

**THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY**

**Evaluating ambiguous relational accounts:**

**Exploring how optimism moderates perceptions of risk and use of context**

**by**

**Vicki Deveau**

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## Abstract

The present study attempted to assess how an optimistic outlook would moderate the effects of perceived risk on relationship cognition, in particular, to determine how such an outlook would alter the manner in which individuals chose to use contextual information concerning a relational transgression when exposed to risk. Participants read an ambiguous account and were presented with contextual that expanded on the account. Next, participants read a narrative that focused on the inherently risky nature of romantic relationships, or a mundane control narrative. Finally, participants evaluated both the ambiguous account and the context. Unfortunately, the obtained results did not conform to my expectations. I believe, however, that the results challenge several of the basic assumptions that guided the development of my hypotheses.

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## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>List of Tables .....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>List of Figures .....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Method.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Results.....</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>Discussion.....</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Appendix A</b>	
<b>Materials.....</b>	<b>107</b>
<b>Appendix B</b>	
<b>Exploratory Analyses for People in Long and Short-Term Relationships.....</b>	<b>141</b>

## List of Tables

Table 1a. <i>Means, standard deviations, and beta weights for aggravating statements</i>	30
Table 1b. <i>Means, standard deviations, and beta weights for extenuating statements</i>	31
Table 2. <i>Correlations between dependent variables, the Self-Esteem Scale and the BIDR</i>	36
Table 3. <i>Loadings for optimism factor analysis</i>	45
Table 4a. <i>Means, standard deviations, and beta weights for aggravating statements</i>	70
Table 4b. <i>Means, standard deviations, and beta weights for extenuating statements</i>	71
Table B1. <i>Main effects of optimism, risk, and context for participants involved in short relationships</i>	141
Table B2. <i>Main effects of optimism, risk, and context for participants involved in long relationships</i>	142
Table B3. <i>Interactions for participants involved in short relationships</i>	143
Table B4. <i>Interactions for participants involved in long relationships</i>	144

## List of Figures

<b>Figure 1. Predicted risk by context interaction</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Figure 2. Negative impression of account for low optimists using a buffering strategy</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Figure 3. Negative impression of account for high optimists using a buffering strategy</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Figure 4. Negative impression of account for low optimists using an active coping strategy</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Figure 5. Negative impression of account for high optimists using an active coping strategy (exaggeration)</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Figure 6. Negative impression of account for high optimists using an active coping strategy (main effect of risk only)</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Figure 7. Time since last break-up for low and high optimists by context condition</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Figure 8. Likelihood of the average relationship breaking up for high optimists by risk and context condition</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Figure 9. Perceived short-term damage to the relationships for low and high optimists by context condition</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Figure 10. Impressions of Rob for low and high optimists by context condition</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>Figure 11. Value of the contextual information for low and high optimists by risk condition</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Figure 12. Ability of the contextual information to excuse Rob's behavior for low and high optimists by context condition</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Figure 13. Ability of the contextual information to justify Rob's behavior for low and high optimists by context condition</b>	<b>62</b>

<b>Figure 14. Ability of the contextual information to justify Rob's behavior for low and high optimists by risk condition</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Figure 15. Need for information in order to feel justified in forgiving for high and low optimists by risk condition</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>Figure 16. Reported desire for caution in using additional context for low and high optimists by context condition</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>Figure 17. Reported desire for caution in using additional context for low and high optimists by risk condition</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>Figure 18. Amount of positive information needed to conclude that Rob truly cares about Christa for low and high optimists by context condition</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Figure 19. Usefulness of the third extenuating statement for low and high optimists by risk condition</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>Figure 20. Usefulness of the fifth extenuating statement for low and high optimists by risk condition</b>	<b>74</b>

### **Evaluating ambiguous relational accounts:**

**Exploring how optimism moderates perceptions of risk and use of context**

**Relationships play an essential role throughout the course of our lives. Most individuals seek to develop and maintain relationships from a very early age. The vast majority of individuals will, at some point in their lives, be involved in a specific type of relationship: a romantic relationship.**

**Romantic relationships are capable of fostering intense feelings of joy and contentment. Our culture has been, and continues to be, captivated by tales of women and men seeking their proverbial “true love” or “soul mate.” Our interest in these relationships is evident when listening to the radio (e.g., Love Me Tender), when watching movies (e.g., Braveheart) or television programs (e.g., Sex in the City). Even children are exposed these relationships from a very early age (i.e., the popular tale of Cinderella and her prince). Although many of these tales of romance tend to focus on the positive sensations and emotions people feel when they engage in these relationships, it is important to be cognizant of the fact that romantic relationships are also capable of inducing extreme disappointment and pain.**

**When two individuals enter into a romantic relationship, they become vulnerable. A romantic relationship requires a certain degree of trust between two individuals and while in such a relationship, there is always an element of risk that this trust may be violated. Fears of deceit and disloyalty, for example, represent a few of the hazards individuals engaged in romantic relationships may face (see Boon and Pasveer, 1999). These and other elements of risk inherent to romantic relationships may colour the manner in which partners think and interact within the context of the relationship. For example, if a man is suspicious that his partner may be cheating on him, he may begin to withdraw**

emotionally and physically from the relationship to protect himself from hurt and disappointment.

It is important to note that although individuals are undoubtedly affected by those risks that are directly threatening to their romantic relationships, these direct risks may not necessarily be the most prevalent risks encountered on a daily basis. Instead, during the course of each day, individuals are exposed to images of risk while watching films, reading magazines, and listening to music. We are bombarded with images of television characters who cheat on their spouses, newscasters who report current rates of divorce, musicians who sing their tales of love gone wrong, and stories from friends and family members of infidelity. Although these examples of risk do not threaten one's own romantic relationship directly, they may induce thoughts and feelings of risk that have important consequences concerning the manner in which individuals perceive and interpret the actions of their partner and the partners of those they care about.

### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to assess how an optimistic outlook may moderate the effects of perceived risk on relationship cognition, in particular, to determine how such an outlook may alter the manner in which individuals choose to use contextual information concerning a relational transgression when exposed to risk. This study attempted to build on previous research that examined how risk affects evaluations of relational transgressions (e.g., Boon, 1992; Nairn, 2000). Importantly, however, it also attempted to identify how dispositional variables, such as optimism, might influence the manner in which individuals engage in these evaluations. Would those individuals who possess a more optimistic outlook be willing to give the benefit of the doubt when asked to evaluate the ambiguous actions of a dating partner as compared to individuals with a less optimistic outlook?

Would highly optimistic individuals (i.e., those who believe that, in general, more good things will happen in their lives than bad) respond to subtle risks or to the additional contextual information in a manner that differs from those individuals who were low in terms of optimism?

To investigate how optimism and risk might work together or interact to influence judgements and perceptions of romantic relationships, participants were asked to complete several measures of optimism during the first session of a two-session experiment. On the second visit, participants read an ambiguous account (i.e., an account that was designed to make the reader uncertain as to whether or not the principle character's boyfriend cheated on her). Following this account, participants were presented with contextual information that expanded on the ambiguous account. Next, participants were presented with one of two narratives: either a narrative specifically designed to highlight the inherently risky nature of romantic relationships, or a mundane control narrative. Finally, participants were asked to evaluate both the ambiguous account (e.g., make judgements concerning the intentions of the character portrayed in the account) and the usefulness and informational value of the context statements (e.g., indicate how useful the additional information was in helping them form opinions concerning the character and his actions in the ambiguous account).

### Previous Research

Earlier research within the realm of romantic relationships has mainly focussed on direct threats to an individual's own romantic relationship (e.g., Holmes, 1991; Murray & Holmes, 1993). In such research for example, participants would be asked to engage in exercises designed to make threats present in their own romantic relationships salient. When presented in this way with obvious threats to their relationships, individuals tend to

respond in a reassurance-seeking manner; that is, individuals try to bolster positive convictions about their relationship and lessen the impact of the threatening information. These direct and personal threats are not the focus of the current research. Instead, I will examine the effects of more indirect and subtle threats of this kind that we counter on a daily basis. Throughout this document, the term “risk” will refer to these subtle threats.

### Model of Cautious Processing

The experimental design for the present study and the hypotheses it was intended to address are derived from Boon and Holmes' (1999) model of cautious processing. This model describes a process by which certain kinds of perceived risk may elicit a cautious mode of response rather than the more “defensive” reassurance-seeking mode of response identified in previous research.

Previous research (e.g., Holmes, 1991; Murray & Holmes, 1993) suggests that, when presented with obvious threats to their relationships (e.g., your friend telling you that she believes she saw your partner at a restaurant with another woman), individuals typically respond in a reassurance-seeking manner. Recent studies, however, have demonstrated that individuals exposed to an indirect threat (e.g., hearing about your best friend's impending divorce) may engage in a more cautious type of information processing. For example, in Boon and Holmes' (1999) research, individuals who read a narrative designed to highlight the inherently risky nature of romantic relationships (a narrative depicting an unforeseen break-up in an otherwise happy and healthy relationship) adopted a more sceptical or cautious perspective in a later task requiring them to evaluate relationship transgressions and their perpetrators. Participants were also considerably less likely to grant the benefit of the doubt to the perpetrator in their assessments when the risky nature of relationships had been primed.

Boon and Holmes (1999) argue that, when individuals are presented with subtle, indirect types of risk (e.g., a narrative that highlights the risky nature of romantic relationships in general as opposed to information that points to threats to one's own relationship), vulnerabilities in an individual's own relationship may not become salient because the risk does not target their own relationship. However, this exposure will nevertheless prime those aspects of an individual's general relationship schema that are related to risk.<sup>1</sup> In other words, although exposure to subtle, indirect risks may not lead individuals to think of risk in terms of their own relationships, I predict it will still prime thoughts and feelings associated with the risks present in relationships in general.

Once those aspects of people's general relationship schemas pertaining to risk have been primed, Boon and Holmes (1999) suggest that individuals will respond to the heightened accessibility of thoughts and feelings about the risky nature of relationships by adopting a more pessimistic or cautious manner of information processing. For example, in the present study, once risk has been primed, a more cautious mode of processing may cause individuals in the risk condition to be less forgiving and more harsh and condemning when evaluating the actions of the antagonist as compared to individuals who read the control narrative. This pessimistic shift in processing may also incline individuals to demand more clear, diagnostic information before deciding whether or not to forgive questionable actions, that is, it may cause individuals to raise the informational or evidential criteria that must be met before a conclusion is drawn. In sum, the theoretical

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that exposure to both indirect and direct risks can activate these aspects of people's general relational schemas, but due to the fact that individuals do not necessarily recognize the implications of indirect risk, Boon and Holmes argue they do not necessarily construct counter-evidence in the form of reassurance seeking cognitions. In essence, Boon and Holmes contend that people are 'blind sided' by subtle, indirect risks -

underpinnings of Boon and Holmes' assertions that perceived risk (i.e., subtle, indirect risks) elicits fears of making a wrong decision come from what is known as Kruglanski's fear of invalidity (1990).

Prior to exploring Kruglanski's (1990) propositions, it is important to note that the tendency to adopt a cautious approach to information processing may also be explained by the perspective of a dual-process model of information processing. For example, when presented with a message, individuals are able to process this information using either a systematic (i.e., actively attempting to comprehend the message's arguments) or a heuristic (i.e., recipients rely on cues such as the source's identity as opposed to processing the arguments presented) information processing strategy (Chaiken, 1980). Similarly to the propositions advanced by the model of cautious processing, I predicted that exposure to risk would prime thoughts and feelings associated with the risks present in relationships in general. Once those thoughts and feelings were primed, individuals would respond to the heightened accessibility of thoughts and feelings about the risky nature of relationships by adopting a more systematic information processing strategy as opposed to a heuristic approach. Specifically, I predicted that the risk narrative would shift participants who were exposed to risk from a heuristic processing mode into a systematic style of processing.

### The Fear of Being Wrong

In situations where the penalties for making an erroneous decision are quite costly, individuals have been found to experience fears about making a wrong decision, or what Kruglanski (1990) calls "fear of invalidity." For example, if your best friend were to confide to you that she suspected her boyfriend was cheating on her, you may be quite

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that they 'do not see them coming' - and as a result, that the effects of perceptions of such risks are insidious.

hesitant to suggest to her that she accept his excuses. Instead, you may counsel your friend not to accept his explanations immediately to safeguard against the possibility that she might be wrong in her final judgement (i.e., you would not want to advise your friend to trust her boyfriend if he was in fact cheating on her since this could potentially make her vulnerable should he continue his unfaithful behaviours).

According to Kruglanski (1989), when individuals experience apprehensions about making an erroneous decision, they may be more likely to avoid cognitive closure and instead, opt to gather as much pertinent information as possible before making a final judgement or drawing a final conclusion. By gathering further information, individuals try to maximize the chances of making an accurate decision based on the information that is available. For example, you might suggest to your friend that she not accept the explanations of her partner immediately. Instead, you may encourage her to confront her boyfriend about her suspicions as a means of acquiring more information about the incident in question. By seeking further information concerning her partner's suspicious behaviour, she decreases the odds of making an erroneous decision (e.g., trusting her partner when he does not deserve her trust) and placing herself at risk of further harm.

If the consequences attached to making an inferential error are negative (e.g., as in the case of deciding trusting a partner who has actually been unfaithful), individuals may be inclined to focus their search for clarifying information in a specific direction. That is, some conclusions may be less desirable than others. Accordingly, individuals may be particularly concerned with avoiding certain conclusions or drawing certain kinds of wrong conclusions.

For instance, in the previous example, your friend may wish to believe that her partner has not been unfaithful. To the extent that she is concerned with making an

accurate inference on the issue however, it is likely that she will be especially vigilant for signs that he is cheating because she may view the costs associated with wrongly concluding he has been faithful, when he has not, to be greater than the costs associated with wrongly concluding he has not been faithful, if he has been. Although there are obvious costs associated with making both types of errors (i.e., trusting him when he has indeed cheated or not trusting him when he hasn't cheated), I believe that the costs associated with deciding to trust when he has in fact cheated are more negative than the costs associated with failing to trust when he did not cheat because even though the evidence may allude to innocence, there is still a possibility that he is guilty. As a result, by seeking more clear and diagnostic information about the offending partner's actions prior to making a judgement, as opposed to simply accepting information that would permit her to draw more charitable and trusting conclusions, the individual tries to avoid further hurt and disappointment.

This example of adopting a more stringent criterion is analogous to the avoidance of certain errors in Psychology. Psychological researchers have long been concerned with avoiding Type I errors. In psychological research, researchers prefer to err on the side of failing to find an effect that truly exists rather than to err on the side of finding an effect that may be due to chance (Type I error). In order to avoid making a Type I error, researchers tend to adopt a more stringent statistical criterion when making decisions concerning the significance of an effect.

In the present study, I expected participants to be more concerned with testing the hypothesis of guilt rather than the hypothesis of innocence. Specifically, I anticipated that highlighting the risky nature of romantic relationships would motivate individuals to avoid extending the benefit of the doubt when asked to evaluate the behaviour of the character

portrayed in an ambiguous account (i.e., it would induce fear of invalidity because perceived risk would make salient the costs associated with these errors by focussing people on the risks inherent to relational involvement). Accordingly, by making the inherent risk of romantic relationships salient, I expected that risk participants would be motivated to avoid drawing positive conclusions concerning the character, (i.e., motives, behaviours, and personality) portrayed in the ambiguous account and thus to exercise caution (i.e., adopt more stringent evaluative criteria in deciding how and whether to use available information in drawing conclusions) when making judgements or drawing conclusions concerning the transgressor's actions as compared to control participants.

#### On the Importance of Contextual Information

When we are presented with a story or an account, it is seldom that we simply receive the information without any elaboration. Instead, when people talk about their experiences, they tend to give additional information that helps shape and mould the account. In the present study, I will refer to this additional, elaborative information as “context.”

Weiner (1995) contends that context may play an essential role in determining an observer or listener's interpretation. Consider the example he gives of two students who are doing very poorly in school. If their teacher realizes that one student is trying his best to succeed (studying diligently and asking for additional help) while the second student is not putting any effort into his work (arriving late and not completing his homework), she is likely to draw very different conclusions about the two students. She may become angry with the student who does not put any effort into his work and feel sympathy for the boy who tries his best but never succeeds. Although both students exhibit the same behaviour (i.e., performing poorly in school), the teacher draws two very different inferences about

them based upon the additional context. Given that the children were exhibiting the same behaviour, why would the teacher draw different inferences about behaviour?

Interestingly, the link between observing behaviours and drawing inferences may not be a simple one. In some instances, perceivers draw initial inferences but then modify or correct these inferences based on additional contextual information. Gilbert, Krull & Malone (1990) tested Spinoza's supposition that all information is "accepted" during comprehension and that false information is then "unaccepted" at a later time. In a series of studies, Gilbert et al. found that participants initially represented both true and false information as true. It was only with further appraisal and rational analysis that individuals revised a previously accepted idea if it was in error.

A similar process of acceptance prior to rational analysis can also be applied to the manner in which traits are inferred from behaviours. As described by Gilbert and Osborne (1989), social inference consists of an initial stage whereby the perceiver draws character inferences from behaviour (characterization stage) and a later stage in which he or she corrects these inferences based on information about the context in which the behaviour took place (correction stage). For example, if we were to see an individual sitting on the sidewalk crying and talking to him or herself, we might initially assume that he or she is intoxicated or mentally ill (characterization of person). Should we then notice a crumpled bicycle propped on a fire hydrant near the person (context), we may then correct our initial interpretation and decide that the person has been hit by a passing car and is in need of medical help.

I expect that the correction stage may play an important role in the process by which perceived risk leads to more cautious processing. In particular, recall Boon and Holmes' (1999) contention that perceived risk induces fear of invalidity that, in turn, causes people

to adopt more stringent evaluative criteria in assessing the informational or evidential value of the information at hand. I believe, these more stringent criteria may affect the correction process, and thus whether or not available context is used in the inference process (i.e., the perceived relevance, clarity, and informativeness of available contextual information may influence how heavily it is weighted in the inference process and perceived risk may lead people to apply more stringent criteria in determining perceived relevance, clarity, and informativeness).

Gilbert and Osborne suggest that the characterization process generally takes less conscious attention than does correction and, moreover, that correction does not always take place when warranted. Are individuals more likely to correct their original perceptions when presented with certain types of contextual information and does perceived risk affect people's use of different types of context?

#### Moral Attributes and Correction

Previous research suggests that certain types of contextual information do indeed make individuals more likely to correct their initial perceptions (Kanouse & Hanson, 1972; Reeder & Brewer, 1979; Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). For example, researchers have demonstrated that individuals tend to give precedence to negative information as opposed to positive information when asked to form moral judgements (Kanouse & Hanson, 1972; Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). This tendency, the negativity bias, is thought to occur since individuals tend to view negative information as more diagnostic and informationally valuable than positive information in forming decisions about morality.

When making inferences about an individual's disposition, Reeder and Brewer (1979) argue that we typically begin by observing their behaviour. Depending on the salient properties of the behaviour, attributes that characterize the behaviour are selected

and the person is described as falling along a continuum of the behaviour (Reeder & Brewer, 1979). For example, if a perceiver were to witness an individual trip and fall at a party, the perceiver may infer that the person is very clumsy (the perceiver decided that along the continuum of "clumsiness," the individual fits the criteria of being "very clumsy").

In the case of attributes that relate to morality (e.g., honesty and dishonesty), Reeder and Brewer (1979) propose that inferences are formed along a continuum of morality and an individual's position on this continuum is determined by the most extreme behaviour that he or she displays. For example, if an individual is ranked as "very dishonest" on a morally based continuum, he or she is not constrained to acting dishonestly. Should the "very dishonest" person display an act of honesty, this one act would not typically lead observers to correct their dispositional view that he or she is dishonest. If, on the other hand, an individual is deemed "very honest," a single dishonest act may be sufficient for an observer to alter her perception. In other words, individuals who are deemed "very honest" must conform to restricted types of behaviour (i.e., they must always exhibit honest behaviours) in order to maintain their "very honest" standing on the continuum. If a "very honest" individual deviates from the expected honest behaviour, there is a strong likelihood that the observer will revise their initial judgements.

Why do individuals tend to make judgements concerning moral attributes based on extreme behaviours? Reeder and Brewer (1979) argue that when individuals make judgements about moral characteristics (i.e., honesty) these moral or positive acts are regarded as less indicative or diagnostic of character than are immoral or negative acts (i.e., dishonesty). In the context of the present study, the extenuating contextual statements participants will receive (positive information that attests to honest and good motives of the

perpetrator) may therefore be seen as less useful and less diagnostic of the perpetrator's true character than aggravating statements (negative information that further taints the individual's moral character).

The present study sought to extend the work of Reeder and Brewer (1979) and others to include judgements that were not morality based. For example, half of the participants within this study were primed for risk. I anticipated that priming individuals in terms of risk would elicit fears of invalidity, therefore making participants more likely to seek diagnostic and clarifying information of the transgressor's motives before drawing a conclusion. However, since the consequences of extending the benefit of the doubt to the transgressor (e.g., granting forgiveness; reporting less desired caution in drawing inferences about the transgressor's behaviour), if he in fact does not deserve the benefit of the doubt may be quite negative, I expected that exposure to risk would enhance participants' natural tendency to overweight aggravating (or negative) information relative to extenuating information. Having primed individuals' thoughts and feelings associated with risk, I anticipated risk participants would be leery to base their decisions to extend the benefit of the doubt on positive or extenuating information. Accordingly, I predicted that participants who were given extenuating contextual information and were primed for risk, would evaluate positive characteristics as less diagnostic than participants who read the aggravating information.

I also expected that, in addition to context, there could be important individual difference variables that affect people's evaluations and judgements when exposed to the risk inherent in romantic relationships. Specifically, I wondered if levels of optimism would moderate the expected influence of risk and context on participants' evaluations of an ambiguous account.

## Optimism

Some individuals appear to go through the trials and tribulations of life wearing the proverbial “rose-coloured glasses,” whereas others tend to view life events from a much darker perspective. Individuals who hold the belief that they will generally be more likely to experience positive events than negative outcomes are often termed “optimists” (Scheier & Carver, 1985). These individuals expect that, in general, a greater number of good things will happen in their lives than bad things.

A wealth of research has been conducted on the manner in which optimists cope with negative life events (e.g., Aspinwall & Brunhart, 1996; Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992; Taylor et al., 1992). A large proportion of this literature focuses on health related issues such as breast cancer and AIDS, and behaviours such as sunbathing and smoking.

The present study did not address health related issues, but it did deal with negative events that often have very costly consequences.

Romantic relationships are capable of fostering great joy and contentment. But, these relationships are equally capable of causing distress, unhappiness, and misery to those involved. Because levels of optimism have been shown to affect how individuals cope with negative health related events, do levels of optimism affect the manner in which individuals cope with negative events related to romantic relationships? Although the literature on optimism has not addressed this question specifically, research on optimism has identified two distinct trends in the manner by which optimistic individuals respond to situations negative events.

Past research on optimism and the manner in which optimists typically deal with negative information appears to support the notion that highly optimistic people tend to engage in processes designed to avoid negative information (e.g., Norem & Cantor, 1986;

Norem & Illingworth, 1993; Taylor & Brown, 1988). As described by Norem and Illingworth (1993) high optimists employ mechanisms such as ignoring, discounting, repressing, or actively distorting negative information in order to avoid it. For example, if a highly optimistic individual is exposed to a situation concerning risk, he or she may choose to avoid challenging his or her optimistic beliefs by thinking of other things or by engaging in behaviours that minimize attention to the risky situation. While these behaviours may protect high optimists from negative information, are these “buffering” strategies truly adaptive or do these strategies place high optimists at a higher risk of experiencing negative outcomes?

In contrast to employing buffering strategies when exposed to negative information, more recent research suggests that some optimists react by actively focussing on the negative information and engage in behaviours designed to minimize the occurrence of a negative outcome (e.g., Aspinwall & Brunhart, 1996; Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992; Carver et al., 1993). For example, Aspinwall and Brunhart (1996) found that optimistic beliefs about one's health predicted greater attention to health risk information than to neutral or health benefit information. Based on the fact that optimistic individuals may respond to health related risk with two distinct approaches, how might optimistic individuals react to risk associated with romantic relationships? Would high optimists exposed to risk ignore or discount the fact that romantic relationships are inherently risky or would highly optimistic individuals be especially likely to use the information provided in the risk narrative and be cautious in drawing conclusions?

