

## SHIFTING STANDARDS OF UNFAIRNESS IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

By Ashley M. Boerst

The current study sought to investigate whether differential appraisals of online relationship transgressions made by victims and perpetrators in romantic relationships can be accounted for by incongruent unfairness standards. Prior research has shown that judgments of injustice can be a function of the confirmatory standards to which people determine harm has occurred (Miron, Warner & Branscombe, 2010). A confirmatory standard of injustice is defined as a subjective threshold people set in order to conclude that an action has definitely taken place or that a person or group has a particular ability (Miron & Branscombe, 2008). Miron et al. (2011) found that when judging the severity of wage inequality, disadvantaged group members set lower confirmatory standards than advantaged members and therefore perceived the existing inequality as more unfair. This means that disadvantaged group members asked for less evidence of wage inequality and consequently made harsher judgments of inequality. The motivation to protect one's positive identity has also been shown to manifest itself in the differential attributions made by victims and perpetrators (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990), especially within romantic relationships (Feeney & Hill, 2006; Kearns & Fincham, 2005). While both differential standards and attributions have been found to lead to different perceptions of harm, the current study proposed a model in which the effect of victim vs. perpetrator perspective on standards of unfairness and judgments of harm occurs above and beyond that of attributions. Participants read a hypothetical transgression situation in either the perspective of the victim or perpetrator. Participants then answered questions assessing their unfairness standards, judgments of harm, attributions, and levels of forgiveness. The results suggested that victims of online relational transgressions and perpetrators of the offenses set different confirmatory standards of unfairness for what content can be discussed with potential others, with victims setting lower confirmatory standards than perpetrators. Although these divergent unfairness standards were not found to influence individuals' appraisals of the unfairness of transgression, the effect of the perspective manipulation on standards occurred above and beyond that of attributions. Implications and future research directions are discussed.

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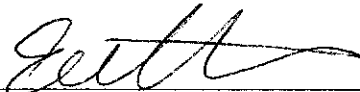
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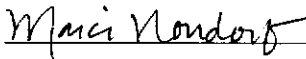
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## **Introduction**

Managing a close relationship with a significant other may be difficult, as individuals develop differing standards and expectations of what is acceptable and valued in a relationship. This is because relationship expectations are not always mutually agreed upon. What one individual perceives to be unfair may not necessarily coincide with the understanding of the other partner; therefore, betrayal is in the eye of the beholder (Ferra & Levine, 2009).

Transgressions involve the violation of these relationship norms, whether mutually accepted or not. To be transgressed against is to say that one feels harmed or victimized; i.e., that an individual has experienced a personal injury against his or her core beliefs. Transgressions are often a source of hurt in romantic relationships, as they have been shown to violate rules regarding supportiveness, fidelity, openness, and trust, as well as imply a devaluation of the relationship (Feeney, 2005). In general, research has demonstrated that the victim of a betrayal often responds with negative emotions (Feeney, 2005; McCornack & Levine, 1990), which can have devastating consequences, such as the relationship being terminated (Hall & Fincham, 2006; Jang, Smith, & Levine, 2002).

What counts as unfaithful behaviors in romantic relationships has been found to include: dating or spending time with another, sexual infidelity, withholding information, betrayal of confidence, and emotional involvement with another (Roscoe, Cavanaugh, &



Kennedy, 1988). However, the emergence of the Internet has enabled individuals to interact and form relationships with others. With this came a new form of unfaithfulness: online infidelity.

### **Online Infidelity**

Research indicates that people view online infidelity as a real form of cheating and believe it can have just as devastating effects (e.g., breaking up, loss of trust) on relationships as offline infidelity (Whitty, 2005). Although some evidence has focused on the commonalities between traditional infidelity and its online counterpart, other researchers have stressed the uniqueness of these virtual interactions. For instance, Gerson (2011) argued that there are four properties of online infidelity that distinguish it from offline unfaithfulness. The first of these is the suddenness of its exposure. With offline infidelity it is often the case that one partner suspects the other of having an affair after finding a hint of what might be evidence of betrayal, such as an unknown phone number or a lingering of an unfamiliar perfume on clothing, for example. However, the revelation of an online liaison is generally found unexpectedly and fully exposed by a log of an Internet chat or a string of emails. Another factor uniquely characteristic of cyberspace betrayal is the permanence of its record. Evidence of an offline affair can be exposed of and physically dismissed whereas the record of online infidelity can sometimes be archived and subject to reexamination and further rumination. Gerson also argues that the private nature of online relationships can lead to the offline partner feeling

more violated and betrayed, and that these virtual relationships tend not to be a onetime occurrence driven by impulsivity, but rather are ongoing and often obsessive. Given the increasing commonality of using the Internet for means of developing and maintaining relationships, it is essential for research to examine the nature of non-traditional forms of interacting and the implications they have for interpersonal relationships.

### **The Influence of Perspective: Victim vs. Perpetrator**

There are always two sides to every story. Partners can have very divergent opinions about the same situation. Research has shown that the perspective in which people experience a betrayal affects their perceptions and understanding of it (Boon & McLeod, 2001; Gordon & Miller, 2000; Kaplar & Gordon, 2004). A common explanation for these differences is that both the perpetrator and the victim are engaging in self-serving biases, as they are motivated to maintain positive views of themselves (Feeny & Hill, 2006; Kearns & Fincham, 2005). Specifically, individuals who commit transgressions against others are likely to perceive their behavior as less severe or harmful (Cameron, Ross, & Holmes, 2002; Feeney & Hill, 2006). Victims show the opposite biases in their judgments of transgressions. Victims are shown to magnify the severity of the mitigating event to a greater extent than the perpetrators (Kearns & Fincham, 2005).

In the past, researchers have investigated perspective-related differences using autobiographical narratives whereby individuals were assigned to either a victim or

perpetrator role (Cameron, Ross, & Holmes, 2002) and asked to describe either a time when they had wronged another person (i.e., perpetrator) or describe a time when they were wronged by another individual (i.e., victim). Another similar approach commonly used is to have participants provide narrative accounts of two situations, one in which they were victimized and one in which they were in the wrong (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Kearns & Fincham, 2005). The advantage of using this method is to ensure role-related differences are not due to individual differences, as each participant is asked to become both the ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator.’ However, this method may not reflect genuine perspective differences as it does not take into account that participants may provide qualitatively different incidents. Mikula, Athenstaedt, Heschgl, and Heimgartner (1998) attempted to account for the methodological limitation of using autobiographical narratives in a study on married couples. In one study (Study 1), both partners separately described and evaluated incidents in which they felt their partner had treated them unfairly as well as a situation when they had treated their partner unfairly. Participants were then asked separately to describe and evaluate the events the other partner provided from their own point of view. Each of the partners evaluated the four incidents on scales of perceived injustice, attributions of cause, justifiability, and intentionality. They found that regardless of whether the incident was introduced by the perpetrator or the victim, victims perceived the situations as more unjust and less justified than actors (i.e., perpetrators), as well as attributed more causality and intention to the perpetrators than the victims did themselves. Evaluations of victim-reported incidents

followed similar patterns in subsequent studies, however perpetrators reported incidents as more unjust and less justified than victims, and attributed more causality to themselves than did victims when evaluating incidents that they introduced. In other words, victims consistently rated incidents as more severe than perpetrators but discrepancies emerged when perpetrators evaluated incidents, suggesting that even while attempting to use a more stringent method by having perpetrators and victims rate the same event, inconsistencies were still found in the evaluations of the transgression events.

In the present study, participants will be presented with the same situation and asked to either take the perspective of the perpetrator or the perspective of the victim in order to avoid inconsistencies found in previous research as well as to avoid methodological limitations associated with using autobiographical narratives.

### **Attributions in Forming Relationship Judgments**

A vast amount of research has been done on the components of relationship satisfaction and, arguably, even more on relationship dissatisfaction. Of the many hypothesized correlates of both relationship satisfaction and dissatisfaction, behavioral attributions have long been given a great deal of attention. According to Eberly, Holley, Johnson, and Mitchell (2011), attributions are “the causal explanations that individuals use to interpret the world around them and adapt to their environment, especially when reacting to events viewed as important, novel, unexpected, and negative” (p. 733).

