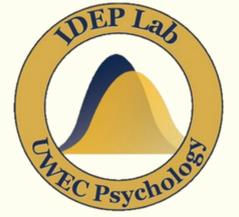# They Should Have Seen It Coming:
Hindsight Bias in Evaluation of Romantic Relationship Outcomes

Michaela Gunseor, Yan Lin Lee, and April Bleske-Rechek
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

Introduction

Hindsight bias is commonly referred to as the "I knew it all along" effect. First documented by Fischhoff,[1] 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. In essence, individuals perceive a given outcome as more obvious when they know that it happened.

Hindsight bias has been documented in many contexts, including individuals' judgments of historical events,[1] sporting event outcomes,[2] medical diagnoses,[3] witness testimonies,[4] employee evaluations,[5] and perceived obviousness of research outcomes.[6]

In this study, we investigated hindsight bias in individuals' perceptions of events in close romantic relationships. We chose the context of romantic relationships because (1) it is an understudied context, and (2) 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.

Study Overview

We predicted that when informed of a specific outcome of a romantic relationship, individuals would be unable to ignore that information when making evaluations of the relationship and forecasting outcomes about the relationship. To test this prediction, we asked young adult men (n=122) and women (n=226) to read a story about a couple whose relationship grows increasingly serious during college; at the end of the scenario, one of the partners is sexually unfaithful. For half of the participants, the male ("Jon") was unfaithful; for the other half, the female ("Jen") was unfaithful.

Then, participants in the control condition assigned a 0-100% likelihood rating to three possible relationship outcomes, such that the ratings added up to 100%. The outcomes (with Jen as cheater) are below:

A: *John could see how upset Jen was and he believed that Jen would never cheat on him ever again. He forgave her. They proceeded with the wedding and remained faithful to each other through the course of their marriage.*
B: *John was not convinced by Jen's apologies and became even more infuriated. He decided that he could never trust her again and wanted nothing to do with her; he broke off the engagement and they went their separate ways.*
C: *John forgave Jen. He decided that this was something they could move past and they proceeded with the marriage. A few years later, Jen cheated again and they ended up divorcing.*

For participants in the three different experimental conditions, the scenario was followed by a statement describing one of those three specific outcomes (A, B, C). *Then*, participants were instructed to ignore that outcome knowledge as they assigned a 0-100% likelihood rating to the three possible outcomes. All participants also used seven-point scales to evaluate aspects of the relationship, the cheater's personality, and what they thought the victim should have done in response to their partner's betrayal.

Procedure

All participants read a 350-word scenario about a couple, Jen and John. Below are several segments of the scenario. For illustration purposes, the specific segments below show one version of the story – the one in which *Jen* cheats on *John*.

"Jen and John were not just a couple; they were also best friends. They met their freshman year in college... They came from different social groups and religious backgrounds, but they shared the same political views and they enjoyed each other's sense of humor... By their senior year, Jen and John had started creating plans for their future together... They pushed aside the arguments and frustrations that surfaced when Jen opted to spend their free time going out with friends and drinking while John opted to spend their free time relaxing with a good movie... During the winter holidays of their senior year, John and Jen got engaged... one month before the wedding, John found out through a mutual friend that Jen had recently gone out drinking and had had sex with her ex-boyfriend from high school while John was out of town. John was devastated and angry, and he confronted Jen about her infidelity. She said she regretted the incident and said that having sex with her ex-boyfriend made her realize even more how much she wanted to be only with John. She promised that her cheating was a one-time occurrence and that it would never happen again."

After the scenario, participants judged the likelihood of three possible outcomes, either without receiving outcome knowledge (control) or after receiving outcome knowledge (experimental conditions). The order in which the outcomes were presented was counterbalanced across participants.

Results

Experimental Group	Outcome Provided	Outcome Evaluated		
		Outcome A	Outcome B	Outcome C
Control	**None**	**25.00**	**31.38**	**43.89**
Outcome A	Faithful	25.82	32.48	41.70
Outcome B	Breakup	23.04	40.70*	36.24
Outcome C	Divorce	24.46	36.89	38.63

Note. Values represent mean likelihood ratings (0 to 100%), collapsed across sex of cheater. Our general prediction was that participants' perceptions of the likelihood of the three different outcomes would be affected by having received outcome information. As expected, participants' perceptions of the likelihood of Outcome B were heightened when they were told that Outcome B occurred (compared to those who had been given no outcome). However, participants' perceptions of the likelihood of Outcome A and C were not heightened when they were told that Outcome A or C occurred, respectively, (compared to those who had been given no outcome). Overall, we did not see consistent evidence of hindsight bias. The pattern of findings was similar when analyzed separately for those exposed to John as the cheater and Jen as the cheater.