Drawing on the literature concerning optimism and health issues, I expected that participants might respond to the risk narrative used in this study in one of two ways. On one hand, highly optimistic individuals might be especially sensitive to the risky

information presented in the risk narrative (active coping strategy in response to risky information) as compared to those individuals who were low in terms of optimism. For example, individuals who are high in terms of optimism and who read the risk narrative might be especially likely to report suspicions of infidelity when asked to evaluate the ambiguous account as compared to high optimists in the control group. On the other hand, optimism might attenuate the effects of priming since optimistic individuals were likely to have less risk related information in their general relationship schemas, or perhaps because their threshold for perceiving risk would have been higher than for low optimists. Should this trend have occurred, I expected that individuals who were highly optimistic would have reported similar suspicions of infidelity when asked to evaluate the events portrayed in the ambiguous account and the additional contextual information as compared to high optimists in the control group.

### Covariates

Over and above optimism, there were several individual difference variables that I thought might affect people's responses to risk and uses of contextual information. I asked participants to complete a measure of self-esteem, a measure of self-deception, and a measure of repression-sensitization that I intended to include as covariates. To assess general levels of self-esteem, participants were asked to complete The Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). In addition, to assess participants' general tendency to use self-deception, individuals completed the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (Paulhus, 1988). Although I included a Repression-Sensitization Scale, the data for this scale were not analyzed.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I was unsuccessful in locating who developed the scale, how it is scored, or what scores signify. As a result, the data for this scale will not be reported or interpreted.

### Overview of the Study

The study was a 2 Risk (risk narrative vs. control narrative) x 2 Context (aggravating statements vs. extenuating statements) between subjects design with optimism, a third factor, measured as a continuous variable. During the first testing session, participants were given a battery of measures designed to assess levels of optimism, self-esteem, socially desirable responding, and repression-sensitization. The latter three variables were included for use as possible covariates. Participant returned for the second phase of the study, on average, four days after the initial session. All participants read an ambiguous account detailing an event in a stranger's relationship. Participants then read one of two types of context statements. Half of the participants received five aggravating contextual statements, designed to further incriminate the character portrayed in the account; the second half of the participants received five extenuating statements, designed to clear the character portrayed in the account of wrongdoing. Once participants finished reading these statements, half of the participants read a risk narrative that detailed a painful break up; the remaining participants read a control narrative (a mundane account of a first date).

### Dependent Variables and Hypotheses

Following the manipulation narrative, participants completed evaluations of both the account itself and the context they were given. First, participants completed items that assessed their overall impression of the events described in the ambiguous account, the character portrayed in the account, and his motives, behaviours, and personality. Specifically, these items permitted me to assess the differences in people's responses depending on whether they had read the risk or control narrative. In addition, these items also functioned as an indirect test of the context statements (i.e., Would people's responses

vary as a function of the context they received?). Participants responded to items that assessed their impression of the account, perceived blameworthiness of the offending partner (e.g., Rob), perceived damage to the relationship, likelihood that the offending partner cheated, and their impression of Rob.

Second, participants were asked to complete a series of items that assessed their overall evaluations of the context statements. These items primarily functioned as a test of the additional context participants received but also functioned as an assessment of the risk narrative. For example, participants completed items that assessed their perceptions of the informational value of the context, perceived ability of the context to justify Rob's behaviour, perceived need for more information, reported desire for caution in evaluating the context statements, perceptions of the type of information they would like to receive regarding the account, amount of positive and negative information they would like to receive, and perceived usefulness of the context statements they received.

#### Evaluation of the Ambiguous Account

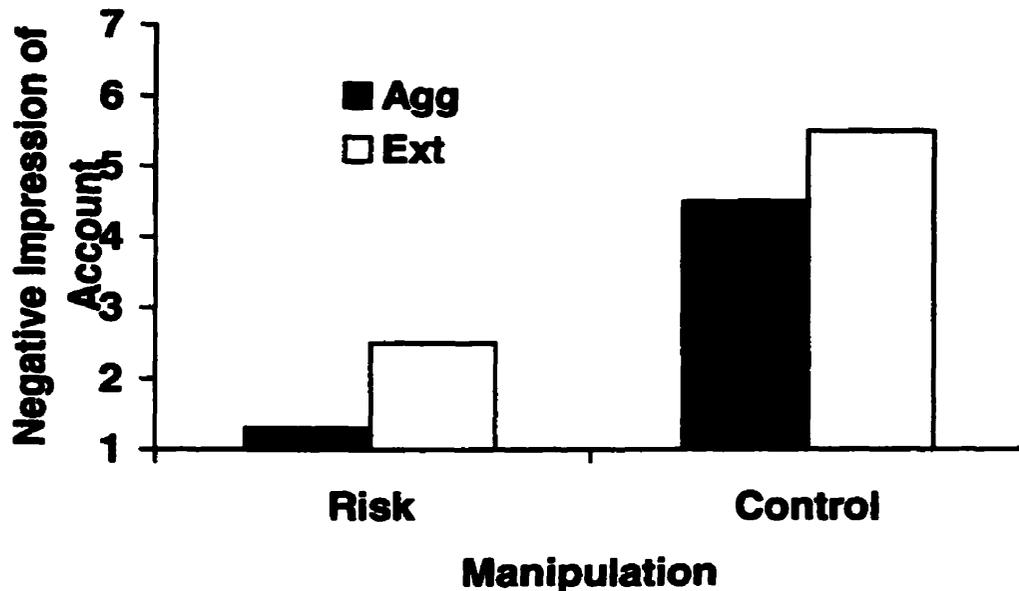
Main effect of risk. I predicted that participants who read the risk narrative would be primed for the inherent risky nature of romantic relationships and therefore, be more likely to adopt a cautious approach to information processing, as compared to those who read a control narrative which would result in more negative and less charitable evaluations. For example, I expected that participants who read the narrative that highlighted the risky nature of romantic relationships would rate the ambiguous account, the character depicted in the account, and his motives, behaviours, and personality as significantly more negative than those individuals who read the mundane account of a couple's first date.

**Main effect of context.** I also expected that individuals who received extenuating contextual statements would be more charitable than those in the aggravating condition when evaluating the character portrayed in the ambiguous account and his behaviours. For example, I expected individuals who received aggravating statements to rate the ambiguous account and the antagonist as considerably more negative and responsible for the incident than individuals who received extenuating contextual statements. This prediction can be explained by the valence of the information they received and its implications for interpreting the ambiguous account.

**Risk x context interaction.** My predictions concerning the main effect of context can be justified solely on the difference in valence between the two types of information. However, Reeder and Brewer's (1979) research suggests that there are other reasons to have expected differences between aggravating and extenuating context, and, moreover, to have expected that exposure to risk would have a differential impact on participants who receive the two types of context. Specifically, I anticipated that exposure to risk would heighten the tendency of participants to attend to aggravating contextual information and elicit fears of invalidity which would then diminish participants' attention to extenuating information. Namely, I predicted that those individuals who received the risk narrative and who read the aggravating contextual statements would be significantly less charitable in their evaluations of the ambiguous account and the character portrayed in the account than those participants who read the risk narrative and received extenuating contextual statements. In other words, I anticipated that participants' natural tendency to overweight aggravating (or negative) information relative to extenuating information would be enhanced for those individuals who were primed for risk than for those participants who

read the control narrative (see Figure 1). In contrast, for those people in the control condition, I simply expected the predicted main effect of context.

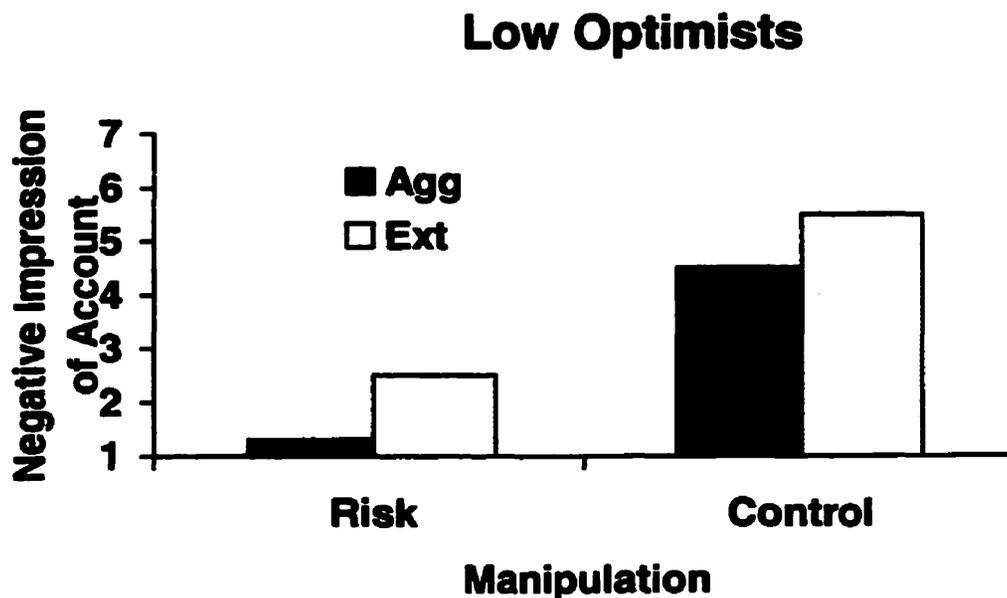
**Figure 1.** Predicted risk by context interaction.



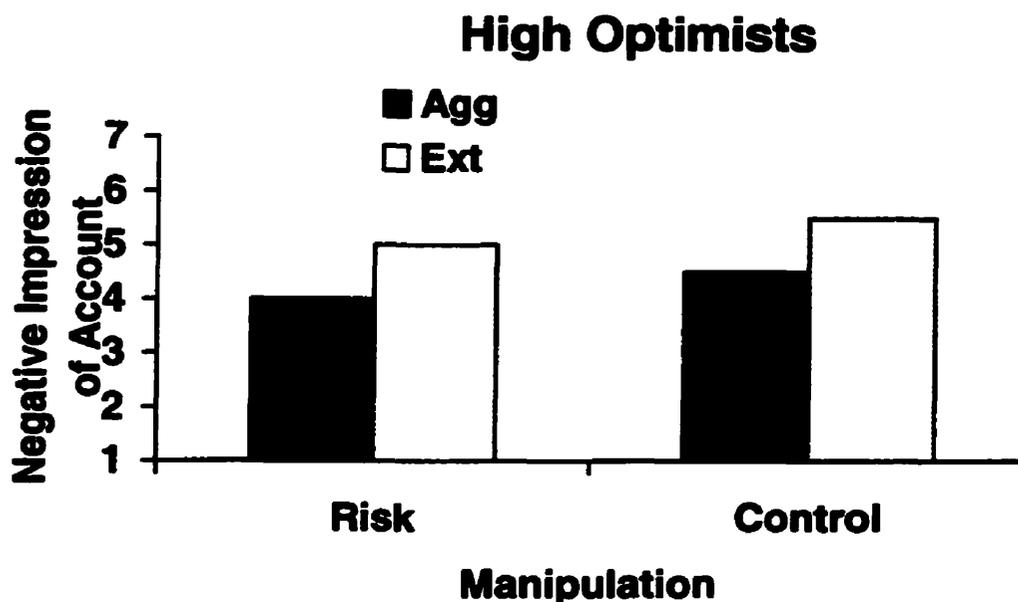
Risk x context x optimism interaction. Finally, I predicted that optimism would moderate the interaction between risk and context in one of two ways. Based on the research of Norem and Illingworth (1993), I expected participants who had a highly optimistic outlook to be buffered from the effects of the risk manipulation. Specifically, those people who were very optimistic in terms of their perceptions of romantic relationships may be relatively unmoved by the risk narrative and thus differ little in their responses from individuals who received the control narrative. Low optimists, conversely, may be especially sensitive to the risk narrative (since they may already tend to believe that negative things are prone to occur) and thus show a markedly different pattern of response compared to low optimists in the control condition.

Accordingly, if a “buffering” effect for optimism was found, I expected to find the predicted risk x context interaction (described previously) for individuals who were low in optimism. That is, I expected that participants’ natural overweighting of aggravating information relative to the extenuating information would be enhanced for those individuals who were primed for risk as compared to those who read the control narrative. Conversely, I expected that I would not find the predicted risk x context interaction for individuals high in optimism since optimism would eliminate the effect of risk (leaving only the main effect of context). See Figure 2 and Figure 3.

Figure 2. Negative impression of account for low optimists using a buffering strategy.

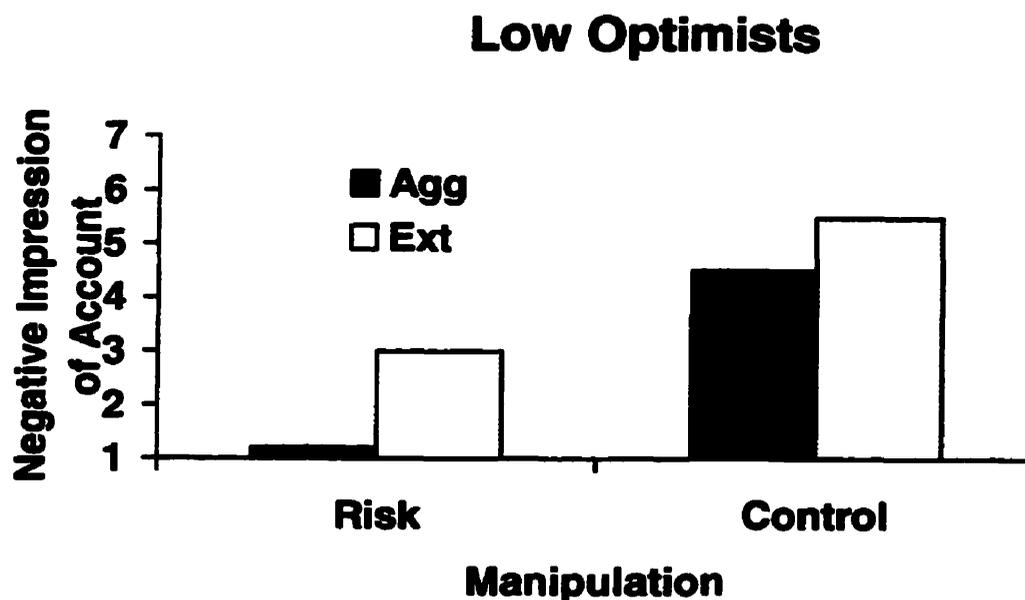


**Figure 3.** Negative impression of account for high optimists using a buffering strategy.



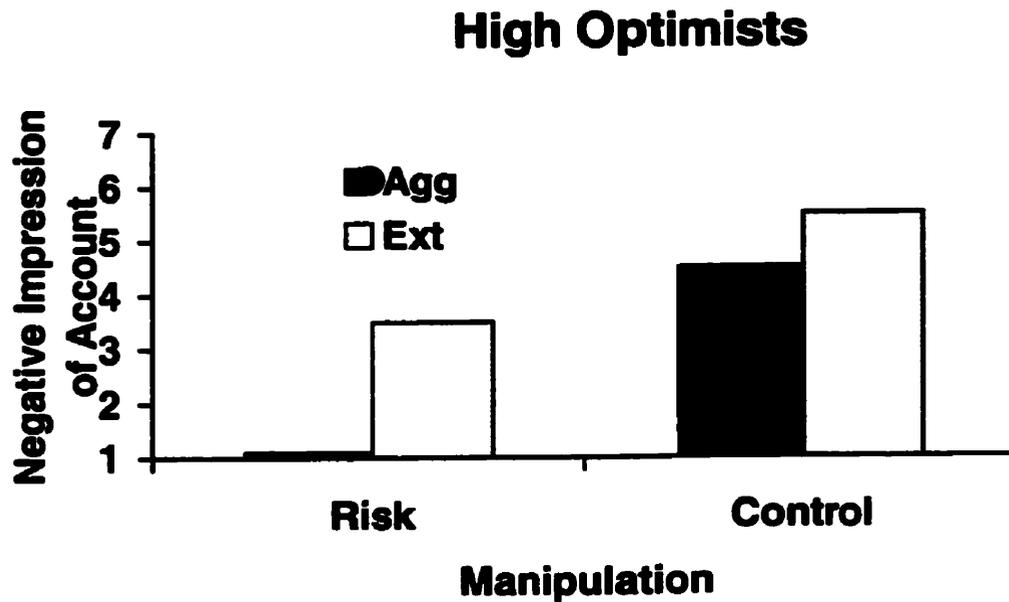
Alternatively, drawing on the research of Aspinwall and Brunhart (1996), I expected that individuals who have a very optimistic perception of romantic relationships may be especially likely to attend to the information provided in the risk narrative. In this case - that is, if optimism produced an active coping response - my predictions were less certain about the nature of the risk x context x optimism interaction. I speculated that the predicted risk x context interaction may be present for those individuals who were low in optimism (i.e., exposure to risk might again enhance the natural overweighting of aggravating information versus extenuating information for risk participants in comparison to those who read the control narrative). See Figure 4.

**Figure 4.** Negative impression of account for low optimists using an active coping strategy.

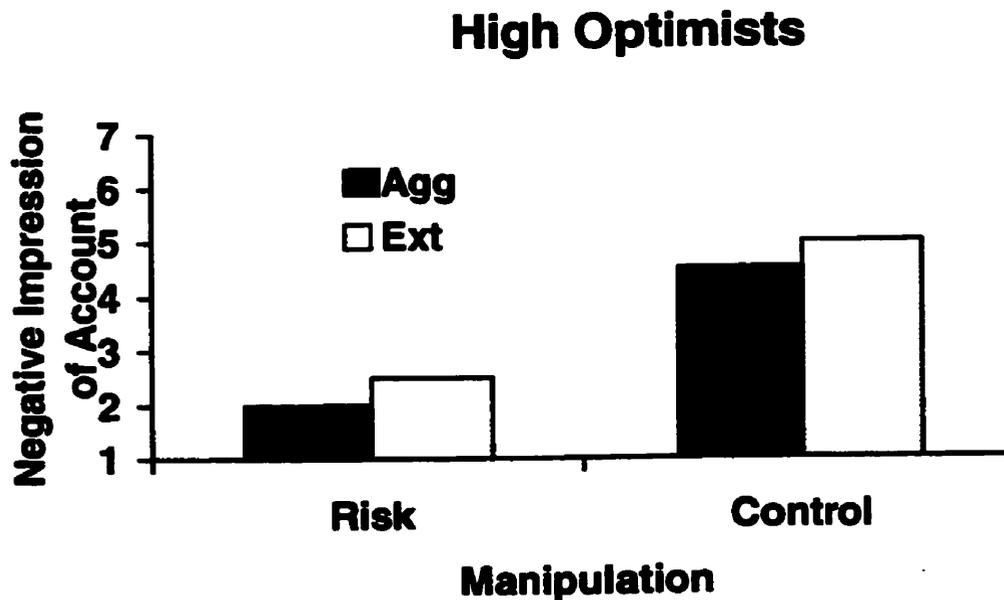


I was less clear what may happen for highly optimistic individuals. On one hand, the predicted Risk x Context interaction may be exaggerated for high optimists (see Figure 5). Highly optimistic participants who were exposed to risk and who received aggravating statements may have significantly outweighed the aggravating information as compared to those who read the control narrative (i.e., they would actively focus on the risk and the negative information and exercise a disproportionate amount of caution as compared to those who had not been primed for risk). On the other hand, high optimists may have been equally interested in the aggravating and extenuating contextual statements, eliminating the effect of context (leaving only the main effect of risk). See Figure 6.

**Figure 5.** Negative impression of account for high optimists using an active coping strategy (exaggeration).



**Figure 6.** Negative impression of account for high optimists using an active coping strategy (main effect of risk only).



Evaluation of Context

**Main effect of context.** Based on Reeder and Brewer's research (1979), I hypothesized that participants who received the extenuating contextual statements would view the statements as less diagnostic and informative than those who received the aggravating statements. Accordingly, I predicted that when participants were asked to complete items assessing the utility of the contextual statements, those individuals who read the excusing statements (extenuating condition) would view the statements as less useful than those individuals who evaluated the utility of the aggravating statements.

I also hypothesized that due to the valence of the of the information, participants who received the extenuating information would believe the context excused and justified Rob's behaviour to a greater extent than those in the aggravating condition. In addition, I expected participants who received extenuating information would report needing less information about the context in which the incident occurred in order to feel justified in forgiving Rob.

**Risk x context interaction.** Drawing on the previous work of Reeder and Brewer (1979) and Kruglanski (1990), I hypothesized that participants in the risk condition would be more likely to attend to the information provided by the contextual information compared to control participants, but that this would be particularly true for the aggravating context since risk would enhance individuals' natural tendency to view negative information as more diagnostic than positive information. Accordingly, I predicted that the difference between participants' evaluations of extenuating and aggravating contextual statements would be more pronounced for those individuals who were primed for risk than for those participants who read the control narrative.

**Optimism x risk x context interaction.** Given the previous discussion of the optimism x risk x context interaction, I predicted a similar pattern of results for the

evaluations of context. For example, if participants exhibited a buffering strategy on the items assessing reported desire for caution in using the information provided in the context statements, I expect to find the predicted risk x context interaction (described previously) for individuals who were low in optimism. That is, I expected that participants' natural overweighting of aggravating information relative to the extenuating information would be enhanced for those individuals who were primed for risk as compared to those who read the control narrative. Conversely, I expected that I would not find the predicted risk x context interaction for individuals high in optimism since optimism would eliminate the effect of risk (leaving only the main effect of context).

## Method

### Participants

Sixty-six female and 14 male students enrolled in psychology courses at the University of Calgary were recruited by means of the Research Participation Bonus Credit Board and received partial course credit for their participation. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 54 years ( $M = 23.28$ ;  $SD = 6.19$ ). The majority of participants identified themselves as Caucasian (59.0%) while the remaining students were predominantly of Asian (31.4%) and East Indian (6.0%) origins.

Of the 81 people who participated in the study, 71.6% of participants (or 58 people) were involved in romantic relationships whereas the remaining participants were not.<sup>3</sup> These relationships ranged in length from one month to 384 months, ( $M = 40.60$ ,  $SD = 64.67$ ). When asked to provide information concerning the type of relationship they were in, five people reported that they were casually dating, 16 participants reported they were exclusively dating / quite serious, 22 participants indicated they were exclusively dating / very serious, five people indicated they were engaged, 10 participants reported they were cohabitating, and five participants reported being married.

Prior to analyses, seven participants (6 females, 1 male) were dropped from the sample due to experimenter error (i.e., participants were inadvertently provided with an earlier version of the ambiguous account). In addition, three people (two females, and one male) were excluded since they failed to return for the second portion of the study. Finally,

one participant realized he had participated in a related study and therefore was aware of the nature of the manipulation. In total, the data for 11 participants were omitted from the analyses.

### Materials

All materials (see Appendix A) participants were asked to read were gender matched to each individual participant. Female participants, for example, read materials written by a female victim. Males on the other hand, read materials written by a male victim. To avoid confusion, I will refer to the female materials throughout the remainder of the paper.

Ambiguous account. Each participant was asked to read an account that depicts an ambiguous event that occurred within the context of a romantic relationship. This account, which was adapted from a relational transgression obtained in earlier research at the University of Waterloo (Boon & Holmes, 1999), served as the stimulus participants were later asked to evaluate. The account described how Rob, Christa's boyfriend, permitted his ex-girlfriend to spend the night in his apartment. The fact that Rob spent the night in the same apartment as his ex-girlfriend is not acceptable in Christa's opinion, as Rob's ex-girlfriend has always been a sore spot in their relationship. This account was very vague and therefore made it ambiguous to the reader as to whether any inappropriate events transpired during the night in question. Although the account employed in this study was modified from an earlier version used in Nairn (2000) to make Rob's actions more

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<sup>3</sup> Several of the questionnaires asked participants to make judgements concerning their "current relationship." Due to very slow sign-up rates, participants who were not currently in relationships also responded to these items. Instead of thinking about their "current relationship," these participants responded to the items using their most recent relationship. Though less than ideal, the responses of these individuals were analyzed. Had I removed

ambiguous, in Nairn's research participants indicated that they perceived the portrayed events as both negative and possibly harmful to Rob and Christa's relationship (Nairn, 2000).

Context statements. Having read the ambiguous account, participants were assigned to read one of two types of context statements. All statements were written from the perspective of the victim (Christa). Participants in the aggravating condition were presented with five statements designed to incriminate Rob. Participants were asked to read statements such as "I've always made sure Rob doesn't have to worry about my ex's, but he doesn't take my concerns about his ex-girlfriends seriously. He knows how I feel when he makes a point of calling them or seeing them." Participants in the extenuating condition were presented with five statements designed to clear Rob of any wrongdoing. For example, participants were asked to read statements such as "I know that Rob is very committed to us. We are moving in together when my lease runs out at the end of this semester so I know he'd never do anything to jeopardize our relationship."

