

Overview

Hindsight bias is commonly referred to as the “I knew it all along” effect. Individuals who are informed of a specific outcome prior to judging how the event will pan out perceive that outcome as more likely to occur than do individuals who are not informed of any outcome.¹ In essence, individuals perceive a given outcome as more obvious when they know that it happened.

Hindsight bias has been documented in many contexts:

- Individuals' judgments of historical events¹
- Sporting events²
- Medical diagnoses³
- Witness testimonies⁴
- Employee evaluations⁵
- Perceived obviousness of research outcomes⁶

We chose to investigate hindsight bias in the context of romantic relationships because it is common for people to experience self-blame after a breakup and for others outside of the relationship to claim they “saw it coming.” But do the data support this notion?

Hypothesis:

When informed of a specific romantic relationship outcome, individuals will be unable to ignore that information when making evaluations of the relationship and retrospectively forecasting outcomes about the relationship.

Participants:

College Student Sample: 92 M, 89 F,
 $M_{age} = 21.23 \pm 2.63$.

Community Sample: 129 M, 201 F, 4 not reported,
 $M_{age} = 42.89 \pm 14.80$.

Procedure

Participants in both the college student and community samples read the following scenario:

“Sofia and Daniel have just begun dating. It is their sophomore year of college and they hit it off after being introduced by a mutual friend at the homecoming football game.

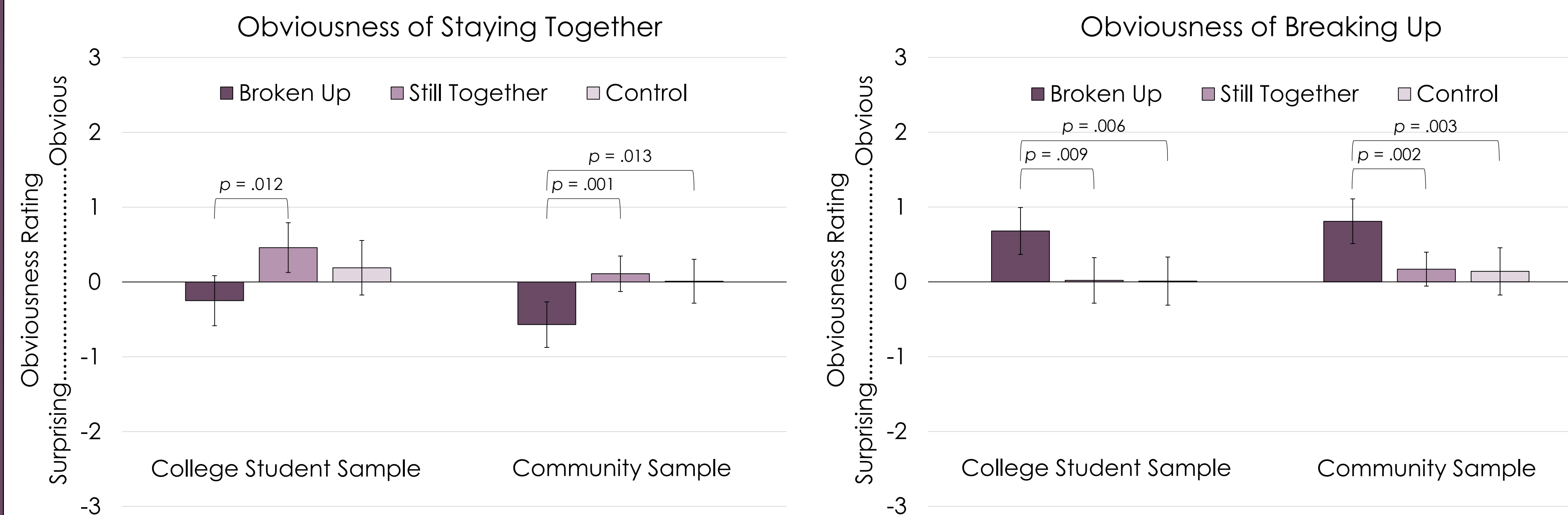
The couple has some potential issues. Sofia is very religious and spends a lot of time with her campus ministry while Daniel is a firm disbeliever. They are also pursuing opposite careers. She aims to work for a nonprofit and he is majoring in finance. Because of these differences, they tend to hang out with different crowds and don't share a lot of friends. In fact, their friends don't really support their relationship. They think the relationship is moving too fast and that Sofia and Daniel are too into each other to recognize that they are on different life paths. For all of these reasons, when certain topics come up there is some tension between Daniel and Sofia.