Participants' judgments of Jen and John did not differ as a function of outcome knowledge
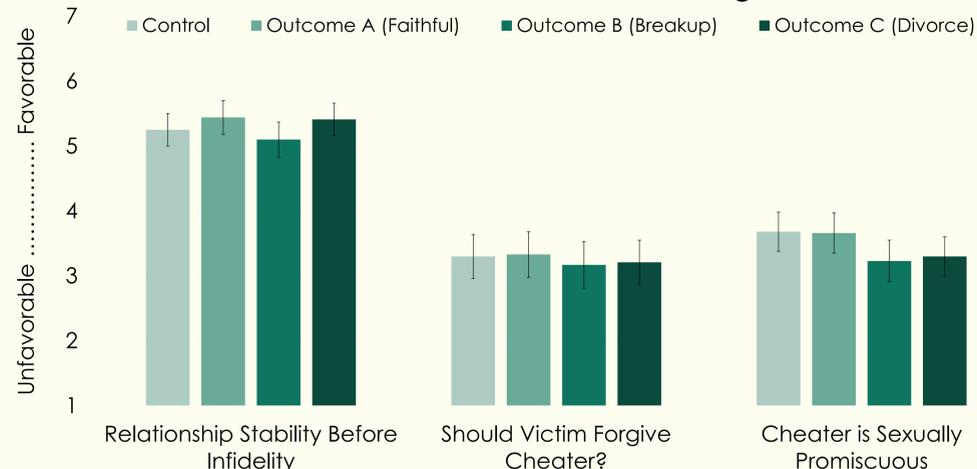
Participants also rated seven aspects of Jen and John's relationship, three of which are shown in the figure above. Our general prediction was that participants' ratings would be affected by the outcome that they received. Those who received a favorable outcome (i.e., faithful) should also assign more favorable ratings. Contrary to expectation, participants' ratings did not differ depending on the outcome knowledge they received. Error bars represent ± 2SE.

Discussion

We designed this study to investigate hindsight bias in individuals' evaluations of romantic relationship outcomes. Given previous research on hindsight bias combined with anecdotal reports of individuals' perceptions that they "should have known" a given relationship outcome would occur (e.g., a break-up), we expected to find evidence of hindsight bias. However, we found limited evidence at best. Participants who were told that the couple broke up immediately after the infidelity did perceive that outcome as more likely than did participants who were not told anything about the outcome; but participants who were told either that the couple stayed together faithfully or that the couple eventually divorced did not rate that outcome as more likely than did the control group.

We are left to explore possible explanations for our lack of consistent effects. One possibility is that our participants did not read the story or respond carefully. However, if participants were not thinking about their responses, the outcome probabilities would have been split at 33% each, because they were presented in counterbalanced order. Instead, looking at the control group and across experimental conditions, participants consistently perceived Outcome C (staying together at first but eventually divorcing) as the most likely outcome. We speculate that students favored this outcome because it allowed for a little bit of both Outcome A (staying together) and Outcome B (breaking up). We are left with another possible explanation for our findings, which is that people are actually quite good at setting aside outcome knowledge when evaluating others' relationships.

References

1. Fischhoff, B. (1975). Hindsight ≠ foresight: The effect of outcome knowledge on judgment under uncertainty. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance, 104*, 288-299.
2. Tykocinski, O. E., Pick, D., & Kedmi, D. (2002). Retroactive pessimism: A different kind of hindsight bias. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 32*, 577-588.
3. Arkes, H. R., Wortmann, R. L., Saville, P. D., & Harkness, A. R. (1981). Hindsight bias among physicians weighting the likelihood of diagnoses. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 66*, 252-254.
4. Neisser, U. (1981). John Dean's memory: A case study. *Cognition, 9*, 1-22.
5. Mitchell, T. R., & Kalb, L. S. (1981). Effects of outcome knowledge and outcome valence on supervisors' evaluations. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 66*, 604-612.
6. Wong, L. Y. (1995). Research on teaching: Process-product research findings and the feeling of obviousness. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 87*, 504-511.

Acknowledgements