The 10 context statements employed in this study were adapted from a set of 20 context statements used in previous research (Nairn, 2000). Relying on the information obtained from pilot testing ( $N = 45$ ), Nairn matched the context statements for degree of intensity, diagnostic value, and perceived ability to influence decision-making. However, based on the results in Nairn's study we were somewhat concerned that the context statements were not as well matched in terms of intensity, diagnostic value, and ability to influence decision making as the earlier pilot test had led us to believe they were (e.g., Nairn found that participants in the extenuating condition rated the additional context as

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these responses from the analysis, the statistical power of the present study would have been drastically reduced.

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more relevant, clear, informative, and deserving of serious consideration than did participants in the aggravating condition). In order to remedy this concern, we reworded the statements in order to make them clearer. For example, “When he called back that night, Rob sounded really uncomfortable, nervous, like he was putting on the happy act. I got the impression that something wasn’t quite right, and that whatever it was, I wasn’t going to like it.” was changed to “In both my conversations with him that night, Rob seemed more interested in keeping Michelle entertained than in talking to me when I phoned. Shouldn’t I be more important to him than his ex-girlfriend?” In addition, due to concerns that the context may be overwhelming the effect of risk, we dropped several of the stronger statements (i.e., those evaluated by participants as being most useful in helping them make decisions concerning the protagonist and his behaviors) and then, re-piloted the remaining statements. Participants were asked to rate the statements in terms of degree of intensity, diagnostic value, and ability to influence decision-making. For analysis purposes, these three items were averaged to form a composite index of usefulness, with higher numbers indicating greater perceived usefulness. Based on the results of this pilot study, participants ( $N = 10$ ) appeared to rate the aggravating ( $M = 4.55$ ,  $SD = .42$ ) and extenuating ( $M = 4.70$ ,  $SD = .42$ ) statements equally,  $t(8) = .57$ ,  $p = .58$  (see Table 1a and 1b for means and standard deviations of each individual statement).

Table 1a

Means and standard deviations for aggravating statements

Statements	<u>M</u> <u>(SD)</u>		
	condemn	useful	influence
Once or twice Rob’s laughed at me when I told him that I feel uncomfortable knowing that he still keeps in touch with	4.1 (1.3)	3.5 (1.5)	4.2 (1.5)

his ex.			
I've always made sure Rob doesn't have to worry about my ex's, but he doesn't take my concerns about his ex-girlfriends seriously. He knows how I feel when he makes a point of calling or seeing them.	4.7 (1.4)	4.2 (1.6)	4.7 (1.3)
In both my conversations with him that night, Rob seemed more interested in keeping Michelle entertained than in talking to me when I phoned. Shouldn't I be more important to him than his ex-girlfriend?	5.3 (1.7)	4.9 (1.6)	5.1 (1.9)
More than once I've overheard Rob and his friends talking about hot "how" Michelle is. I've never heard them say that about me.	4.9 (1.8)	4.0 (1.6)	4.9 (1.4)
Lately, Rob has seemed preoccupied with something. He's out late ay night a lot and often I'm not sure where he is.	4.9 (1.7)	4.1 (1.8)	4.7 (1.6)

Table 1b

Means and standard deviations for extenuating statements

Statements	<u>M</u> <u>(SD)</u>		
	condemn useful influence		
I know that Rob is very committed to "us". We are moving in together when my lease runs out at the end of this semester so I know he'd never do anything to jeopardize our relationship.	4.1 (1.5)	4.1 (2.0)	4.0 (1.7)
We've been going out for over a year now and Rob has never given me any reason not to trust what he says about what he's doing.	4.5 (1.7)	4.4 (1.7)	4.5 (1.4)
Even though he insisted I didn't have to, when I called Rob at 10pm I decided not to keep him on the line. I could hear at least two other voices in the background, a guy and a girl, and I didn't want to interrupt.	5.3 (1.2)	5.0 (1.5)	4.8 (1.2)
Michelle is engaged which means I really shouldn't worry about her being interested in Rob.	4.9 (1.6)	5.1 (1.5)	4.7 (1.7)
Rob and Michelle have been friends since they were kids. . . it's no wonder they are still good friends even now after they've broken-up.	4.8 (1.9)	5.2 (1.3)	5.1 (1.6)

**Risk manipulation.** Participants were presented with one of two narratives.

Participants in the risk condition were assigned to read a narrative designed to highlight situational sources of risk (e.g. falling out of love) that are common to all romantic relationships (Boon, 1992).<sup>4</sup> This two-page narrative, written in the third-person, chronicles an unforeseen and painful break up in an otherwise healthy relationship (e.g., “She is probably feeling pretty vulnerable right now since she has realized that getting involved with someone is just risky as hell. Thinking about this I’ve realized just how fragile relationships really are, how many things can change, how the chemistry of fitting together is just so damn delicate.”). Participants assigned to read the control narrative read a mundane account of how Danielle and Stephen met and began dating. This two-page account was also written in the third person and does not include any mention of risk in relationships.

**Manipulation bolstering task.** I included a generation task after the manipulation narratives to ensure that those participants assigned to the risk condition were actively thinking about the risks inherent to romantic relationships. This task was adapted from the work of Maio and Olson (1998). Following the manipulation narrative, participants assigned to the risk condition were instructed to “Describe in detail as many reasons as you can to explain why people often feel insecure in romantic relationships.” Participants in the control condition were instructed to “Describe in detail as many destinations and activities for a couple’s first date as you can.” In each case, participants were told that they had

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<sup>4</sup> The original risk narrative was written in the first person. The modified version, used in this study, was narrated in the third person. Given participants’ comments in previous studies, I hoped that this modification would minimize derogation of the victim.

approximately 10 minutes to complete the task and were free to use the back of the page if necessary.

### Optimism Measures

Life orientation task - R. A general measure of dispositional optimism, The Life Orientation Task -R (Scheier, Carver & Bridges, 1994), was administered to participants in order to obtain a trait measure of optimism. This measure consisted of eight items and four filler items (items 2,6,7, and 10) that were excluded from the scale prior to analysis. Of the eight items, four were phrased in a positive manner (e.g., I'm always optimistic about my future) and four in a negative manner (e.g., If something can go wrong for me, it will). Participants were asked to rate their agreement with such items using a seven-point scale ranging from "1-strongly disagree" to "7-strongly agree." Negatively scored items were reversed before scoring and the individual items were averaged to create an overall dispositional optimism index with higher numbers indicating higher levels of optimism (alpha = .78).

Relationship optimism scale. The Relationship Optimism Scale (Murray & Holmes, 1997) was administered to participants in order to assess their beliefs concerning the likelihood of certain positive and desirable events occurring in their relationship as compared to the "typical" relationship. Participants were presented with eleven statements such as "The love my partner and I share continuing to grow" and "My partner or I being attracted enough to another person to consider leaving our relationship" and were asked to indicate whether they believed the stated events were more, less, or equally likely to occur in their relationship in comparison to the typical or average relationship. Participants rated these statements using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from "1 - much less likely to occur in my relationship than in the typical relationship," to "7 - much more likely to occur

in my relationship than in the typical relationship.” Prior to analyses, the negatively phrased items were recoded and the individual items were averaged to create an overall general relational optimism score with higher numbers indicating greater optimism ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

**Relationship defensive-pessimism scale.** The manner in which participants generally respond to situations in romantic relationships was assessed by means of an adapted version of the Optimism / Defensive-Pessimism Scale used by Norem and Cantor (1986). The scale, as used in this study, was modified from an academic orientation to focus on romantic relationships. For example, statements such as “I often go into academic situations expecting the worst, even though I know I will probably do well” and “I often think about what it will be like if I did very poorly in an academic situation” were modified as follows: “I go into romantic relationships expecting the worst, even though I know things usually work well” and “I often think about what it will be like if my romantic relationship does very poorly.” This scale was composed of nine items rated on a 7-point scale ranging from “1-not at all true of me” to “7-very true of me.” Of the nine items, four items measured pessimism ( $\alpha = .54$ ) while four items assessed optimism ( $\alpha = .43$ ). Following the procedure used by Norem and Cantor (1986), the optimism and pessimism items were totaled individually. Next, the total pessimism score was subtracted from the total optimism score, yielding a total optimism / defensive pessimism score.

**Relationship success profile.** The Relationships Success Profile (Boon, 1992) was administered to participants in order to determine the extent to which participants felt desirable or positive characteristics (e.g.; handling conflict well, sharing) were present in their own relationships and the average “other” relationship. Specifically, this scale permitted me to gauge participants’ optimism regarding the likelihood of success of their

own romantic relationship as compared to their perceptions of relationship success for the average “other” relationship. Participants completed the scale twice, once for the average other relationship and once for their own relationship. The first time participants completed the scale, they were told: “Research shows that the presence of certain characteristics can foster the growth of a healthy romantic relationship. Using the scale below, please rate the extent to which you think each characteristic is typical of the average dating relationship.” The second time they completed the scale participants were instructed as follows: “Research shows that the presence of certain characteristics can foster the growth of a healthy romantic relationship. Using the scale below, please rate the extent to which you think each characteristic is typical of your dating relationship.” On a seven-point Likert scale ranging from “1- not at all typical” to “7 - very typical,” participants rated characteristics such as “handle conflict well,” “completely satisfied with relationship,” and “keep promises.” For analysis purposes, the mean responses to the “own relationship” scales were regressed on mean responses to the “average relationship” scale to form a residualized “own relationship” score that excluded the shared variation in common between participants’ “own relationship” and the “average relationship” scores. Higher numbers indicated greater optimism regarding participants’ perceptions of relationship success (“average relationship”  $\alpha = .88$ ; “own relationship”  $\alpha = .92$ ).

Predicting relationship success from personality inventory. This inventory assessed relationship optimism by measuring the extent to which participants believe they possess a greater number of positive traits (for example, openness, trustworthiness) predictive of relationship success than does the “typical” person. Participants were instructed to rate themselves in terms of how typical the attribute is of them in comparison to the “average” person who is in a relationship. Participants were asked to rate the ten items in this scale

using a 7-point scale ranging from “1- much less typical of me than of the average dating partner” to “7 - much more typical of me than of the average dating partner.” Participants were presented with attributes such as openness, trustworthiness, honesty, and patience. For analysis purposes, the individual items were averaged to create an overall index that reflected participants’ perceptions that they possessed characteristics that predicted relationship success with higher numbers indicating greater optimism ( $\alpha = .64$ ).

### Covariates

I also asked participants to complete several individual differences measures for use as possible covariates. As can be seen in Table 2, however, the measures failed to correlate adequately with the dependent variables to justify entering them in the analysis.<sup>5</sup>

Table 2

### Correlations between dependent variables, the Self-Esteem Scale and the BIDR.

Variables	Self-Esteem	BIDR
	r (p)	r (p)
Impression of account	.03 (.78)	.21 (.06)
Blame	-.21 (.06)	-.32 (.004)
Damage	-.12 (.30)	-.15 (.19)
Likelihood of infidelity	-.29 (.01)	-.27 (.02)
Impressions of Rob	-.36 (.001)	-.36 (.001)
Informational value of context	.01 (.94)	.11 (.33)
Excused Rob’s behavior	.09 (.42)	.18 (.10)
Justified Rob’s behavior	.08 (.46)	.11 (.31)
Need for more information	-.06 (.60)	.06 (.60)
Caution	-.23 (.04)	-.25 (.02)
Type of information	-.18 (.11)	-.16 (.17)
Positive information	-.22 (.05)	-.15 (.19)
Negative information	.15 (.18)	.14 (.22)
Usefulness (statement 1)	.22 (.05)	.11 (.33)
Usefulness (statement 2)	.17 (.13)	-.01 (.91)

<sup>5</sup> As described by Pedhazur (1997), in order to justify entering variables as covariates, a correlation of .30 is desired.

Usefulness (statements3)	-0.09 (.45)	-0.02 (.88)
Usefulness (statement 4)	-0.07 (.53)	-0.06 (.62)
Usefulness (statement 5)	.07 (.52)	.06 (.60)

**Self-esteem scale.** The Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) assessed participants' general level of self-esteem. Participants were asked to rate ten statements such as "I certainly feel useless at times" and "I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others" using a seven point scale, ranging from "1-strongly disagree" to "7-strongly agree." Negatively scored items were reversed before scoring. For analysis purposes, the ten items were averaged to form an overall index of self-esteem with higher numbers indicating higher self-esteem (alpha = .88).

**Balanced inventory of socially desirable responding (BIDR).** The Self-Deception subscale of the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (Paulhus, 1988) was administered to participants to assess their willingness to respond in a socially desirable manner. Participants were asked to respond to 20 items such as "My first impressions of people usually turn out to be right" and "It's hard for me to turn off a disturbing thought" using a 7-point scale ranging from "1 – not true" to "7 – very true." Prior to analysis, all negatively worded items were reversed scored. Next, following the procedure suggested by Paulhus (1988), one point was added for each extreme response (i.e., if an individual gave a score of six on item 11, one point was added and the final score on the item would have been seven.). The 20 items were averaged to form an overall index of self-deceptive positivity (alpha = .67).

### **Manipulation Checks**

**Positive and negative affect schedule (PANAS).** To assess their current mood, participants were asked to complete the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson

Clark & Tellegan, 1988), a brief mood inventory, prior to reading the ambiguous account and again after completing the risk manipulation. This inventory is composed of 18 terms that describe emotions such as “calm,” “relaxed,” and “nervous.” Participants were asked to rate each item using a seven-point scale ranging from “1-not at all” to “7-extremely.” Negatively scored items were reversed before scoring. For analysis purposes, the individual items were combined to create an overall mood index with higher numbers indicating a more positive mood (pre-manipulation  $\alpha = .93$ ; post-manipulation  $\alpha = .95$ ).

Perceptions of risk. A second risk manipulation check was adapted from a questionnaire designed to assess homeowners’ perceptions of risk of asbestos and radon contamination in their homes (Weinstein, Kolb & Goldstein, 1996). Participants were asked to complete this measure directly after completing the manipulation-bolstering task. The purpose of these items was to assess the extent to which the risk manipulation primed feelings and thoughts concerning the risk of breaking up. The original scale was composed of four items assessing perceived risk including: perceived likelihood of developing illness due to radon exposure, perceived danger due to exposure, expected concern regarding exposure, and expected fear of exposure. These items were modified for the present study to assess perceived likelihood of the average relationship breaking-up (1-no chance to 7-certain), perceived loss to average person (1-no loss to 7-extreme loss), expected concern of break-up to average person (1-not at all concerned to 7- very concerned), and expected fear of break-up to average person (1-no fear to 7- very frightened). Although I planned to combine these items to form a composite risk score, the obtained alpha ( $\alpha = .47$ ) was too low to justify analyzing the items together. Responses to these four items were

therefore analyzed individually. In each case, higher numbers indicate greater perceived risk.

**Relational belief scale.** The Relational Belief Scale (Boon & Holmes, 1999) functioned as an additional manipulation risk check in that I expected participants who read the risk narrative to report more negative beliefs about relationships in general compared to those participants who read the control narrative. The scale is composed of 15 items and assesses individual's general relationship beliefs. Participants were asked to rate statements such as "Many things can change in a relationship as time goes on" and "Any problems that surface in a relationship can be worked through successfully if the partners truly love each other" on a scale ranging from "1-strongly disagree" to "7-strongly agree." Negatively scored items were reversed before scoring. For analysis purposes, these items were averaged to create a relationships belief index with higher numbers indicating more negative beliefs about the nature of romantic relationships in general ( $\alpha = .65$ ).

### **Dependent Measures**

**Evaluations and impressions of ambiguous account.** All dependent measures included in the evaluation of the ambiguous account were adapted from Boon and Holmes (1999) and Nairn (2000). The first task participants completed following the manipulation checks was the evaluation of the information presented in the ambiguous account.

**Impression of the incident.** Participants were instructed to rate the negativity of the incident in the account. Participants rated the following statement "The incident described in the account was" on a scale ranging from "1-very negative" to "7-very positive." Higher ratings were indicative of a more negative evaluation.

**Blame.** Participants then completed four measures intended to assess intention to hurt the partner, responsibility, blameworthiness, and willingness of the victim to forgive

(i.e., How responsible was Rob for upsetting Christa?). These items were measured on 7-point scales ranging from “1-not at all” to “7-extremely.” Prior to analysis, the item assessing the willingness of the victim to forgive was reverse coded. In order to simplify analysis, the items were averaged to form an index of blame with higher numbers indicating greater perceived blame ( $\alpha = .76$ ).

Damage. Next, participants used a 7-point Likert scale (1-absolutely no damage” to “7-severe and extensive damage) to rate the extent to which they believed Christa’s relationship with Rob would be negatively affected in the short term by his actions. This item was analyzed individually with higher numbers indicating greater perceived damage.

Likelihood of infidelity. Participants were then asked to indicate how likely they thought it was that Rob slept with Michelle behind Christa’s back using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “1- not at all likely” to “7-extremely likely.” This item was analyzed individually with higher numbers indicating greater perceived likelihood of infidelity.

Impressions of Rob. Finally, participants were presented with eight continua designed to assess their impressions of Rob. Participants were told: “We would like to know your impressions of Rob, based on what you read.” Using a seven-point continuum, participants rated Rob on characteristics such as “1 - sincere” to “7 - insincere,” with higher numbers indicating a more negative impression of the character. Prior to analysis, I recoded those items that were scored in the reverse direction. In order to simplify analyses, I averaged the items to create an overall evaluation for Rob ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

Evaluation of context statements. Participants also completed a number of measures designed to assess evaluations of the contextual information (aggravating or extenuating) that followed the ambiguous account.

**Informational value.** First, participants rated four items that assessed the overall informativeness, relevance, clarity, and seriousness of the contextual statements (i.e., How informative was the additional context you received?). These items were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from “1- not at all” to “7 - extremely,” and were combined to form a composite index of informational value with higher numbers indicating participants perceive the context as more valuable ( $\alpha = .78$ ).

**Justification of Rob’s behavior.** Participants also completed two items that assessed whether they believed the contextual information was able to excuse (i.e., How much does the additional context you received excuse Rob’s behavior?) and to justify (i.e., How much does the additional context you received justify Rob’s behavior?) Rob’s behaviors. Both of these items were evaluated using 7-point scales ranging from “1- not at all” to “7 – entirely” and were analyzed individually.

**Need for more information.** Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they would need more information about the context in which the incident occurred in order to feel justified in forgiving Rob’s behavior. Participants rated this item using a 7-point scale ranging from “1- I’d need no further information” to “7 – I would need a great deal more information” with higher numbers indicating a greater need for information.

**Caution.** Next, participants completed a series of items designed to evaluate the level of caution they would adopt in forming decisions concerning the transgressor’s behavior on the basis of the contextual information they were provided. This scale was composed of 11 items such as “I would feel completely comfortable trusting the contextual information Christa provided when drawing conclusions about Rob’s behavior in their relationship more generally.” These items were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from “1- strongly disagree” to “7-strongly agree.” Before scoring, those items that were phrased in a

non-cautious manner were reversed and the individual items were averaged to form a composite index of desire for caution, with higher scores indicating a greater desire for caution ( $\alpha = .63$ ).

Type and quantity of information. Participants were questioned regarding the type of information they would like to receive. Participants were instructed as follows “If the circumstances were such that you could only have access to one type of information, which type of information would you prefer?” Participants responded to this question by placing a checkmark next to one of two options “information indicating Rob’s motives may have been unselfish or benevolent” or “information indicating Rob’s motives may have been selfish or inconsiderate.”

Participants were also asked to rate their agreement with the following statements: “Based on what I have read, I would need a lot more positive evidence to conclude that Rob truly cares about his relationship with Christa” and “Based on what I have read, I would need a lot more negative evidence to conclude that Rob truly does not care about his relationship with Christa.” Both of these items were evaluated using seven-point scales ranging from “1 - strongly disagree” to “7 – strongly agree.”

Usefulness of context. Finally, participants rated each of the context statements in terms of how useful it was to them in drawing inferences about the events in the account they read about. Participants rated each statement using a 7-point scale ranging from “1 - not at all useful” to “7 - extremely useful,” with higher numbers indicating greater usefulness when decision making. Each item was analyzed individually, separately for the aggravating and extenuating context groups.

### Demographic Items

**Relationship satisfaction.** Those participants who reported being in relationships were asked to complete three items designed to assess relationship satisfaction, success, and happiness. Ratings on these items allowed me to verify the effectiveness of random assignment to condition. Using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “1 – not at all” to “7 – extremely,” participants were asked to indicate how satisfied they were with their relationship, how successful their relationship was, and how happy they were with their partner. The three items were averaged to form a relationship satisfaction score with higher numbers indicating greater satisfaction ( $\alpha = .94$ ).

**Break-up experience.** Participants were also asked to indicate (in months) when their last break-up had occurred and to rate the severity of this break-up using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from “1- not at all negative / severe” to “7 – extremely negative / severe.” Again, ratings on these items provided me with an indication of the success of random assignment.

### Procedure

Participants were told that the study was composed of two parts: questionnaire testing and evaluating accounts. During the first testing session, participants were asked to complete some basic demographic information. Next, participants responded to a variety of scales that assessed both personal and relational optimism. Because I believed responses to these pre-measures might colour the manner in which participants would read and interpret other materials, I decided it would be wise to allow at least two days to elapse before continuing with the study.

When participants returned for the second session (on average four days later), they completed a mood scale and read an account that highlighted a possible transgression

within a romantic relationship (i.e., ambiguous account). Half of participants were randomly assigned to read additional statements that further incriminated the transgressor (i.e., statements that made it look as though the transgressor really was cheating on his or her partner) whereas the remaining participants were assigned to read statements that made the transgressor appear to be innocent of any wrongdoing (i.e., statements that cleared the transgressor of cheating). Following these statements participants were randomly assigned to read one of two narratives. Half of participants were assigned to read a narrative that highlights the risky nature of being in a romantic relationship (i.e., risk narrative). The “risk” narrative was intended to raise people’s awareness of the potential risks of being in a romantic relationship (e.g., a romantic partner falling out of love). The remaining participants were asked to read a mundane narrative detailing a first date (i.e., control narrative). Finally participants completed a variety of scales evaluating the narratives and context statements (i.e., evaluations of the story and the people depicted in the story, along with evaluations of the additional context information). Finally, participants were asked to provide information concerning their last break-up (i.e., when it occurred and the severity of the break-up). The experimenter then thoroughly debriefed the participant, obtained full informed consent, and answered any questions the participant may have had.

### Analysis

Given that participants completed a variety of optimism measures (i.e., Life Orientation Task - R, the Relationship Optimism Scale, the Relationship Defensive Pessimism Scale, the Relationship Success Profile, and the Predicting Relationship Success from Personality Inventory), I performed principal axis analysis with oblique rotation to determine which, if any, measures of optimism grouped together. As can be seen by the factor loadings in Table 3, a single factor representing optimism emerged from the analysis

(eigenvalue = 1.91). I therefore computed a composite index of optimism by averaging scores on the optimism measures. This composite index served as the continuous independent variable for all regression analyses.

**Table 3**  
**Loadings for optimism factor analysis.**

Variables	Factor Loadings
Life Orientation Task	.40
Relationship Optimism Scale	.75
Relationship Defensive Pessimism Scale	.42
Relationship Success Profile	.88
Predicting Relationship Success from Personality Inventory	.49

Unless otherwise indicated, the data were analyzed using a mixed model regression analysis (involving two categorical variables and one continuous variable). The categorical variables, risk (risk or control) and context (aggravating or extenuating) were dummy coded.

For each regression, the three main effects (i.e., risk, context, and optimism) were entered on the first step. In the second step, the two-way interactions (i.e., risk X context, risk x optimism, and context x optimism) were entered. On the last step of the regression analyses, the three-way interaction (i.e., risk x context x optimism) was entered. All significant interactions were followed up with simple t-tests, using the mean square residual as the error term and the appropriate degrees of freedom from the last step of the analysis to evaluate the significance of the calculated t-value. For those follow-ups that involved optimism, I used a median split (Mdn = 4.53) to separate those who were high in terms of

optimism from those who reported lower optimism. Unless otherwise specified, the Bonferroni procedure ( $.05 / 2$ ) was employed to control for Type I error on each follow-up t-test.

## Results

I will begin by discussing the results for several demographic items participants completed concerning their own relationship experience. I will then discuss results for the manipulation checks, followed by the results for the evaluations and impressions of the ambiguous account. Finally, I will conclude by detailing the results for the evaluations of the context statements.

