

# Self-Reflection at Work: Why It Matters and How to Harness Its Potential and Avoid Its Pitfalls

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## Keywords

self-reflection, rumination, distancing, leadership, emotion regulation, reflection

## Abstract

It is difficult to fathom how an organization could be successful without its employees engaging in self-reflection. Gone would be its personnel's capacity to problem-solve, learn from past experiences, and engage in countless other introspective activities that are vital to success. Indeed, a large body of research highlights the positive value of reflection. Yet, as both common experience and a wealth of findings demonstrate, engaging in this introspective process while focusing on negative experiences often backfires, undermining people's health, well-being, performance, and relationships. Here we synthesize research on the benefits and costs of self-reflection in organizational contexts and discuss the role that psychological distance plays in allowing people to harness the potential of self-reflection while avoiding its common pitfalls.

## INTRODUCTION

A compelling body of organizational scholarship highlights the positive value of self-reflection. Our ability to turn our attention inward to reflect on our circumstances allows us to learn from our mistakes, make sense of our experiences, plan, and engage in a host of other mental processes that contribute handily to our ability to regulate our emotions, innovate, problem-solve, and create. But self-reflection does not always lead to positive outcomes. Particularly when people focus on negative experiences, self-reflection often backfires, leading them to get stuck in negative thought loops (i.e., worry and rumination), which undermine decision making, performance, health, and relationships.

Considering these different findings together presents a paradox. On the one hand, ample evidence indicates that self-reflection can be adaptive, enhancing emotion regulation and providing new perspectives into difficult situations. On the other hand, self-reflection can also become a liability when it morphs into perseverative negative thinking. Over the past 20 years, a great deal of research has been devoted to solving this puzzle. However, much of this work has been performed outside the organizational scholarship domain. Our main goal is to review this broader literature and discuss its implications for organizational research.

We begin by synthesizing what we know about the positive and negative implications of self-reflection in the organizational domain. We then turn to discussing the role that psychological distance plays in helping people reflect on negative experiences adaptively and discuss several distancing tools that scientists have identified. We conclude by discussing future research directions.

## SELF-REFLECTION AT WORK: ASSET OR LIABILITY?

Organizational scholars use different terms to refer to the general process of turning one's attention inward to examine one's work experience. Researchers studying the positive implications of turning inward typically call this process reflection or reflexivity. In an organizational context, reflection refers to considering how work-related issues affect one's ability to achieve positive outcomes (Schön 1983) and has been studied in many contexts—e.g., team-based after-event reviews (DeRue et al. 2012, Ellis & Davidi 2005, Ellis et al. 2006); collective reflection among members of a team (Carter & West 1998, West 2000); reflection interventions (Anseel et al. 2009, Bono et al. 2013, Grant & Dutton 2012, Lanaj et al. 2019); and self-initiated, naturally occurring reflection (Ong et al. 2015, 2022).

On the flip side, organizational scholars examining the negative implications of turning attention inward tend to describe this process as rumination or worry, which is characterized by recurring negative thoughts and is associated with negative psychological, physical, and behavioral outcomes (Nolen-Hoeksema et al. 2008). In organizations, rumination and worry frequently occur when individuals face work stressors (Rosen & Hochwarter 2014), experience interpersonal mistreatment (Baranik et al. 2017, Liang et al. 2018, Liao et al. 2021, Rafaeli et al. 2012, Wang et al. 2013), or grapple with uncertainty (Yip et al. 2020).

These differences in terminology notwithstanding, what is striking about research in this area is how engaging in ostensibly the same process—turning inward to reflect on self-referential material—can lead to such strikingly divergent consequences. Yet, these findings are rarely discussed together in organizational scholarship. Instead, scholars who focus on the positive outcomes of reflection generally talk about the beneficial features of introspection, whereas those who study the dark side of this process harp on its harmful consequences. In the following section, we provide a bird's-eye juxtaposition of these different sets of findings to provide readers with a sense

of the landscape, and to begin to highlight the importance of identifying ways of harnessing the benefits of reflection while avoiding its pitfalls.

## Positive Implications

**Performance.** Reflection improves performance by allowing people to draw lessons from their past experiences (Anseel et al. 2009, Ashford & DeRue 2012), take personal responsibility for their past performance (Ellis et al. 2006), and feel more confident about achieving their goals (Di Stefano et al. 2014). These benefits have been documented across multiple domains, including field settings [e.g., call centers (Di Stefano et al. 2014) and military exercises (Ellis & Davidi 2005)] and in the laboratory [e.g., work simulations (Anseel et al. 2009) and brain-teaser tasks (Di Stefano et al. 2014)].

People need not spend inordinate amounts of time reflecting to reap the aforementioned benefits. Individuals who spend just a small fraction of their day reflecting on their experiences at work enjoy performance-enhancing effects. For example, Di Stefano et al. (2014) conducted a field experiment in a call center and discovered that workers who spent the last 15 minutes of their day journaling about their day's activities scored higher on a work assessment test and received better customer satisfaction ratings than workers who spent the same amount of time performing their normal work activities.

Although people often engage in reflection on their own, it can also be initiated by others. For example, supervisors often conduct formal reflection exercises as part of group-based organizational learning procedures following specific engagements. In such settings, reflecting on both one's accomplishment and areas for improvement is important. For example, Ellis & Davidi (2005) found that soldiers' performance on navigation exercises improved when they reflected on their failures and successes during an after-event review conducted by a supervising commander at the end of each training day compared to when they reflected only on their failures. Reflecting on both failures and successes allows individuals to think more systematically and have a deeper, more complex understanding of their experiences.

People can also reflect collectively. Team reflexivity refers to the extent to which group members overtly reflect on and communicate about issues relevant to team operations (West 2000). Team reflexivity improves performance by helping groups adjust to uncertainty (West 2000), collectively process information that is essential for achieving the team's goals (Schippers et al. 2014), and generate new ideas (Schippers et al. 2015). For example, a survey study of media production teams showed that team reflexivity was strongly linked to team effectiveness (Carter & West 1998). The authors argued that reflexive teams are more likely to be effective because they openly discuss their team objectives and their approach to achieving those objectives.

Importantly, teams enjoy the benefits of team reflexivity not only when it happens spontaneously but also when they participate in structured exercises designed to enhance it (Vashdi et al. 2007, Villado & Arthur 2013). For example, a qualitative study of military and surgical teams revealed that team-based briefing–debriefing sessions had a meaningful impact on team performance (Vashdi et al. 2007).