Various studies have found that distressed spouses are more likely than non-distressed spouses to make particular attributions when judging the impact of a negative event. For example, Fincham (1985) found that distressed spouses tend to make attributions that heighten the impact of a negative event and see it as stable and unchanging over time. Fincham, Beach, and Nelson (1987) found that distressed spouses make global attributions, where they believe their partners' behavior affected multiple areas of their relationship. It has also been found that they will attribute the negative event as internal to their partner (i.e., that the behavior was due to something about the partner's character versus some outside or external factor), and see it as him or her acted intentionally, was motivated by selfish concerns, had control over the event, and should be blamed (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987).

These findings were later taken into consideration by Fincham and Bradbury (1992) when constructing The Relationship Attribution Measure, one of the most widely used scales for measuring attributions made by partners in committed relationships. The scale measures the following six attribution constructs. (1) Locus of control, or the extent to which the cause of a behavior is internal or external to the partner. For example, an internal attribution might be one that credits someone's behavior to selfishness as opposed to that person being in a bad situation. (2) Stable vs. unstable attributions, or when people infer that an event or behavior is due to an unchanging or permanent factor, such as one's long-term disability rather than a temporary factor, like having an illness. (3) Global vs. specific attributions infer the degree to which one's behavior affects other

aspects of the relationship or is consistent across a variety of contexts (e.g., “He is a jerk to everyone” vs. “He only gets annoyed when my mother is around”) (4) Intentionality attributions focus on the degree to which behavior was purposeful. For example, if a woman says she accidentally forgot to bring her wallet to dinner her date might assume she forgot intentionally in order to avoid having to pay. (5) Selfish vs. unselfish attributions gauge the degree to which a behavior was motivated by selfish concerns. For example, a man might consider his wife’s behavior to be selfish if she hides his favorite cookies (assuming she wants them all for herself). (6) Blameworthiness attributions infer the extent to which the partner is blameworthy for a behavior. For instance, a woman might blame her partner for messing up the kitchen if he was the only one home all day. Taken together, these individual factors make up two-higher order attributions that are conceptualized to be explanations of causality, measured by the first three scales, and attributions of responsibility, measured by the remaining three scales. Higher causal scores indicate the individual believed the cause to be due to something about the partner, that the cause is unchanging and that it has affected the relationship globally. Higher scores on the responsibility index indicate that an individual believed their partner behaved intentionally, was selfishly motivated, and should be blamed for their actions.

Given the research suggesting distressed spouses make global and stable attributions and attribute negative events as internal to their partner, it is likely that victims will make similar attributions after being betrayed. Therefore, the current study will utilize Bradbury and Fincham’s (1992) Relationship Attribution Measure to test the

hypothesis that victims will make more attributions of causality and responsibility for the partner's transgression than perpetrators.

### **Shifting Judgment Standards**

Confirmatory standards are subjective thresholds people set in order to conclude that an action has definitely taken place or that a person or group has a particular ability (Biernat & Fuegen, 2001). When confronted with negative information pertaining to one's self identity, people have been found to quantitatively shift the standard used to evaluate the evidence. For instance, Miron et al. (2011) found that advantaged and disadvantaged groups use different confirmatory standards when evaluating gender and racial wage inequality. They had participants read a paragraph about the current gender (Study 1) or racial (Study 2) wage inequality in the United States. Participants were then asked to report the threshold by which they thought the wage inequality would be unfair. Judgments of inequality were measured by rating the extent to which they believed the current wage distribution between men and women, and blacks and whites, respectively were unfair. The researchers found that disadvantaged members of a group (i.e., women and black individuals) set lower confirmatory standards (i.e., needed less evidence of wage inequality) than advantaged members and therefore perceived the existing inequality as more unfair. Moreover, in both Studies 1 and 2, injustice standards were found to significantly mediate the effect that gender (or race) had on judgments of wage inequality (i.e., women and blacks set low confirmatory standards which in turn allowed

them to make more severe appraisals of injustice) and on the willingness to restore intergroup justice (Study 2).

In other research, Miron, Branscombe, and Biernat's (2010) findings have suggested a motivational component to the shifting of standards. They found that individuals who highly identified with a group set higher standards (i.e., needed more evidence) to conclude that an ingroup's actions were unjust and perceived the consequential harm of the action to be less severe than did low identifiers. Taken together, these studies provide evidence that motivation to protect one's social identity can cause elevated injustice standards and decreased judgments of harm.

Reasoning by analogy, in the context of romantic relationships when one partner commits a transgression that may harm the other and the relationship, the standards the victimized partner sets are malleable, as the victim will shift downward the quantitative standard used to assess the relationship transgression, compared to the partner who committed the harm. The current study will investigate whether partners use different standards of unfairness when making judgments of relationship transgressions. Specifically, it is predicted that perpetrators, in comparison to victims, will set higher confirmatory standards when judging the unfairness of a transgression situation and the harm it caused, and consequently will make less severe judgments of harm than the victims.

Although research has shown that victims, as opposed to perpetrators, are more likely to make non-benign attributions (i.e., internal, global, and stable attributions) that



affect perceptions of negative relationship events (Hall & Fincham, 2006), it has been suggested that “spouses appraise and make attributions not only for their partner’s behavior, but also for their own behavior [and] allowing for this possibility is important because the attributions that spouses make for their own behavior may serve as a standard against which partner behaviors are judged and interpreted” (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990, p. 28). As previously mentioned, there has been a vast amount of research conducted indicating that attributions influence the judgments people make. While there is also compelling evidence suggesting that individuals are motivated to use differential standards when judging events, it is possible that the attributions made by individuals might be accounting for this effect. Thus, the current research sought to investigate whether the effect of perspective on standards of unfairness and judgments of relationship transgressions occurs above and beyond the contribution of attributions by using a mediation model (see Figure 1).

### **Forgiveness**

Forgiveness is often studied alongside relational transgressions. Forgiveness is an interpersonal process whereby an individual makes an intentional and motivated shift in perception, dissipating the resentment and negative affect felt toward a transgressor.

Fincham (2000) points out that forgiveness is a very important strategy for relationship maintenance, as people’s imperfections make harm inevitable at one point or another. It has been argued that relationship dissolution is more likely when partners

perceive the other's behavior as motivated by internal, global, and stable attributes, or what some have referred to as conflict-promoting attributes (Hall & Fincham, 2006). However, the researchers found that forgiveness fully mediated this relationship, suggesting that making these attributes likely inhibits forgiveness, which in turn promotes relationship termination. This is consistent with other research showing that benign attributions (i.e., attributions reflecting less damage) are predictive of forgiveness following a transgression in married couples (Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002).

Nevertheless, the injustice of the offense to some extent determines the likelihood of forgiveness. As stated by Fincham (2000), "It is the perceived injustice of the harm that gives life and staying power to unforgiveness" (p. 12). Presumably, people's expectations, or standards, shape their judgments of a betrayal. Ferrara and Levine (2009) used components of the investment model to investigate the effect of betrayal on relationship outcomes. In their model, satisfaction is conceptualized as a function of the rewards gained relative to internalized expectations of a quality relationship, what they refer to as CL (satisfaction in relation to comparison level). These standards are formed on the basis of prior experiences and through comparison to others. They found that offering an apology, promising to change, and expressing value for the relationship were most effective in preserving the relationship following a betrayal. However, they found that both betrayal severity and CL's were inversely related to satisfaction. That is, the more severe participants perceived an offense to be, the less satisfaction they reported. Moreover, the higher CL standards partners reported, the unhappier they were in their

relationship following a betrayal. These findings demonstrate the importance of people's standards and betrayal severity on forgiveness in romantic relationships.