### Demographic Items

Relationship satisfaction. This scale was designed to assess participants' general relationship satisfaction and was administered to determine whether random assignment was achieved. The risk X context X optimism interaction was not significant,  $t(50) = .11$ ,  $p = .92$ . Similarly, the two-way interactions failed to reach significance (risk x context:  $t(51) = .45$ ,  $p = .65$ , optimism x context:  $t(51) = .02$ ,  $p = .99$ , and risk x optimism:  $t(51) = .29$ ,  $p = .78$ ). No significant effects of risk, (risk:  $M = 5.79$ ,  $SD = 1.11$  vs. control:  $M = 5.93$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ),  $t(54) = .04$ ,  $p = .97$ , or context, (aggravating:  $M = 6.03$ ,  $SD = 1.05$  vs. extenuating:  $M = 5.64$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ )  $t(54) = .45$ ,  $p = .66$ , were found. In contrast, a main effect of optimism was found. As ratings of optimism increased, ratings of relationship satisfaction also increased ( $\beta = .39$ ),  $t(54) = 4.12$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Break-up experience. At the end of the questionnaire in the second section, I asked participants to indicate when their last break-up had occurred. The risk X context X optimism interaction was not significant in response to this item,  $t(65) = .09$ ,  $p = .93$ . Similarly, the risk x context,  $t(66) = .06$ ,  $p = .95$ , and risk x optimism,  $t(66) = .61$ ,  $p = .54$ , interactions were not significant. Participants who read the risk narrative did not differ from those who read the control narrative, (risk:  $M = 26.89$ ,  $SD = 34.08$  vs. control:  $M = 25.94$ ,  $SD = 25.79$ ),  $t(69) = .05$ ,  $p = .96$ . In addition, participants who read the aggravating

statements did not differ from those who read the extenuating statements (aggravating:  $\underline{M} = 26.82$ ,  $\underline{SD} = 36.28$  vs. extenuating:  $\underline{M} = 26.08$ ,  $\underline{SD} = 23.89$ ),  $t(69) = .04$ ,  $p = .97$ . Finally, as optimism increased, reported time since participants' last break-up did not vary, ( $\beta = 2.36$ ),  $t(69) = .92$ ,  $p = .36$ .

An unexpected marginally significant optimism x context interaction was found,  $t(66) = 1.79$ ,  $p = .08$ , when participants were asked to indicate when their last break-up occurred. As can be seen in Figure 7, however, those people who scored low in terms of optimism and who read extenuating statements ( $\underline{M} = 23.50$ ,  $\underline{SD} = 22.70$ ) did not differ from those who read aggravating statements ( $\underline{M} = 16.43$ ,  $\underline{SD} = 12.17$ ),  $t(65) = .68$ ,  $p > .025$ . In addition, those participants who were high in terms of optimism, and who received extenuating statements ( $\underline{M} = 29.41$ ,  $\underline{SD} = 25.65$ ) did not differ from high optimists who received aggravating statements ( $\underline{M} = 34.10$ ,  $\underline{SD} = 45.27$ ),  $t(65) = .19$ ,  $p > .025$ .

Although both follow-up tests were not statistically significant, there does appear to be a pattern among the means. Low optimists who read aggravating statements reported less time since their last break-up than low optimists who read extenuating statements. Similarly, high optimists, who read aggravating statements reported less time since their last break-up than high optimists who read extenuating statements. However, the difference for low optimists between those who read aggravating and those who read extenuating statements appears to be a somewhat bigger than for high optimists.

**Figure 7.** Time since last break-up for low and high optimists by context condition.



When asked to rate the severity of the last break-up, the risk x context x optimism interaction was not significant,  $t(66) = 1.60, p = .11$ . In addition, the risk x context,  $t(67) = 1.01, p = .32$ , the optimism x context,  $t(67) = .54, p = .59$ , and the risk x optimism,  $t(67) = 1.06, p = .29$ , interactions were not significant. No significant effects of risk, (risk:  $M = 4.03, SD = 1.91$  vs. control:  $M = 4.32, SD = 1.76$ ),  $t(70) = .69, p = .49$ , context, (aggravating:  $M = 4.06, SD = 1.66$  vs. extenuating:  $M = 4.29, SD = 2.00$ ),  $t(70) = .56, p = .57$ , or optimism, ( $\beta = .03$ ),  $t(70) = .20, p = .85$ , were found.

With the exception of one marginally significant optimism x context interaction, no significant effects were found on items designed to assess random assignment. Based on these findings, I believe that random assignment was successfully achieved.

#### Manipulation Checks

Relational belief scale. I expected participants who read the risk narrative to report more negative evaluations concerning relationships in general as compared to those

participants who read the control narrative. This was not the case. Participants who read the risk narrative ( $M = 4.56$ ,  $SD = .66$ ) did not differ from those individuals who read the control narrative ( $M = 4.46$ ,  $SD = .59$ ),  $t(77) = .97$ ,  $p = .33$ . In addition, those participants who were in the aggravating condition ( $M = 4.44$ ,  $SD = .70$ ) did not differ from those people who received extenuating statements ( $M = 4.58$ ,  $SD = .51$ ),  $t(77) = .78$ ,  $p = .44$ . Although I did not have any specific predictions concerning optimism and this scale, as ratings of optimism increased, participants reported less agreement with the items on the relationship belief scale ( $\beta = -.10$ ),  $t(77) = 2.17$ ,  $p = .03$ .

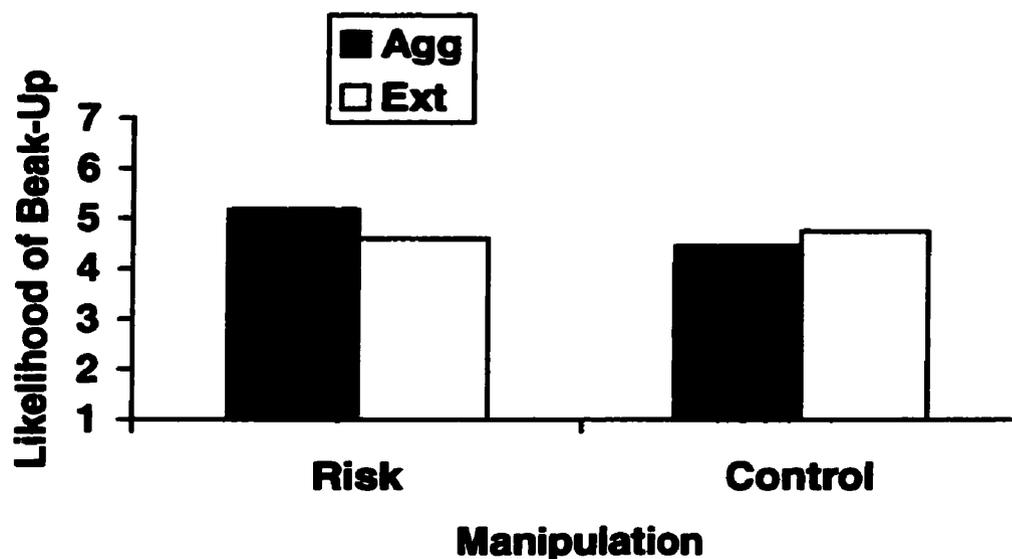
Perceptions of risk. The purpose of the perceptions of risk items was to assess the extent to which the risk manipulation primed feelings and thoughts of relational risk. Contrary to my prediction, people who read the risk narrative did not differ from those individuals who read the control narrative on perceived likelihood of average relationship breaking-up ( $M = 4.88$ ,  $SD = .91$  vs.  $M = 4.63$ ,  $SD = .80$ ,  $t(77) = 1.28$ ,  $p = .20$ ), perceived loss to average person ( $M = 5.45$ ,  $SD = .85$  vs.  $M = 5.29$ ,  $SD = .93$ ,  $t(77) = .81$ ,  $p = .42$ ), expected concern of break-up to average person ( $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 1.45$  vs.  $M = 4.83$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ,  $t(77) = 1.03$ ,  $p = .31$ ), and expected fear of break-up to average person ( $M = 4.48$ ,  $SD = 1.24$  vs.  $M = 4.59$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ,  $t(77) = .41$ ,  $p = .69$ ). In addition, people who read the aggravating statements did not differ from individuals who read the extenuating statements on perceived likelihood of average relationship breaking-up ( $M = 4.70$ ,  $SD = .88$  vs.  $M = 4.80$ ,  $SD = .84$ ,  $t(77) = .50$ ,  $p = .60$ ), perceived loss to average person ( $M = 5.35$ ,  $SD = .77$  vs.  $M = 5.39$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ,  $t(77) = .18$ ,  $p = .86$ ), expected concern of break-up to average person ( $M = 4.80$ ,  $SD = 1.44$  vs.  $M = 4.54$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ,  $t(77) = 1.16$ ,  $p = .25$ ), and expected fear of break-up to average person ( $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 1.40$  vs.  $M = 4.56$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ,  $t(77) = .23$ ,  $p = .82$ ). There was, however, a significant three-way interaction on the item that

asked participants to indicate the likelihood that the average relationship would break-up,  $t(73) = 2.06, p = .04$ .

To explore this interaction, I examined the results separately for low and for high optimists. For each regression, I entered the risk and context variables on the first step and the risk x context interaction on the second step. The two-way interaction for low optimists was not statistically significant,  $t(37) = .57, p = .57$ , whereas for the high optimists it was marginally significant,  $t(36) = 1.75, p = .08$ . Highly optimistic participants who received the risk narrative and who read aggravating statements ( $M = 4.56, SD = .88$ ) did not differ from those who read extenuating statements ( $M = 5.10, SD = .99$ ). Similarly, highly optimistic participants who received the control narrative and who read aggravating statements ( $M = 4.56, SD = 1.13$ ) did not differ from those who read extenuating statements ( $M = 4.77, SD = .73$ ) (see Figure 8).

Although the follow-up tests were not statistically significant, there appears to be a trend in the means. High optimists who read the risk narrative and aggravating statements rated the likelihood of the average relationship breaking up higher than those in the extenuating condition. This pattern reversed for those in the control condition. In the control condition, those who read extenuating statements rated the likelihood of the average relationship breaking-up higher than those in the aggravating condition.

**Figure 8.** Likelihood of the average relationship breaking up for high optimists by risk and context condition.



Positive and negative affect schedule (PANAS). Participants were asked to complete this scale before reading the ambiguous account and again after completing the risk or control narrative in order to assess whether the risk manipulation would alter mood. The risk X context X optimism interactions were not significant (pre-narrative:  $t(72) = .10$ ,  $p = .92$ ; post-narrative:  $t(73) = .07$ ,  $p = .95$ ). Similarly, the two-way interactions were not significant (risk x context, pre-narrative:  $t(73) = .09$ ,  $p = .93$ ; post-narrative:  $t(74) = .68$ ,  $p = .50$ , optimism x context, pre-narrative:  $t(73) = 1.46$ ,  $p = .20$ ; post-narrative:  $t(74) = .06$ ,  $p = .95$ , risk x optimism, pre-narrative:  $t(73) = .56$ ,  $p = .58$ ; post-narrative:  $t(73) = .79$ ,  $p = .43$ ). No differences of risk were found on the pre-narrative (risk:  $M = 5.39$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ , vs. control:  $M = 5.39$ ,  $SD = .72$ ,  $t(76) = .18$ ,  $p = .96$ ) or post-narrative (risk:  $M = 5.24$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ , vs. control:  $M = 5.41$ ,  $SD = .96$ ,  $t(77) = .115$ ,  $p = .25$ ) assessments of mood. In addition, no differences of context were found on the pre-narrative (aggravating:  $M = 5.41$ ,  $SD = .98$ ,

vs. extenuating:  $M = 5.37$   $SD = .84$ ,  $t(76) .03$ ,  $p = .98$ ) or post-narrative (aggravating:  $M = 5.35$ ,  $SD = .99$ , vs. extenuating:  $M = 5.31$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ,  $t(77) .31$ ,  $p = .76$ ) assessments of mood.

Although I did not expect ratings on the PANAS to differ in relation to optimism, a significant main effect of optimism was found when participants were asked to complete the PANAS a second time after the manipulation. Specifically, as optimism increased, reported mood became more positive ( $\beta = .29$ ),  $t(77) = 3.78$ ,  $p < .001$ .

#### Evaluations and Impressions the Information Presented in the Ambiguous Account.

I predicted that participants who read the risk narrative would rate the events in the ambiguous account, the character depicted in the account, and his motives, behaviours and personality as considerably more negative than those individuals who read the control narrative. In addition, I expected that individuals who received extenuating contextual statements would be more charitable when evaluating the character portrayed in the ambiguous account, his motives, his behaviours, and his personality as compared to those who received aggravating contextual statements. I also anticipated that the difference between participants' ratings in the aggravating and extenuating conditions when evaluating the ambiguous account would be more pronounced for those individuals who have been primed for risk than for those participants who read the control narrative (i.e., risk X context interaction).

Finally, I predicted that the risk x context interaction could be moderated by optimism in one of two ways. On one hand, I expected that participants who had a highly optimistic outlook might be relatively unmoved by the risk narrative. Low optimists, conversely, might be especially sensitive to the risk narrative (buffering hypothesis). On the other hand, I expected that individuals who had a very optimistic perception of romantic

relationships might be especially likely to focus on the information provided in risk the narrative as compared to those individuals who read the control narrative (active coping hypothesis). In this case I speculated that the predicted risk x context interaction might be present for those individuals who were low in optimism. I was less certain about highly optimistic individuals. I expected that the predicted risk x context interaction might be exaggerated for high optimists or, conversely, high optimists might be equally interested in the aggravating and extenuating contextual statements eliminating the main effect of context.

**Impression of account.** Contrary to my hypotheses, when participants were instructed to rate the negativity of the events described in the ambiguous account, the expected risk X context X optimism interaction was not significant,  $t(73) = .15, p = .88$ . Similarly, the predicted two-way risk x context interaction failed to reach significance,  $t(74) = .80, p = .43$ . Although I did not have predictions regarding the two remaining interactions, they were also not significant (optimism x context:  $t(74) = .38, p = .71$ , risk x optimism:  $t(74) = .70, p = .49$ ). In addition, no differences in evaluations were found between those people who read the risk narrative ( $M = 2.53, SD = .88$ ) or the control narrative ( $M = 2.54, SD = 1.21$ ),  $t(77) = .05, p = .96$ . Participants' perceptions also did not vary depending on the context they received (aggravating:  $M = 2.45, SD = 1.08$ ; extenuating:  $M = 2.61, SD = 1.02$ ),  $t(77) = .55, p = .59$ . Finally, the main effect of optimism was not significant, ( $\beta = -.08$ ),  $t(77) = .94, p = .35$ .

**Blame.** Participants then completed several measures intended to assess Rob's intention to upset his partner, Rob's responsibility in upsetting Christa, Rob's blameworthiness, and Christa's willingness to forgive Rob. These items were averaged to form an index of blame. The hypothesized three-way,  $t(73) = .67, p = .50$ , and risk x

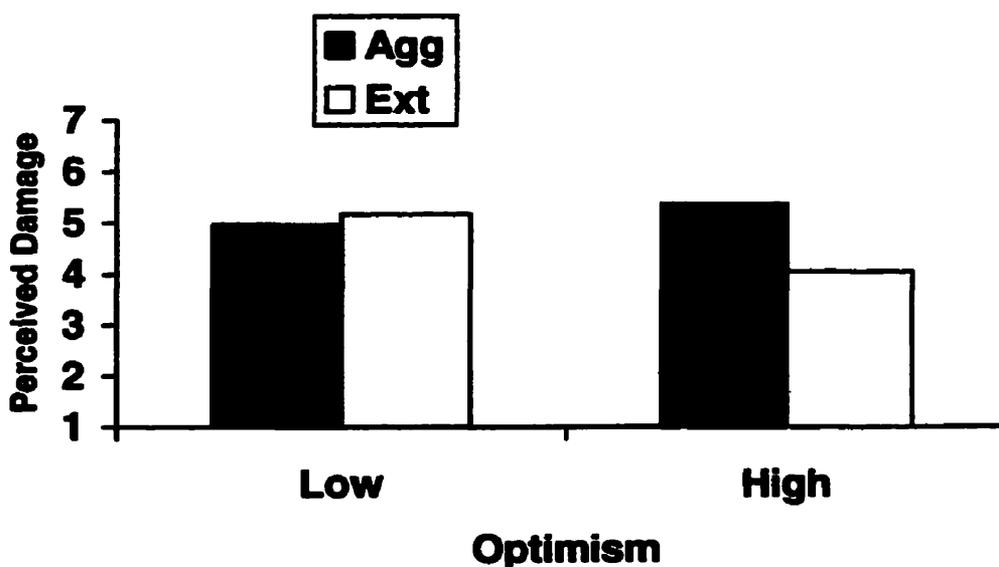
context interactions were both non significant,  $t(74) = .63, p = .53$ . Similarly, the optimism x context,  $t(74) = .91, p = .37$ , and risk x optimism,  $t(74) = .34, p = .73$ , interactions failed to reach significance. In addition, people's perceptions did not differ between those who read the control narrative ( $M = 4.05, SD = 1.19$ ) and those who read the risk narrative ( $M = 3.89, SD = 1.21$ ). The main effect of optimism also failed to reach statistical significance,  $\beta = -.08, t = .90, p = .37$ . In contrast, the main effect of context was significant,  $t(77) = 3.77, p < .001$ . Those people who received the extenuating statements ( $M = 3.53, SD = 1.27$ ) blamed Rob less than those people in the aggravating condition ( $M = 4.43, SD = .92$ ).

**Damage.** When participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they believed Christa's relationship with Rob would be negatively affected in the short term by his actions, the predicted risk X context X optimism,  $t(73) = .96, p = .34$ , and the risk x context interactions,  $t(74) = 1.55, p = .12$ , were non significant. Similarly, the risk x optimism  $t(74) = .88, p = .39$  interaction was non significant. Also, participants' perceptions did not differ by risk condition (risk:  $M = 4.83, SD = 1.28$  vs. control:  $M = 5.00, SD = 1.26$ ),  $t(77) = .61, p = .54$ , nor by optimism ( $\beta = -.08$ ),  $t(77) = .63, p = .53$ . Participants' perceptions did vary however, by context condition,  $t(77) = 2.68, p = .01$ . As expected, those people who received extenuating statements ( $M = 4.56, SD = 1.40$ ) indicated they believed that Christa and Rob's relationship would suffer less short-term damage than those who received aggravating statements ( $M = 5.28, SD = 1.01$ ).

An unexpected marginal optimism x context interaction was also found,  $t(74) = 1.90, p = .06$ . When followed up, those participants who were low in terms of optimism and who read extenuating context ( $M = 4.96, SD = 1.15$ ) did not differ in their evaluations from those who read aggravating statements ( $M = 5.17, SD = 1.25$ ),  $t(73) = .60, p > .025$ .

In contrast, for high optimists, those who read extenuating statements ( $M = 4.06$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ) reported less short-term damage than those who read aggravating statements, ( $M = 5.36$ ,  $SD = .79$ ),  $t(73) = .342$ ,  $p < .025$  (see Figure 9).

**Figure 9.** Perceived short-term damage to the relationships for low and high optimists by context condition.



Likelihood of infidelity. When participants were asked to indicate how likely they believed it was that Rob slept with Michelle behind Christa's back neither the expected three-way,  $t(73) = .08$ ,  $p = .93$ , nor the risk x context,  $t(74) = 1.33$ ,  $p = .19$ , interactions reached significance. Similarly, neither the optimism x context,  $t(74) = 1.39$ ,  $p = .17$ , nor the risk x optimism,  $t(74) = .72$ ,  $p = .48$  interaction were significant. In addition, ratings did not differ by risk condition (risk:  $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = 1.56$  vs. control:  $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ),  $t(77) = 1.50$ ,  $p = .14$ , nor by optimism ( $\beta = -.19$ ),  $t(77) = 1.49$ ,  $p = .14$ . There was a difference in ratings however, between those who received aggravating statements and those who received extenuating statements,  $t(77) = 2.53$ ,  $p = .01$ . As predicted, individuals

who received extenuating statements ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ) indicated they believed it was less likely that Rob slept with Michelle behind Christa's back than those who received aggravating statements ( $M = 4.48$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ).

**Impressions of Rob.** When participants were asked to provide their impressions of Rob, once again, the expected three-way,  $t(73) = .28$ ,  $p = .78$ , and the risk x context interactions,  $t(74) = .69$ ,  $p = .50$ , failed to reach significance. Also, the risk x optimism interaction,  $t(74) = .54$ ,  $p = .59$ , was not significant. In addition, participants' perceptions of Rob did not vary by risk ( $M = 4.14$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) or control condition ( $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ),  $t(77) = .84$ ,  $p = .41$ . In contrast, participants' ratings of Rob did differ depending on optimism and context. As ratings of optimism increased, impressions of Rob were more positive ( $\beta = -.24$ ),  $t(77) = 2.96$ ,  $p = .004$ , and people who read extenuating statements ( $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ) rated Rob more positively than people who read aggravating statements ( $M = 4.83$ ,  $SD = .67$ ),  $t(77) = 5.39$ ,  $p < .001$ .

A marginally significant optimism x context interaction was also found,  $t(74) = 1.86$ ,  $p = .07$ . Those people who scored low in terms of optimism and who read extenuating statements ( $M = 4.17$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ) differed from those who read aggravating statements ( $M = 4.98$ ,  $SD = .57$ ),  $t(73) = 2.56$ ,  $p < .025$ . In addition, those participants who were high in terms of optimism, and who received extenuating statements ( $M = 3.10$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) differed from high optimists who received aggravating statements ( $M = 4.70$ ,  $SD = .73$ ),  $t(73) = 5.07$ ,  $p < .025$ .

As can be seen in Figure 10, those people who were low in optimism and who read extenuating statements rated Rob more positively than those people who received aggravating statements. High optimists followed the same pattern but the difference in

ratings between those who received aggravating and those who received extenuating statements was larger than for the low optimists.

**Figure 10.** Impressions of Rob for low and high optimists by context condition.



#### Evaluations of Context Statements.

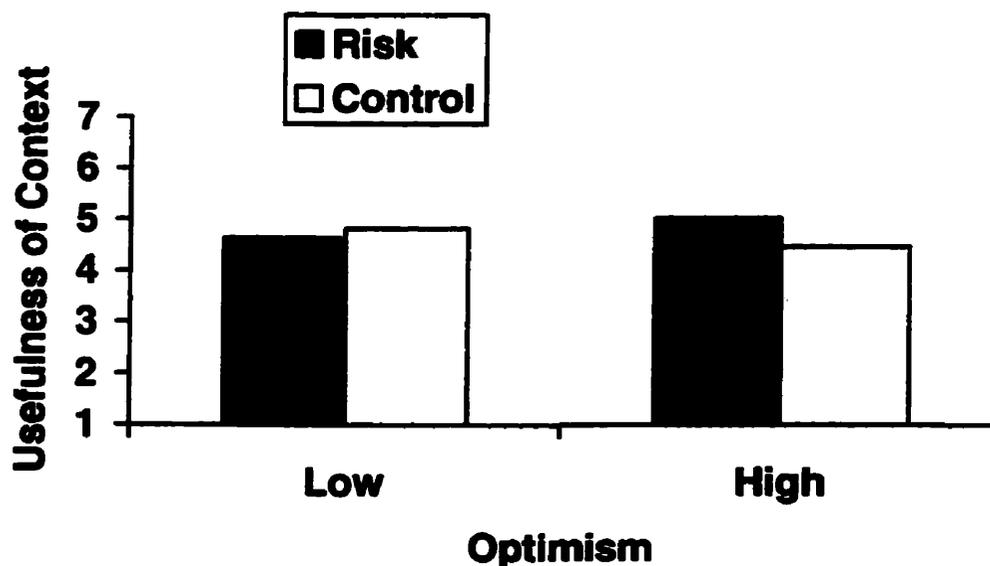
I hypothesized that participants who received the extenuating contextual statements would view the statements as less diagnostic and informative than those who received the aggravating statements. I also predicted that participants in the risk condition would be more likely to utilize the information provided by the contextual information as compared to control participants, but that this would be particularly true for the aggravating context since risk would enhance individuals' natural tendency to view negative information as more diagnostic than positive information. Finally, I predicted that the predicted risk x context x optimism interaction would follow the same pattern for evaluations of context as for evaluations of the ambiguous account.

