BRIEF REPORT

Boosting Wisdom: Distance From the Self Enhances Wise Reasoning, Attitudes, and Behavior

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Although humans strive to be wise, they often fail to do so when reasoning over issues that have profound personal implications. Here we examine whether psychological distance enhances wise reasoning, attitudes and behavior under such circumstances. Two experiments demonstrate that cueing people to reason about personally meaningful issues (Study 1: Career prospects for the unemployed during an economic recession; Study 2: Anticipated societal changes associated with one’s chosen candidate losing the 2008 U.S. Presidential election) from a distanced perspective enhances wise reasoning (dialecticism; intellectual humility), attitudes (cooperation-related attitude assimilation), and behavior (willingness to join a bipartisan group).

Keywords: distance, self, wisdom, emotional intelligence, emotion regulation

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1 Other commonly mentioned wise reasoning dimensions include searching for compromise between groups involved in conflict and adopting the perspective of other people involved in conflict. We did not focus on these dimensions because our experiments did not focus on issues involving group conflict.

2 This consensus emerges from the fact that these dimensions are among the most frequently mentioned facets of wisdom across different operationalizations of the construct.
nizing the limits of one’s own knowledge; Baltes & Smith, 2008; Ryan, 2008). Because prosocial orientation is often conceptualized as an important consequence of wise reasoning (Sternberg, 1998), Experiment 2 also examined the effect of distancing on two prosocial tendencies.

**Experiment 1**

College seniors and recent college graduates who were unsuccessful at securing a job after graduation were asked to reason about how the economic recession characterizing the United States economy at the time of the study would influence their career prospects. We focused on this issue to examine how distancing would influence wise reasoning over an issue that was both ecologically valid and meaningful to our sample. Participants were randomly assigned to reason about this issue from a distanced or immersed perspective. We predicted that distancing would enhance wise reasoning.

**Method**

**Participants.** Fifty-seven University of Michigan college seniors and recent graduates who were unsuccessful at securing a job after graduation at the time of data collection (35 women, 22 men; $M_{age} = 21.57$ years, $SD = 2.22$) participated in a study on human reasoning in exchange for $12.

**Procedure.** A hypothesis-blind experimenter informed participants that the study explored “the ways people talk and reason about different future events.” Participants were asked to select a card from a deck to choose a topic to discuss. Each card described the current recession in the United States and rising unemployment rates. Participants were first instructed to “take a few minutes to think about how the current economic climate will impact you personally.” They were then randomly assigned to reason aloud to an interviewer about how the recession would impact their career prospects from either an immersed perspective (i.e., “imagine the events unfolding before your own eyes as if you were right there”; $n = 27$) or a distanced perspective (i.e., “imagine the events unfolding as if you were a distant observer”; $n = 30$) using a modified version of established procedures (Kross, Ayduk, & Mischel, 2005). Interviewers followed a standardized script to deliver all instructions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wisdom dimension</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of limits of knowledge/humidity</td>
<td>This is a challenge. In the immediate future I see myself enrolled in a vet school at Michigan State, and being a lab technician. And then this would roll out either to vet school after the lab technician or working somewhere whether it be as a doctor in a clinic setting or in a lab. Maybe I see myself in Michigan, in the close proximity and then maybe in a different state wherever any of these paths take me, possibly abroad in Latin America . . . . But I can’t really understand what the future of the economy is going to be like. In part, this is because I don’t really understand the economic situation well enough.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recognition of the likelihood of change</td>
<td>It’s going to be hard in the first couple of years to find a job, because the whole economy has just gone downhill. But once I do get a job, it’s going to be a good job. It’ll be good pay and then I’ll be able to afford for myself and then eventually my family, so I think it’ll be hard for the first couple of years and after that, it should look better . . . . The economy right now is just bad, but it’s coming back up. I think the current economy will be an obstacle that will actually help me become a better and more motivated worker.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Results**

Response omissions and an equipment malfunction resulted in missing values for post manipulation affect ($n = 3$), and wise reasoning ($n = 4$). We used a multiple imputation approach to replace missing values (Rubin, 1996), which produces parameter estimates that are less biased than listwise deletion and mean substitution procedures (Schafer & Graham, 2002). Missing values were not related to condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 57) = 0.86$, ns; the results of all analyses remained substantively the same when analyses were performed without missing values imputed.

When appropriate, effect sizes were quantified using the probability of superiority (PS), which estimates the probability that a randomly selected participant from the distanced group scored higher than a randomly selected immersed participant on a given dependent variable. Thus, a PS score of .60 indicates that there is a 60% chance that a randomly selected distanced participant scored higher than a randomly selected immersed participant.