At the group level, Miron et al. (2011) found that setting different confirmatory standards affected group members' motivation to restore intergroup justice. This finding suggests that when individuals hold dissimilar standards, it can affect their willingness to reconcile. Thus, having a low standard of unfairness will lead to a more severe assessment of harm, which in turn will make the likelihood of forgiveness lower. Therefore, it is predicted that victims will report lower levels of forgiveness than perpetrators.

### **Overview of the Current Study and Hypotheses**

The current study sought to investigate incongruent unfairness standards set by victims and perpetrators as a mechanism (i.e., as opposed to attributions) for differing judgments of relationship transgressions and levels of forgiveness. Individuals were given a hypothetical account of a negative relationship situation involving a potential online betrayal and asked to imagine themselves in the situation as if they were either the one who was transgressed against (i.e., victim) or the one who transgressed (i.e., perpetrator). They then received a series of questionnaires measuring standards of unfairness, judgments of harm, attributions, and forgiveness, according to the perspective to which they were assigned. The present investigation sought to test the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1:* Perpetrators, compared to victims, will set higher confirmatory standards when judging the unfairness of the situation and the harm caused.

*Hypothesis 2:* Victims will make more severe judgments of harm than perpetrators.

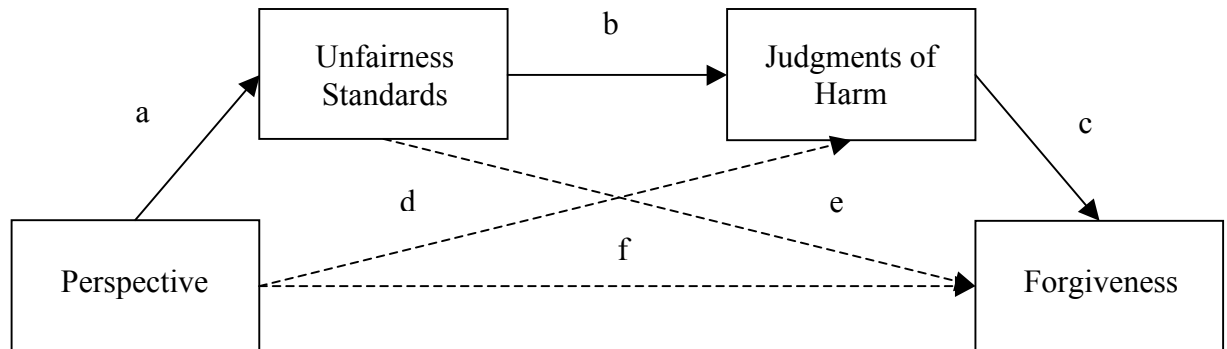
*Hypothesis 3:* Victims will be more likely than perpetrators to make attributions of responsibility and causality.

*Hypothesis 4:* Victims will report lower levels of forgiveness than perpetrators.

An important part of the study examined the effect that unfairness standards have on judgments of harm and levels of forgiveness when accounting for attributions. Knowing the unique contribution that perspective has on standards of unfairness, independent of any other driving force (e.g., attributions), will allow for a better understanding of the standard shifting phenomenon. Just as standards were found to be a significant mediator of the different judgments of racial and wage inequality made by advantaged and disadvantaged group members (Miron, Warner, & Branscombe, 2011), the current study also theorized a mediation model (see Figure 1). The following mediation hypotheses were proposed:

*Hypothesis 5:* Standards will mediate the effect of the perspective manipulation on judgments when attributions for transgressions are taken into account.

*Hypothesis 6:* Judgments will mediate the effect of the perspective manipulation and standards on forgiveness when attributions for transgressions are taken into account.



*Figure 1.* The predicted mediation model of standards on judgments and forgiveness. The solid lines show the predicted mediating paths; the dotted lines represent direct effects that are expected not to differ from zero when including the mediating variables.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

A total of 63 undergraduate students participated in this study for course credit in their psychology courses at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. They were recruited using the psychology research pool website, Sona-Systems. Only students who indicated on two pre-screening questions that they were currently involved in a romantic relationship with a member of the opposite sex were eligible to participate. The participants consisted of 45 females (70.3%) and 18 males (28.1%) and ranged in age from 18 to 55, with a mean and median age of 19. At the time of the study, 55 of the participants indicated they were in exclusive relationships and three reported being married. The remaining five participants marked their relationship status as single ( $n = 2$ ), no longer dating ( $n = 1$ ), or other ( $n = 2$ ) and subsequently were excluded from further analysis; therefore the final sample consisted of 58 participants. The average relationship length was 24 months and the median length was 12 months.

### **Procedure**

The students completed the study individually. Upon arrival, students were directed to a quiet room for the duration of the study. On a table in front of them was the informed consent document. Students read that the purpose of the current study was to assess their judgments of conflict-causing situations within romantic relationships (see Appendix A).

Participants were then instructed to read a scenario regarding a potential conflict-arousing situation and answer subsequent questionnaires while attempting to understand the situation as if it were occurring in their relationship. The researcher then handed them an envelope containing the scenario manipulation and a series of questionnaires. The packets were matched according to gender and randomly assigned to either the victim perspective or perpetrator perspective so that the researcher was unaware of the condition that the participant received. The participants were then instructed to open the envelope and begin the study as soon as the experimenter exited the room. Before leaving, the researcher asked if the participant had any questions and then left the student alone to complete the study.

### **Manipulation of Role Perspective**

Participants first read a scenario that depicted an ambiguous situation in which one partner had discovered that the other had been having an ongoing online relationship with a member of the opposite sex (see Appendix B). This vignette also served as the manipulation of role perspective. Participants were randomly assigned to the role of the victim or the perpetrator.

In the *victim perspective* condition, participants read that *they* had just discovered that *their partner* had been having an online relationship with another person. The subsequent questionnaires measured their standards and judgments of unfairness and the likelihood that they would forgive the partner.



In the *perpetrator perspective* condition, participants read that *their partner* had just discovered *their own relationship* with another person and the following questionnaires measured their standards for the transgression behavior and the harm it caused their partner as well as the likelihood that their partner would forgive them.

### **Dependent Measures**

Individual scales were developed for the purpose of this study to measure the primary dependent variables: standards of unfairness, judgments of harm, attributions for the transgression, and forgiveness.

**Standards of unfairness.** Standards of unfairness were assessed using a 10-item objective response measure in which participants indicated on a 7-point scale how much evidence they would need to consider the presented behavior unfair (see Appendices C and D). For example, participants in the victim condition were asked, “For you to consider this behavior unfair, what percentage of messages with romantic content would your partner have to have with this person?” Lower scores on this assessment were indicative of setting low confirmatory standards, or needing only a small amount of evidence to conclude that the event was unfair.

**Judgments of harm.** Judgments of harm were assessed with a 7-item Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely* (see Appendices E and F). The purpose of this scale was to evaluate the extent that the participants felt that the online transgression was harmful to the relationship and to the victimized partner. For example,

participants taking on the victim perspective were asked “How harmful to *you* do you consider your partner’s behavior?” and those in the perpetrator condition were asked “How harmful to *your partner* do you consider your behavior?” Higher scores on this scale were suggestive of a more severe assessment of harm and unfairness.

**Attributions for transgressions.** A measure of attributions was adapted from Fincham and Bradbury’s (1992) Relationship Attribution Measure. In the original version participants were presented with four hypothetical negative partner behaviors and asked to rate six statements measuring attributions of responsibility and causality. The present research modified the instrument (see Appendices G and H), in that participants only read one hypothetical scenario and made their evaluations on a 7-item Likert-type scale ranging from, 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree*, rather than the 5-item scale originally used. This was done in order to be consistent with all the other measures. Additionally, the present research sought to assess perceptions of unmarried individuals; therefore words with marriage-related connotations (e.g., husband, wife) were replaced with more general terms (e.g., partner) that would allow for a more broad assessment of attributions.

**Forgiveness.** Three questions measuring the likelihood to forgive were also included following the primary measures of judgment. The questions included “What is the likelihood that you would forgive your partner for this behavior?”, “What is the likelihood that you and your partner could work through this situation?” and “What is the likelihood that you and your partner would still be together 6 months from now?” All

responses were measured on a 7-item Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 = *Extremely unlikely* to 7 = *Extremely likely*.