**Informational value of context.** Contrary to my prediction, the three-way,  $t(73) = .35$ ,  $p = .73$  and the risk x context interactions,  $t(74) = .46$ ,  $p = .65$ , were not significant for the index of informational value. In addition, the context x optimism interaction,  $t(74) = 1.36$ ,  $p = .18$ , also failed to reach statistical significance. Also, ratings of usefulness did not differ by risk condition (risk:  $M = 4.84$ ,  $SD = 1.15$  vs. control:  $M = 4.66$ ,  $SD = 1.67$ ),  $t(77) = .69$ ,  $p = .49$ , nor by optimism ( $\beta = .03$ ),  $t(77) = .37$ ,  $p = .71$ . I also hypothesized that participants would evaluate aggravating context as more useful than extenuating information. There was a marginal main effect of context,  $t(77) = 1.86$ ,  $p = .07$ . In contrast to what I had hypothesized, participants who received the extenuating statements ( $M = 4.98$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ) tended to rate the statements as more valuable in terms of information as compared to those who received aggravating statements ( $M = 4.51$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ).

There was also an unexpected but significant risk X optimism interaction,  $t(74) = 2.23$ ,  $p = .03$ . When followed-up with protected t-tests however, people who were lower in terms of optimism and who read the risk narrative ( $M = 4.63$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ) did not differ in their evaluations from those people who read the control narrative ( $M = 4.82$ ,  $SD = .87$ ),  $t(73) = .53$ ,  $p > .025$ . In addition, those people who were high in terms of optimism and who read the risk narrative ( $M = 5.02$ ,  $SD = .97$ ) did not differ in their evaluations from those who read the control narrative ( $M = 4.47$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ),  $t(73) = 1.54$ ,  $p > .025$ .

Although these differences were non-significant, it appears the nature of the interaction may be disordinal. It seems that for low optimists, those who read the control narrative rated the context as more valuable than those in the risk condition. Conversely, for high optimists, ratings of usefulness were higher for those in the risk condition than for those in the control condition (see Figure 11).

**Figure 11.** Value of the contextual information for low and high optimists by risk condition.



**Justification of Rob's behavior.** When participants were asked to evaluate whether they believed the context excused Rob's behavior, the predicted three-way,  $t(73) = .03$ ,  $p = .98$ , and the risk x context,  $t(74) = .89$ ,  $p = .37$ , interactions were not significant. Also, the risk x optimism,  $t(74) = .95$ ,  $p = .35$ , interaction failed to reach significance. Similarly, participants' ratings did not vary by risk condition (risk:  $M = 3.18$ ,  $SD = 1.74$  vs. control:  $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ ),  $t(77) = .42$ ,  $p = .69$ , nor by optimism, ( $\beta = -.001$ ),  $t(77) = .01$ ,  $p = .99$ . People who read extenuating statements ( $M = 3.80$ ,  $SD = 1.79$ ) indicated they believed the context excused Rob's behaviour to a greater extent than those people who read the aggravating statements ( $M = 2.40$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ),  $t(77) = 4.04$ ,  $p < .001$ .

This main effect, however, was qualified by a significant optimism X context interaction,  $t(74) = 2.53$ ,  $p = .01$ . Participants who scored lower in terms of optimism and who read extenuating information ( $M = 3.57$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ) did not differ significantly from

those who read aggravating information ( $M = 2.89$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ),  $t(73) = 1.24$ ,  $p > .025$ . In contrast, those people who scored higher in terms of optimism and who read extenuating statements ( $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = 1.88$ ) indicated they believed the context excused Rob's behaviour to a greater extent than those people who read the aggravating statements ( $M = 2.00$ ,  $SD = .93$ ),  $t(73) = 3.83$ ,  $p < .01$  (see Figure 12).

**Figure 12.** Ability of the contextual information to excuse Rob's behavior for low and high optimists by context condition.

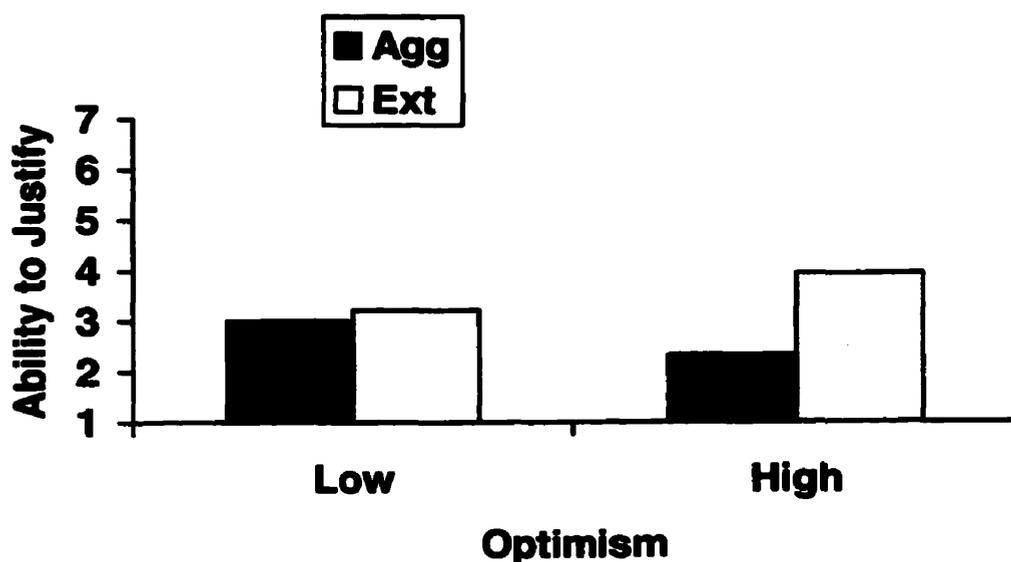


Similar findings emerged when participants were asked whether the context they received justified Rob's behaviour. The predicted three-way,  $t(73) = .18$ ,  $p = .86$ , and the risk x context,  $t(74) = .24$ ,  $p = .81$ , interactions were not significant, and again, participants' ratings did not vary by risk condition (risk:  $M = 3.18$ ,  $SD = 1.65$  vs. control:  $M = 2.95$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ),  $t(77) = .68$ ,  $p = .50$ , nor by optimism, ( $\beta = .01$ ),  $t(77) = .01$ ,  $p = .92$ . However, people who read the extenuating statements ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ) indicated they

believed the context justified Rob's behaviour to a greater extent than those people who read aggravating statements ( $M = 2.58$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ),  $t(77) = 2.80$ ,  $p = .006$ .

Again, however, this main effect was qualified by a significant optimism X context interaction,  $t(74) = 2.85$ ,  $p = .006$ . As can be seen in Figure 13, people who scored low in terms of optimism and who received extenuating context ( $M = 3.22$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ) did not differ from those who received aggravating context ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ),  $t(73) = .47$ ,  $p > .025$ . Conversely, people who scored high in terms of optimism and read extenuating context ( $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 1.80$ ) indicated they believed the context justified Rob's behaviour to a greater extent than those people who read aggravating statements ( $M = 2.23$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ),  $t(73) = 3.65$ ,  $p < .025$ .

**Figure 13.** Ability of the contextual information to justify Rob's behavior for low and high optimists by context condition.

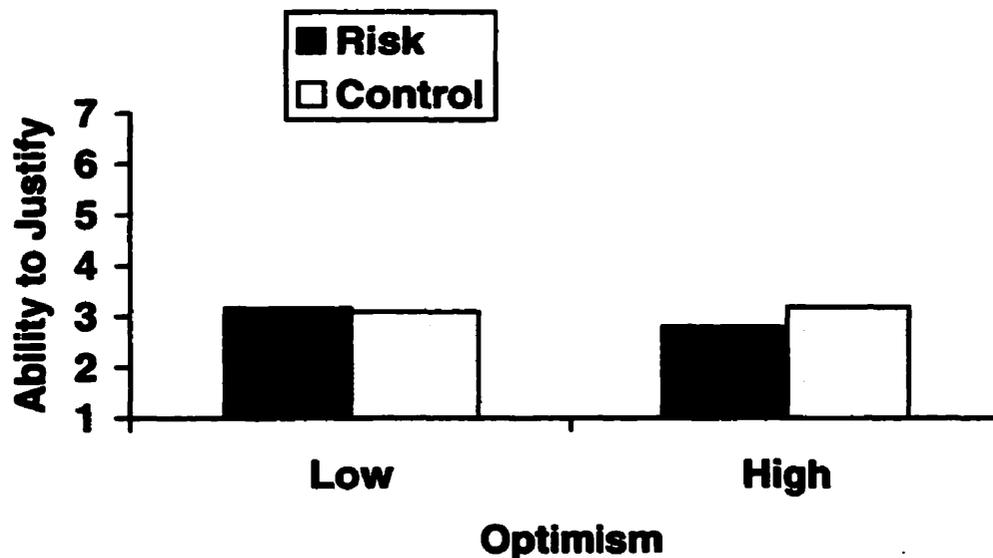


In addition to this optimism x context interaction, there was a marginally significant risk x optimism interaction,  $t(74) = 1.84$ ,  $p = .07$ . As can be seen in Figure 14, people who

scored low in terms of optimism and who read the risk narrative ( $M = 3.16$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ) did not differ from those who read the control narrative ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ),  $t(73) = .14$ ,  $p > .025$ . Similarly, people who scored high in terms of optimism and read the risk narrative ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ) did not differ from those who read the control narrative ( $M = 2.79$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ),  $t(73) = .85$ ,  $p > .025$ .

Although neither of the follow-up tests reached statistical significance, it appears that low optimists in both the risk and control conditions rated the ability of the contextual information to justify Rob's behaviour equally. In contrast, there appears to be a small, although non significant, difference in ratings for high optimists. High optimists who received the control narrative appear to believe the context was better able to justify Rob's behaviour than those who read the risk narrative.

**Figure 14.** Ability of the contextual information to justify Rob's behavior for low and high optimists by risk condition.

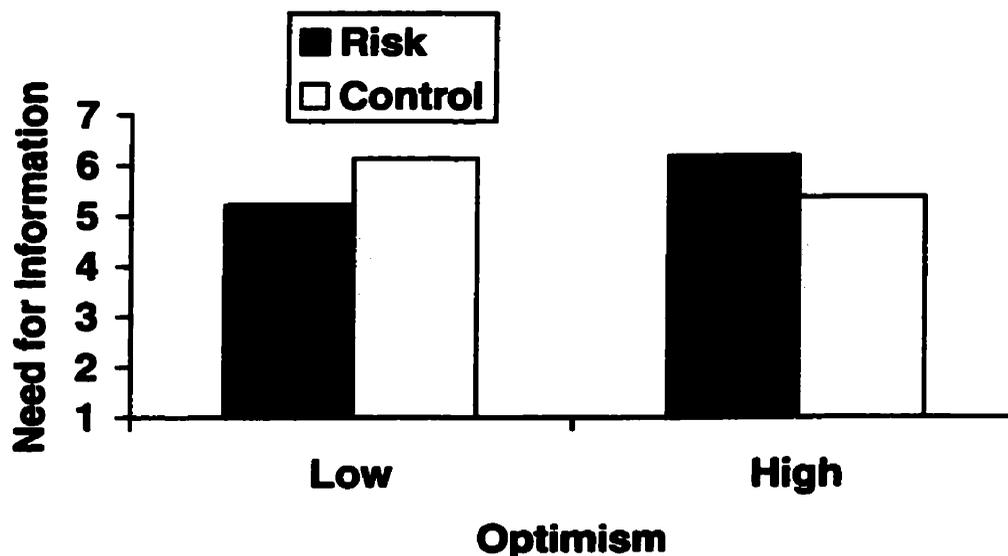


**Need for more information.** The last question in this series asked participants to indicate the extent to which they would need more information about the context in which the incident occurred in order to feel justified in forgiving Rob's behavior. The risk x context interaction was not moderated by optimism,  $t(73) = 1.65, p = .10$ . In addition, the risk x context,  $t(74) = .86, p = .39$ , and optimism x context,  $t(74) = 1.16, p = .25$  interactions failed to reach significance. No differences were found by risk condition (risk:  $M = 5.73, SD = 1.45$  vs. control:  $M = 5.78, SD = 1.67$ ),  $t(77) = .18, p = .86$ ; nor by optimism ( $\beta = -.01$ ),  $t(77) = .07, p = .94$ . There was however, a significant main effect of context,  $t(77) = 2.14, p = .04$ . As predicted, participants who read the extenuating statements ( $M = 5.39, SD = 1.63$ ) indicated they would need less information in order to feel justified in forgiving Rob's behavior than those people who read the aggravating statements ( $M = 6.13, SD = 1.40$ ).

Although there was a marginally significant risk x optimism interaction,  $t(74) = 1.82, p = .07$ , when followed up, low optimists who read the risk narrative ( $M = 5.21, SD = 1.78$ ) did not differ in their evaluation from those who read the control narrative ( $M = 6.14, SD = 1.49$ ),  $t(73) = 1.97, p > .025$ . Similarly, high optimists who read the risk narrative ( $M = 6.19, SD = .87$ ) did not differ from those who read the control narrative ( $M = 5.37, SD = 1.80$ ),  $t(73) = 1.75, p > .025$ .

While both follow-up tests failed to reach statistical significance, there appears to be a disordinal interaction. As can be seen in Figure 15, low optimists who read the risk narrative reported needing less information than those participants who read the control narrative in order to feel justified in forgiving Rob's behavior. In contrast, high optimists who read the risk narrative reported a greater need for information than those who read the control narrative in order to feel justified in forgiving Rob's behavior.

**Figure 15.** Need for information in order to feel justified in forgiving for high and low optimists by risk condition.



**Caution.** Participants completed a series of items designed to evaluate the level of caution they would desire in using the additional context they received in forming decisions concerning Rob's behaviour. The expected three-way interaction was not significant,  $t(77) = .36$ ,  $p = .72$ . Also, the predicted risk x context interaction,  $t(74) = 1.35$ ,  $p = .18$ , failed to reach statistical significance. Although participants' level of caution did not vary by risk condition (risk:  $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = .82$  vs. control:  $M = 4.35$ ,  $SD = .74$ ),  $t(77) = 1.46$ ,  $p = .15$ , levels of caution did differ significantly by optimism,  $t(77) = 2.46$ ,  $p = .02$ , and by context condition,  $t(77) = 2.75$ ,  $p = .008$ . Specifically, as ratings for optimism increased, participants reported less desire for caution in using the statements ( $\beta = -.15$ ) and participants who received extenuating statements ( $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = .98$ ) reported less desire

for caution than those people who received aggravating contextual statements ( $M = 4.42$ ,  $SD = .46$ ).

These main effects were also qualified by a significant optimism X context interaction,  $t(74) = 2.46$ ,  $p = .02$ . Those people who scored low in terms of optimism and who read extenuating statements ( $M = 4.28$ ,  $SD = .90$ ) did not differ from those who read aggravating statements ( $M = 4.51$ ,  $SD = .40$ ),  $t(73) = 1.02$ ,  $p > .025$ . Desire for caution did vary, however, for high optimists. As depicted in Figure 16, high optimists who read extenuating statements ( $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = .10$ ) desired less caution than high optimists who received aggravating statements ( $M = 4.35$ ,  $SD = .51$ ),  $t(73) = 2.89$ ,  $p < .025$ .

**Figure 16.** Reported desire for caution in using additional context for low and high optimists by context condition.

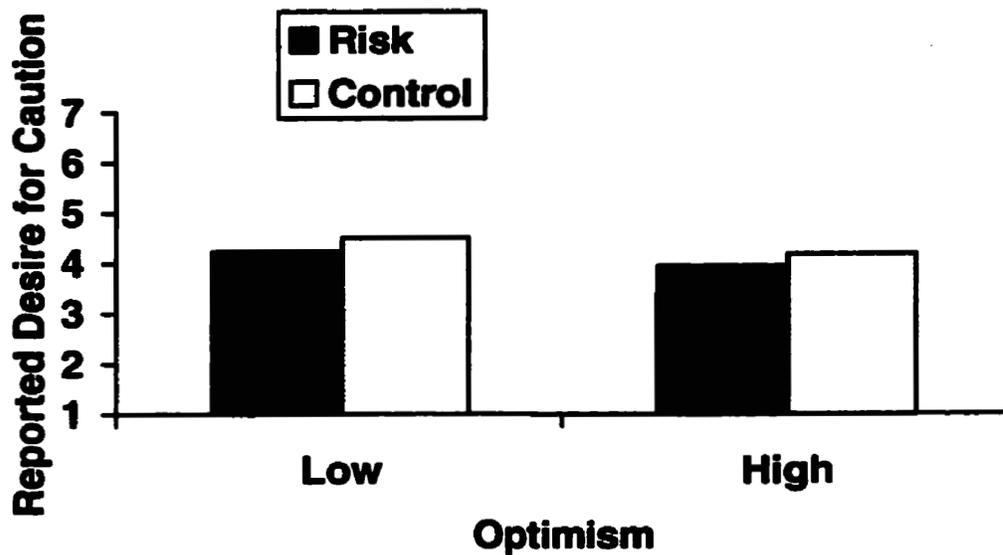


There was also a marginally significant risk x optimism interaction,  $t(74) = 1.83$ ,  $p = .07$ . When followed up, however, low optimists who read the risk narrative ( $M = 4.23$ ,  $SD = .89$ ) did not differ in their evaluation from those who read the control narrative ( $M =$

4.50,  $SD = .53$ ),  $t(73) = 1.24$ ,  $p > .025$ . Similarly, high optimists who read the risk narrative ( $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = .75$ ) did not differ from those who read the control narrative ( $M = 4.18$ ,  $SD = .91$ ),  $t(73) = 1.04$ ,  $p > .025$ .

Although a marginally significant interaction was obtained, as can be seen in Figure 17, low optimists who read the risk narrative reported similar desire for caution as did low optimists who read the control narrative. High optimists followed the same pattern. Participants who read the risk narrative reported similar desire from caution as did participants who read the control narrative.

**Figure 17.** Reported desire for caution in using additional context for low and high optimists by risk condition.



Type and quantity of information. When asked to identify the type of information regarding Rob's motives they would most like to receive, the predicted three-way,  $t(72) = .49$ ,  $p = .62$ , and the risk x context interactions,  $t(73) = .93$ ,  $p = .35$ , were not significant. In addition, the optimism x context,  $t(74) = .94$ ,  $p = .35$ , and risk x optimism,  $t(74) = .59$ ,

$p = .56$ , interactions were non significant. Contrary to my hypotheses, participants' responses did not vary by context condition,  $t(77) = .88$ ,  $p = .38$ , nor by risk condition,  $t(77) = .89$ ,  $p = .38$ . Participants' responses did vary however, by optimism,  $t(77) = 2.96$ ,  $p = .004$ . As reported optimism increased, participants indicated they would like to receive more information suggesting Rob's motives may have been unselfish or benevolent ( $\beta = -.11$ ).

Next, participants were asked a question regarding the amount of positive information they would need to conclude that Rob truly cares about Christa. The predicted three-way,  $t(73) = .32$ ,  $p = .75$ , and risk x context,  $t(74) = 1.22$ ,  $p = .23$ , interactions were not significant. In addition, the risk x optimism,  $t(74) = .62$ ,  $p = .53$ , interaction was not significant. Also, participants' responses did not vary by risk condition (risk:  $M = 4.88$ ,  $SD = 1.54$  vs. control:  $M = 4.90$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ),  $t(77) = .02$ ,  $p = .99$ , nor by optimism,  $\beta = -.19$ ,  $t(77) = 1.51$ ,  $p = .14$ . Responses did vary however, by type of context,  $t(77) = 3.95$ ,  $p < .001$ , in the need for positive information. Consistent with my prediction, people who received extenuating context ( $M = 4.24$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ) indicated they would need less positive evidence to conclude that Rob truly cares about his relationship with Christa than those who read aggravating information ( $M = 5.55$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ).

Once again, this main effect of context for positive information was qualified by a significant optimism X context interaction,  $t(74) = 2.42$ ,  $p = .02$ . People who scored low in terms of optimism and who read extenuating statements ( $M = 4.91$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ) did not differ in their reported need for more positive information from those people who received aggravating information ( $M = 5.50$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ),  $t(73) = 1.23$ ,  $p > .025$ . In contrast, those people who scored high in terms of optimism and who read extenuating information ( $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ) indicated they would need less positive information to conclude that Rob

truly cares about his relationship with Christa than those who read aggravating information ( $M = 5.59$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ),  $t(73) = 4.57$ ,  $p < .01$ . See Figure 18.

**Figure 18.** Amount of positive information needed to conclude that Rob truly cares about Christa for low and high optimists by context condition.



When participants were asked if they would need a lot more negative information to conclude that Rob truly does not care about Christa the expected three-way,  $t(73) = 1.65$ ,  $p = .10$ , and the risk  $\times$  context,  $t(74) = .32$ ,  $p = .75$ , interactions failed to reach significance. In addition, the optimism  $\times$  context,  $t(74) = 1.32$ ,  $p = .19$ , and the risk  $\times$  optimism,  $t(74) = 1.47$ ,  $p = .14$ , interactions were not significant. Also, participants' responses did not vary by risk condition (risk:  $M = 4.65$ ,  $SD = 1.69$  vs. control:  $M = 4.85$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ,  $t(77) = .52$ ,  $p = .60$ ), by optimism, ( $\beta = .02$ ,  $t(77) = .11$ ,  $p = .91$ ), or by context condition concerning their need for negative information (aggravating:  $M = 4.58$ ,  $SD = 1.84$  vs. extenuating,  $M = 4.93$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ),  $t(77) = .91$ ,  $p = .37$ .

Usefulness of context. Finally, participants rated each of the five context statements they received in terms of how useful they were in drawing inferences about the account they read. To explore these ratings, I examined ratings for the aggravating and extenuating conditions separately. For each regression, I entered the risk and optimism variables on the first step and the risk x optimism interaction on the second step.

Participants' ratings of usefulness did not differ by risk condition, or by level of optimism for any of the aggravating or extenuating statements (see Tables 4a and 4b for the appropriate means, standard deviations and beta weights).

Table 4a

Means, standard deviations, and beta weights for aggravating statements

Statements	Main Effects	
	Risk <u>M</u> ( <u>SD</u> )	Optimism
Once or twice Rob's laughed at me when I told him that I feel uncomfortable knowing that he still keeps in touch with his ex.	Risk: 4.47 (1.87) Control: 4.80 (1.77)	$\beta = .10$
I've always made sure Rob doesn't have to worry about my ex's, but he doesn't take my concerns about his ex-girlfriends seriously. He knows how I feel when he makes a point of calling or seeing them.	Risk: 4.79 (1.55) Control: 4.80 (1.67)	$\beta = .02$
In both my conversations with him that night, Rob seemed more interested in keeping Michelle entertained than in talking to me when I phoned. Shouldn't I be more important to him than his ex-girlfriend?	Risk: 4.80 (1.56) Control: 4.40 (1.85)	$\beta = .22$
More than once I've overheard Rob and his friends talking about hot "how" Michelle is. I've never heard them say that about me.	Risk: 4.58 (1.88) Control: 4.10 (1.77)	$\beta = .10$

Lately, Rob has seemed preoccupied with something. He's out late at night a lot and often I'm not sure where he is.