**Health and well-being.** Certain kinds of reflection enhance emotional and physical well-being. Specifically, reflecting on the positive aspects of one's job helps people positively reframe their work situation (Fritz & Sonnentag 2005) and recover from work stress (Fritz & Sonnentag 2006), contributing to people's health and well-being. In this vein, experience sampling studies demonstrate that employees who engage in end-of-workday reflection exercises that focus on the positive events that happened to them report fewer physical and mental health complaints (Bono et al. 2013), more positive affect at bedtime (Sonnentag & Grant 2012), and better mood the

next morning (Meier et al. 2016). They also experience a greater sense of work meaningfulness, self-confidence, coworker support, and work engagement the next day (Sonnentag et al. 2021).

Team reflexivity also enhances well-being. Results from a quasi-field experiment by Chen et al. (2018) showed that teams who underwent a team reflexivity intervention had less burnout compared to teams in the control condition that participated in a placebo team-building program. Workers were less exhausted and less cynical and had a greater sense of efficacy.

Individuals can also enhance their well-being by engaging in positive reflection during their leisure time. For example, a latent profile analysis study discovered that individuals who reflected primarily on positive (versus negative) aspects of their job during their leisure time reported high levels of well-being. They also reported feeling more vigor and less exhaustion (Casper et al. 2019). Complementing these results, Fritz & Sonnentag (2005) found that positive work reflection during the weekend predicted more work engagement and less burnout after the weekend.

There is, however, a caveat to consider concerning the impact of reflection on well-being and health. Reflection during one's leisure time appears to enhance well-being only when people reflect on positive events. A longitudinal study found, for example, that individuals who reflected on negative work events during their vacation felt more exhausted and more disengaged for up to two weeks after they returned to work (Fritz & Sonnentag 2006). Thus, when it comes to health and well-being, being strategic about what one reflects on is important (though see our discussion of how to promote more adaptive forms of reflection on negative experiences below).

**Relationships and social influence.** Reflection can make people become more helpful toward others. For example, Grant & Dutton (2012) found that participants contributed both more time to help their organization and more money to aid natural disaster victims after reflecting on experiences in which they helped other people feel grateful as opposed to experiences in which they themselves had felt grateful for receiving a benefit from others. Reflection on one's experiences helping others increases the salience of one's identity as a capable, caring contributor. This strengthened identity encourages more prosocial behavior.

Reflection also plays an important role in leadership. It facilitates self-awareness, which is a key component of leaders' self-development process (Reichard & Johnson 2011). It allows leaders to think critically about their beliefs and work (Alvesson et al. 2016) and take charge of their development (Nesbit 2012). In this vein, a quasi-experiment involving master of business administration students conducted over a nine-month period revealed that individuals in the experimental group, who reflected via an after-event review (versus those who did not reflect at all), experienced a positive impact on leadership development in terms of both task- and relational-oriented leadership behaviors (DeRue et al. 2012).

## Negative Implications

**Performance.** When reflection morphs into perseverative negative thinking (i.e., worry or rumination), it undermines performance. One explanation for why this happens concerns attention. Perseverating is cognitively demanding and can interfere with employees' ability to focus on their work if the issues that they are perseverating over deal with something else (Baranik et al. 2017). For example, in a series of four experimental studies, Rafaeli et al. (2012) asked participants to imagine they were an employee and found that those who were exposed to customer verbal aggression (versus no verbal aggression) experienced impairments in cognitive performance, arguably by ruminating and shifting their focus away from the task at hand. Similarly, a survey study of call-center customer service representatives found that after experiencing customer mistreatment, those who could not stop ruminating about their negative experiences with customers received lower job performance ratings from their supervisors (Baranik et al. 2017).

Rumination also prevents employees from speaking up about their ideas (Madrid et al. 2015), which is problematic from a performance perspective because organizations perform better when employees articulate ideas to solve organizational problems. It can also undermine performance by leading people to overthink their jobs in ways that contribute to choking (Beilock & Carr 2001). Thus, rumination undermines performance through multiple pathways.

**Health and well-being.** There is strong evidence that people who tend to ruminate experience poorer emotional and physical well-being. When people ruminate, they feel even more distressed, and this undermines their ability to problem-solve or do things to improve their mood (Niven et al. 2013). Results from a two-week study of call-center employees revealed that rumination at night on customer mistreatment that happened during the day was associated with more negative mood the next morning (Wang et al. 2013). Rumination not only exacerbates negative feelings but also drains psychological resources. In this vein, rumination and anxiety have been linked to emotional exhaustion [e.g., among customer representatives (Baranik et al. 2017)].

The harmful health implications of self-reflection extend to physical well-being. Rumination in response to work stressors or negative events maintains the activation of the physiological fight-or-flight system (Dickerson & Kemeny 2004), which causes wear and tear on the body and deteriorates physical well-being (Glynn et al. 2002). In this vein, Liang et al. (2018) found that individuals who engaged in rumination were more likely to have been bothered by health issues such as stomach pain and headaches. Rumination has also been linked to sleep disorders, such as insomnia [e.g., among US Forest Service employees (Demsky et al. 2019)].

**Relationships and social influence.** Research has demonstrated consistently that self-reflection that takes the form of rumination can be detrimental for one's relationships. When an employee is a victim of a transgression, rumination on that transgression is associated with anger toward the transgressor, aggression, and thoughts about revenge (McCullough et al. 1998). Indeed, findings from the field indicate that employees who ruminate about customer mistreatment are more likely to engage in customer-directed sabotage (Baranik et al. 2017) and that those who ruminate about abusive behavior from their supervisors are more likely to engage in supervisor-directed deviance (Liao et al. 2021). Experimental studies support these field-based observations. Wang et al. (2011) found, for example, that when people experience unfair actions, rumination (versus distraction or reappraisal) makes them engage in costly punishing behavior toward the person who treated them unfairly.

Perhaps most disconcertingly for relationships, ruminating about a transgression not only leads people to retaliate against those who acted directly against them but also leads to displaced aggression against innocent others. In this vein, Garcia et al. (2014) found that supervisors who had a history of family aggression were more likely to engage in abusive supervision toward their subordinates if they tended to ruminate on their earlier experiences with their respective families.

A final negative consequence associated with rumination concerns the way it interferes with leadership processes. For instance, Gabriel et al. (2021) examined rumination in leaders and discovered that leaders who ruminated in the evening were less helpful toward their subordinates the next day because rumination used up their self-regulatory resources. In turn, because lowered helping meant fewer meaningful social connections, leaders also felt more lonely. Similarly, Schaubroeck et al. (2021) found that rumination prevented individuals without formal leadership positions from engaging in leadership behaviors because it diminished the attentional resources they needed to engage in such behaviors.