**Additional Measures.** Following the questionnaires, participants completed a demographics survey, including additional questions regarding their past experiences with online infidelity, difficulty perspective taking, as well as a survey of relationship satisfaction (Appendix F). Relationship satisfaction was measured using the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm et al., 1986), in order to test whether relationship satisfaction covaried with any of the dependent variables. Following the satisfaction scale were four questions measuring past and future experiences with online betrayal. Examples included: “How likely would you be to get involved in a situation like the one described on the first page?” and “Have you, either in your current or in a previous relationship, ever been transgressed against in a way similar to the situation presented?”. Additionally, one question (“How difficult was it for you to put yourself in the situation presented?”) served to identify how well the participants were able to identify with their role.

### **Data Analysis**

Factor analyses were performed on the standards, judgments and attribution measures in order to create corresponding indices of the constructs. The data were then screened for outliers by creating dummy variables and calculating Mahalanobis distance, leverage, and Cooks d. Five scores were found to exceed the criteria for Mahalanobis distance (criterion for five independent variables = 20.52) and leverage, two of which were scores on the attribution factor. The final three scores were found within the unfairness, forgiveness and standards indices. Multivariate general linear analyses were conducted with and without the outliers in order to test the effect that perspective had on the standards, judgment and attribution factors (Hypotheses 1-4). The outliers were found to impact the outcome of the analyses and were therefore discarded.<sup>1</sup>

In testing the first four hypotheses, no significant main effect of perspective on judgments was found; therefore, the mediation analyses testing hypotheses 6 and 7 could not be completed. However, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were used to examine the relationship between perspective standards and attributions.

## Results

### Creating Indices

Standards of unfairness were measured with twelve questions pertaining to how much evidence one would need to conclude that the online transgression behavior was unfair. A factor analysis of the items revealed only one meaningful factor ( $\alpha = .90$ ), comprised of four items, pertaining to standards for discussion content (i.e., romantic and sexual content, content discussing relationship and mentioning partner).

As predicted, a judgment of harm factor ( $\alpha = .90$ ) and a forgiveness factor emerged from the factor analysis of the eleven judgment items ( $\alpha = .86$ ). Included in the former were appraisals relating to the negativity, acceptability and unfairness of the transgression, as well as beliefs about the harm done to the relationship and partner. The forgiveness index quantified the likelihood of forgiveness and ability to work through the situation.

The creation of the attribution index was not as clear cut as the former two. Fincham and Bradbury (1992) found that the Relationship Attribution Measure measured two higher-order attributions, causality attributions, i.e., beliefs about locus of control, stability and globality—and responsibility attributions, i.e., attitudes about intentionality, selfish motivation and blameworthiness. However, the present analyses suggested a composite construct that presumably measures a range of general attributions that fall on a continuum from positive to negative ( $\alpha = .72$ ). This composite attribution variable

included all of the items except the final variable measuring the degree to which the transgressing partner should be blamed.

### **Testing the Hypotheses**

The first hypothesis predicted that perpetrators, compared to victims, would set higher confirmatory standards when judging the unfairness of the situation, that is, they would need more evidence to conclude that the situation was unfair than victims. The hypothesis was confirmed,  $F(1, 52) = 9.97, p = .003$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .16$ . Victims were shown to have a lower threshold for unfairness ( $M = 1.71, SD = .64$ ) than perpetrators ( $M = 2.52, SD = 1.16$ ).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that by using dissimilar confirmatory standards, perpetrators and victims would arrive at different conclusions about the harm that the online transgression situation caused. This hypothesis was not supported. Victims ( $M = 6.40, SD = .63$ ) and perpetrators ( $M = 6.57, SD = .43$ ) made similar judgments for the harm and unfairness of the online betrayal situation,  $F(1, 52) = 1.40, p = .24$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .03$ . The same null outcome was found for the effect of the manipulation on forgiveness,  $F(1, 52) = .07, p = .80$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .001$ . Perpetrators ( $M = 3.63, SD = 1.23$ ) expected their partners to be no more likely to offer forgiveness than victims ( $M = 3.53, SD = 1.53$ ) said themselves. Thus, because there were no significant effects of the perspective manipulation on judgments and forgiveness, the mediation analyses proposed in

Hypotheses 5 and 6 could not be conducted. Table 1 presents the zero-order correlations between the variables in each of the hypotheses.

It was also hypothesized that victims would be more likely than perpetrators to make attributions of responsibility and causality (Hypothesis 3). However, due to the changes to the attribution indices, the analysis tested whether the valence of the composite attributions and blameworthiness attributions varied by perspective. It was expected that victims' attributions would be more negative than the perpetrators' and also that the victims would be more likely to place blame compared to the perpetrators. The multivariate analysis was significant, Wilks' Lambda = .74,  $F(2, 49) = 8.76$ ,  $p = .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .26$ . Univariate analyses revealed a significant main effect of perspective on the composite attribution index,  $F(1, 50) = 8.24$ ,  $p = .006$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .14$ . As expected, victims made more negative attributions for the transgressors' behavior ( $M = 5.06$ ,  $SD = .90$ ) than did the perpetrators ( $M = 4.37$ ,  $SD = .84$ ). Interestingly, *perpetrators* indicated that they should be blamed for their actions more ( $M = 6.38$ ,  $SD = .64$ ) than victims reported ( $M = 5.92$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ), although this effect was not statistically significant,  $F(1, 50) = 8.23$ ,  $p = .06$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .14$ .

Table 1. Zero order correlations among variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Perspective	1						
2. Attributions	-.38**	1					
3. Blameworthiness	.27	.21	1				
4. Discussion Content Standards	.40**	-.35*	-.15	1			
5. Judgments of Unfairness	.16	.13	.45***	-.37**	1		
6. Forgiveness	.03	-.33*	-.54**	.24	-.50***	1	
7. Relationship Satisfaction	-.15	.03	.03	-.21	.01	.08	1

Note: \*\*\* denotes  $p \leq .001$ , \*\*  $p \leq .01$ , \*  $p \leq .05$

### Additional Analyses

**Identification with the role.** Although the significant differences found in the standards and attributions made by participants in each condition suggested that the perspective manipulation was effective, it was informative to know how well the participants were able to identify with their role. Participants were asked, on scale from 1 to 7, how difficult it was for them to put themselves in the situation presented. Univariate analysis of variance revealed that difficulty of perspective taking varied by condition,  $F(1, 53) = 4.86, p = .03$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .08$ . Participants who were asked to take on the perpetrator role found it significantly more difficult to do so than ( $M = 5.46, SD = 1.53$ ) those assigned to the victim condition ( $M = 4.41, SD = 2.01$ ).



Presumably, one factor that might influence individuals' ability to perspective take is their past experience with online betrayal, which was assessed by asking participants whether they had ever been transgressed against in a way similar to the online situation that they read. Surprisingly, 49.1% of the participants indicated that they had been a victim in their current or in a previous relationship. Participants were also asked whether they had ever transgressed against a partner (i.e., been the perpetrator) in a way similar to the situation presented. Only 23.6% of participants revealed that they had been the one to transgress against their partner. Although a large proportion of the participants had real life experience being either the victim or the transgressor, a Chi-square analysis revealed that past experience, both with being the victim ( $\chi^2(6) = 7.00, p = .32$ ) and the perpetrator ( $\chi^2(6) = 2.88, p = .82$ ) of online betrayal, did not affect their ability to take on their assigned perspective. One might also speculate that having previous experience with online infidelity could consequently alter individuals' perceptions of similar situations. However, real life experience as either the victim or the perpetrator was found to be unrelated to all of the indexed variables of interest, all  $ps \geq .08$ .