However, the couple also has a lot going for them. They always have something to talk about and can be open and honest with each other without feeling judged. Daniel says that he has never felt so comfortable with a romantic partner. Sofia, too, feels secure and safe around Daniel. She goes to all of his soccer games and he surprises her with flowers and candy. They have many of the same hobbies, like camping, kayaking, and listening to live music. For all of these reasons, Sofia and Daniel have grown close very quickly. They spend hours talking about their possible future together – where they'll get married, their favorite baby names, and where they want to live.”

Participants in the control condition received no further information. Participants in the two experimental conditions received one of two sentences about the couple's relationship outcome: “Six months later, Sofia and Daniel have broken up” or “Six months later, Sofia and Daniel are still together.”

Then, all participants reported their perceptions of the likelihood of each relationship outcome, made judgments about the relationship, and rated the obviousness of each outcome.

Results



The pattern of results was similar for the two samples. In the College Student Sample, participants who were told that Daniel and Sofia had broken up rated the outcome of them staying together as **less obvious** (more surprising) than did participants who were told that Daniel and Sofia were still together. In the Community Sample, participants told that the couple broke up perceived them staying together as **less obvious** than did both participants told that the couple was still together and participants who received no further information about the couple. Error bars represent $\pm 2 SEM$.

Again, the pattern of results was the same for both samples. In both the College Student Sample and the Community Sample, participants told that Daniel and Sofia broke up perceived them breaking up as **more obvious** than did both participants who were told that the couple was still together and participants who received no further information about the couple. Error bars represent $\pm 2 SEM$.

Discussion

In two studies, we documented systematic evidence that knowing about a dating couple's breakup can influence people's perceptions of the quality and likelihood of future dissolution of that relationship. In other words, we have documented evidence for people's anecdotal accounts that others have retrospectively forecasted their breakup: “We knew a long time ago that you wouldn't last.”

In the College Student Sample, participants who were told that the couple broke up showed less favorable judgments about the couple than did participants who were told that they stayed together. However, in the Community Sample, participants told that the couple broke up differed not only from participants told they stayed together, but also from control participants. In both studies, participants told that the couple stayed together did not differ from control participants. This pattern of findings is consistent with research in other areas showing that people respond more strongly to negative information than to positive information.⁷ Because the trends were in the same direction in both studies, we suspect that the more prominent effects in the Community Sample are due to a larger sample size.

Although our studies document hindsight bias in the context of relationships, they do not attempt to explain the various mechanisms that may have been operating. Future research should investigate the different mechanisms (e.g., memory reconstruction, selective retrieval of evidence, reinterpretation of evidence) that may be operating to produce hindsight bias.