## Summary

From improved performance, to enhanced health and well-being, to more harmonious social relationships, the literature reviewed above makes it clear that reflection can lead to a host of adaptive outcomes. It is just as clear, however, that when faced with negative events, whether they involve being the victim of customer mistreatment, or having too much work to do, self-reflection can transform quickly into rumination and worry, which undermine not only people's ability to think and perform well at work but also their health, well-being, and interpersonal functioning.

The juxtaposition of these seemingly conflicting findings on the benefits versus harms of self-reflection at work parallels the inconsistencies noted in the broader literature on self-reflection outside the organizational domain, which likewise demonstrate that people experience enormous difficulty reflecting adaptively on negative experiences without becoming entangled in rumination (for a review, see Kross & Ayduk 2017). Taken together, these findings raise the question of how people can harness the positive potential of self-reflection when focusing on negative experiences without falling victim to its dark side. Over the past decade, research from different areas of psychology has begun to converge on the notion that part of the answer to this question has to do with the concept of psychological distance (for review, see Kross & Ayduk 2017).

## HOW PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTANCE PROMOTES ADAPTIVE SELF-REFLECTION

One of the defining features of maladaptive self-reflection is its immersive and egocentric quality. When people ruminate or worry about negative experiences, they get stuck focusing narrowly on the aversive features of their experiences that pose a threat to themselves, which makes it difficult for them to see the bigger picture, where solutions to their problems often lie (Kross 2021). Building from this observation, psychologists have speculated that facilitating adaptive reflection requires a mechanism to help people psychologically distance from their experience so they can step back from their immersed view of the situation to reflect on it more effectively.

Psychological distancing refers to the process of mentally moving away from what is experientially available in the here and now, which by default is embedded in the present egocentric state of the self (for review, see Kross & Ayduk 2017). That is, whereas the default mode with which people typically engage in self-reflection is embedded in a first-person, egocentric perspective, which elicits rumination and worry, distancing helps break people out of this narrow view, allowing them to reconstrue negative experiences without becoming overwhelmed by negative emotions.

A large amount of work links engaging in psychological distance (hereafter referred to as distance or distancing) when people reflect on negative emotional experiences with adaptive psychological, physiological, and behavioral outcomes. This is true for different populations (e.g., children as well as adults, vulnerable groups), regardless of whether people distance spontaneously or are directed to do so in the context of experiments and field interventions.

The role that distancing plays in enabling self-regulation has a long history in psychology (see Kross & Ayduk 2017 for a similar historical overview). Mischel was one of the first to speculate on the role that distancing plays in helping individuals grapple with intense emotions. He argued that creating psychological distance from the desirable features of tempting treats via distraction or abstraction allowed children to exert self-control in the classic delay-of-gratification paradigm (aka the Marshmallow Test; e.g., Mischel & Rodriguez 1993). More recent work on construal level theory has produced a large body of work consistent with Mischel's claims by showing that more abstract mindsets and goal construals tip people's decision making in favor of prioritizing long-over short-term goals (Fujita et al. 2006).

A similar insight is captured by Ury's (1991) metaphor of "going to the balcony" in the context of negotiations: When facing a particularly frustrating moment during a difficult negotiation, it is helpful to adopt an attitude of a third-party observer watching the negotiation unfold from a balcony overlooking a stage. Ury argues that going to the balcony allows people to see the needs and goals of both sides more clearly and thus generates more mutually satisfactory solutions to deadlocks.

In the clinical domain, Beck defined distancing as "the ability to view one's own thoughts (or beliefs) as constructions of 'reality' rather than as reality itself" (Alford & Beck 1998, p. 142) and recognized it as an important preliminary step that clients achieve in order for cognitive therapy to be successful. More recently, the closely related concepts of decentering—observing one's thoughts and emotions as passing mental events rather than direct readouts of an objective reality (see Bernstein et al. 2015 for review)—and perspective-broadening appraisals—seeing the bigger picture, recognizing that time heals all, and acknowledging the good with the bad (e.g., Schartau et al. 2009)—have been shown to play a key role in facilitating healthy self-reflection in a variety of contexts.

The specific role that distancing plays in facilitating adaptive self-reflection has been studied in depth in the social-personality psychology domain (for review, see Kross & Ayduk 2017). In this line of work, researchers manipulate and assess peoples' tendency to adopt a distanced perspective while reflecting on negative experiences and then measure an array of immediate and delayed outcomes. Across studies, researchers have linked the tendency to distance in this manner with lower levels of emotional reactivity, assessed subjectively and implicitly using physiological and neural measures. In this vein, a recent large-scale meta-analysis found that distancing was associated with a medium effect size (Hedges's  $g = 0.518$ ) for reducing self-reported negative emotions (Moran & Eyal 2022). The benefits associated with distancing are not, however, restricted to emotional reactivity. Distancing has also been linked with reduced cognitive accessibility of negative affect, intrusive ideation, and physiological stress reactions (e.g., blood pressure) relevant to physical health outcomes (Kross & Ayduk 2017).

How does distancing lead to these beneficial outcomes? Although many techniques exist for enhancing this psychological state, at a broad level, a common mechanism underlies their benefits: They facilitate cognitive change, a process in which people reframe their negative experiences in ways that reduce their aversive qualities. As we elaborate on in the next section, although the specific form that such cognitive change takes may depend on both the type of distancing tactic used and the nature of the situation one is trying to reframe, by allowing people to step back from the emotional immediacy of the situation, distancing helps people change how they think about their circumstances in ways that ultimately improve the way they feel about them rather than leading them to simply relive the aversive feature of their negative experience over and over again—the defining feature of maladaptive forms of self-reflection such as worry and rumination.

## DISTANCING TOOLS

As research on the benefits of distancing evolved, so did the recognition that there are multiple ways of cultivating it. In this section, we review distancing tools that have received some of the most empirical support, organizing our discussion of these tools into four categories: linguistic, conceptual, behavioral, and relational (for a summary, see **Table 1**). These categories lack clear-cut boundaries, and some of the tools we review below arguably belong to multiple groups. Therefore, the distinctions we make below are meant to be interpreted heuristically, not in terms of pure, nonoverlapping features.