**Relationship satisfaction.** Participants were also given a relationship satisfaction measure with the intent to test another theoretical model similar to the one shown in Figure 1. In this model, it was proposed that relationship satisfaction may also be indirectly affected by the manipulation's effect on standards and judgments— similar to what was expected for forgiveness. However, the results indicated that relationship

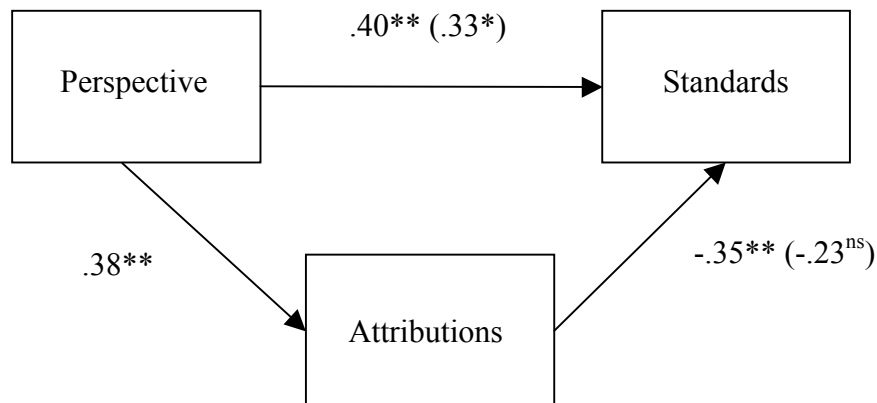
satisfaction was unaffected by the perspective manipulation. Both victims ( $M = 6.24$ ,  $SD = .78$ ) and perpetrators ( $M = 5.99$ ,  $SD = .86$ ) were similarly satisfied in their current relationships,  $F(1, 53) = 1.24$ ,  $p = .27$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .02$ . Therefore, the alternative theoretical model could not be tested. Relationship satisfaction was also found to be unrelated to any of the other variables of interest (See Table 1).

### **Post Hoc Analyses**

The primary purpose of the current study was to investigate how differences in the amount of evidence people need to conclude that something has been unfair (i.e., their confirmatory standards) influence their judgments of harm. While a plethora of research has established that attributions play a crucial role in the judgments partners make when facing relationship difficulties (Fincham, 1985; Fincham, Beach, & Nelson, 1987; Fincham & Bradbury, 1987), this study was the first to investigate the influence that confirmatory standards have on judgment formation in romantic relationships. Thus, another important objective was to compare these two mechanisms. Although the results of the current study were insufficient to draw any conclusions regarding judgment formation, perspective taking was shown to affect both standards and attributions and thus, post hoc analyses were performed in order to parse out these relationships.

A mediation analysis was performed, testing whether the effect of perspective on standards of unfairness was indirectly due to attributions. As shown in Figure 2, the analysis revealed that the perspective manipulation significantly predicted standards of

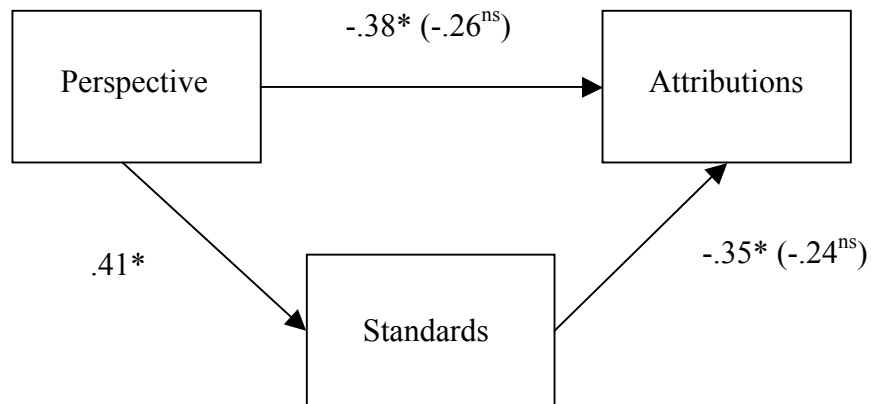
unfairness ( $\beta = .40, p = .003$ ); however, when perspective and attributions were both used to predict standards, the relationship between attributions and standards became nonsignificant ( $\beta = -.23, p = .10$ ), while perspective remained a significant predictor,  $\beta = -.33, p = .02$ . Thus, when accounting for attributions, the effect of perspective on standards remained significant. The nonsignificant correlation between attributions and standards indicated that, although there was an overlap between the two variables with regards to their relationship to the perspective manipulation, the effect of perspective on standards occurred above and beyond the effect of perspective on attributions.



Note: \*\* denotes  $p \leq .01$ , \*  $p \leq .05$

*Figure 2.* Path analysis testing the effect of perspective manipulation on confirmatory standards while controlling for attributions made for the transgressors' behavior

In order to determine if perspective also had a unique effect on attributions, a second mediation analysis was performed testing the alternative causal model shown in Figure 3. Perspective was found to significantly predict attributions,  $\beta = -.38, p = .005$ , but when perspective and standards were both used to predict attributions, standards became nonsignificant,  $\beta = -.24, p = .10$  as did the relationship between perspective and attributions,  $\beta = -.26, p = .07$ . In addition, the Sobel test of mediation was not significant,  $z = -1.43, p = .15$ . Thus, no evidence was found to support the notion that standards mediated the effect of perspective on attributions.



Note: \* denotes  $p \leq .01$

*Figure 3.* Path analysis testing the effect of perspective manipulation on attributions while controlling for confirmatory standards

Therefore, no support was found for each of the mediation models. It seems that the confirmatory standards victims and perpetrators set in regard to negative relationship situations (e.g., online infidelity) and the attributions they each make for these situations stem from independent mechanisms. However, it is noteworthy that in the first model, the relationship between perspective and standards remained significant even when accounting for attributions. This opposite effect was not found in the alternative model, suggesting that standards of unfairness accounted for more of the variance in the perspective manipulation than attributions.

## **Discussion**

It was expected that individuals assigned to the perpetrator condition would set higher confirmatory standards for judging the unfairness of negative relationship situations in the form of online betrayal and the harm it caused the victims. In other words, it was hypothesized that perpetrators would need more evidence than victims in order to conclude that harm had occurred. In addition, it was expected that victims would make more negative attributions for the transgressors' behavior than the perpetrators would themselves. Furthermore, it was predicted that victims would make more severe judgments of harm than perpetrators and, finally, that victims would report lower levels of forgiveness in comparison to the offender.

The first hypothesis was supported; victims set lower confirmatory standards when judging unfairness than did perpetrators. However, this effect was only evident in regard to the content of the discussion. Compared to victims, perpetrators indicated that it would take more messages with romantic and sexual content, and more messages detailing personal information regarding the partner and relationship, for the situation to be considered unfair. One reason for this difference could be the ambiguity in the perceived details of the online relationship. The online infidelity situation was rather vague in describing what was discussed between the transgressing partner and the online acquaintance, thus leaving it open for interpretation. For victims, even the slightest comment about them to a potential other might be offending. However, the perpetrator is

probably not as apt to place such a low threshold for a seemingly innocent topic.

Standards about more serious matters, such as lying about the individual or meeting the individual face to face, were not affected by the manipulation. This is most likely due to the seriousness of the issue. With matters that are generally agreed to be unacceptable within romantic relationships it is likely that both the perpetrator and victim hold similarly low standards.

The perspective manipulation was also found to affect the attributions individuals made. As predicted, victims made more negative attributions for the transgressors' behavior than the perpetrators, supporting the third hypothesis. However, it was interesting to find that perpetrators, rather than victims, tended to indicate that they should be blamed for their actions more often. This parallels previous findings that perpetrators, when evaluating incidents they committed, reported their behavior to be more unjust and less justified than the victims perceived (Mikula, Athenstaedt, Heschgl, & Heimgartner, 1998), as well as research demonstrating that perpetrators are more likely than victims to mention regret and to blame themselves for what happened (Kearns & Fincham, 2005). These findings might be evidence of perpetrators experiencing guilt and should be investigated further. However, in the current study, the finding suggests, at the very least, that the manipulation was effective.