Risk: 5.47 (1.43)  
Control: 4.85 (1.81)

$\beta = .08$

Table 4b

Means, standard deviations, and beta weights for extenuating statements

Statements	Main Effects	
	Risk $M$ (SD)	Optimism
I know that Rob is very committed to "us". We are moving in together when my lease runs out at the end of this semester so I know he'd never do anything to jeopardize our relationship.	Risk: 5.20 (1.77) Control: 5.00 (1.52)	$\beta = .16$
We've been going out for over a year now and Rob has never given me any reason not to trust what he says about what he's doing.	Risk: 4.40 (1.76) Control: 4.14 (1.90)	$\beta = .29$
Even though he insisted I didn't have to, when I called Rob at 10pm I decided not to keep him on the line. I could hear at least two other voices in the background, a guy and a girl, and I didn't want to interrupt.	Risk: 4.70 (1.59) Control: 4.62 (1.50)	$\beta = .08$
Michelle is engaged which means I really shouldn't worry about her being interested in Rob.	Risk: 4.90 (1.55) Control: 5.10 (1.64)	$\beta = .17$
Rob and Michelle have been friends since they were kids. . . it's no wonder they are still good friends even now after they've broken-up.	Risk: 4.70 (1.63) Control: 4.14 (1.88)	$\beta = -.05$

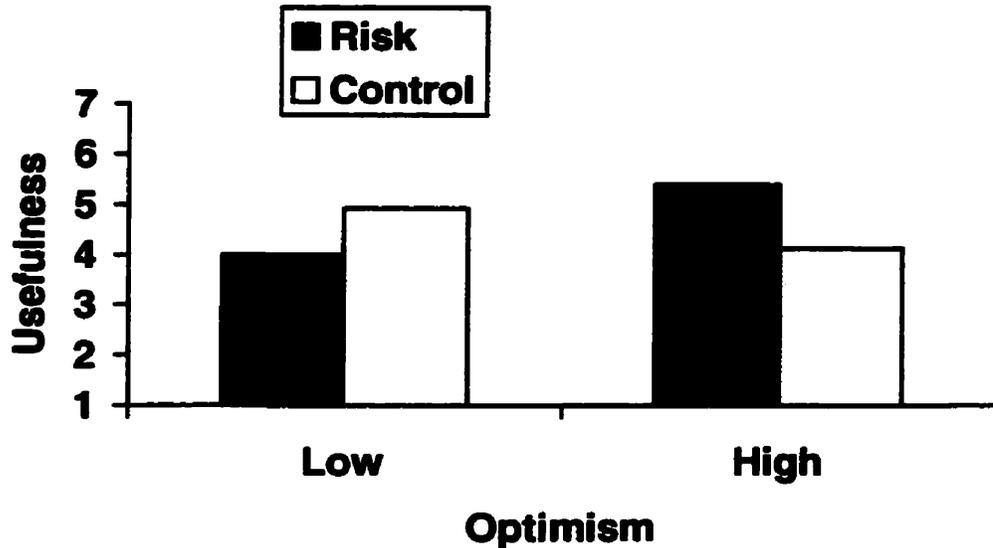
Although none of the main effects were significant, two significant risk X optimism interactions were found. These interactions were for the third extenuating (i.e., Even though he insisted I didn't have to, when I called Rob at 10pm I decided not to keep him on the line. I could hear at least two other voices in the background, a guy and a girl, and I

didn't want to interrupt),  $t(37) = 2.77, p = .01$ , and fifth aggravating (i.e., Lately, Rob has seemed preoccupied with something. He's out late at night a lot and often I'm not sure where he is.),  $t(35) = 2.10, p = .04$ , context statements.

Although significant risk X optimism interactions were found for both of these statements, none of the simple t-tests were significant. People who were low in terms of optimism and who read the risk narrative ( $M = 4.00, SD = 1.49$ ), did not differ in their evaluations of the usefulness of the third extenuating context statement from those who read the control narrative ( $M = 4.92, SD = 1.39$ ),  $t(37) = 1.52, p > .025$ . In addition, participants who scored high on optimism and who read the risk narrative ( $M = 5.40, SD = 1.43$ ) did not rate the usefulness differently than those in the control condition ( $M = 4.13, SD = 1.64$ ),  $t(37) = 1.86, p > .025$ .

Although these follow-ups were not significant it appears as though the interaction may be disordinal. Low optimists who read the risk narrative indicated the statement was less useful than those who read the control narrative. Conversely, high optimists who read the risk narrative, indicated the statement was more useful than those who read the control narrative (see Figure 19).

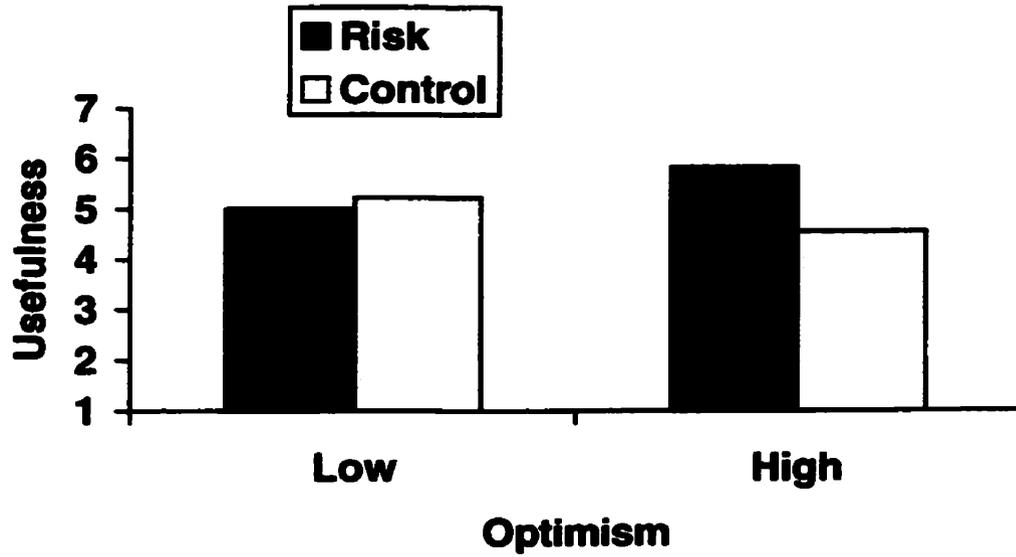
**Figure 19.** Usefulness of the third extenuating statement for low and high optimists by risk condition.



Similarly, those who scored low on optimism and who read the risk narrative ( $M = 5.00$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ) did not differ in their evaluations of the fifth aggravating context from those who read the control narrative ( $M = 5.22$ ,  $SD = 1.86$ ),  $t(35) = .29$ ,  $p < .025$ . In contrast, those who scored high on optimism and who read the risk narrative ( $M = 5.82$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ) rated the statements as more useful as compared to those who read the control narrative ( $M = 4.55$ ,  $SD = 1.81$ ),  $t(35) = 2.67$ ,  $p < .025$ , see Figure 18.

Again, it appears as though the pattern of means reverses depending on the level of optimism (i.e., a disordinal interaction). Low optimists who read the risk narrative indicated the statement was less useful than those who read the control narrative. Conversely, high optimists who read the risk narrative, indicated the statement was more useful than those who read the control narrative (see Figure 20).

**Figure 20.** Usefulness of the fifth extenuating statement for low and high optimists by risk condition.



## Discussion

Individuals within our culture are bombarded with accounts and images of relational risk on a daily basis (i.e., in advertisements, music, television, interactions with friends and family). Although these risks do not necessarily jeopardize one's own romantic relationship directly, I expected exposure to these risks might have important implications concerning the manner in which individuals evaluate and interpret events in relationships. Specifically, I proposed that exposure to risk might induce individuals to make less charitable conclusions or less likely to forgive in the face of an actual transgression. Furthermore, because individuals typically receive these images and accounts accompanied by rich and colourful details, I also predicted people's evaluations and interpretations could vary as a function of the type of additional contextual information they received (i.e., extenuating or aggravating).

Besides the influence of risk and context on people's evaluations and interpretation, I was also interested in determining how an optimistic outlook might moderate the effects of these variables. Psychologists have demonstrated that the presence or absence of optimistic beliefs has important implications concerning issues such as health, adversity, coping, and major life transitions (Andersson, 1996; Aspinwall, Carver et al., 1993; Richter & Hoffman, 2001; Spencer & Norem, 1996). For example, some research suggests that higher levels of optimism are indicative of better problem solving (Scheier & Carver, 1987), improved health (Scheier & Carver, 1987), and improved coping strategies (Carver et al., 1993). Other researchers, however, have suggested that an optimistic outlook is not always functional (Perloff, 1983). For example, some researchers argue that people who underestimate their own vulnerability of experiencing negative life events may have more difficulty in dealing with negative events should they occur (Wortman, 1976).

Given this evidence concerning the importance of optimism, I wondered if those individuals who possessed a more optimistic outlook would differ in their evaluations of a relationship transgression from those who possessed a less optimistic outlook. Specifically, I sought to determine whether and how such an outlook would alter the manner in which individuals chose to use aggravating or extenuating contextual information concerning a relational transgression when exposed to risk.

Unfortunately, my results did not conform to my expectations. Indeed, as I will argue in the remaining sections of this discussion, I believe the results I obtained challenge several of the basic assumptions that guided the development of my hypotheses.

In the sections that follow, I will review these four assumptions. First, I will discuss the predictions I held concerning exposure to subtle, indirect risks and how the present results cast doubt on the assumption that these risks lead to cautious styles of information processing. Next, I will review what my data suggest in relation to the assumption that negative information is more diagnostic than positive information when drawing inferences about moral attributes. Then, I will discuss the implications of my data for the assumption that people are more concerned with avoiding the error of forgiving someone who is guilty than of not forgiving someone who is innocent. Finally, I will review the fit between my results and the assumption that individuals who are higher in optimism tend to use buffering strategies when exposed to situations of risk. I will conclude with a discussion of the limitations of my research and some concluding thoughts.

#### **First Assumption: Exposure to Indirect Risks Leads to Caution in Information Processing**

The present study hinged on the belief that when exposed to subtle, indirect risks, individuals tend to adopt a more cautious approach to information processing. That is, based on Boon and Holmes' (1999) model of cautious processing, I proposed that, once

those aspects of people's general relationship schemas pertaining to risk have been primed, individuals would respond to the heightened accessibility of thoughts and feelings about the risky nature of relationships by adopting a more pessimistic or cautious manner of information processing.

In actuality however, I found virtually no evidence to support this proposition. Instead, participants who had been exposed to risk did not differ from controls in their appraisals of the ambiguous account or their judgements concerning the value of the information they received. The manipulation was not effective in inducing participants to report more pessimistic beliefs concerning relationships in general or the risks associated with breaking-up. Also, the manipulation failed to elicit a more negative mood. Instead, risk participants did not differ from controls in their responses to any of the three manipulation checks (i.e., Relationship Belief Scale, Perceptions of Risk items, and the PANAS). Not surprisingly given this outcome, none of the predicted risk x context x optimism nor risk x context interactions were statistically significant, either.

These results cast considerable doubt on the effectiveness of the risk manipulation, at least concerning its ability to cause the pattern of effects I expected to obtain. In fact, the only evidence I have to suggest that the risk narrative was at all successful in leading people to think about the risks inherent in romantic relationships comes from examination of participants' responses to the manipulation bolstering generation task.

What happened to risk: A possible explanation. Participants in the risk condition were asked to describe, in detail, as many reasons as they could why people often feel insecure in romantic relationships. An examination of responses indicates that people were indeed thinking about risk while completing this task. For example, participants in the risk condition often wrote things such as: "from being hurt in other relationships," "any form of

abuse,” and “statistically people know that most marriages end in divorce.” In contrast, participants in the control condition, who were asked to describe places to go and things to do on a first date, wrote things such as: “go to a movie, have coffee and dessert or drinks at a lounge,” “see a football or hockey game,” and “go to a live theatre to see a play.”

The question thus arises, if risk participants did think about risk, why did participants assigned to the risk condition fail either to become more pessimistic in their beliefs about breaking-up or to exhibit caution in their evaluations? Let me suggest two possible explanations for this pattern of results.

The first explanation stems from the work of Nairn (2000). In her original analysis of the data from her Masters’ study, Nairn (2000) too, found very little support for the model of cautious processing and, in particular, for the hypothesis that those exposed to risk would exhibit caution when information processing. However, in recent re-analyses of her data in which she divided her sample into two groups as a function of relationship length (i.e., longer and shorter relationships) Nairn found a distinct pattern of results suggesting that the risk manipulation worked as predicted but only for some participants. Consistent with the findings of her original analysis, participants in longer relationships (e.g., relationships 24 months and over) did not appear to exhibit caution when exposed to risk. In contrast, these individuals became defensive. Specifically, when exposed to risk, participants in longer relationships reported more positive evaluations of romantic relationships and of the relationship transgression under examination. However, participants in shorter relationships (e.g., relationships from six to 24 months in length) did, in fact, exhibit cautious processing when evaluating. For example, participants in short-term relationships reported more negative or pessimistic beliefs in general about romantic relationships than did those in long-term relationships. Why should those individuals who

are in shorter relationships exhibit caution when exposed to risk whereas people in long-term relationships do not?

A possible explanation centers on the specific types of relationship concerns people hold in long and short-term relationships. For example, the risk narrative employed in these studies might be personally relevant to those people in shorter relationships (i.e., romantic relationships are fragile and there is a risk of getting hurt while in such a relationship). In contrast, since the risk narrative documents the story of a newer relationship, people who are in longer relationships may not view the events depicted in the story as likely to occur in their own relationship (i.e., they have invested a great deal of time into making the relationship a success and therefore, the type of break-up depicted in the narrative is very unlikely to occur in their own relationship).

This finding suggests that exposure to risk might not affect all people in the same manner. For example, there may be distinct differences in people's reactions to risk depending on whether an individual is involved in a casual dating relationship, a serious dating relationship, or is married. If this is the case, grouping participants together (i.e., those in longer and shorter relationship) for analysis purposes may obscure any tendencies toward cautious processing that may exist among different participants.

Unfortunately, Nairn's discovery occurred during the later stages of data collection for the current project. Had I known earlier about the discrepancy in results for long and short-term relationships, I would have taken steps to ensure that I had sufficient numbers of participants in both types of relationships to warrant including relationship length as an additional independent variable in my analyses. Regrettably, the number of people per cell in the present sample is too small to permit confidence in interpreting the findings of the results I obtained when I attempted to analyze the present data separately for participants in

short and long-term relationships. As the data presented in Appendix B tentatively suggest, however, there may be good reason to explore the role of relationship length with a larger sample.

In sum, Nairn's (2000) study seems to provide tentative support for the notion that the model of cautious processing is valid for people involved in short-term romantic relationships. However, the phenomenon may be much more specific than I had expected. Although people involved in short-term romantic relationships who are exposed to risk may respond to the heightened accessibility of thoughts and feelings about the risky nature of relationships by adopting a more pessimistic or cautious manner of information processing, those in longer relationships may respond very differently.

Challenging the model of cautious processing. There is at least one other important possible explanation to consider, however. Specifically, perhaps there are a variety of ways that people respond to the sorts of risks studied in this experiment, one of which involves choosing not to pay attention to the risks they encounter. Consider, for example, people's actions while watching a documentary on puppy mills. As the images of mutilated, gaunt, and pest-infested puppies fill the television screen, many people respond by changing the channel, leaving the room, or simply shutting the television off. Few individuals are inspired by these images to begin campaigning for the elimination of puppy mills.

Although the narrative I employed in the present study is certainly not as appalling as images of abused animals, participants in this study may have adopted a similar approach to the television viewer mentioned above. Participants assigned to read the risk narrative might in fact have mentally "change the channel" or "left the room" when they read the risk narrative. If this is the case, that is, if participants exposed to the risk narrative simply "tuned out" the idea that romantic relationships are inherently risky, it is not

surprising that risk participants did not report more negative evaluations of romantic relationships as compared to those who read the control narrative. Participants in the risk condition may very well have read the risk narrative and have experienced a few niggling concerns about risk in relationships, but their dominant response may have been to dismiss these thoughts or to banish them to the periphery of their minds along with other thoughts they consider too painful or perhaps too irrelevant to think about. This could explain the near complete lack of significant risk effects in this study. Moreover, because the predicted interactions (i.e., risk x context x optimism and risk x context) all involved risk as well, it would also serve to explain the complete absence of any of the predicted interactions.

It is also possible that participants may have reacted defensively to the references to relationship risk. Rather than becoming cautious, they may have adopted information-processing strategies aimed at reassurance seeking or denial, much as participants have been found to do in previous research using direct threats (e.g., Holmes, 1991, Murray & Holmes, 1993). For example, they might have actively thought about the positive things that were present in their own relationships or have denied the possibility that the negative events portrayed in the risk narrative could happen to them. Note however, that we might have expected to find evidence of this defensive processing in participants' responses. For example, I might have expected that a reassurance-seeking response would have led risk participants to report no desire for caution, which would result in risk effects but in the opposite direction to what I had predicted. That no such effects were obtained leave me sceptical that participants in this study responded to the risk manipulation in a defensive (i.e., reassurance-seeking) fashion. Instead, I believe that the results (i.e., null effects of risk, whether considering main effects or interactions) more clearly conform to what I'd expect to find were participants essentially ignoring the threats implied.

One of the obvious directions future research might take is to explore the discrepancy in ratings between individuals in short and long-term relationships found by Nairn (2000). Thus far, the only study that has been successful in demonstrating the full effect of risk is that of Boon and Holmes (1999). They too, limited their sample to individuals in relationships of no less than four months and no longer than 24 months. Since this cautious mode of information processing has only been completely demonstrated in one instance, I believe the model stands on tenuous ground. Should replication of Nairn's study fail to demonstrate that exposure to subtle risk leads to cautious processing, I believe serious consideration must be given to the theoretical framework of the model before further research is carried out. It's possible that people who are exposed to subtle risks simply do not respond in a cautious manner. Instead, people who are exposed to subtle risks might adopt reassurance or denial-like responses or possibly, are simply not affected by exposure to these types of risks. Clearly, future research should attempt to disentangle what types of responses are likely to occur in the face of subtle risks.

In addition to examining what, if any kind, of response individuals exhibit when exposed to subtle risk, I believe it is important to determine how men and women might differ in their responses. Due to insufficient numbers of male participants in both the present and Nairn's study,<sup>6</sup> we were unable to test for differences between male participants and female participants. Would males who are exposed to risk report similar responses to females exposed to risk? Would either sex show a tendency to exhibit more caution when exposed to relationship related risk as compared to the other sex? If replication of Nairn's

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<sup>6</sup> Due to the very small number of men who participated in Nairn's (2000) study, she only analyzed the data for female participants.

study does provide support for the model, it is imperative that this mode of processing be demonstrated in both sexes prior to making generalizations.

Also, I believe that prior to using the risk narrative employed in the present study in future research, it is critical to obtain clear evidence that the narrative is able to make participants aware of the risks of being in romantic relationships. As demonstrated by the manipulation checks, participants who read the risk narrative did not rate relationships more negatively than participants who read the control narrative. Perhaps by using a risk manipulation that is more vivid and or personally relevant, the anticipated risk effects would emerge. For example, researchers might attempt to show participants a movie clip as opposed to asking participants to read a risk narrative. In contrast to the narratives we have typically employed in these studies, such a manipulation would provide participants with both a visual representative and auditory stimuli supporting the notion that relationships are inherently risky. Conceivably, by enabling participants to see and hear “real” victims of relationship dissolution, participants may be more likely to report cautious and negative views concerning romantic relationships.

In sum, given the methodological weaknesses in the present study, I do not believe that the model of cautious processing should be discounted entirely at this point. Instead, I think that further research is required to explore when this effect may occur (i.e., does it occur with other types of stimuli) and who is more likely to adopt this mode of information processing (i.e., people involved in different kinds of relationships).

**Second Assumption: Negative Information is more Diagnostic than Positive Information?**

In addition to my predictions concerning risk, I also expected that, due to the valence of the information, individuals who received extenuating contextual statements would be more charitable when evaluating the character portrayed in the ambiguous

account (i.e., his motives, behaviours, and personality), and the additional context statements as compared to those who received aggravating contextual statements.

Based on Reeder and Brewer's research (1979), I further predicted that participants who received the extenuating contextual statements would rate the statements as less diagnostic and informative than those who received the aggravating statements on items assessing the informational value of the statements. As my results indicate, however, this latter assumption was not supported in the present study. Although the effect was marginal and should be interpreted with caution, participants who received extenuating information indicated that they believed the information was more diagnostic and informationally valuable than the aggravating information. Below, I will review my findings and discuss possible reasons why I believe my predictions were not supported.

Context effects that occurred as predicted. On a number of dependent variables, individuals' evaluations of the ambiguous account and the additional statements varied as a function of the context they received and did so in the predicted direction. As hypothesized, individuals who received extenuating context (i.e., contextual information designed to make Rob appear innocent of wrongdoing) indicated they believed Rob was less blameworthy, would experience less short-term damage to his relationship, and was less likely to have cheated on Christa, as compared to those who received aggravating contextual statements (i.e., contextual statements designed to make Rob appear guilty of wrongdoing). Similarly, participants who received extenuating statements also reported a more favourable impression of Rob and they believed the context excused and justified Rob's behaviour to a greater extent than those in the aggravating condition. Finally, as I expected, participants in the extenuating condition indicated they would need less positive information to feel justified in forgiving Rob, exhibited less caution in making judgements,

and reported needing less positive information to conclude that Rob truly cares about Christa than those in the aggravating condition.

It is not surprising that people who received extenuating (or positive) information were willing to indicate that the context excused and justified Rob's behaviour to a greater extent than those who received aggravating (or negative) information, nor is it surprising that they reported that they would need less positive information to feel justified in forgiving Rob than those who received aggravating information. The contextual information the two groups of participants received was, in fact, designed to elicit much this kind of response (though, of course, I expected risk to moderate this pattern of response).

Context effects that did not occur as predicted. Although ratings did differ as expected depending on the context condition for many variables, there were three noteworthy exceptions to this pattern of results.

First, participants rated the events described in the ambiguous account equally negatively regardless of whether they received aggravating or extenuating context. Given the fairly consistent patterns of context effects I obtained on the remaining measures assessing the ambiguous account, I am not sure why participants' responses to this particular dependent variable did not vary depending on the context they were asked to read. It seems odd, for example, that extenuating participants would rate Rob as less worthy of blame, less likely to have cheated on Christa, and less likely for his actions to have caused short-term damage and yet not rate the incident portrayed in the account less negatively than participants in the aggravating condition.

A second noteworthy exception occurred for participants' responses to the item that asked them to indicate the type of information (i.e., that Rob's motives were unselfish and

benevolent or selfish and inconsiderate) they most wanted to receive. I expected participants to request more negative information because the results of previous research have been interpreted as demonstrating that individuals typically view this information as more diagnostic and informationally valuable than positive information at least when judging people on moral dimensions (i.e., Alicke, 2000; Kanouse & Hanson, 1972; Reeder and Brewer, 1979; Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). In contrast to this prediction, however, participants wanted more positive information and not more negative information concerning Rob and his motives.

In fact, in the present study, 59.3% of participants requested extenuating information whereas only 39.5% requested aggravating information. Interestingly, Nairn found a similar pattern, in her study (i.e., over three-quarters of participants indicated they would like to receive more information suggesting that Rob's motives may have been unselfish and benevolent as opposed to selfish and inconsiderate).

Participants in the present study also tended to rate the extenuating statements as more diagnostic and informative than the aggravating statements on items assessing the informational value of the statements. Whereas this finding is marginal and must be interpreted with caution, it stands in direct contradiction to Reeder and Brewer's propositions concerning the diagnostic value of positive and negative information. It is worth noting that Nairn (2000) found a similar pattern of results as reported here. Participants in her study who received extenuating information again rated the statements they received as more diagnostic and informative than did those participants who received aggravating information.

What do these findings mean? Paired with Nairn's findings, I would argue they provide persuasive evidence that Reeder and Brewer's theory needs to be re-examined. Do

people really perceive negative information as more useful and relevant than positive information or do individuals believe that positive information is as relevant and diagnostic as negative information? Could people actually perceive positive information to be more diagnostic than negative information?

There are important methodological differences between previous research endeavours (e.g., Reeder & Brewer, 1979) and both the present study and the Nairn (2000) study that could account for the apparently discrepant pattern of results. First, in previous research that documents individuals' tendency to overweight negative information, participants were given both aggravating and extenuating contextual information simultaneously (Reeder & Brewer, 1979). In contrast, participants in both my study and in Nairn's study received only one type of contextual information (i.e., aggravating or extenuating). Perhaps the manner in which participants are given context has implications concerning evaluations of the diagnosticity of the information.

A second important difference between the present study and works that document individuals' tendency to overweight negative information centers on the types of judgments participants were asked to make. In the present study, participants were asked to make judgments concerning the informational value of the context statements. In contrast, Reeder and Brewer (1979) and others, asked individuals to make judgments concerning moral attributes. In those studies that have specifically examined judgments relating to morality, participants have not been asked to rate the informational value of the two types of context. Instead, it appears that their inferences concerning people's perceptions of the diagnosticity of negative information are just that – inferences. If participants in these studies were expressly asked to rate the diagnosticity of the positive and negative

information, they too may show a preference for extenuating as opposed to aggravating information as did the participants in the present study.

Although my assumption concerning the weighting of negative information was disconfirmed, I believe important implications can be drawn from my study. Taking into account the consistent tendency of participants in the present study and in Nairn's (2000) study to rate positive information as more useful, I believe further research must be conducted to shed light on the inconsistency between our studies and the existing body of research that suggests that people perceive negative information as more useful (Reeder & Brewer, 1979).

I think the most succinct method of addressing the inconsistencies between Reeder and Brewer's (1979) research and the present study, would be to replicate a study which demonstrated that participants tended to view negative information as more diagnostic and useful in decision-making than positive information. However, this study would differ on a key point: participants would specifically be asked to indicate whether they thought the positive or negative information was more useful in helping them draw conclusions. If this replication demonstrated that participants viewed negative information as more diagnostic than positive information, I presume that the methodology (i.e., only giving participants one type of context or asking people to make judgments not related to morality) employed in the present study hindered my attempt to find this effect. If however, participants indicate they perceive the positive information is more useful in forming judgements, I believe this suggests a potential flaw in Reeder and Brewer's theory.