**Table 1** Distancing tools

Type of tool	Tool
Linguistic tools	Distant self-talk
	Generic “you”
	Thinking in a foreign language
	Expressive writing
Conceptual tools	Mental time travel
	Seeing the bigger picture
	Adopting an observer perspective
	Mindfulness
Behavioral tools	Rituals
	Green space exposure
	Exposure to awe-inspiring experiences
Relational tool	Talking to others who help us activate distancing tools

## Linguistic Tools

**Distanced self-talk.** Converging evidence indicates that using one’s own name or non-first-person pronouns (e.g., he/she, you) to refer to oneself during silent self-reflection, a tool we refer to as distanced self-talk, enhances people’s ability to reason wisely [i.e., recognize the limits of one’s own knowledge and that the future is likely to change, and engage in perspective taking (Grossmann & Kross 2014)] and manage stressful circumstances (Dolcos & Albarracín 2014, Kross et al. 2014, Orvell et al. 2019a). In this vein, distanced self-talk has been linked with reductions in emotional reactivity via self-report, physiological, and neural measures. For example, Moser et al. (2017) found that when people used distanced (versus immersed) self-talk to reflect on painful memories, they displayed less reactivity in a neural marker of self-referential emotional reactivity (i.e., medial prefrontal cortex) that tends to be elevated among people who suffer from dysfunctional forms of self-reflection. Another study found that distanced self-talk led individuals who were preparing to give a speech in front of a panel of judges to display lower levels of total peripheral resistance—a physiological marker of a harmful stress response (Streamer et al. 2017).

Many of the aforementioned benefits have been demonstrated beyond the laboratory. Using distanced (versus immersed) self-talk when reasoning about the Ebola epidemic in 2016 predicted significant reductions in anxiety (Kross et al. 2017). Along similar lines, Grossmann et al. (2021) found that a brief distanced self-talk intervention promoted wise reasoning about interpersonal challenges over a 30-day period by allowing people to adopt a broader perspective. Furthermore, experimental studies with children as young as five years of age have shown that they also benefit from using distanced (versus immersed) self-talk, performing better on executive function and perseverance tasks (White & Carlson 2016, White et al. 2017).

More recent laboratory experiments by Orvell et al. (2020b) have also shown that unlike other cognitive reappraisal tools that are less effective under high levels of stress (e.g., Raio et al. 2013), distanced self-talk reduces negative emotions regardless of the intensity of the experiences being reflected on or participants’ own vulnerability to negative affect. Furthermore, these effects hold across past versus future stressors, stressors from different domains (e.g., academic, financial, existential threats), and different types of negative experiences (e.g., anger, embarrassment, betrayal).

The fact that distanced self-talk is just as effective for high-intensity as low-intensity experiences suggests this tactic could be a relatively effortless route to adaptive self-reflection (see Orvell et al. 2019a). In fact, growing evidence suggests this is indeed the case. That is, several



neuroimaging and event-related potential studies have shown that referring to the self with one's own name (rather than first-person pronouns) during self-reflection reduces activation in neural networks involved in self-referential emotional processing without activating neural networks involved in cognitive control (Moser et al. 2017; see Orvell et al. 2019a for review), implying that distanced self-talk does not require excessive cognitive effort.

**Generic “you.”** When people engage in distanced self-talk, they use “you” to refer to themselves rather than other people. For example, Jason might think to himself, “Jason, you need to get your act together.” Research indicates that people can also use “you” generically, which allows one to describe their own deeply personal experiences in universal terms (e.g., “You win some, you lose some”).

Because the grammatical function of using generic “you” is to describe norms that apply to people in general, its use during self-reflection helps extend the relevance of an event beyond the self to other people, allowing people to transcend their egocentric perspective (Orvell et al. 2017). Across a variety of studies, Orvell et al. (2017, 2020a) have shown that reflecting on negative experiences using generic you (versus in the first person using “I”) reminds people that what they are experiencing applies to people more generally, thus providing them psychological distance needed to reframe their experiences and regulate their emotions. Some of these benefits have been demonstrated in adults as well as in children as young as age five, highlighting how fundamental this reflection tool is to meaning making (Orvell et al. 2019b).

Although the bulk of research on generic you has focused on documenting its benefits for facilitating adaptive reflection, it also has interpersonal benefits. Specifically, using the word you generically to talk about an experience implicitly suggests that the topic one is speaking about is relevant to the target of communication. For example, when a person says, “You win some, you lose some,” after being rejected, that phrase is semantically equivalent to saying, “Anyone wins some, and anyone loses some”—a statement that includes whoever one is speaking to. Building off this observation, several studies indicate that using generic you (versus other nongeneric parts of speech) to talk about ideas enhances both their persuasiveness (Orvell et al. 2019c) and the degree to which they resonate with others (Orvell et al. 2020a).

**Thinking in a foreign language.** Research indicates that the intensity of our emotional reactions is influenced by whether we use our native versus foreign language to think about experiences (see Caldwell-Harris 2015 for review). Feelings, both good and bad, are more potent in our native tongue than in a foreign language; curse words have more punch; endearments make us swoon more; criticisms hurt more deeply. Unsurprisingly, bilinguals tend to switch between their native and foreign languages to strategically regulate their emotions, using the former to upregulate and the latter to downregulate affective intensity (Bond & Lai 1986).

The emotion-dampening effect of foreign language use also extends to reflecting on judgment and decision making. For example, people make more rational (less emotional) judgments in resolving moral dilemmas when they reason about what to do in a foreign (versus their native) language (e.g., Hayakawa et al. 2017, Keysar et al. 2012). Similarly, when people engage in decision making in a foreign (versus native) language, they are less susceptible to well-established biases, including the belief that one is on a winning streak [i.e., the “hot-hand” effect (Gao et al. 2015)] and the tendency to be risk averse for gains and risk seeking for losses [i.e., the “framing” effect (Keysar et al. 2012)].

Psychological distance has been proposed as one of the fundamental mechanisms that explain such foreign language effects. That is, because people learn foreign languages later in life than their native language, often in instructional settings that lack social interactions rich in

emotional content (which is not typical of native language learning), people's network of autobiographical memory tends to be more impoverished and less embodied in a foreign (versus native) language. Because autobiographical memories are the building blocks of the self-concept, this line of reasoning argues that foreign language use dampens emotional reactions because the self-concept constructed in a foreign language is not as well-developed and salient as the self-concept constructed in one's native language, hence, affording greater psychological distance from an egocentric perspective (e.g., Keysar et al. 2012, Pavlenko 2012).

**Expressive writing.** More than three decades of research have revealed that asking people to write expressively about their deepest thoughts and feelings surrounding negative experiences facilitates peoples' ability to work through emotionally trying situations in ways that improve physical and mental health (Pennebaker & Chung 2007). This is true of people working in organizational leadership contexts as well. For example, Lanaj et al. (2019) found that leaders who reflected on their positive characteristics as a leader through expressive writing at the start of each day felt less depleted and therefore were more engaged and influential at work during the day over the course of three weeks.