Based on previous research (Miron et al., 2011), it was expected that when victims used lower confirmatory standards, they would be more likely to make harsher judgments of harm than when they used higher confirmatory standard, since their

threshold for unfairness would be low and therefore easier to surpass. It was further predicted that these harsher judgments would likely lead to the victims being less forgiving. However, this is not what was found. Victims and perpetrators made similar judgments when it came to appraise the harm and unfairness of the situation and when indicating levels of forgiveness. Presumably, this could be due to how the judgment questions were asked. In a sense, participants who were asked to take on the role of the perpetrator were expected to answer the questions in terms of how their partner would feel, and that might account for the absence of the predicted pattern of results. For instance, perpetrators were asked, “What is the likelihood that *your partner* would forgive you for your behavior?” It could be that perpetrators know how their partner would react and that their predictions were in line with what the victims indicated. This could be one potential limitation of the current study. Perhaps wording such as “What do you believe the likelihood of forgiveness *should* be?” would get at the perceptions of both the victim and the perpetrator. Due to the fact that no relationship was found between unfairness standards and judgments, and judgments and forgiveness, mediation analyses could not be conducted.

While the current study found little evidence suggestive of significant relationships between standards, judgments, and forgiveness, it was able to shed some light on the influence that perspective has on attributions and standards of unfairness. Specifically, it seems as though the perspective in which individuals experience negative relationship situations affects both the attributions they make for the transgressors’



behavior as well as the standards they set when judging the unfairness of the situation (at least in regard to the discussion content). However, the current study suggests that they each operate independently of one another. In other words, the different confirmatory standards set by victims and perpetrators were not due to the attributions they each made.

These findings are interesting, as previous research has shown that injustice standards affect judgments of harm (Miron et al., 2011). The current study, although unable to replicate the effect of standards on judgments, was able to identify that one's role, or perspective, in a situation affects the criterion a that person uses to define unfairness. This is in line with Miron et al.'s findings that advantaged and disadvantaged group members set different confirmatory standards when judging inequality. In addition, the current study indicates that the effect of perspective on standards cannot be explained by the differing attributions made by victims and perpetrators.

Attribution research has also shown that the attributions individuals make affect their judgments about a behavior or an event. The fact that the judgments made by participants in the current study were unaffected by *both* standards and attributions is puzzling. Presumably, it suggests that the participants were lacking a basis for judgment. It is possible that there were no differences in judgments because the online scenario was too ambiguous to make any conclusive assessments. It is also possible that society has constructed stereotypical norms for how to react in situations where infidelity may have occurred—determining that participants, regardless of their assumed role, will make equally harsh judgments of the online transgression. In contrast, past experience, personal

values, and situational motives, rather than societal norms, may dictate the standards people set for what is considered to be unfair in relationships. In this way, standards might be a more sensitive measure of an individual's *true* appraisals and, were in fact, responsive to the perspective the participants assumed (victim vs. perpetrator of transgression). More research needs to be done before any conclusions regarding the relationship between confirmatory standards of unfairness and appraisals of harm in online transgression situations can be drawn.

### **Limitations**

The findings from this study offer some new insight for researchers interested in the standard shifting phenomenon. However, some limitations to the study should be addressed. Most obvious is the constricted sample size as well as the sample of college students. It is possible that students have a different understanding of what qualifies as infidelity than individuals in the general public, as well as a unique set of norms for how to react to such indiscretions. However, this may also be viewed as a strength of the present research, as college-aged individuals are more likely than older generations to use the Internet as a medium for communication.

Previous studies examining perceptions of relationship transgressions have used more than one negative situation to assess people's reactions (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992). It is possible that using only one fairly unspecific example of a relationship offense was insufficient for finding differences between the judgments of perpetrators

and victims. Similarly, the online infidelity scenario used to evoke self-serving biases may have been too ambiguous to interpret and therefore may have produced inconsistent responses. Nevertheless, the significant effects of the manipulation on standards and attributions argue against these possibilities.

During the debriefing interview, a few participants indicated that some of the questions were difficult to understand, though they did not identify any specific items. This might account for the items that loaded on more than one factor when performing the factor analysis, which could have had an effect on the outcome indices.

### **Future Research**

The current study provided new findings that warrant further research. What the present research suggests is that definitions of unfairness set by partners in romantic relationships are inherently subjective: what seems to be fair to perpetrators may be very different from what is deemed acceptable or fair to the victims of indiscretions. However, it would be interesting to see if the same individuals would shift their unfairness standards for an *actual* transgression when put in the other's perspective. That is, do individuals use harsher standards when judging the unfairness of a situation in which they are the victim than they will when they are the ones who committed an offense?

Specifically, the present findings suggest that victims of relational transgressions, and the perpetrators of the offenses, set different confirmatory standards for what content can be discussed with potential others. Future research might want to look at whether

partners set different standards for other aspects of their relationship as well, such as standards for withholding information. For instance, consider the situation in which one partner decides not to tell their partner that they ran into an old fling at the grocery store. Whether or not this is viewed as acceptable is likely to stem from the standards each partner has regarding how much and what type of information is allowable to withhold from the other. Broadly speaking, the findings of the current study suggest that a multitude of relationship conflicts may be due to partners setting different standards of unfairness when evaluating relationship transgressions.

## APPENDIX A

### Consent Form

### Consent Document

The purpose of the present research is to assess peoples' judgments of conflict-causing situations within romantic relationships. The following information is provided so you may decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you wish to withdraw from the study at any time, you may do so without penalty.

If you decide to participate, your participation will consist of reading a hypothetical scenario about a potential relationship betrayal and answering questions gathering your opinions about it. You will also be asked questions about yourself and your current relationship. Completion of the study should not take longer than 30 minutes.

Participation in this study will not directly benefit you nor do we believe this study will present any risk of physical or psychological harm to your health. However, the research task may evoke sensitive memories and/or feelings regarding your most intimate relationships and might be upsetting for some people. Your responses will be anonymous as your name or student ID number will never be associated with the research project in any way. If, for some reason, you choose to withdraw from the study you will still receive credit for your research participation.

Once the study is completed, you will be provided with a more detailed description of the study. Please feel free to ask any questions before, during, or after the study is complete. If you would like additional information concerning this research do not hesitate to contact me or my thesis advisor:

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If you have any complaints about your treatment as a participant in this study, please call or write:

Chair, Institutional Review Board  
For Protection of Human Participants  
UW Oshkosh  
Oshkosh, WI 54901  
(920) 424-1415

I have received an explanation of the study and agree to participate. I understand that my participation in this study is completely voluntary.

---

Printed Name

Signature

Date

## APPENDIX B

Manipulation of Perspective:  
Victim vs. Perpetrator

### **Victim Perspective**

**Instructions:** Please read the following paragraph regarding a potential conflict-arousing situation between two romantic partners. While reading the scenario, please try your best to imagine yourself in the situation as if it were happening in your own relationship. Then with the specified role in mind, answer the questions on the next pages.

Imagine that you discover that the person with whom you've been seriously involved has been having an ongoing relationship with another woman/man online. You find a series of conversations in which he/she discusses very personal details of your relationship and you even read that he/she has considered breaking it off with you. You don't know what has happened between them or the extent of their relationship as your partner has never mentioned anything about her/him to you. You also find a picture online of a very attractive female/male which you assume to be his/her online acquaintance. You are very surprised by your partner's behavior and by this mysterious situation.



### **Perpetrator Perspective**

**Instructions:** Please read the following paragraph regarding a potential conflict-arousing situation between two romantic partners. While reading the scenario, please try your best to imagine yourself in the situation as if it were happening in your own relationship. Then with the specified role in mind, answer the questions on the next pages.

Imagine that the person with whom you've been seriously involved has discovered that you have been having an ongoing relationship with another man/woman online. He/She finds a series of conversations in which you discuss very personal details of your relationship and he/she even reads that you have considered breaking it off with him/her. Your partner does not know what has happened between you and this other man/woman or the extent of your relationship as you have never mentioned anything about him/her to her/him. Your partner also finds a picture online of a very attractive man/woman which he/she assumes to be your online acquaintance. Your partner is very surprised by your behavior and by this mysterious situation.

