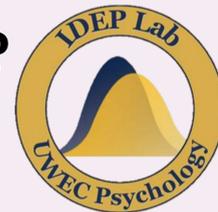




# Hindsight Knowledge and Relationship Break-Up: Should They Have Seen It Coming?

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## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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' judgements of historical events<sup>1</sup>
- Sporting events<sup>2</sup>
- Medical diagnoses<sup>3</sup>
- Witness testimonies<sup>4</sup>
- Employee evaluations<sup>5</sup>
- Perceived obviousness of research outcomes<sup>6</sup>

In the current studies, we chose to investigate hindsight bias in the context of romantic relationships because:

- It is an understudied context;
- We suspected the effect of hindsight bias would be relatively strong because people relate easily to personal relationships and hence can vividly imagine the scenario and outcomes given.

### Hypothesis:

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

### Participants:

Men and women enrolled in lower level courses at a midsized liberal arts university.  
Study 1: 75 M, 211 F,  $M_{age} = 18.59 \pm 1.75$ .  
Study 2: 92 M, 89 F,  $M_{age} = 21.23 \pm 2.63$ .

## Procedure

All participants read a scenario about a young couple. Excerpts from the scenarios are below.

### Study 1

"Sofia and Daniel met their sophomore year of college at the homecoming football game. After being introduced by mutual friends, they hit it off immediately and within a couple weeks began dating.

From the start, the couple had some longstanding issues. Sofia was very religious... while Daniel was a firm disbeliever. They were also pursuing polar opposite careers... Because of these differences, they... did not share a lot of friends. In fact, their friends... complained that the relationship was moving too fast and that Sofia and Daniel were too consumed in each other to recognize that they were on different life paths.

They also had a lot going for them. They seemed to always have something to talk about and found it easy to share their insecurities with each other without feeling judged... They had many of the same hobbies, such as camping, kayaking, and listening to live music. For all of these reasons, Sofia and Daniel grew close very quickly. They spent hours talking about their future - where they would get married, when they would start having kids, and their favorite baby names.

At the beginning of their junior year, Sofia and Daniel got engaged and started making plans to get married the summer following their junior year."

Control Condition: No outcome knowledge	Experimental Condition 1: "They have been married ever since."	Experimental Condition 2: "They ended up divorcing a few years later."
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### Study 2

"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...while Daniel is a firm disbeliever. They are also pursuing opposite careers... Because of these differences, they... don't share a lot of friends. In fact, their friends... 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.

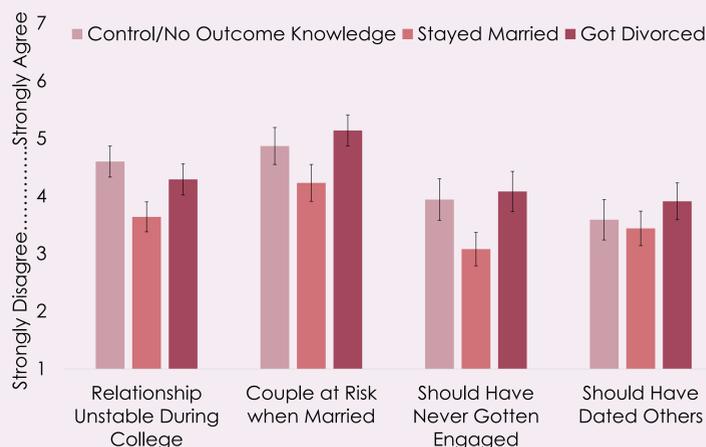
However, the couple also has a lot going for them. They always have something to talk about and can be open and honest with each other without feeling judged... They have many of the same hobbies, like camping, kayaking, and listening to live music. For all of these reasons, Sofia and Daniel have grown 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."

Control Condition: No outcome knowledge	Experimental Condition 1: "Six months later, they are still together."	Experimental Condition 2: "Six months later, they have broken up."
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Then, all participants reported their perceptions of the likelihood of each relationship outcome, made judgments of the relationship, and, in Study 2, rated the obviousness of each outcome.

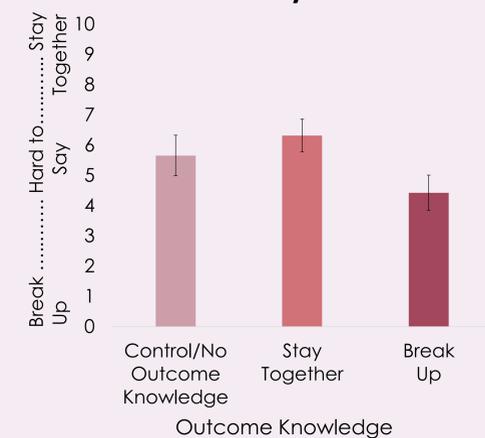
## Results

### Study 1



Contrary to expectation, Study 1 participants' judgments of how likely the couple would be to eventually divorce (versus stay married) were not affected by receiving outcome knowledge.

### Study 2



In Study 2, participants who were told the couple broke up forecasted that outcome as more likely than did those in the control group and those who were told the couple was still together six months later.

Further, Study 2 participants' perceptions of the couple were affected by receiving outcome knowledge. Relative to those who were told that the couple broke up, participants who were told that the couple *stayed together* perceived the relationship as less unstable during college, agreed less with the statement that Sofia and Daniel needed to date other people, and disagreed that the negatives in their relationship outweighed the positive. (Error bars represent 95% CI.)

## Discussion

When looking back on previous relationship experiences, individuals often reflect upon the outcome by saying that they should have seen it coming. For example, a relationship dissolution seems obvious in hindsight and alternatives seem unlikely ("How could I have ever thought I would marry that person?!"). The objective of our research was to document systematic evidence of this bias in the evaluation of relationship outcomes. Studies 1 and 2 offered multiple tests of this hypothesis. In Study 1, outcome knowledge did not affect participants' perceptions of outcome likelihood, but in multiple cases, those who were told the couple stayed together made more positive evaluations of the couple's relationship compared to those in the control group and compared to those who were told the couple broke up. In Study 2, knowledge of break-up increased participants' perceptions of the likelihood of break-up. Further, consistent with the logic of hindsight bias, those participants who were told the couple stayed together evaluated the couple more positively (and less negatively) than did participants who were told the couple broke up. We conclude, tentatively, that we have documented evidence of hindsight bias in the evaluation of romantic relationship outcomes.

In subsequent studies, we aim to explore hindsight bias among middle-aged adults with children. This group of individuals may not only have more experience with relationships, but may also be likely to succumb to hindsight bias in the evaluation of their children's dating relationships.

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