All participants reported feeling less happy after reasoning about their future compared to baseline, $F(1, 56) = 24.41, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .30$. This effect was not moderated by condition, $F(1, 55) < 1$, ns.

Our main predictions concerned the effect of distancing on wise reasoning. As predicted, participants in the distanced group were significantly more likely to recognize the limits of their knowledge, $F(1, 55) = 7.00, p = .01, \eta^2_p = .11, PS = .68$, and recognize that the future was likely to change, $F(1, 55) = 7.14, p = .01, \eta^2_p = .12, PS = .68$ (see Table 1 and Figure 1A). Controlling for gender, baseline affect, and pre- versus post-manipulation change in affect did not alter these results.
Experiment 2

The Study 1 findings provide preliminary evidence indicating that distancing enhances wise reasoning. Study 2 aimed to extend these findings in four ways.

First, we sought to conceptually replicate the Study 1 results by having participants’ reason about a different personally meaningful issue. Specifically, during the 3 weeks preceding the 2008 U.S. Presidential election, we asked strongly liberal and conservative participants to think about how various foreign and domestic issues would play out over the next 4 years if the candidate that they did not endorse wins the election from a distanced or immersed perspective.

Second, prior research indicates that different types of distancing manipulations similarly influence the way people construe information (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Therefore, to further establish the relationship between distance and wisdom we used a different type of manipulation.

Third, we examined the effect of distancing on two prosocial tendencies—cooperation and openness to diverse views. First, we examined whether distancing influenced participants’ political beliefs. Prior research indicates that cooperation leads people to assimilate other people’s views (Stapel & Koomen, 2005). Thus, we expected participants in the distanced group to endorse their liberal or conservative views less strongly after the experiment. Second, we measured openness to diverse viewpoints behaviorally by asking participants if they would like to join a bipartisan group devoted to discussing political issues in an informal setting at the end of the study. We predicted that participants who distanced would be more likely to join this group.

Finally, we explored the relationship between distance, wise reasoning, and prosocial tendencies. If distancing influences prosocial tendencies, we predicted that it would do so via wise reasoning.

Method

Participants. Three weeks before the 2008 U.S. Presidential election 54 strongly liberal or conservative participants (27 women, 27 men; $M_{age} = 18.5$ years, $SD = 0.81$) were recruited for a study on human reasoning in exchange for course credit. All participants were U.S. citizens. Participants were enrolled if they scored in the “very liberal” ($\leq 3; n = 47$) or “very conservative” ($\geq 7; n = 7$) range on a 10-point political ideology question (Inglehart & Baker, 2000) administered during university subject pool prescreening.

Procedure. Participants first read summaries of the Democrat and Republican parties’ position on different political issues taken from each party’s website. They were then asked to focus on two issues about which they felt strongly. Next, they were randomly assigned to reason aloud to an interviewer about how each issue would develop over the next 4 years if the candidate that they did not endorse wins the election from an immersed ($n = 29$) or distanced ($n = 25$) perspective.

We used a spatial distance paradigm to manipulate distance (Fujita, Henderson, Eng, Trope, & Liberman, 2006). Specifically, immersed participants reasoned about each issue from the perspective of a U.S. citizen living in the United States for the next 4 years; distanced participants reasoned about each issue from the perspective of a citizen of Iceland living in Iceland for the next 4 years.

Affect. The same measure was used to measure baseline ($M = 6.58, SD = 1.09$) and post-manipulation affect ($M = 6.02, SD = 1.18$), as in Study 1.

Wise reasoning. Participants’ predictions about the future were content analyzed for dialectical thinking and intellectual humility following the Study 1 procedures (inter-rater $r > 0.9$).

Attitude assimilation. Participants’ rated their level of political ideology after the interview using the same question administered before the experiment. Political ideology adjustment scores were computed by first reverse coding scores for liberal participants and then subtracting post-manipulation scores from pre-manipulation scores for all participants such that lower scores reflected less extreme views ($M = -0.19, SD = 1.73$).

Openness to diverse viewpoints. At the end of the study participants were asked if they were interested in joining a bipartisan group devoted to discussing political issues in an informal setting. They were told to leave their e-mail address if they wanted to join the group.
Results

Preliminary analyses. Response omissions and a procedural error resulted in missing values for post manipulation affect (n = 2), wise reasoning (n = 8), and attitude assimilation (n = 7). We again used a multiple imputation approach to replace missing values, which were unrelated to condition, \( \chi^2(1, N = 54) = 0.52, ns \). The magnitude of our observed effects remained substantively the same when analyses were performed without missing values imputed. Neither gender, nor political ideology, nor the type of political issue that participants discussed moderated the results. Effect sizes are quantified using PS.