Although multiple mechanisms help explain this effect, several authors have speculated that distancing may play a role. As Park et al. (2016) noted, multiple features of expressive writing promote self-distancing: the necessity to separate the self-as-narrator from the self-as-protagonist, to take the perspective of a hypothetical audience (at least implicitly), and to focus on the broader context. Consistent with this theorizing, across two longitudinal experiments, Park et al. (2016) found that expressive writing (versus various control conditions) led people to adopt a more self-distanced perspective when they reflected on the negative experience they wrote about, which in turn predicted the subjective benefits of the writing intervention.

Interestingly, Park and colleagues also found that writing expressively about one's experience led to a reduction in the amount of first-person singular pronouns people used over the course of the writing intervention, which in turn predicted increases in self-distancing over time. This finding is consistent with the notion that different distancing manipulations are interrelated (also see Kross et al. 2014 and Nook et al. 2017), which lends credence to the idea that a common psychological mechanism underlies them.

## Conceptual Tools

**Mental time travel.** Maladaptive self-reflection often involves focusing narrowly on the aversive features of one's problems to the exclusion of alternative ways of making sense of one's circumstances. When people get stuck engaging in this type of tunnel vision, it can be easy to lose sight of the fact that most emotional experiences subside with the passage of time. Indeed, the passing of time has been described as a central component of people's psychological immune system, a concept that refers to a suite of processes that help promote resilience (Gilbert et al. 1998).

Temporal distancing is a tool that helps remind people of this truism. It involves thinking about a current experience from the perspective of the self in the far future (Bruehlman-Senecal & Ayduk 2015). For example, in temporal distancing studies, people are asked to think about how they will feel about the experience they are currently struggling with sometime in the far future (e.g., 10 years from now) in contrast to the near future (e.g., in a week). Research shows that adopting a far (versus near) future time perspective improves the way people feel. When people think about how they will feel about a problem they are struggling with in the far future, they become increasingly aware that their current emotional reactions, as intense as they may be, will eventually lose their significance, which in turn improves how they feel in the moment (Bruehlman-Senecal & Ayduk 2015).

People who habitually use temporal distancing report better affective and interpersonal functioning both concurrently and prospectively (Bruehlman-Senecal et al. 2016). To highlight one particularly interesting finding, high temporal distancers participating in a two-week daily diary study reported greater emotional equanimity in the face of daily failures and triumphs than those low in temporal distancing. Furthermore, their greater affective equilibrium during the two-week period explained why they also reported higher life satisfaction and less worry, anxiety, and depression three and six months later (Bruehlman-Senecal et al. 2016, Study 4).

The benefits of mental time travel generalize across a variety of contexts and samples. For example, a far future time perspective is effective in downregulating distress with respect to major (e.g., death, COVID-19, social exclusion) and minor (e.g., work overload) life events, stressors that had happened in the past or might still be ongoing (Bruehlman-Senecal & Ayduk 2015, Chishima et al. 2021). Similar benefits have also been demonstrated among adolescents, including participants as young as 10–11 years of age (Ahmed et al. 2018), and cross-culturally (Chishima et al. 2021).

Beyond emotion regulation outcomes, Huynh et al. (2016) have shown that adopting a far future time perspective when reflecting on romantic relationship conflicts leads to more adaptive reasoning (e.g., lower blame, greater forgiveness), indicating that the use of this tool accrues adaptive outcomes for both the person (e.g., low negative affect) and their relationship partners (e.g., greater partner satisfaction). Mental time travel is also helpful for leaders. Carton & Lucas (2018) found that leaders who mentally project themselves to a moment in the future and reflect on what the future could look like were able to craft more impactful and compelling vision statements filled with image-based rhetoric.

**Seeing the bigger picture.** Temporal distancing is one component of a set of mental exercises that help people break out of their tunnel vision when they find themselves wallowing in distress and situate their experience in a bigger picture. Engaging in perspective-broadening appraisals is another tool toward a similar end. However, these appraisals direct people to focus on their circumstances more broadly, beyond considering only the passage of time. Typical perspective-broadening exercises direct participants to “think about how this won’t feel as bad in the future,” “bad things happen and we just need to move on,” “good things can come out of even bad events,” “bad things happen but good things happen too,” and “think about what you would say if this were happening to someone else” (e.g., Schartau et al. 2009, Travers-Hill et al. 2017).

Research shows that use of perspective-broadening appraisals is linked to several important positive self-reflection outcomes in both healthy (Schartau et al. 2009) and clinical (Travers-Hill et al. 2017) populations. For example, Schartau et al. (2009) demonstrated that training healthy participants to adopt a broad perspective reduced how distressed (subjective and physiological) they became in response to various negative affect-eliciting stimuli (e.g., distressing films and autobiographical memories). The intervention also led them to experience fewer intrusive thoughts over time, a defining feature of negative self-reflection (also see Miller et al. 2015). Complementing these experimental findings, research shows that individual differences in the habitual use of perspective-broadening, or big-picture, appraisals are correlated with higher scores on measures of decentering, cognitive flexibility, and high-level goal construals but with lower scores on emotion regulation difficulties (Gill et al. 2017).

**Adopting an observer perspective.** A commonly studied distancing tool involves adopting the perspective of a distanced observer as one reflects on emotional experiences. This tool has been operationalized in various ways across different studies. One frequently studied manipulation targets visual imagery, which people often engage in during reflection. For example, it is not uncommon

for people to imagine in vivid detail past experiences playing out in their mind's eye, or to simulate how a future encounter may transpire. Imagery, however, is not fixed. People can adopt different visual perspectives when imagining events that vary in how much they immerse versus distance people from the emotional immediacy of their experiences.

Visual self-distancing involves reasoning about one's emotional reactions to an event while adopting a "fly-on-the-wall" perspective and watching oneself in the event as it unfolds in one's mind's eye (for review, see Kross & Ayduk 2017). In lab studies, self-distanced reflection is compared to self-immersed reflection, where participants are led to try to understand their emotions while visualizing an event from a first-person perspective. Research links the adoption of a self-distanced perspective with reductions in emotional and physiological reactivity in the short term and intrusive ideation over time. Adopting a distanced visual perspective as people try to make sense of their feelings helps people reframe negative experiences in ways that allow them to learn from them and move forward rather than get stuck reliving their experience. Many of these benefits have been documented cross-culturally, in adults as well as in children, and extend to vulnerable groups. Furthermore, similar findings have been observed when people spontaneously use self-distancing in their daily lives, as opposed to being asked to do so in the context of laboratory experiments, which further speaks to the important role this tool plays in helping facilitate adaptive self-reflection.