## APPENDIX C

### Standards of Unfairness Questionnaire: Victim Perspective

**Instructions:** For each question, please place a checkmark next to the single answer that best describes your opinion based on the situation previously described. Remember to maintain the role you were assigned to, in the scenario you read on the previous page.

1. For you to consider this behavior unfair **to you**, how frequently would your partner have to have contact with this person?

☐ Once a day  
☐ 2-5 times a day  
☐ Once a week  
☐ 2-5 times a week  
☐ Once a month  
☐ 2-5 times a month  
☐ Any contact at all

2. For you to consider this behavior unfair **to you**, how long would it have to be since their last contact with the online acquaintance?

☐ One hour  
☐ One day  
☐ One week  
☐ One month  
☐ Six months  
☐ One year  
☐ More than one year

3. For you to consider this behavior unfair **to you**, how many messages discussing details about your relationship would your partner have to have with this person?

☐ less than 1%  
☐ 1 – 10%  
☐ 11 – 25%  
☐ 26 – 50%  
☐ 51 – 75%  
☐ 76 – 99%  
☐ 100%

4. For you to consider this behavior unfair **to you**, how many messages mentioning you would your partner have to have with this person?

☐ less than 1%  
☐ 1 – 10%

- \_\_\_\_\_ 11 – 25%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 26 – 50%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 51 – 75%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 76 – 99%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 100%

5. For you to consider this behavior unfair **to you**, what percentage of messages with romantic content would your partner have to have with this person?

- \_\_\_\_\_ less than 1%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1 – 10%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11 – 25%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 26 – 50%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 51 – 75%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 76 – 99%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 100%

6. For you to consider this behavior unfair **to you**, what percentage of messages with sexual contact would your partner have to have with this person?

- \_\_\_\_\_ less than 1%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1 – 10%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11 – 25%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 26 – 50%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 51 – 75%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 76 – 99%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 100%

7. For you to consider this behavior unfair **to you**, how many times would your partner have to have met face-to-face with this person since the relationship began?

- \_\_\_\_\_ Once
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2 – 5 times
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6 – 10 times
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11 – 15 times
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16 – 20 times
- \_\_\_\_\_ 21 – 25 times
- \_\_\_\_\_ 26 times or more

8. For you to consider this behavior unfair **to you**, what percentage of time would your partner have to begin the exchange with this person?

- \_\_\_\_\_ less than 1%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1 – 10%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11 – 25%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 26 – 50%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 51 – 75%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 76 – 99%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 100%

9. For you to consider this behavior unfair **to you**, how long would your partner have to have hid this relationship from you?

- \_\_\_\_\_ One hour
- \_\_\_\_\_ One day
- \_\_\_\_\_ One week
- \_\_\_\_\_ One month
- \_\_\_\_\_ Six months
- \_\_\_\_\_ One year
- \_\_\_\_\_ More than one year

10. For you to consider this behavior unfair **to you**, how many times would your partner have to have lied to you about his/her relationship with this person?

- \_\_\_\_\_ Once
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2 – 5 times
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6 – 10 times
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11 – 15 times
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16 – 20 times
- \_\_\_\_\_ 21 – 25 times
- \_\_\_\_\_ 26 times or more

11. How long would it take **you** to forgive your partner for this behavior?

- \_\_\_\_\_ One hour or less
- \_\_\_\_\_ One hour
- \_\_\_\_\_ One day
- \_\_\_\_\_ One week
- \_\_\_\_\_ One month
- \_\_\_\_\_ Longer than one month
- \_\_\_\_\_ Never

12. How many times would **you** tolerate this behavior before **you** terminated the relationship?

- ☐ Zero times
- ☐ One time
- ☐ Two times
- ☐ Three times
- ☐ Four times
- ☐ Five times
- ☐ More than five times

## APPENDIX D

### Standards of Unfairness Questionnaire: Perpetrator Perspective

**Instructions:** For each question, please place a checkmark next to the single answer that best describes your opinion based on the situation previously described. Remember to maintain the role you were assigned to, in the scenario you read on the previous page.

1. For you to consider this behavior unfair **to your partner**, how frequently would you have to have contact with this person?

☐ Once a day  
☐ 2-5 times a day  
☐ Once a week  
☐ 2-5 times a week  
☐ Once a month  
☐ 2-5 times a month  
☐ Any contact at all

2. For you to consider this behavior unfair **to your partner**, how long would it have to be since your last contact with the online acquaintance?

☐ One hour  
☐ One day  
☐ One week  
☐ One month  
☐ Six months  
☐ One year  
☐ More than one year

3. For you to consider this behavior unfair **to your partner**, how many messages discussing details about your relationship would you have to have with this person?

☐ less than 1%  
☐ 1 – 10%  
☐ 11 – 25%  
☐ 26 – 50%  
☐ 51 – 75%  
☐ 76 – 99%  
☐ 100%

4. For you to consider this behavior unfair **to your partner**, how many messages mentioning your partner would you have to have with the online acquaintance?

☐ less than 1%



- \_\_\_\_\_ 1 – 10%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11 – 25%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 26 – 50%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 51 – 75%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 76 – 99%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 100%

5. For you to consider this behavior unfair to **your partner**, what percentage of messages with romantic content would you have to have with this person?

- \_\_\_\_\_ less than 1%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1 – 10%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11 – 25%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 26 – 50%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 51 – 75%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 76 – 99%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 100%

6. For you to consider this behavior unfair to **your partner**, what percentage of messages with sexual contact would you have to have with this person?

- \_\_\_\_\_ less than 1%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1 – 10%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11 – 25%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 26 – 50%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 51 – 75%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 76 – 99%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 100%

7. For you to consider this behavior unfair to **your partner**, how many times would you have to have met face to face with this person since the relationship began?

- \_\_\_\_\_ Once
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2 – 5 times
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6 – 10 times
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11 – 15 times
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16 – 20 times
- \_\_\_\_\_ 21 – 25 times
- \_\_\_\_\_ 26 times or more

8. For you to consider this behavior unfair to **your partner**, what percentage of time would you have to begin the exchange with this person?

- \_\_\_\_\_ less than 1%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1 – 10%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11 – 25%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 26 – 50%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 51 – 75%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 76 – 99%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 100%

9. For you to consider this behavior unfair to **your partner**, how long would you have to have hid this relationship from your partner?

- \_\_\_\_\_ One hour
- \_\_\_\_\_ One day
- \_\_\_\_\_ One week
- \_\_\_\_\_ One month
- \_\_\_\_\_ Six months
- \_\_\_\_\_ One year
- \_\_\_\_\_ More than one year

10. For you to consider this behavior unfair to **your partner**, how many times would you have to have lied to you about his relationship with this person?

- \_\_\_\_\_ Once
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2 – 5 times
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6 – 10 times
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11 – 15 times
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16 – 20 times
- \_\_\_\_\_ 21 – 25 times
- \_\_\_\_\_ 26 times or more

11. How long would it take **your partner** to forgive you for your behavior?

- \_\_\_\_\_ One hour or less
- \_\_\_\_\_ One hour
- \_\_\_\_\_ One day
- \_\_\_\_\_ One week
- \_\_\_\_\_ One month
- \_\_\_\_\_ Longer than one month
- \_\_\_\_\_ Never

12. How many times would **your partner** tolerate this behavior before he/she terminated your relationship?

- ☐ Zero times
- ☐ One time
- ☐ Two times
- ☐ Three times
- ☐ Four times
- ☐ Five times
- ☐ More than five times

## APPENDIX E

### Judgments of Harm Questionnaire: Victim Perspective

**Instructions:** For each question, please indicate the degree to which you feel about the situation described in the scenario on the first page.

1. How negatively do you view your partner's behavior?

Not Negative At All	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Very Negative
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2. How unacceptable do you consider your partner's behavior?

Not Unacceptable At All	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Extremely Unacceptable
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3. How harmful to the relationship do you consider your partner's behavior?

