 0.15$, $SE = 0.58$, suggesting that participants who took a distanced perspective on the self were statistically indistinguishable from participants who reasoned about someone else's problem.

General Discussion

Questions surrounding wisdom have perplexed scholars for centuries, and for good reason: Studies have linked wise reasoning with well-being, relationship satisfaction, and longevity (e.g., Ardelt, 2000; Grossmann et al., 2013). The current results contribute to this emerging area of work by demonstrating that a pervasive asymmetry characterizes the way people reason about personal issues: People are wiser when reasoning about others' problems than when reasoning about their own problems. In addition, our results demonstrate that self-distancing reduces this asymmetry in wise reasoning, whereas aging does not, contrary to what some recent research might lead one to expect (Baltes, 1993; Grossmann et al., 2013; Grossmann et al., 2010; Orwoll & Perlmutter, 1990; Worthy, Gorlick, Pacheco, Schnyer, & Maddox, 2011).

These findings integrate and extend several lines of research. They extend research on aging and wisdom by demonstrating that when older adults reason about conflicts for which they have case-specific information (e.g., conflicts involving close friends), they show the same self-other asymmetry in wisdom as younger adults do. This finding suggests that the common adage "with age

comes wisdom” should be revised to “with age comes wisdom . . . about dilemmas of strangers.” Note that older adults benefited from self-distancing⁷ just as much as younger adults did, which suggests that wise reasoning is also malleable in older age. Future work should examine whether these findings generalize beyond the hypothetical scenarios involving betrayal and infidelity that we employed in the current studies to other interpersonal situations involving wise reasoning in daily life.

Failure to observe age-related differences in wise reasoning about personal social dilemmas stands in contrast to research indicating that older and younger adults cope differently with emotionally charged conflicts: In the face of negative interpersonal experiences, older adults report less anger (Charles & Carstensen, 2008) and prefer passive-avoidant coping strategies more than younger adults (Blanchard-Fields, Jahnke, & Camp, 1995). Juxtaposing these findings suggests that coping and wise reasoning may represent orthogonal constructs. Irrespective of their ability to reason wisely, older adults may be motivated to avoid unpleasant experiences in order to maintain their well-being (at least in Western countries; Grossmann, Karasawa, Kan, & Kitayama, 2014; Scheibe & Carstensen, 2010). Future research is needed to directly examine how these constructs relate to each other across the life span, to enhance understanding of how aging is associated with wise reasoning, emotion regulation, and well-being.

The present work dovetails with research on close relationships, which has identified taking the partner's perspective (Arriaga & Rusbult, 1998) and seeking external attributions (Bradbury & Finchman, 1990) as adaptive ways to handle relationship dilemmas (for a review, see Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). These processes are conceptually similar to certain aspects of wise reasoning (e.g., considering other people's perspectives), which the current findings suggest are inhibited by an egocentric focus (for a similar view, see Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Extending this literature, the present work further demonstrates that reducing egocentrism—either by focusing on another person or by self-distancing—activates other processes that constitute wisdom (e.g., recognition of a world in flux), which may also serve to enhance relationship well-being.

Our work also extends research on psychological distance (Trope & Liberman, 2010). From the perspective of construal-level theory, distance from the self and distance from another person may both tap into a social-distance dimension (Trope & Liberman, 2010) and therefore similarly influence the way people mentally represent information (Fiedler, Jung, Wänke, & Alexopoulos, 2012; Trope & Liberman, 2010). Yet in Studies 2 and 3, increasing distance influenced wise reasoning differently when

the target of attention was the self rather than someone else. Specifically, Figures 1 and 2 indicate that the difference between the self-distanced and self-immersed conditions does not mirror the difference between the other-distanced and other-immersed conditions, suggesting that immersing oneself, as opposed to distancing oneself, may have differential effects on mental representations of information depending on the target (e.g., self vs. other; for a similar argument, see Kross et al., 2014). Future work is required to disentangle the processes involved in distancing from the self as opposed to distancing from any other target.

The current work also extends research indicating that people's perceptions of themselves are often less accurate than the perceptions of other people (Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Pronin, 2008). Our research demonstrates that a comparable self-other asymmetry characterizes wise reasoning about social conflicts and that self-distancing can eliminate this asymmetry. Future research should test the direct links between wise reasoning and social-cognitive biases.

Finally, this research has a number of practical implications. In the context of close relationships, the current findings add to a growing body of research on the adaptive role of self-distancing (Ayduk & Kross, 2010; Finkel, Slotter, Luchies, Walton, & Gross, 2013; Grossmann & Kross, 2010), and conceptually analogous processes (e.g., Arriaga & Rusbult, 1998; Yovetich & Rusbult, 1994), in developing and maintaining relationship well-being. More broadly, our findings suggest that decision making about assigning individuals to advisory roles in domains that involve social dilemmas (e.g., management, intergroup negotiations) may benefit from considering whether the decision makers' and possible advisors' self-interests are involved. If so, their reasoning may be biased. Self-interests are often unavoidable; people regularly make decisions about situations in which they have personal stakes (e.g., business negotiations, relationship transactions, or health-related decisions). The current findings, in conjunction with prior research (Kross & Grossmann, 2012), suggest that self-distancing may provide people with a tool to enhance wise reasoning under such consequential circumstances.

Author Contributions

I. Grossmann and E. Kross designed the research, I. Grossmann performed the research and analyzed the data, and I. Grossmann and E. Kross wrote the manuscript.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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Supplemental Material

Additional supporting information may be found at <http://pss.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data>

Open Practices



All data for these studies have been made publicly available via Open Science Framework and can be accessed at osf.io/7xs93. All materials for these studies have also been made publicly available via Open Science Framework and can be accessed at osf.io/mpnsy. The complete Open Practices Disclosure for this article can be found at <http://pss.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data>. This article has received badges for Open Data and Open Materials. More information about the Open Practices badges can be found at <https://osf.io/tvyxz/wiki/view/> and <http://pss.sagepub.com/content/25/1/3.full>.

Notes

1. Two participants did not follow instructions for the item measuring recognition of change and thus were excluded from analyses involving this item. Three participants' data on this item were missing because of technical errors.
2. Two participants did not respond to the item measuring recognition of change, and another 3 participants' scores for this item were missing because of technical errors.
3. When thinking about others, some people might spontaneously put themselves in those people's shoes (as in the other-immersed condition), whereas other people might maintain their distance (as in the other-distanced condition). Therefore, we collapsed across these categories.
4. One participant took part in the survey three times and was excluded.
5. See Supplemental Method and Results, in the Supplemental Material, for results of analyses of the association between pronoun use and wise reasoning in the three experiments.
6. The difference between the other-distanced and other-immersed conditions was significant among the younger but not the older adults (Fig. 2). Given that younger adults tend to have more distanced (loose, virtual) friend networks than older adults do (Barker, 2012; Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999), this finding is consistent with the idea that greater distance among younger adults (through a combination of the distanced nature of the friendship they thought about and the manipulation in the other-distanced condition) promoted wiser reasoning.

7. The effectiveness of self-distancing in improving wise reasoning among older adults dovetails with previous research demonstrating that temporal self-distancing (reflecting on a day of a 25-year-old vs. a 75-year-old) attenuates the aging-related positivity bias in speech (Sullivan, Mikels, & Carstensen, 2010).

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