Detached reappraisal or objective distancing refers to a tool that overlaps conceptually and operationally with visual distancing as well as with Ury's notion of going to the balcony. Typically, participants are asked to observe negative content, such as aversive images, from the perspective of a detached, objective third party (Powers & LaBar 2019). Although in detached reappraisal studies participants are often not explicitly told to try to make sense of their emotional experiences, this tool, too, is associated with several positive outcomes indicative of adaptive self-reflection. These include reductions in self-reported negative emotions, reduced activation in neural structures related to emotional arousal (e.g., amygdala) and self-referential processing (e.g., medial prefrontal cortex), and greater activation in neural systems related to perspective taking and cognitive control (Powers & LaBar 2019).

**Mindfulness.** Mindfulness refers to a set of practices that derive from Eastern contemplative traditions, which focus on teaching people how to relate differently to their thoughts and feelings to cultivate an accepting, nonreactive state of being aware of the contents of one's mind. Although mindfulness interventions have been discussed in Western academic contexts for quite some time (e.g., Kabat-Zinn 1990), their potential value for facilitating adaptive self-reflection attained mainstream recognition only within the past 20 years. Indeed, several recent meta-analyses and systematic reviews of the literature have found that mindfulness interventions help reduce a variety of problems that accompany maladaptive self-reflection, including stress and depression (for review, see Wielgosz et al. 2019).

Organizational scholars have also shown great interest in mindfulness (for review, see Sutcliffe et al. 2016). Although some focus on the positive influence of mindfulness as a personality trait (e.g., Dane & Brummel 2014), there is also a large body of work on workplace mindfulness interventions. For example, mindfulness interventions have been found to have a positive impact on workers' well-being (e.g., Hülshager et al. 2014), task performance (e.g., Reb & Narayanan 2014), and prosocial behavior (e.g., Hafenbrack et al. 2020).

Unlike many of the other tools reviewed thus far, mindfulness interventions are not always operationalized the same way across studies—there is much wider heterogeneity in their implementation. For example, whereas some interventions lean heavily on meditation exercises involving

mantras or breath focus, other mindfulness interventions are more cognitive and involve teaching people to relate differently to their thoughts and feelings using a variety of experiential exercises (e.g., imagine your feelings are like clouds that come and go). This heterogeneity makes it more difficult to draw firm conclusions about the mechanisms underlying the benefits of mindfulness interventions. Nonetheless, a focus on mechanism has emerged as a vibrant area of work.

In this regard, researchers have noted that mindfulness targets several underlying processes, including (but not limited to) focusing on the present, adopting a nonjudgmental attitude, and developing meta-awareness and self-compassion (for discussion, see Wielgosz et al. 2019). Most relevant to the present discussion, however, is the fact that mindfulness involves teaching people to observe their thoughts and emotions as mental processes that occur in the mind rather than as reflections of reality, a process also referred to as decentering that overlaps with distancing (Bernstein et al. 2015, Wielgosz et al. 2019).

Studies examining decentering have consistently linked this tool with adaptive outcomes (Bernstein et al. 2019, Wu et al. 2022). For example, in a recent randomized clinical trial, Fresco and colleagues found that shifts in decentering mediated the benefits of a mindfulness-based cognitive therapy intervention on symptoms of depression and rates of relapse over time among formerly depressed individuals (Moore et al. 2022). Mindfulness and decentering thus provide additional tools for enhancing distance, which individuals may find useful when trying to self-reflect more adaptively.

## Behavioral Tools

**Rituals.** Cultures from around the world have for centuries prescribed rituals—meaning-infused, rigid sequences of behavior (Hobson et al. 2018)—to help people manage their emotions. Consider, for example, the prevalence of grieving rituals offered by different religious and spiritual traditions (Norton & Gino 2014) or the frequency with which athletes perform team rituals during stressful moments in competition (Schippers & Van Lange 2006).

Recent research indicates that participating in rituals helps people regulate emotions and buffers against maladaptive forms of self-reflection such as anxiety (for review, see Hobson et al. 2018). In one study, for example, Brooks et al. (2016) randomly assigned participants to perform either a ritual or an arbitrary sequence of behaviors prior to a stressful experience. Participants who were assigned to the rituals condition not only performed better but also displayed improved physiological and subjective emotional reactivity.

As Hobson et al. (2018) discuss, performing rituals helps people regulate their emotions in multiple ways. They often involve an elaborate set of behaviors that draw people's attention away from distressing thoughts and provide people with a sense of agency and control, which is often lacking when people succumb to rumination. Rituals are also performed in group settings, which have been linked with enhanced levels of social support. Finally, and most germane to the current argument, rituals connect people with a mission and/or meaning system that is greater than themselves. They help people transcend their egocentric concerns, providing them with a sense of distance from their emotions while simultaneously promoting a sense of loyalty and connection.

**Green space exposure.** Converging evidence from multiple areas of research indicates that exposure to green spaces improves peoples' mood, reduces rumination, and is linked with improved mental health and physical well-being more generally (for review, see Bratman et al. 2019). For example, Bratman et al. (2015) linked exposure to natural (versus urban) settings with reductions in both a self-reported and a neural measure of rumination.

Although the mechanisms underlying these benefits remain a vigorously pursued area of ongoing research, one explanation for how nature benefits people involves attention. Attention is a limited resource; people can devote only so much of it to a particular issue without becoming depleted. Early theorizing on this topic suggested that nature helps restore people's attentional resources by gently drawing their focus away from problems they are fixated on, providing an opportunity for their resources to restore themselves (Kaplan & Berman 2010). Several well-designed experiments have provided consistent evidence to support this hypothesis, demonstrating that people's attentional capacity improves after interacting with nature versus urban spaces. Interestingly, many of these benefits have been demonstrated when people are simply exposed to images or sounds of nature, although the degree to which people benefit from these less-immersive forms of nature exposure is smaller (for review, see Schertz & Berman 2019).

Green space exposure not only restores attention but may also promote distancing. In this vein, recent work indicates that exposure to natural (versus urban) settings leads people to focus less on the self (Schertz et al. 2022) and become more mindful of issues concerning spirituality and one's life journey (Schertz et al. 2020), which in turn guides people's attention to ideas that go beyond their immediate, concrete experience in the here and now. Exposure to green space also provides people with enhanced opportunities to experience the emotion of awe, which as we next explain is a self-transcendent emotion that by definition involves directing people to focus away from the self in ways that help improve reflection. Given these myriad benefits of green space exposure, it is perhaps not surprising that organizations are increasingly incorporating elements of nature into workplace design (Klotz & Bolino 2021).