Not Harmful at All	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Extremely Harmful
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4. How harmful to *you* do you consider your partner's behavior?

Not Harmful at All	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Extremely Harmful
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5. How hurt would you feel by your partner's behavior?

Not Hurt At All	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Extremely Hurt
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6. How unfair to you do you consider your partner's behavior?

Not Unfair At All	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Extremely Unfair
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7. How angry would you feel by your partner's behavior?

Not Angry At All	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Extremely Angry
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8. How mad would you be at your partner for this behavior?

Not Mad At All	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Extremely Mad
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9. What is the likelihood that you would forgive your partner for this behavior?

Extremely Unlikely	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Extremely Likely
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10. What is the likelihood that you and your partner could work through this situation?

Extremely Unlikely	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Extremely Likely
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11. What is the likelihood that you and your partner would still be together 6 months from now?

Extremely Unlikely	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Extremely Likely
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## APPENDIX F

### Judgments of Harm Questionnaire: Perpetrator Perspective

**Instructions:** For each question, please indicate the degree to which you feel about the situation described in the scenario on the first page.

1. How negatively do you view your behavior?

Not Negative At All	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Very Negative
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2. How unacceptable do you consider your behavior?

Not Unacceptable At All	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Extremely Unacceptable
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3. How harmful to the relationship do you consider your behavior?

Not Harmful at All	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Extremely Harmful
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4. How harmful to your partner do you consider your behavior?

Not Harmful at All	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Extremely Harmful
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5. How hurt would your partner feel by your behavior?

Not Hurt At All	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Extremely Hurt
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6. How unfair to your partner do you consider your behavior?

Not Unfair At All	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Extremely Unfair
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7. How angry would your partner feel by your behavior?

Not Angry At All	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Extremely Angry
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8. How mad would your partner be at you for your behavior?

Not Mad At All	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Extremely Mad
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9. What is the likelihood that your partner would forgive you for your behavior?

Extremely Unlikely	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Extremely Likely
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10. What is the likelihood that you and your partner could work through this situation?

Extremely Unlikely	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Extremely Likely
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11. What is the likelihood that you and your partner would still be together 6 months from now?

Extremely Unlikely	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Extremely Likely
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## APPENDIX G

### Attributions Questionnaire: Victim Perspective

**Instructions:** Please circle the number that indicates how much you agree or disagree with each statement, using the scale below:

1. This behavior was due to something about my partner (e.g., the type of person he/she is)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

2. The reason my partner behaved this way is *not* likely to change

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

3. The reason my partner behaved this way is something that affects other areas of our relationship

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

4. My partner's behavior was on purpose rather than unintentionally

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

5. My partner's behavior was motivated by selfish rather than *unselfish* concerns

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

6. My partner deserves to be blamed for his/her behavior

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

## APPENDIX H

### Attributions Questionnaire: Perpetrator Perspective

**Instructions:** Please circle the number that indicates how much you agree or disagree with each statement, using the scale below:

1. This behavior was due to something about me (e.g., the type of person I am)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

2. The reason I behaved this way is *not* likely to change

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

3. The reason I behaved this way is something that affects other areas of our relationship

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

4. My behavior was on purpose rather than unintentionally

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

5. My behavior was motivated by selfish rather than *unselfish* concerns

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

6. I deserve to be blamed for my behavior

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

## APPENDIX I

### Demographics Information



### Demographic Information

1. What is your gender?

Male: \_\_\_\_\_ Female: \_\_\_\_\_

2. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_

3. What is your current relationship status?

\_\_\_\_\_ Single  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Exclusively Dating  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Married  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Separated  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Divorced  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ No longer dating this person

4. How long have you been involved with your current partner? \_\_\_\_\_ (in months)

5. How difficult was it for you to put yourself in the situation presented?

Not Difficult At All	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Extremely Difficult
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6. How satisfied are you with your relationship?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Extremely Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Mixed	Somewhat Satisfied	Very Satisfied	Extremely Satisfied

7. How satisfied are you with your boyfriend/girlfriend as a partner?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Extremely Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Mixed	Somewhat Satisfied	Very Satisfied	Extremely Satisfied

8. How satisfied are you with your relationship with your boyfriend/girlfriend?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Extremely Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Mixed	Somewhat Satisfied	Very Satisfied	Extremely Satisfied

9. How likely would you be to get involved in a situation like the one described on the first page?

Extremely Unlikely	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Extremely Likely
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10. How worried are you about the possibility of your partner having an online relationship similar to the one presented?

Not At All Worried	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Extremely Worried
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11. Have you, either in your current or in a previous relationship, ever been transgressed against in a way similar to the situation presented?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

12. Have you, either in your current or in a previous relationship, ever transgressed your partner in a way similar to the situation presented?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX J  
Debriefing Procedure

### Debriefing Procedure

Before you leave, I would like to ask you a few questions, if that's okay with you. First, do you have any questions or concerns regarding the story you read or questions you answered? (Yes/No)

Have you ever participated in any other psychological studies? (Yes/No)

You might be aware that sometimes the actual purpose of the study is not told to the participants until after the study is over. Do you think there is more to the study than what you have been told? (Yes/No)

**If Yes:** What do you think this study is all about?

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In this study, you were asked to read a story about a negative situation that arose in a romantic relationship. You were asked to put yourself in the story as if you were actually experiencing the situation in your own relationship. Was it easy for you to do this? (Yes/No)

Did it bring to mind a similar situation that you have actually experienced in a past or current relationship? (Yes/No)

**If Yes:** How did that make you feel?

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Did you think during the study that we were trying to influence your feelings about the relationship or your partner by having you answer questions about your relationship and partner? (Yes/No)

Do you think anything about this study will affect your current relationship? (Yes/No)

**If Yes:** How so?

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In this study, we were looking at whether unfairness standards (i.e., the amount of evidence you would need to conclude that something was unfair) affected judgments of harm and forgiveness. We also wanted to explore whether the perspective in which a person experiences a situation affects the standards they set and if this, in turn, affects judgments of harm and forgiveness. There were two versions of the negative relationship event scenario. Participants either read that *they* had just found out about their partner's

online relationship (i.e., victim perspective) or that *their partner* had just found out about *their own* online relationship (i.e., perpetrator perspective).

Which perspective did you receive? (Victim/Perpetrator)

It was predicted that people in the *victim* condition would set lower standards (i.e., need less evidence) of unfairness so that they would make more severe judgments of harm and consequently would be less likely to forgive their partner. In the *perpetrator* perspective it was predicted that they would set high standards (i.e., need more evidence) of unfairness so that they would make more lenient judgments of harm and be more likely to forgive than would the participants in the victim condition. Does that make sense? (Yes/No)

I understand that the information presented to you may have evoked negative memories and/or feelings regarding your current or previous relationship. Because of the sensitive nature of the topic, we are providing participants, if they chose to take it, with information about UW Oshkosh's counseling center, which offers free and confidential counseling services to all UWO students. Would you like to receive this information? (Yes/No)

Do you have any questions about this study or comments that you think would have made the study better?

I thank you for your participation and hope that you will be careful not to tell anyone who may also be participating in this study what it is about. Do you think you can do that? (Yes/No)

Again, thank you very much for your help.

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Comments:

### Endnotes

1. When outliers were included in the analyses, the effect of the manipulation on standards became slightly more significant ( $p = .002$ ) as did attributions ( $p = .002$ ).

Neither judgments of unfairness ( $p = .92$ ) or forgiveness ( $p = .62$ ) were significantly affected. However, the addition of the outliers made the effect of the manipulation on attributions of blameworthiness to be significant ( $p = .03$ ). In order to prevent a type I error, the outliers were removed.

2. Looking at individual standards, percentage beginning exchange (question 8) was also significantly affected by perspective. It was only moderately correlated with the discussion content standards and therefore was left out of further analyses.

3. While analyzing the data, it was discovered that the response categories of the first question in the measure of standards did not follow the same format as the others and might have been difficult for participants to interpret. It was subsequently discarded. Questions 2, 7, and 10 were also left out of the analysis because the response categories were ambiguous.

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