If further research is not successful in demonstrating that negative information is more diagnostic than positive information, this will also have serious implications for the model of cautious processing. As described, the model is based on the assumption that

exposure to risk (i.e., negative information) will lead individuals to adopt a cautious approach to information processing. If people truly do not view negative information as more diagnostic, why should individuals exposed to negative information (i.e., relationships are inherently risky) become more cautious in their evaluations of relationships in general? Instead, if people believe that positive information is more diagnostic than negative, I expect that individuals would be considerably more likely to pay attention to positive cues concerning romantic relationships than negative cues.

In sum, unless people truly do believe that negative information is more diagnostic and useful than positive, important theoretical assumptions that form the foundation for this and other lines of inquiry are at jeopardy. Specifically, all hypotheses based on the notion that negative information is more diagnostic than positive are wrong.

#### Third Assumption: Individuals are Testing the Likelihood of Guilt

I believe the results concerning participants' reported preference for additional extenuating context might have important consequences for the manner in which we think about hypothesis testing. While developing this study, I worked under the assumption that participants would perceive certain cognitive errors as being more costly than others. Specifically, I postulated that participants would see greater costs associated with the error of extending the benefit of the doubt to Rob if he was actually guilty of infidelity than with the error of failing to extend the benefit of the doubt if he was innocent. Accordingly, I predicted that individuals would be particularly concerned with avoiding the former error, and thus would attempt to gather as much negative information as possible to test the hypothesis of guilt. Two findings in the present study lead me to believe my assumptions in this regard were incorrect. First, as reported previously, the majority of participants indicated they would like to receive information suggesting Rob's motives may have been

unselfish or benevolent. This contradicts my beliefs concerning which of the two types of errors would be most important.

In addition, a consideration of participants' responses to the open-ended question that asked them to justify their choice of type of information they selected also appears to disconfirm the view that participants were more concerned with the error of extending the benefit of the doubt when not deserved than with the error of failing to extend the benefit of the doubt when warranted. Specifically, participants were more interested in testing the hypothesis that Rob was innocent of any wrongdoing or they were simply giving Rob the benefit of the doubt. For example a female participant who read the risk narrative and who received extenuating statements said: "I feel he deserves the benefit of the doubt. She was just at his house, not in his bed. I always try to find the positive and would rather hear positivity over negativity." Similarly, a male participant who read the risk narrative and who received aggravating statements said: "Why look for selfish motives? That information would only lead to break-up the relationship."

These results have serious implications for the manner in which I had perceived participants would engage in hypothesis testing. This finding, coupled with similar findings obtained by Nairn (2000), suggest that our fundamental assumptions concerning information searching and hypothesis testing may be wrong. The majority of participants appear to be more concerned with avoiding the attribution of blame when it is not deserved than with failing to attribute blame when it is deserved. Once again, the model of cautious processing appears to be challenged. Had participants been concerned with making the anticipated error (i.e., wrongly extending the benefit of the doubt), I believe they should have demonstrated caution and have overwhelmingly requested negative or incriminating information. Their obvious preference for positive information implies that they were not

shifted into a more cautious type of information processing or that our assumptions concerning which hypothesis participants are testing is wrong.

I also believe these findings have important implications for individuals who are involved in romantic relationships. Would individuals involved in romantic relationships also be interested in testing the hypothesis of innocence if they suspected their partner was guilty of wrongdoing? Or conversely, would individuals search for information that was indicative of wrongdoing when drawing conclusions about negative events occurring in their own romantic relationships? I don't believe there is a straightforward answer to these questions. I think some individuals would be very motivated to find information that suggests their partner is responsible of wrongdoing whereas others would embark on an information search to unearth as much exonerating information as possible. However, I speculate that the vast majority of individuals would fall somewhere in the middle of these two extremes. For example, an individual may want to test both hypotheses simultaneously. He or she may try to unearth as much information as possible regardless of whether it is suggestive of innocence or guilt. I believe if my speculations concerning which hypothesis individuals were testing proved to be correct, this would also challenge the claim that people exposed to risk react by adopting a cautious approach to information processing.

Although research to determine which hypothesis individuals are interested in testing is important, I believe the concerns associated with the assumptions behind the model of cautious processing and the diagnosticity of negative information must first be addressed. In essence, if people do not perceive negative information as more diagnostic, there may not be any reason for individuals to shift to a cautious mode of processing when exposed to negative or risky information. In addition, if both of these theories are founded

on faulty assumptions, there is no reason for individuals to report wanting negative information when positive information is accessible.

In brief, I believe that attempting to address why participants in the present study reported wanting more positive information about Rob and his motives than negative information is virtually impossible given that the expectations I held concerning this preference are steeped in theoretical assumptions that have clearly been challenged.

#### Fourth Assumption: Increased Optimism Leads to Buffering

Earlier research on optimism seemed to suggest that individuals who are relatively optimistic about their risk of experiencing negative outcomes might fail to engage in behaviours to prevent these outcomes (e.g., Perloff, 1983; Weinstein, 1982). In essence, these individuals “buffer” or deny thoughts concerning negative events (e.g., ignoring, discounting, or distorting thoughts concerning negative events) as opposed to engaging in behaviours to minimize the occurrence of negative outcomes.

In contrast, more recent research (e.g., Aspinwall & Brunhart, 1996; Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992) suggests that increased optimism may not always lead to the denial-like kinds of responses previous theorists have presumed it does. Instead, people who are highly optimistic may be especially likely to pay attention to cues of risk and actively engage in behaviours designed to minimize negative outcomes.

It will become evident as I discuss the unexpected interactions involving optimism that, contrary to the majority of literature on optimism, the pattern of results in the present study seem to conform to the “active coping” strategy and thus challenge the buffering perspective.

Context x optimism interactions. Support for an active coping approach was demonstrated in several unanticipated optimism x context interactions. These interactions

emerged on items assessing how much the additional information participants received excused Rob's behavior, how much the context justified Rob's behavior, the level of caution participants desired in making judgments based on the context, the amount of positive information participants reported they would need to conclude that Rob cares about Christa, the amount of short-term damage caused to the relationship, and participants' impressions of Rob.

In each instance, the pattern was consistent: Low optimists did not differ in their evaluations as a function of the contextual information they were assigned to read whereas high optimists did. For example, low optimists who read extenuating statements did not differ in reported desire for caution from those who read aggravating statements. The pattern was also consistent for high optimists: High optimists who received extenuating context consistently provided more favourable evaluations than did high optimists who received aggravating statements. For example, high optimists who read extenuating statements reported less desire for caution than high optimists who received aggravating statements. What does this pattern imply?

Although I am not entirely certain that the past research concerning optimism can be generalized clearly to the present study, I would suggest that the pattern emerging in my data is more indicative of participants employing certain elements of the "active coping" approach than of the "buffering approach." For example, those people who are highly optimistic seem to be showing a tendency to view the information provided within the context statements as more useful or valuable. Past research has demonstrated this is indicative of active coping. Had participants exhibited a "buffering" approach, I would have expected the effect of context to be eliminated that is, I would have expected to find a

pattern of results in which high optimists did not differentiate between the two types of context.

Risk x optimism interactions. Tentative support for an “active coping” approach is also apparent in several unexpected risk x optimism interactions. For example, disordinal risk x optimism interactions were found when participants were asked to evaluate the informational value of the context, and the usefulness of the third extenuating and fifth aggravating context statements, and how well the context was able to justify Rob’s behavior. Specifically, when evaluating the usefulness of the context statements, low optimists who read the risk narrative indicated the statement was less useful than those who read the control narrative. Conversely, high optimists who read the risk narrative indicated the statement was more useful than those who read the control narrative. In essence, the pattern obtained for high optimists is the pattern I would have expected had the risk manipulation been effective throughout.

As with the context x optimism interaction, the pattern of findings among the risk x optimism interactions appears to support an active coping approach. Highly optimistic participants appear to view the statements as more useful when exposed to risk whereas low optimists do not. Had participants displayed a buffering strategy, I believe that those participants who were highly optimistic and who read the risk narrative would have rated the statements as less useful than high optimists in the control condition.

Puzzling findings. In addition to the risk x optimism interactions that appeared to provide support for an active coping response, two interactions, failed to conform to either an active coping or a buffering approach. When asked to indicate the amount of positive information they would need to feel justified in forgiving Rob, low optimists who read the risk narrative did not differ in their evaluation from those who read the control narrative.

Similarly, high optimists who read the risk narrative did not differ from those who read the control narrative. In addition, reported desire for caution did not differ between low optimists who read the control or risk narrative and for high optimists who read the control or risk narrative.

Given that both of these interactions are marginally significant and that they involve the risk manipulation does not appear to have worked in the desired manner, I presume that these findings may simply be attributable to error.

Also, I was surprised that context did not influence the obtained risk x optimism interactions on several items. For example, when asked to indicate how well the context was able to justify Rob's behavior, there was a marginally significant risk x optimism interaction, however, context appears to have not moderated this interaction. Given that ratings did differ by context condition (i.e., there was a main effect of context on this item, and a context x optimism interaction) I am baffled as to why the three-way interaction failed to reach significance.

A word of caution. Although I have attempted to make sense of the interactions I obtained, my interpretations concerning participants' tendency to exhibit an active coping strategy must be interpreted with a caution. While many of my explanations for participants responses in the present study were based on Aspinwall and Brunhart's (1996) work, it is important to be cognizant of the fact that their study examined participants' responses to risk associated with sun exposure and cigarette smoking (i.e., personally relevant risks). The present study, in contrast, focused on subtle risks present in other people's relationships. Due to the discrepancy between the two types of risks studied, I was required to speculate what an active coping response would look like in the present

study. That is, based on the pattern of responses for high optimists obtained by Aspinwall and Brunhart, I speculated how high optimists in the present study may respond.

Implications. I believe my research has advanced possible implications concerning the manner in which highly optimistic individuals respond to negative information within romantic relationships. Contrary to what the majority of existing literature leads us to expect, highly optimistic individuals do not necessarily bury their heads into the proverbial sand at the first sign of threat. Instead, the results obtained in the present study are suggestive of a more active approach to negative information. Overall, high optimists appear to have been attentive to the negative information.

I think this finding may have positive implications for people who are highly optimistic. This pattern may suggest that high optimists may generate reasons for their optimism. These individuals might actively engage in behaviors designed to minimize the likelihood of negative outcomes. For example, they might remain vigilant for signs that bad things may occur and then act to reduce the likelihood of the negative outcome. If this were the case, I would argue that highly optimistic individuals have every reason to be optimistic that more good things will occur than bad.

In addition to the possible implications for high optimists, I believe the lack of differences for low optimists between risk and especially context<sup>7</sup> conditions is also worthy of further exploration. Why didn't responses for low optimists vary depending on the type of context they received? Perhaps ratings by low optimists did not vary by context condition because low optimists believe that bad things and good things are equally likely to occur (as opposed to optimists who think that good things are more likely to occur). Or,

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<sup>7</sup> I will only focus on context since I am less confident about the true nature of the interactions involving risk given the failed risk manipulation.

perhaps people who reported low levels of optimism are actually pessimists and therefore expect bad things to occur?

In sum, I believe that given the consistent trends for both high and low optimists in the present study, future work should focus on development of the active coping model. I think that the pattern of responses for high optimists in the present study suggests that optimism does not necessarily lead individuals to ignore or repress thoughts about negative information but instead, to face negative or risky information in a pro-active manner.

### Limitations

Although I have already addressed the concerns with the risk narrative and the assumptions behind the model of cautious processing, there were also several limitations involving the sample tested and the context statements employed.

First, the sample I obtained was less than ideal in a number of ways. I had initially hoped to test only those people between the ages of 18-25 involved in dating relationships. Due to slow sign-up rates however, I relaxed my participation criteria to include all people regardless of age, dating, or marital status (i.e., those not in relationships and those who were married). Also problematic at the same time, the composition of the sample was heterogeneous in terms of age and relationship experience but the sample was homogeneous in terms of gender (three-quarters of the sample was female). By having a primarily female sample, I was not able to test for differences between the pattern of male and females responses.

In light of Nairn's findings concerning relationship length (i.e., short vs. long-term relationships), the mixture of participants (i.e., some who were not in relationships, some who were married, some in short-term relationships, some in long-term relationships) I tested in this study may have seriously hindered my attempts to find the risk effects I

anticipated. In essence, the anticipated effects of risk may have been nullified due to the possible difference in ratings provided by those people in different types of relationships.

Another difference between the present study and the study by Nairn (2000), was the absence of a “no context” condition. In her study, Nairn provided participants with aggravating, extenuating or no context. In doing so, she was able to contrast ratings for those who received positive and negative information with the baseline condition. Interestingly, Nairn discovered that those participants who received no context did not differ in their evaluations from those who received aggravating context. Again, this challenges the assumption that negative information is most diagnostic when making decisions.

I believe that by removing the “no context” condition in the present study, I removed the “baseline” by which to confidently interpret the context effects. Had I incorporated a “no context” group, I would have been able to determine whether participants who received the aggravating statements would have differentiated between negative context and no context at all.

I also believe that this study is limited in generalizability. The vast majority of individuals who participated in this study were female, Caucasian, and young. Obviously, this sample is not representative of the vast majority of individuals within our society. Given these limitations, generalization of these results must be done with caution until individuals representing other groups (e.g., males, people not enrolled in university, other ethnic groups) have been tested.

Finally, I suspect that the statistical power of the present study may have been weak. I predicted numerous three-way interactions involving risk, context, and optimism. Had I

·tested a greater number of participants, perhaps more of the anticipated interactions would have emerged.

### Conclusions

This project was developed based on the assumption that when exposed to risk people will respond in a cautious manner, that individuals perceive negative information to be more diagnostic than positive information, that people are more concerned with determining guilt than innocence, and that highly optimistic people tend to ignore or buffer as opposed to actively cope with adversity. I believe that the results of this research provide clear evidence that these assumptions are not as accurate as I had believed. Participants in this study failed to exhibit caution when exposed to risk, indicated they believed positive information was more diagnostic than negative, were more interested in assigning innocence than guilt, and high optimists displayed active coping strategies as opposed to buffering.

Although I was not able to explore the predicted relationships, I do not believe the present study was a failure. Instead, I believe the obtained patterns of effects (or non effects) in the present study are suggestive of the need for further theoretical refinement, development, and testing. I believe that by conducting further research to address these limitations, we will better understand how people in romantic relationships interpret the actions of and make decisions concerning those they care about.

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## Appendix A

Participant no.

**Please choose the most applicable answer. Some questions may require you to select more than one answer.**

1. Your gender        M        F
2. Your age: \_\_\_\_\_ years
3. Which of the following groups do you identify with? (choose all that apply)
 

a) caucasian	e) first nations (indigenous peoples)
b) african american	f) east indian
c) hispanic	g) middle eastern
d) asian	h) other (please specify) _____
4. What year of university are you in? \_\_\_\_\_ year
5. How many psychology courses have you taken (including this semester)? \_\_\_\_\_ half courses
6. What is your biological parents' relationship status?
 

a) married to each other	e) divorced and remarried / common law
b) common law	f) widow/widower
c) separated but not divorced	g) widow/widower but remarried / common law
d) divorced	h) other
7. Are you currently involved in a romantic relationship?        no        yes
 

If you answered yes:

  - a) how long have you been involved in the relationship? \_\_\_\_\_ months
  - b) your partner's gender is:        F        M
  - c) please indicate which of the following best describe(s) your relationship. (choose all that apply)
    - 1) casual dating
    - 2) exclusive dating/quite serious
    - 3) exclusive dating/very serious
    - 4) engaged
    - 5) cohabiting
    - 6) married

d) Please use the following scale to answer the 3 questions below:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all		moderately			extremely	

  - \_\_\_\_\_ a) how satisfied are you with your relationship?
  - \_\_\_\_\_ b) how successful is your relationship?
  - \_\_\_\_\_ c) how happy are you with your partner?

### **Your Task**

**The goal of this study is to examine how personality characteristics influence the manner in which individuals view themselves and others. You will be asked to complete a variety of questionnaire measures. It is expected that this task will take approximately 60 minutes for you to complete. Once you have finished, I will discuss the study with you in more detail and answer any questions you may have at that time.**

Be as accurate and honest as you can throughout. As well, try not to allow your answer on one question to influence your answers to other questions. Finally, remember that there are no correct or incorrect answers.

1                    2                    3                    4                    5                    6                    7  
strongly                    neutral                    strongly  
disagree                                       agree

- \_\_\_ 1. In uncertain times, I usually expect the best.
- \_\_\_ 2. It's easy for me to relax.
- \_\_\_ 3. If something can go wrong for me, it will.
- \_\_\_ 4. I always look on the bright side of things.
- \_\_\_ 5. I'm always optimistic about my future.
- \_\_\_ 6. I enjoy my friends a lot.
- \_\_\_ 7. It's important for me to keep busy.
- \_\_\_ 8. I hardly ever expect things to go my way.
- \_\_\_ 9. Things never work out the way I want them to.
- \_\_\_ 10. I don't get upset too easily.
- \_\_\_ 11. I'm a believer in the idea that "every cloud has a silver lining."
- \_\_\_ 12. I rarely count on good things happening to me.

Research shows that the presence of certain characteristics can foster the growth of a healthy romantic relationship. Using the scale below, please rate the extent to which you think each characteristic is typical of the average dating relationship:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all typical			neutral			very typical

In the average dating relationship, partners:

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Handle conflict constructively
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Are happy with each other "just the way they are"
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Share with each other
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Know what the other's really thinking most of the time
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Feel completely satisfied with their relationship
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Have truly compatible personalities
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Are able to communicate effectively about relationship anxieties and concerns
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Have compatible interests
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Keep their promises to each other
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Share the same life-goals (i.e. marriage, careers)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. Agree on the level of closeness appropriate to different situations
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. Are truly responsive to each other's needs
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. Believe that the relationship will succeed
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. Are confident depending on one another





**In responding to these statements, please consider whether you believe the stated events are more, less or equally likely to occur in your relationship in comparison to the typical or average relationship. In thinking about the typical or average relationship, please consider a relationship of approximately the same length as your relationship with your current partner. Please use the scale below to respond to each statement:**

**1 much less likely to occur in my relationship than in the typical relationship**

**2**

**3**

**4 equally probable in my relationship and the typical relationship**

**5**

**6**

**7 much more likely to occur in my relationship than in the typical relationship**

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Becoming closer to my partner even when external events or forces conspire to tear our relationship apart.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. The love my partner and I share continuing to grow.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. My partner and I becoming happier and even more satisfied with our relationship than we are today.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. My partner and I discovering areas in which our needs conflict in a serious way.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. My partner or I being attracted enough to another person to consider leaving our relationship.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. My partner and I growing further apart as we discover negative aspects of our relationship.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. My partner and I never tiring of one another's company no matter how much time we spend together.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Our relationship breaking up within the next 6 months.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Our relationship leading to marriage.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. My partner or I questioning our involvement with one another as we discover one another's faults.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. The passion my partner and I share remaining as intense as it is today.

Below is a list of characteristics that people typically possess to varying degrees. Research shows that the extent to which you possess these characteristics can strongly impact the success of your relationship. Using the scale below, please rate yourself, in terms of how typical the attribute is of you in comparison to an "average" person who is in a relationship.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
less typical of me than of the average person					more typical of me than of the average person	

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. openness
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. trustworthiness
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. caring
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. patience
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. honesty
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. predictability
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. respectfulness
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. dependability
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. willingness to forgive
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. slow to anger

Listed below are ten statements. Please use the scale provided to rate each of them according to how you think they reflect your feelings about yourself. Be as honest and as open as possible.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree			neither agree nor disagree			strongly agree

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. I take a positive attitude towards myself.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. I certainly feel useless at times.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. At times I think I am no good at all.



The following are some statements on feelings, attitudes, and behaviour. Read each statement and decide if it is true or false in reference to yourself. Check "1" if the statements is true, and "2" if it is false. Be honest, but do not spend too much time over any one statement. As a rule, first impressions are as accurate as any.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. People often disappoint me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. If I could get into a movie without paying and be sure I was not seen I would probably do it.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. I tend to keep on at a thing until others lose their patience with me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. I do not always tell the truth.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. I frequently find myself worrying about something.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. I have often met people who were supposed to be experts who were no better than I.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. I sweat very easily even on cool days.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. I like to know some important people because it makes me feel important.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. I think of ways to get even with certain people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. I often think, "I wish I were a child again."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. Most people I know would say I am a cheerful person.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. I do not like everyone I know.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. I find discussion about sex slightly annoying.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. I gossip a little at times.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. Sometime at elections I vote for men whom I know very little.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. I usually have to stop and think before I act even in trifling matters.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. Once in a while I laugh at dirty jokes.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. Sometimes when I am not feeling well I am cross.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. I have never felt better in my life than I do now.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. I am more of a "happy-go-lucky" person than a deep thinker.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 21. I do not read every editorial in the newspaper every day.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 22. I try to plan in advance what to do if certain threatening situations were to arise.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 23. Once in a while I put off until tomorrow what I ought to do today.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 24. I work under a great deal of tension.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 25. My table manners are not quite as good at home as when I am out in company.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 26. When things go wrong, I cannot rest until I've corrected the situation.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 27. I would rather win than lose in a game.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 28. I worry over money and business.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 29. I like to let people know where I stand on things.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 30. I think a great many people exaggerate their misfortune in order to gain the sympathy and help of others.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 31. When I leave home I tend to worry about such things as whether the door is locked and the windows closed.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 32. It takes a lot of argument to convince most people of the truth.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 33. I am not easily awakened by noise.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 34. Most people will use somewhat unfair means to gain profit or an advantage rather than lose it.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 35. I have very few quarrels with members of my family.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 36. Often I can't understand why I have been so cross and grouchy.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 37. I rarely wonder what hidden reason another person may have for doing something nice for me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 38. Criticism or scolding hurts me terribly.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 39. I am not often troubled with disturbing thoughts.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 40. I certainly feel useless at times.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 41. I have daydreams that I make a fool of someone who knows more than I do.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 42. At times my thoughts have raced ahead faster than I could speak them.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 43. I never get angry.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 44. It makes me impatient to have people ask my advice or otherwise interrupt me when I am working on something important.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 45. I have sometimes felt that difficulties were piling up so high that I could not overcome them.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 46. Everything is turning out just like the prophets of the Bible said it would.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 47. At times I feel like swearing.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 48. People have too much sex on their minds.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 49. What others think of me does not bother me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 50. I sometimes tease animals.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 51. I am against giving money to beggars.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 52. Most nights I go to sleep without thoughts or ideas bothering me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 53. It makes me uncomfortable to put on a stunt at a party even when others are doing the same sort of things.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 54. I tend to get along well with people and am liked by almost everybody.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 55. At times I am full of energy.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 56. Bad words, often terrible words, come into my mind and I cannot get rid of them.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 57. I find it hard to make talk when I meet new people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 58. I have a habit of counting things that are not important such as bulbs on electric signs, and so forth.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 59. I get mad easily and then get over it soon.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 60. I find it hard to set aside a task that I have undertaken, even for a short time.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 61. Sex education should not be part of the high school curriculum.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 62. When in a groups of people I have trouble thinking of the right things to talk about.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 63. I never get so mad as to feel like beating or smashing things.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 64. I think nearly anyone would tell a lie to keep out of trouble.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 65. I almost never think of things too bad to talk about.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 66. I have periods in which I feel unusually cheerful without any special reason.

Participant # \_\_\_\_\_

### **A Questionnaire Study: Evaluations of Relationship Accounts**

**In this study, you will be asked to read and evaluate two events that occurred in romantic relationships for possible use in future studies. Once you have completed these tasks, I will discuss the experiment with you in detail and answer any questions you may have.**

**TASK #1**

**This scale consists of a number of words that describe different feelings and emotions. Please read each item and then mark the appropriate response in the space next to the word. Indicate to what extent you feel this way right now, that is, at the present moment. Use the following scale to record your responses:**

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all			moderately			extremely
___ calm						___ distressed
___ tense						___ content
___ happy						___ upset
___ worried						___ certain
___ nervous						___ relaxed
___ composed						___ uncertain
___ sad						___ satisfied
___ comfortable						___ uneasy
___ concerned						___ confident

**ACCOUNT #1**

The first account we would like you to read and evaluate is on the next page. It was written by a student who participated in a previous study in our lab. All of the names have been changed to protect the identity of those involved. In that study, participants were given the following instructions for writing their accounts:

“Please describe an event or experience from your current dating relationship. We would like you to describe the factual sequence of events that occurred. Later you will have an opportunity to provide any further details that you think are important to understanding the event, but for this first phase we would like you to try to stick to the bare bones of the story.”