**Exposure to awe-inspiring experiences.** We experience awe when we find ourselves contemplating ideas, experiences, or objects that are vast and difficult to grasp fully (for review, see Stellar et al. 2017). Although awe can be triggered from multiple sources, the physical environment is filled with stimuli that provide us with opportunities to experience this emotional state. For example, nature is filled with scenes like beautiful sunsets and majestic views that people regularly report experiencing awe in response to.

Research shows that experiencing awe leads to improvements in well-being and reductions in ill-being. For example, one study found that individuals who participated in a river rafting study over the course of one or four days experienced notable improvements in their well-being that were mediated by their daily experience of awe (Anderson et al. 2018).

One explanation for how awe promotes these benefits has to do with the effect it has on broadening people's perspective. Piff et al. (2015) showed that experiencing awe leads to a shrinking of the self—people feel smaller and cease to be the center of the world when they are contemplating something bigger than themselves, suggesting that awe serves a distancing function. Furthermore, because such stimuli by their very nature push the boundaries of people's existing meaning systems, they often lead them to revise their cognitive schemas. Experiencing awe thus appears to serve as a catalyst for distancing and cognitive change.

## Relational Tools

When people struggle to reflect adaptively, they often seek support from others, and for good reason. Other people have distance from our problems and are thus in a prime position to help us activate distancing tools that we struggle to implement on our own. For example, when we find ourselves besieged with rumination, a good friend or colleague can remind us of our ability to broaden our perspective, take a hike, or engage in any other number of effective distancing strategies. Yet, other people are also able to lead us astray. For example, talking with other people



might shift our focus away from the deeper lessons that can be learned from our experiences (Daudelin 1996) or promote negative ways of reflecting on our circumstances, such as venting and corumination, a collective form of rumination that involves rehashing the negative features of experiences together (e.g., Lee et al. 2020, Rose 2002).

One useful framework for determining why talking to others succeeds versus fails draws from Rimé and colleagues' research on the social sharing of emotion (Rimé 2009), which indicates that people seek to fulfill two principle needs when conversing with others about their emotions. First, they have socio-affective needs—they seek to empathically connect with others, feel validated, and have their experience normalized, especially during the immediate aftermath of a negative experience. Second, they have cognitive needs—they yearn to reframe how they are thinking about their circumstances to provide them with a sense of meaning, insight, and closure. Addressing both needs is important for actualizing effective social support.

An experiment by Lee et al. (2020), in which participants talked about a recent negative interpersonal experience with a confederate trained to provide one of two kinds of support, demonstrates this point. In one condition, the confederate established an emotional bond with the participant (by learning about what happened to them) and then encouraged them to continue venting their feelings. In the second condition, instead of encouraging venting, the confederate posed questions to help participants reframe how they were thinking about their circumstances (e.g., “Have you learned anything from this experience?”; “In the grand scheme of things, if you look at the ‘big picture,’ does that help you make sense of this experience?”).

Participants encouraged to vent displayed a significant spike in how distressed they felt at the end of the conversation compared to when they first arrived at the study. In contrast, participants encouraged to reframe their experience remained buffered against any negative emotion increase.

These findings are consistent with longitudinal research linking the tendency to coruminate about distressing experiences with a variety of negative consequences, including increased levels of depression and anxiety (for review, see Spindel et al. 2017). These findings are also consistent with organizational research showing that venting to coworkers following a negative work event amplifies negative emotions, limiting one's ability to move on from the event (Baer et al. 2017) and harming one's work performance (Brown et al. 2005).

Collectively, this work demonstrates that people can be helpful coaches to others who are seeking to reflect effectively. However, to do so effectively, they must both take time to listen and hear what the other person is struggling with (to address their socio-emotional needs) and then work with them to help reframe their experience (to address their cognitive needs). It is noteworthy that many of these processes are implemented in organizations in the form of workplace or executive coaching interventions that aim to improve employees' work effectiveness (Feldman & Lankau 2005). A critical function of a coach is to help their client reflect on their actions and gain self-insight (see Jones et al. 2016 for meta-analysis and review), and we suggest that coaches can help facilitate their clients' productive self-reflection as well. In this vein, empirical studies have found that coaches reduce the anxiety and stress that their clients experience (see Jones et al. 2016), which allows them to reflect in a more productive manner.

## NEXT STEPS

We have made enormous progress in documenting the positive and negative implications of self-reflection, as well as in identifying tools that allow people to reflect on their negative experiences adaptively. Yet, important questions remain. In this section, we highlight several issues that are particularly relevant to advancing our understanding of reflection in the organizational context and how to optimize it.



## Self-Reflection and Its Outcomes

First, there is room for more empirical research on the positive impact of reflection on workplace relationships. For example, might reflection encourage individuals to engage in more perspective-taking and therefore be more helpful toward their coworkers or customers? Might leaders who take time to reflect be better able to address the needs of the teams they lead and thus be more effective leaders? We also need to advance our understanding of who benefits more from reflection and under what organizational contexts. It may be that employees with certain personality traits need to engage in more reflection (e.g., those who are action oriented or have a high need for cognition) or benefit more from it. Certain types of jobs or organizations, such as those characterized by high uncertainty (Weick & Sutcliffe 2007), may also require employees to engage in more reflection to be successful.

Second, most of the research on the negative implications of self-reflection in the workplace has looked at rumination in the context of interpersonal interactions, with a particular focus on victims of workplace mistreatment. People ruminate when they are victims of others' aggression, and this leads to a negative spiral whereby the victims become perpetrators of subsequent aggression. We believe this victim-oriented view should be expanded. People ruminate on a variety of experiences. They want to do well at work and ruminate when they fail to achieve their goals or when unexpected work events thwart their progress (e.g., Schaubroeck et al. 2021). They have a moral conscience and ruminate on their past interpersonal or ethical transgressions (Ong 2022). Thus, more research is needed on the different types of events that lead individuals to ruminate, and how rumination may differ across experiences.

Third, this article represents an initial attempt to bring together two related but distinct research streams in the organizational literature on adaptive self-reflection and maladaptive rumination. Both reflection and rumination involve turning attention inward; however, they lead to different work outcomes (i.e., reflection is generally linked to positive consequences and rumination to negative consequences). A closer conceptual and empirical examination of the antecedents of reflection and rumination is needed. For example, it is unclear whether reflection and rumination are precipitated by different types of events, or if the same events can lead to both processes, depending on the context and individual differences of the involved individuals.