College Student Sample:
Mean Judgments by Outcome Knowledge Condition

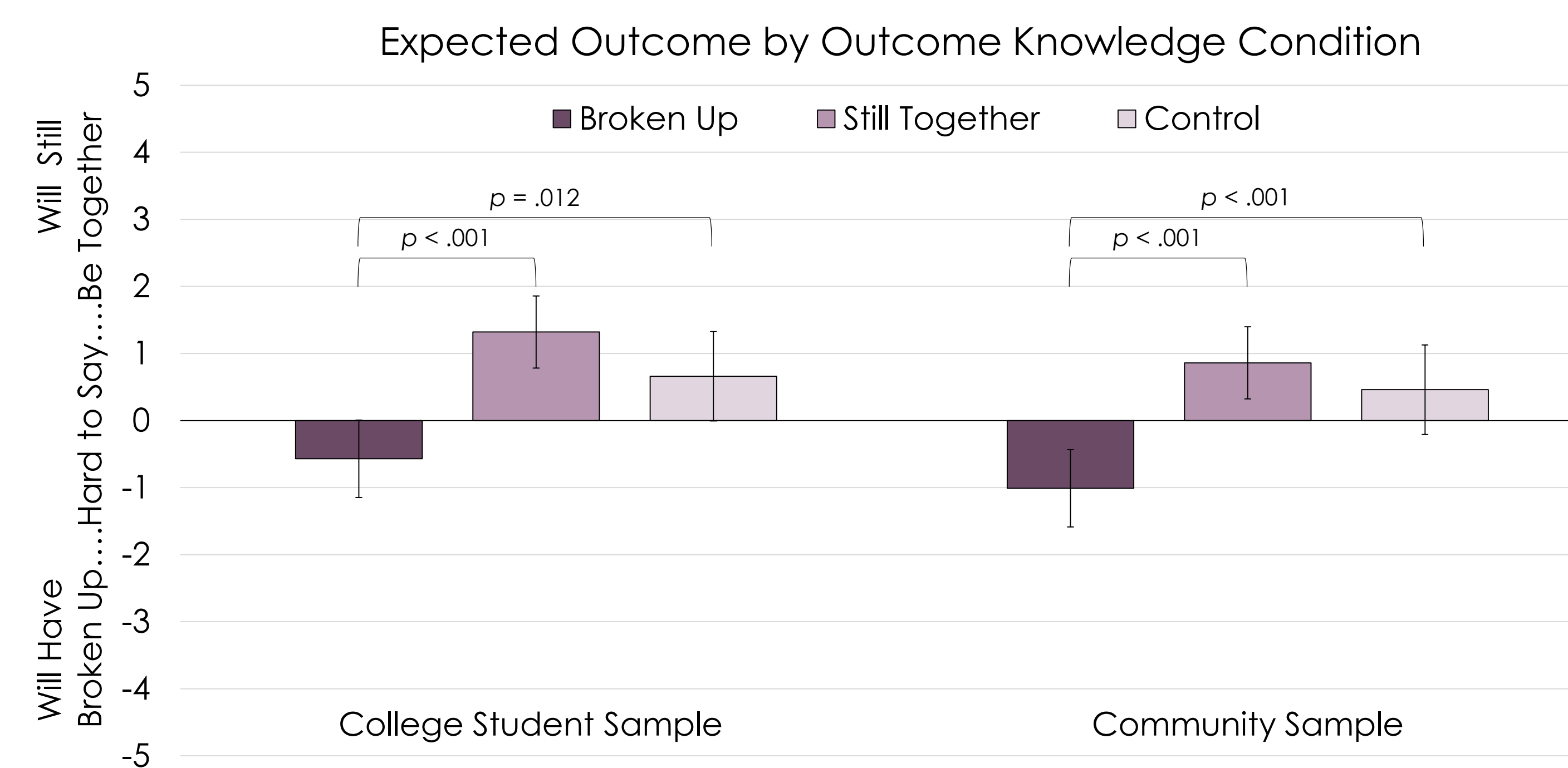
Judgments about Daniel and Sofia	Outcome Knowledge		
	Broken Up (N = 60)	Still Together (N = 59)	Control (N = 62)
Their relationship is unstable.	3.24 _a	2.49 _b	2.92 _{ab}
They are a good fit for one another.	4.02 _a	4.61 _a	4.10 _a
They have a lot in common.	4.82 _a	4.83 _a	4.66 _a
They need to date other people.	3.65 _a	2.97 _b	3.44 _{ab}
In their relationship, negatives outweigh positives.	3.80 _a	2.85 _b	3.36 _{ab}
In their relationship, positives outweigh negatives.	4.07 _a	5.15 _b	4.53 _{ab}

Note. Judgments were on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Means that do not share a subscript are statistically different from each other ($p < .05$).

Community Sample:
Mean Judgments by Outcome Knowledge Condition

Judgments about Daniel and Sofia	Outcome Knowledge		
	Broken Up (N = 107)	Still Together (N = 128)	Control (N = 99)
Their relationship is unstable.	3.69 _a	3.13 _b	3.38 _{ab}
They are a good fit for one another.	3.43 _a	3.99 _b	4.10 _b
They have a lot in common.	3.90 _a	4.51 _b	4.54 _b
They need to date other people.	4.32 _a	3.54 _b	3.78 _b
In their relationship, negatives outweigh positives.	4.48 _a	3.65 _b	3.69 _b
In their relationship, positives outweigh negatives.	3.62 _a	4.41 _b	4.27 _b

Note. Judgments were on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Means that do not share a subscript are statistically different from each other ($p < .05$).



In both the College Student Sample and Community Sample, participants who were told that Daniel and Sofia had broken up reported a stronger expectation that the couple would be broken up six months later than did participants told that they had stayed together or who received no further information about the couple. The effect sizes ranged from moderate to large. In contrast, participants who were told that the couple stayed together and participants who received no further information did not differ significantly in their reports of where they expected the couple to be six months later, although the means were in the predicted direction.

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Acknowledgments

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