Please read this account and answer the questions that follow it.

**Name:** Christa  
**Age:** 22 years  
**Occupation:** Full time student at the University of Calgary  
**Year of study:** Third  
**Major:** Economics  
**Length of relationship:** 1 year  
**Relationship Classification:** Exclusive dating/quite serious

### **Christa's Story**

**"I gave my boyfriend, Rob, a call on Wednesday night at about 8pm, knowing that he would probably be in at that time. Early in the conversation it was obvious that he had company, so I let him get back to whatever he was doing. At about 10:00pm, I got the return call. He said he was still busy but that he would call me the next day.**

**When I woke up the next morning around 9:00am, I decided to go over to Rob's house to surprise him with some coffee and muffins. I knocked on the door but there was no answer (thankfully, I had remembered to bring the extra key he had given me for his house). I let myself in the back door and called out his name but he didn't come out to greet me. I thought that he may have still been sleeping since it was still fairly early so I quietly made my way down the hall towards his bedroom. As I passed the living room, I saw Rob's ex-girlfriend Michelle sitting on the couch watching television! I was so surprised to see her sitting there I turned and left. I knew I should give him the benefit of the doubt, but the whole time I was driving around I couldn't help thinking "is he sleeping with her behind my back?"**

**In a separate part of the session, Christa supplied the following additional information to further explain the situation. Please read through each section carefully.**

Lately, Rob has seemed preoccupied with something. He's out late at night a lot and often I'm not sure where he is.

In both of my conversations with him that night Rob seemed more interested in keeping Michelle entertained than in talking to me when I phoned. Shouldn't I be more important to him than his ex-girlfriend?

More than once I've overheard Rob and his friends talking about how "hot" Michelle is. I've never heard them say that about me.

Once or twice Rob's laughed at me when I told him that I feel uncomfortable knowing that he still keeps in touch with his ex's.

I've always made sure Rob doesn't have to worry about my ex's, but he doesn't take my concerns about his ex-girlfriends seriously. He knows how I feel when he makes a point of calling them or seeing them.

**In a separate part of the session, Christa supplied the following additional information. Please read through each section carefully.**

**Rob and Michelle have been friends since they were kids...it's no wonder they are still good friends even now after they've broken-up.**

**Even though he insisted I didn't have to, when I called Rob at 10pm I decided not to keep him on the line. I could hear at least two other voices in the background, a guy and a girl, and I didn't want to interrupt.**

**Michelle is engaged which means I really shouldn't worry about her being interested in Rob.**

**I know that Rob is very committed to "us". We are moving in together when my lease runs out at the end of this semester so I know he'd never do anything to jeopardize our relationship.**

**We've been going out for over a year now and Rob has never given me any reason not to trust what he says about what he's doing.**

## ACCOUNT #2

**Please read this account carefully and answer the questions that follow it.**

### **Danielle's Story**

My best friend Ellen and her boyfriend Stephen broke up several weeks ago after going out for just over a year. Ellen told me that she had no idea it was going to hurt so much to lose Stephen. They had a good relationship overall but things just eroded over time, things just changed. I don't know if either one of them had control over it. It just seemed to happen. There were no warning signs.

Ellen told me that Stephen said that he didn't want to hurt her, which is why he had been hesitant to tell Ellen about his doubts about their relationship earlier on. Stephen tried to explain to her how he felt like they'd just sort of grown apart in the last couple of months. In the long run Ellen ended up hurt anyways and I know she wishes he would have been more open with her when he first started having doubts about their compatibility. It was very easy to fall in love with her right from the start and that they had some good things going for them in the relationship. But, as time passed, he began to have some doubts about how well they suited each other on a deeper, more serious level.

Ellen says she always thought she'd know if things were changing in their relationship or if the relationship was coming to an end, so she was caught off-guard when he finally told her how he felt. Fourteen months may not be forever, but they both had invested a lot in this relationship. Ellen told me she thought this was "it," the relationship that would last, the real thing. So she wasn't really thinking about what might happen if they broke up. This got me thinking, I know most dating relationships end at some point or another, but nobody goes into a relationship thinking "The relationship probably won't last"??

Since the break-up Ellen said that she has really begun to notice all the ways she depended on Stephen in their relationship. Maybe you have to break up in order to realize clearly just what it is that you've lost. A good relationship involves learning to depend on another. You can't be close to another person unless you're willing to be a bit vulnerable, willing to rely on someone else for some of your needs to be met. Unfortunately, this leaves you open to the possibility of being hurt, although I don't think people like to think that way.

I know that now Ellen almost wishes that she'd never fallen in love with Stephen because she hurts twice as bad now that it's over. Love's supposed to keep you together, not make it worse when things fall apart. True love is supposed to conquer all. If you really love someone, things are supposed to work out. Maybe she was too naive in believing this. She seems to think that it's partly her fault for getting so involved. She says that she feels she should have been more careful and should never have let things get to the point where she would end up so hurt. Of course, I think part of her knows this kind of pessimistic thinking is just 20-20 hindsight, just her anger at being hurt leaking out, but knowing this doesn't change the way she feels inside.

After thinking about it, I've decided that a good relationship requires just the right fit between two people, and not just on the surface levels, but deeper down, too. It takes a lot of luck and effort to make things work out. Relationships are kind of fragile things. I thought things were okay because they rarely fought and they talked a whole lot. Ellen told me that she never imagined that it would hurt so much if things ever did go wrong because she felt they had such a good and healthy relationship. But she was wrong. I guess love means acknowledging the fact that you're depending on someone else and that it can really hurt when that someone else leaves.

She is probably feeling pretty vulnerable right now since she has realized that getting involved with someone is risky as hell. Thinking about this I've realized just how fragile relationships really are, how many things can change, how the chemistry of fitting together is just so damn delicate. There's so much to lose when you get close to another person, and being in a relationship is a huge investment.

Seeing how a good relationship like Ellen's can end so easily, it makes me wonder why we bother to get involved at all. Why do we believe in these illusions about love and happiness and always being together? Maybe we just need to think this way or we'd be too insecure to ever get involved? Stephen told Ellen he still cares about her as a friend, but that doesn't make her feel any better. They were so much more than "just" friends. I know she really feels hurt, and she can't help taking this personally. They had so much invested in this relationship. After everything they've shared, Ellen doesn't want to be just friends with Stephen.

I used to think that nothing bad like falling out of love would happen to me but if it can happen to Ellen, it can happen to anyone. What happened to Ellen really drives home the fact that just being in love isn't a guarantee that you've found the right person for you. Things like that, like whether you and your partner are truly compatible or not only kind of get tested over the longer term. It's easy to love someone and still be wrong for them. When half of all marriages end in divorce, what makes me think that my own relationship will last?

**TASK #2**

**Please describe in detail as many reasons as you can to explain why people often feel insecure in romantic relationships. This task should take approximately 10 minutes. Feel free to use the back of the page if necessary.**

## **ACCOUNT #2**

**Please read this account and answer the questions that follow it.**

### **Danielle's Story**

My best friend, Ellen, met her boyfriend, Stephen, a little more than a year ago while working for Parks and Rec over the summer. She had just finished her second year of university, and he had just moved to the city after working out of province for a couple of years in his uncle's business out in Vancouver. It was tough to get a job that summer but all three of us were lucky and managed to get on with the city.

We were assigned to the same work crew so obviously Ellen and Stephen met right away, I mean on the first day of work in early May. But it wasn't as though they fell in love at first sight or anything like that. It actually took several weeks for things to even begin to develop. I suppose it might have been different if either one of them had been looking for a relationship at the time but neither of them was.

If you asked them to describe how they met, Stephen's story would be a little different than Ellen's. I know, for example, Stephen thinks that she was the first one to express interest in him. She doesn't agree. I was the one that pointed him out to her one day while we were laying sod in a new playground area somewhere. I told Ellen that he had this funny way of looking at her whenever her work brought them near to each other, like he was kind of paying more attention to her than you'd expect if his mind was just on work. She had no idea what I was talking about, of course, since she hadn't seen it herself, so she more or less ignored what I said. But when it was time to go back to the shop for lunch and we were piling into the trucks for the drive back, she actually caught Stephen watching her while she was walking past the truck he was driving and she began to wonder if I was right after all. Like I said she wasn't really out looking for a relationship, so even though she'd seen him looking at her with interest, she kind of just shrugged her shoulders and kept walking. Pretty much put the whole thing out of her mind at the time, I guess.

Ellen and I were on a coffee break at work the next day and she told me she had caught Stephen looking at her. I said something like 'so, give it a shot, the guy's been watching your every move for the past few weeks' and basically pushed her in his direction and that was it. She glanced over in Stephen's direction and decided my idea might not be a bad one. When she caught his eye, Stephen looked at her with this really intriguing smile and then turned away to continue working.

So, at lunch I made her sit beside him and try to start a conversation. It was the first time she really took the time to look at him carefully and listen to what he was saying. It didn't take too much longer for Ellen to realize that she liked what she was getting to know about Stephen. Even then it's not as though their relationship developed overnight. They started arranging things so that they could work together when they got the chance, just to talk. And then one day it was raining so hard that it was impossible for any of us to work outside so the boss gave us the rest of the day off. Ellen and I were leaving the shop and I nudged her and asked her what Stephen was going to do now that we had a half a day free.

I could tell she was kind of hoping we'd find him somewhere near the door waiting for us on our way out. Well, we left the building and we were just about to give up when she saw him outside just about to climb into his car. He waved to us, and when we came nearer he asked us if we had any plans for the afternoon. We said we didn't, and asked him what he was going to do. He said he didn't know. We invited him to spend the afternoon with us instead of going home and being bored.

After talking about it for a while as we drove around, we all went to the mall and decided to go to a movie. None of us actually remembers which one, so it couldn't have been anything exciting. After that we drove around again for a while. We stopped for dinner at some roadside place not far from the mall. The burgers there weren't bad and the milkshakes were pretty good. We talked about a bunch of stuff. I guess mainly work and the people we knew there, some stuff about school as well. Ellen and I told him about the camping trip we went on last summer. You know, pretty casual stuff. The three of us had a pretty good time. We weren't out very late because we had to be back to work early the next day.

I suppose you could call that their first date, even though I went along with them. There really isn't much more to tell after that....things just sort of progressed, slowly but comfortably if you know what I mean. So you see, Stephen would tell you that Ellen was the one who made the first move by choosing to sit by him at lunch that day and sort of starting things going. But, in Ellen's opinion, and I agree, Stephen had been sending her subtle signals that he was interested in her for quite a while.

**TASK #2**

**Please describe, in detail, as many destinations and activities for a couple's first date as you can. This task should take approximately 10 minutes. Feel free to use the back of the page if necessary.**

**TASK #5**

**Please use the rating scale below to make the following estimates. We are interested in your present thoughts about these issues.**

1. What is the likelihood that the average relationship will break-up?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
no chance						certain

2. How much loss does the average person experience when their dating relationship breaks up?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
no loss						extreme loss

3. How concerned is the average person that their dating relationship will break-up?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all concerned						very concerned

4. How much does the average person in a dating relationship fear breaking-up?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
no fear						very frightened





**TASK #8**

**Next, we would like to know your impressions of Rob, based upon what you read. Please circle the number that best reflects your opinion of Rob's character.**

1 sincere	2	3	4	5	6	7 insincere
1 honest	2	3	4	5	6	7 dishonest
1 untrustworthy	2	3	4	5	6	7 trustworthy
1 considerate	2	3	4	5	6	7 inconsiderate
1 unfaithful	2	3	4	5	6	7 faithful
1 disloyal	2	3	4	5	6	7 loyal
1 secure	2	3	4	5	6	7 insecure
1 trusting	2	3	4	5	6	7 distrusting

**TASK #9**

**The following set of judgments refer to your impressions of the additional *context* information that Christa provided to help you understand what happened and its place in her relationship with Rob (this refers to the separate sheet of information you were given after having read the narrative). Please respond to each of the following items as openly and honestly as possible. We are interested in your candid opinions about the value or merit of this information.**

**When you make the following judgements, please consider how the additional context you received helped you to interpret or understand the situation Christa described?**

How **informative** was the additional context you received?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all informative				extremely informative		

How **relevant** was the additional context you received?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all relevant				extremely relevant		

How clearly did the context you received speak to the nature of Rob's motives in the incident described?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all clearly				extremely clearly		

In your opinion, how seriously should this contextual information be considered in deciding whether Rob deserves to be forgiven?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all seriously				extremely seriously		

How much does the additional context you received excuse Rob's behaviour?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all				entirely		

How much does the additional context you received justify Rob's behaviour?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all				entirely		

To what extent would you need more information about the context in which this incident occurred in order to feel justified in forgiving Rob's behaviour in this incident?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I'd need no further information				I would need a great deal more information		

**TASK #10**

**Now please consider the following statements about the contextual information Christa provided and the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement. Please use the scale below to indicate your response to each statement:**

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree			neutral			strongly agree

- \_\_\_ 1. The contextual information I received is insufficient to warrant excusing Rob for his behaviour.
- \_\_\_ 2. I would consider the contextual information I received highly relevant to any general conclusion that I might make about what Rob's motives are in their relationship.
- \_\_\_ 3. Rob's behaviour in this incident should be taken at face value.
- \_\_\_ 4. It would be unwise to excuse Rob's behaviour solely on the basis of any justifications Christa might offer to explain this behaviour.
- \_\_\_ 5. I would rather be cautious and ignore the contextual information I received when drawing conclusions about Rob's behaviour, even though it means I might be wrong.
- \_\_\_ 6. I feel confident that there are good reasons why Rob acted the way he did.
- \_\_\_ 7. I would need a great deal of evidence of Rob's good motives before I would feel safe excusing his behaviour.
- \_\_\_ 8. In judging the broader implications of the Rob's behaviour, I'd rather err on the side of giving him the benefit of the doubt than on the side of assuming his intentions to be selfish or inconsiderate.
- \_\_\_ 9. I would feel completely comfortable trusting the contextual information I received when drawing conclusions about Rob's behaviour in their relationship more generally.
- \_\_\_ 10. I would need a great deal of evidence of the Rob's bad motives before I would feel safe condemning his behaviour.
- \_\_\_ 11. No amount of evidence could completely justify Rob's behaviour.

**Task #11**

1. If the circumstances were such that you could only have access to one type of information, which type would you prefer to receive? (**Check only one**)

- \_\_\_\_\_ a) information indicating Rob's motives may have been unselfish or benevolent.
- \_\_\_\_\_ b) information indicating Rob's motives may have been selfish or inconsiderate

Please justify your previous response by answering the following question.

**Why would you prefer to receive that type of information?**

1. a) Based on what I have read, I would need a lot more positive evidence to conclude that Rob truly cares about his relationship with Christa.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly agree						strongly disagree

- b) Based on what I have read, I would need a lot more negative evidence to conclude that Rob truly does not care about his relationship with Christa.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree						strongly agree

**Task #12**

**As indicated previously, the author of the first account also supplied this additional information about the incident. Please re-read each statement and indicate how useful you felt each statements was in helping you draw conclusions about Rob using the following scale:**

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all useful						extremely useful

- \_\_\_\_\_ Lately, Rob has seemed preoccupied with something. He's out late at night a lot and often I'm not sure where he is.
- \_\_\_\_\_ In both of my conversations with him that night Rob seemed more interested in keeping Michelle entertained than in talking to me when I phoned. Shouldn't I be more important to him than his ex-girlfriend?
- \_\_\_\_\_ More than once I've overheard Rob and his friends talking about how "hot" Michelle is. I've never heard them say that about me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Once or twice Rob's laughed at me when I told him that I feel uncomfortable knowing that he still keeps in touch with his ex's.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I've always made sure Rob doesn't have to worry about my ex's, but he doesn't take my concerns about his ex-girlfriends seriously. He knows how I feel when he makes a point of calling them or seeing them.



How long ago was your last break-up experience (either with your current partner or a previous partner)?

\_\_\_\_\_ Months

Using the scale below, please indicate how negative or severe your last break-up experience was:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all		moderately			extremely	
negative/severe		negative/severe			negative/severe	

## Appendix B

Table B1

Main effects of optimism, risk, and context for participants involved in short relationships.

Variables	Optimism	Risk	Context
	t (p)	t (p)	t (p)
Impression of account	-.50 (.62)	-.38 (.71)	-2.46 (.02)
Blame	-.41 (.69)	-.67 (.51)	3.10 (.005)
Damage	.56 (.58)	.00 (1.00)	1.71 (.10)
Likelihood of infidelity	-.95 (.35)	-1.46 (.16)	2.09 (.05)
Impressions of Rob	-.62 (.54)	-.96 (.35)	2.66 (.01)
Informational value of context	-.21 (.84)	.24 (.82)	.48 (.63)
Ability of context to excuse	.62 (.54)	.89 (.38)	-3.06 (.005)
Ability of context to justify	-.35 (.73)	1.61 (.12)	-1.68 (.11)
Need for more information to forgive	.40 (.69)	-1.85 (.08)	1.77 (.09)
Desire for caution	-.46 (.65)	-1.61 (.12)	1.44 (.16)
Type of information desired	-1.49 (.15)	.71 (.49)	.98 (.33)
Positive information desired	-1.34 (.19)	-.79 (.44)	4.84 (.001)
Negative information desired	1.14 (.26)	.99 (.33)	-2.28 (.03)
Aggravating statement 1	1.13 (.28)	.24 (.82)	
Aggravating statement 2	-1.65 (.13)	1.71 (.12)	
Aggravating statement 3	-.68 (.51)	.05 (.96)	
Aggravating statement 4	-1.53 (.61)	.58 (.57)	
Aggravating statement 5	-2.44 (.04)	-.24 (.82)	
Extenuating statement 1	.23 (.82)	2.89 (.01)	
Extenuating statement 2	-.91 (.38)	-.67 (.52)	
Extenuating statement 3	-1.72 (.11)	-.25 (.81)	
Extenuating statement 4	1.16 (.27)	-.82 (.43)	
Extenuating statement 5	1.17 (.27)	-.04 (.96)	

Table B2

Main effects of optimism, risk, and context for participants involved in long relationships.

Variables	Optimism	Risk	Context
	t (p)	t (p)	t (p)
Impression of account	.07 (.95)	-.09 (.93)	.65 (.52)
Blame	-.76 (.46)	.77 (.45)	1.74 (.10)
Damage	.01 (.99)	.63 (.53)	.62 (.54)
Likelihood of infidelity	-.85 (.41)	-.04 (.97)	1.19 (.25)
Impressions of Rob	-2.29 (.03)	-.77 (.45)	2.62 (.02)
Informational value of context	.65 (.52)	.80 (.43)	-2.30 (.03)
Ability of context to excuse	.06 (.96)	-.25 (.81)	-1.14 (.27)
Ability of context to justify	.91 (.37)	.03 (.98)	-2.19 (.04)
Need for more information to forgive	-.50 (.62)	.60 (.55)	.92 (.37)
Desire for caution	-2.00 (.06)	-.28 (.78)	1.22 (.23)
Type of information desired	-1.41 (.17)	1.71 (.10)	-.27 (.79)
Positive information desired	-.90 (.38)	1.26 (.22)	.58 (.57)
Negative information desired	1.16 (.26)	-1.41 (.17)	.72 (.48)
Aggravating statement 1	-.24 (.81)	-.58 (.57)	
Aggravating statement 2	-.11 (.91)	-1.55 (.15)	
Aggravating statement 3	1.73 (.12)	1.11 (.29)	
Aggravating statement 4	-1.02 (.33)	.40 (.70)	
Aggravating statement 5	1.23 (.25)	.61 (.56)	
Extenuating statement 1	.19 (.85)	-1.21 (.25)	
Extenuating statement 2	.68 (.51)	-.26 (.080)	
Extenuating statement 3	-.26 (.80)	-1.49 (.16)	
Extenuating statement 4	-.13 (.90)	-.67 (.52)	
Extenuating statement 5	-.72 (.48)	.67 (.51)	

Table B3

Interactions for participants involved in short relationships.

Variables	R x C	O x C	R x O	Rx C x O
	t (p)	t (p)	t (p)	t (p)
Impression of account	.20 (.84)	1.26 (.22)	-.91 (.38)	1.75 (.09)
Blame	-.84 (.41)	-.40 (.69)	.85 (.41)	-.63 (.53)
Damage	1.83 (.08)	.94 (.36)	-1.27 (.22)	-.78 (.44)
Likelihood of infidelity	.43 (.67)	.41 (.69)	1.01 (.32)	.37 (.72)
Impressions of Rob	-1.25 (.23)	.42 (.68)	1.93 (.07)	-.58 (.57)
Informational value of context	1.34 (.19)	-1.42 (.17)	-1.67 (.26)	.69 (.50)
Ability of context to excuse	.30 (.77)	-.91 (.37)	-1.16 (.26)	1.89 (.07)
Ability of context to justify	2.20 (.04)	-1.53 (.14)	-2.26 (.03)	.69 (.50)
Need for more information to forgive	-.50 (.63)	.36 (.72)	2.52 (.02)	-.51 (.62)
Desire for caution	.36 (.72)	1.03 (.31)	.40 (.69)	-1.19 (.25)
Type of information desired	-.47 (.64)	-.47 (.64)	-2.26 (.04)	1.07 (.30)
Positive information desired	-.56 (.58)	-.17 (.87)	1.00 (.33)	-.30 (.77)
Negative information desired	.51 (.61)	1.99 (.06)	-2.56 (.02)	-.47 (.64)
Aggravating statement 1			.09 (.93)	
Aggravating statement 2			1.71 (.12)	
Aggravating statement 3			-.16 (.88)	
Aggravating statement 4			-.77 (.46)	
Aggravating statement 5			.17 (.87)	
Extenuating statement 1			-1.23 (.24)	
Extenuating statement 2			-.95 (.37)	
Extenuating statement 3			1.46 (.17)	
Extenuating statement 4			.44 (.65)	
Extenuating statement 5			.73 (.48)	

Note: "Rx C" refers to the risk x context interaction, "O x C" refers to the optimism x context interaction, "R x O" refers to the risk x optimism interaction and "R x C x O" refers to the risk x context x optimism interaction.

**Table B4**  
**Interactions for participants involved in long relationships.**

Variables	R x C	O x C	R x O	R x C x O
	t (p)	t (p)	t (p)	t (p)
Impression of account	.14 (.89)	-.22 (.83)	.57 (.58)	-1.07 (.30)
Blame	1.48 (.15)	1.03 (.31)	-.72 (.48)	1.32 (.20)
Damage	.60 (.56)	2.31 (.03)	-1.49 (.15)	-.48 (.64)
Likelihood of infidelity	.60 (.56)	1.05 (.31)	-.21 (.84)	-.11 (.91)
Impressions of Rob	.24 (.81)	.97 (.34)	-.55 (.59)	.01 (.99)
Informational value of context	.57 (.57)	-.78 (.44)	3.47 (.002)	-.50 (.62)
Ability of context to excuse	-.80 (.43)	-2.13 (.05)	1.82 (.08)	-.04 (.97)
Ability of context to justify	-.83 (.42)	-1.98 (.06)	2.40 (.03)	-1.11 (.28)
Need for more information to forgive	.21 (.84)	.28 (.78)	1.28 (.22)	-.44 (.66)
Desire for caution	.49 (.63)	1.25 (.23)	-1.44 (.17)	.31 (.76)
Type of information desired	2.77 (.01)	2.21 (.04)	.53 (.60)	.22 (.83)
Positive information desired	-.27 (.79)	1.28 (.21)	-.80 (.43)	-1.51 (.15)
Negative information desired	.38 (.71)	-.24 (.81)	-1.10 (.29)	-1.23 (.23)
Aggravating statement 1			-1.94 (.27)	
Aggravating statement 2			-1.56 (.16)	
Aggravating statement 3			.88 (.41)	
Aggravating statement 4			-1.23 (.25)	
Aggravating statement 5			3.01 (.02)	
Extenuating statement 1			1.30 (.22)	
Extenuating statement 2			.44 (.67)	
Extenuating statement 3			1.81 (.10)	
Extenuating statement 4			-.67 (.52)	
Extenuating statement 5			1.36 (.20)	

Note: "R x C" refers to the risk x context interaction, "O x C" refers to the optimism x context interaction, "R x O" refers to the risk x optimism interaction, and "R x C x O" refers to the risk x context x optimism interaction.