## Self-Reflection Tools

We also have several ideas for future research on the various tools that individuals can use to reflect adaptively. First, we know remarkably little about how the individual tools we have talked about work together. Addressing this issue is important because people use multiple strategies to manage the negative emotions they experience when they engage in self-reflection (A. Orvell, C. Costello, S. Takahashi, J. Moser, O. Ayduk & E. Kross, manuscript under review), and an emerging consensus indicates that no single strategy works for everyone across all situations (Bonanno & Burton 2013). Thus, a key challenge is to understand how different strategies interact, and whether the nature of these interactions depends on the context (e.g., personal versus work problems) in which they are engaged. In the same way that medical research emphasizes the importance of understanding how different medications interact, so should we understand how different reflection tools work together in different contexts.

Second, our knowledge of the individual difference and cultural factors that determine what self-reflection tools people select and how they function synergistically requires further explanation. Extant research indicates that people who are increasingly vulnerable to reflecting maladaptively are more likely to select unhealthy (versus healthy) tools [e.g., avoidance tactics, emotional venting (Aldao et al. 2010, Southward et al. 2018; see also A. Orvell, C. Costello,

S. Takahashi, J. Moser, O. Ayduk & E. Kross, manuscript under review)]. We also know that cultural factors impact both the kinds of tools people select (e.g., Kim et al. 2008) and how they function (e.g., Grossmann & Kross 2010). Yet, we know virtually nothing about how these variables impact the combination of strategies people use to reflect adaptively throughout the day and across different contexts.

Third, we need to explore how organizational culture can be modified to enhance the availability of reflection tools for employees and increase the likelihood of their implementation. Recent work suggests that interventions that simultaneously target changing policy and providing people with tools are the most effective in actuating change (Okonofua et al. 2020). Thus, organizations should consider adopting this dual-pronged intervention approach. One could imagine this taking many forms. For example, organizations could embrace the value of reflection in their rituals and mission statements, provide employees with opportunities for reflection throughout the day, or design office spaces to provide opportunities for awe and green space exposure. Of course, employees also need access to reflection tools. In this vein, the fact that so many of the distancing tools we have reviewed are relatively easy to implement and can be taught successfully during brief training sessions bodes well for the intervention potential of this work. Another idea is for supervisors themselves to coach and mentor their staff in ways that encourage them to reflect effectively by helping them reframe their experiences using prompts to encourage distancing.

Indeed, one of the most important practical implications of these findings for organizational behavior is the prospect of providing employees with a tool kit of distancing tools that they can flexibly draw from depending on the specific situational and cultural demands they face. Empowering employees to choose between tools they most desire has the advantage of allowing individuals to choose which tool to implement depending on their preference. Because personal choice accrues greater liking and commitment, particularly in individualistic cultures (e.g., Iyengar & Lepper 1999), providing leaders and employees options among multiple tools may enhance the usefulness of those very tools. Thus, offering employees access to a broad tool kit of distancing tools could offer them flexibility to choose among different tools depending on specific situational and cultural demands.

We emphasize that the tools we have reviewed need to be used strategically, as their adaptiveness depends on the context in which they are engaged. The most obvious illustration of this point comes from research showing how distancing reduces intensity and motivation with respect to not only negative but also positive experiences. Consider, for example, how you might feel about a current success in 10 years. Research shows that just like thinking about how the passage of time alleviates the hurt of failure, it also culls the joy of triumph (e.g., Bruehlman-Senecal et al. 2016, Gruber et al. 2009). Beyond valence, the utility of some distancing tools may also depend on the type of emotional experience people reflect on, with distancing being a more potent regulator of basic than self-conscious emotions (Moran & Eyal 2022).

A final illustration of how the utility of distancing tools depends on context comes from research on mental time travel. We earlier reviewed work demonstrating how imagining the way one will feel about an issue they are currently struggling with in the future can downregulate negative affect. Yet, there are also instances in which mental time travel can function to heat a person up rather than cool them down. For example, Hershfield and colleagues have shown over a series of studies that directing people to feel closer to their future self affects long-term decision making. When individuals feel connected to their future selves as a close other (versus a disconnected stranger), they make more prudent financial decisions, behave more ethically, and are better able to reach their goals (Hershfield 2019). Together, these examples indicate that adaptive self-reflection requires one to flexibly and strategically shift perspectives depending on the valence and nature of emotions, as well as one's regulatory goals.

Given that most of the research on distancing tools we described above was conducted in non-work settings, future research might uncover other distancing tools, not included in our review, that may be particularly relevant to work settings. For example, one way employees could gain distance from a work-related experience might involve imagining themselves in the shoes of their supervisor, a top-level leader in their organization, or the company's client. We also need to investigate whether the tools found to be effective in nonwork settings generalize to work settings. Many work organizations are highly bureaucratic and place their employees under immense pressure and scrutiny. Furthermore, employees, particularly those in the lower ranks, may be pessimistic about their ability to change their work situations and outcomes. As a result, they may feel they have little autonomy to adopt these tools and use them effectively. On the other hand, many of the tools discussed in this review are fairly quick and simple to implement, without needing permission from management or being subject to their scrutiny. Employees could, for example, easily adjust the way they silently engage in self-reflection without their supervisor ever noticing the change. In this sense, the distancing tools we discussed offer employees the freedom to improve how they feel and function in their current work circumstances, especially when those circumstances are the result of systemic problems that are slow to change.

## CONCLUDING COMMENT

Over the past 20 years, researchers have amassed a compelling set of findings that highlight the transformational role reflection plays in enhancing people's performance, well-being, and relationships in organizational contexts. At the same time, we have also identified a specific context in which reflection often backfires (i.e., when people attempt to work through negative experiences) and have made admirable strides in identifying distancing tools people can use to reflect adaptively under such circumstances. These tools come in a variety of forms, providing people with a broad spectrum of options to choose from. Although many important questions remain concerning how individual, cultural, and organizational forces influence the way these tools are selected, blend together, and operate, the initial contours of a science-based blueprint for enhancing adaptive self-reflection in organizations are in hand.

## FUTURE ISSUES

1. Does adaptive self-reflection encourage empathy, perspective taking, and wise leadership in organizational contexts?
2. Can we develop a taxonomy of situational and individual difference factors that predict adaptive versus maladaptive self-reflection?
3. How do different distancing tools work together and in conjunction with other (nondistancing) emotion regulation strategies?
4. How does culture—at the familial, organizational, and societal levels—influence what tools people select and how they function?
5. Can organizational culture be modified to enhance the availability of reflection tools for employees and increase the likelihood of their implementation?

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