**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 whether 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:
- Individuals' judgements of historical events
- Sporting events
- Medical diagnoses

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.

**Procedure**

All participants read a scenario about a young couple. Examples 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 unbeliever. They were also pursuing opposite career paths. Because of these differences, they didn't share much in common, but when they did see friends or family, they realized that the relationship was moving too fast and that Sofia and Daniel were too close to 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 planned to go once they graduated, and the possibility of starting a family. However, Sofia and Daniel have grown close very quickly. They spend hours talking about their future — where they planned to go once they graduated, and the possibility of starting a family.

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

**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 unbeliever. They are also pursuing opposite career paths. Because of these differences, they don't share much in common, but when they did see friends or family, they realized that the relationship is moving too fast and that Sofia and Daniel are too close to each other to recognize that they are on different life paths.

Nonetheless, the couple also has a lot going for them. They always have something new to talk about and can be open and honest with each other without feeling judged. They have many of the same hobbies, such as 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 future — where they planned to go once they graduated, and the possibility of starting a family. However, Sofia and Daniel have grown close very quickly. They spend hours talking about their future — where they planned to go once they graduated, and the possibility of starting a family.

Both these studies employed a 2 (outcome knowledge: control/no outcome knowledge) x 2 (relationship outcome: stay together/break up) experimental design. Participants:

- Study 1: 75 M, 211 F, Mage = 18.59 ± 1.75.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Unstable During College</th>
<th>Couple at Risk When Married</th>
<th>Should Have Never Gotten Engaged</th>
<th>Should Have Dated Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stayed Married</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Got Divorced</td>
<td>95.00</td>
<td>95.00</td>
<td>95.00</td>
<td>95.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Study 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Unstable During College</th>
<th>Couple at Risk When Married</th>
<th>Should Have Never Gotten Engaged</th>
<th>Should Have Dated Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stayed Together</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Break Up</td>
<td>95.00</td>
<td>95.00</td>
<td>95.00</td>
<td>95.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**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. However, Study 1 participants’ perceptions of the couple were affected by receiving outcome knowledge. Relative to those in the control group and those who were told the couple divorced, participants who were told that the couple stayed married perceived the relationship as less unstable during college, perceived the couple as less at risk of the point of marriage, and agreed less with the statement that the couple should have never gotten engaged.** (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 relationships. Study 1 tested the hypothesis that outcome knowledge enhanced participants’ perceptions of outcome likelihood, but in multiple tests of this hypothesis. In Study 1, outcome knowledge did not affect participants’ perceptions of outcome likelihood, but in multiple tests of this hypothesis. In Study 2, knowledge of breakup increased participants’ perceptions of outcome likelihood. 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.

**References**


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