Affect and wise reasoning. Participants reported feeling more distressed after the experiment compared to baseline, \( F(1, 52) = 22.49, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .29 \). This effect was not moderated by condition (\( F < 1 \)).

As in Study 1, distanced participants were more likely to predict that the future was likely to change, \( F(1, 52) = 11.14, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .18, PS = .69 \), and acknowledge the limits of their knowledge, \( F(1, 52) = 11.80, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .19, PS = .68 \) (see Figure 1B).

Prosocial tendencies: Attitude assimilation and openness to alternative viewpoints. Participants in the distancing group endorsed their political views less strongly after the experiment than those of immersed participants (3/29; \( B = -1.41, SE = .75, Wald = 3.56, p = .059 \)).

Mediation analyses. We performed a path analysis to examine whether the effect of condition on prosocial tendencies was mediated by wise reasoning, which we operationalized as the average of participants dialectical reasoning and intellectual humility scores (\( r = .49, p < .001 \)). Wise reasoning was correlated with openness to diverse viewpoints (Spearman’s \( p = .57, p < .001 \)) but not attitude assimilation scores (\( r = -.09 \)). Thus, we focused on the former measure.

Because the pathway we examined included both a continuous variable (wise reasoning) and a categorical variable (openness to diverse viewpoints), we ran a series of linear and logistic regressions to test for mediation following established procedures (MacKinnon, Fairchild, & Fritz, 2007). These analyses provided evidence for mediation (see Figure 3 for statistics). Specifically, condition was related to wise reasoning and openness to diverse viewpoints, and the effect of wise reasoning on openness to diverse viewpoints was significant when controlling for condition. Finally, a bootstrap test indicated a significant indirect effect of condition on openness to diverse viewpoints via wise reasoning.

General Discussion

Although research on wisdom has increased dramatically in recent years, much of this work has focused on defining wisdom and examining how it changes over the lifespan. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to identifying the basic psychological mechanisms that underlie this process. The findings from the present research address precisely this issue. They indicate that people who “distance” while reasoning over personally meaningful issues think and behave in ways that prior research suggests is wise.

It is noteworthy that we observed shifts in wise reasoning and behavior in response to relatively simple manipulations. This suggests that people may not need to go to great lengths to reason wisely in daily life. Whether people can be taught how to distance and implement this process outside the laboratory remains to be seen. It is also unclear whether reasoning over nonpersonal issues from a distanced perspective enhances wisdom or whether distancing has additional beneficial implications for how people make important decisions. The shortcomings of human reasoning and intuition are well established (Gilovich, Griffin, & Kahneman, 2002). Might distancing help people overcome such limitations? Future research is needed to address this issue and is important for integrating these findings with research in the decisions sciences more generally.

In addition to having implications for research on wisdom and psychological distance, these findings extend cultural psychological research. They suggest that distancing may be a mechanism that leads to cultural differences in context-oriented reasoning (i.e., dialecticism; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). This inference is consistent with research showing that cultures that endorse more context-oriented reasoning also tend to spontaneously distance more when reflecting over their experiences than cultures that are less contextual (Cohen et al., 2007; Grossmann & Kross, 2010).

Two caveats are in order before concluding. First, distancing did not influence mood in either study. On the one hand, this suggests that affect did not mediate the effects of distancing on wise reasoning. On the other hand, this finding was unexpected given prior research indicating that distancing dampens emotional reactions (e.g., Kross et al., 2005). One explanation for this asymmetry concerns methodological differences across these studies. Here participants’ reasoned about what would happen in their future, whereas studies linking distancing with less emotionality have cued participants to focus on why they felt the way they did in their past. This explanation notwithstanding, future research is needed to examine the relationship between distance, emotion, and wisdom.

![Figure 2](image-url)
Second, attitude assimilation was not significantly correlated with the other wisdom measures in Study 2. Failure to observe a significant relationship between condition and openness to diverse viewpoints after controlling for wise reasoning: Statistical significance is indicated by superscripts ($p = .06$; "" $p = .05$; "" $p = .01$. "" $p = .005$). The values in the square brackets correspond to the 95% confidence interval from a bootstrap test performed to assess the significance of the indirect effect. The mediation is significant if the confidence interval does not include zero.

Conclusion

Wisdom is a multifaceted construct. The current findings begin to demystify this construct by highlighting a specific psychological process that underlies it. A key challenge for future research is to develop an increasingly fine-grained understanding of how distancing promotes wisdom. Addressing this issue, along with the other questions raised by these findings, promises to enhance knowledge concerning how wisdom operates and can be cultivated in daily life.

References


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