

# Agreement Attraction and Impasse Aversion: Reasons for Selecting a Poor Deal Over No Deal at All



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## Abstract

In the present studies, we examined the positive value of agreement and the negative value of impasse. Participants chose to give up real value and sacrifice economic efficiency in order to attain an agreement outcome and avoid an impasse outcome. A personally disadvantageous option was selected significantly more often when it was labeled “Agreement” rather than “Option A,” and a personally advantageous option was avoided significantly more often when it was labeled “Impasse” rather than “Option B.” In a face-to-face negotiation, a substantial proportion of individuals reached an agreement that was inferior to their best alternative to agreement. We showed that the appeal of agreement and the aversion to impasse both contribute to this effect, yet the aversion to impasse is the stronger of the two motivations. These findings have important implications for negotiators.

## Keywords

agreement, impasse, cooperation, negotiation, allocation task, open data

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In a negotiation, two parties may each have outside alternatives that are more valuable to them than the maximum value the parties could offer each other. When that happens, impasse is the economically advantageous outcome (Raiffa, 1981). Yet success in a negotiation is widely equated with reaching agreement, and negotiations that end in impasse are commonly characterized as failures (Kesner & Shapiro, 1991). When novice negotiators were asked to list all actions that constituted a successful negotiation (O'Connor & Adams, 1999), 84% of them mentioned “reaching agreement”—surpassed only by “attempting to compromise” (92%). Dictionaries also typically define negotiation as an attempt to reach agreement (see Table 1), which obscures the appropriateness of impasse when mutual gain is not possible.

The occasional desirability of impasse also seems to be lost on some negotiators, who accept agreements that may leave them economically worse off than they would be had they walked away (e.g., Cohen, Leonardelli, & Thompson, 2014; Pinkley, Neale, & Bennett, 1994;

Thompson, 2009). Why is the notion that impasse is sometimes desirable so neglected? And how can one explain negotiators’ tendency to sometimes prefer a sub-optimal deal over impasse?

Two factors have been hypothesized to account for such suboptimal agreements. First, informational or judgmental constraints may obstruct an accurate assessment of negotiation parameters and prevent negotiators from realizing that the agreement does not meet their economic interests. Second, many negotiators desire to build or protect their relationships with valued negotiation partners in the hope of securing future economic gains. We propose a third, albeit complementary, cause—the inherent value people place on reaching agreement and

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**Table 1.** Dictionary Definitions of Negotiation

Source	Definition
<i>Cambridge Dictionary of American English</i>	The process of discussing something with someone <b>in order to reach an agreement</b> , or the discussions themselves.
<i>Collins English Dictionary</i>	A discussion set up or <b>intended to produce a settlement or agreement</b> .
<i>The Free Dictionary</i>	To confer with another or others <b>in order to come to terms or reach an agreement</b> .
<i>Law.com Dictionary</i>	Give-and-take discussion or conference <b>in an attempt to reach an agreement</b> or settle a dispute.
<i>Macmillan Dictionary</i>	Formal discussions in which people or groups <b>try to reach an agreement</b> , especially in a business or political situation.
<i>The Wordsmyth English Dictionary-Thesaurus Vocabulary.com</i>	Mutual discussions <b>intended to produce an agreement</b> .
	A negotiation is a business-oriented conversation where two sides argue, discuss, and compromise <b>to reach some agreement</b> .
<i>Webster's New World College Dictionary</i> (4th ed.)	Negotiation is defined as a back-and-forth process in which two or more people with different interests must find a way to reconcile or compromise <b>to come up with an agreement</b> .

Note: Definitions were obtained online on December 19, 2015 ("Negotiation," 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d, 2015e, 2015f, 2015g, 2015h). Statements highlighted in bold present agreement as the objective of a negotiation.

avoiding impasse, even when the relationship is nonexistent or irrelevant.

Human survival depends on maintaining cooperative relationships with other people (Henrich & Henrich, 2007; Tomasello, 2009). If agreement represents the culmination of a cooperative exchange and impasse represents a block to it, and if maintaining cooperative relationships has adaptive value, people may value and seek agreement regardless of the accompanying economic losses. While the adaptive value of good relationships is the likely distal cause of these preferences, we propose that these preferences represent a deep-seated human tendency that is not contingent on the existence of a cherished relationship or even on the existence of any relationship. The attractiveness of agreement and the aversiveness of impasse should thus not be limited to situations in which a negotiator cares about a specific relationship and should be observed even when relational concerns are nonexistent or irrelevant.

To test this prediction, we created an experimental setting—devoid of relational concerns and judgmental or informational constraints—that could provide an alternative explanation for economically disadvantageous agreement outcomes. Our paradigm was similar to that used in studies of social dilemmas. Past research has found that people presented with numerically identical payoff matrices respond differently depending on the contextual framing. For example, people contribute less to a public good when it is framed as an economic as opposed to a noneconomic decision (Pillutla & Chen, 1999), and they defect more in a prisoner's dilemma when the game is labeled "Wall Street Game" as opposed to "Community Game" (Liberman, Samuels, & Ross, 2004). Taking a similar approach, we measured whether people would more often choose a personally disadvantageous outcome

when it is labeled "Agreement" as opposed to "Option A"; we also measured the same situation from the opposite perspective, that is, whether people would less often choose a personally advantageous outcome when it is labeled "Impasse" as opposed to "Option B."

Studies 1a to 1d, although not structured around true negotiations, tested whether the value associated with reaching agreement and avoiding impasse leads people to give up instrumental value. The studies involved a series of decision tasks that lack social implications, such as an identifiable exchange partner or past relational investment (see Table 2 for a comparison of the features of these four studies). Study 1e revealed actual negotiators' tendency to settle for agreements worse than their best alternative to agreement. In Studies 2a and 2b, we dissociated the pursuit of agreement from the avoidance of impasse to assess the relative strength of the two preferences.

## Study 1a

### Method

**Participants.** We recruited 84 anonymous participants (44 women, 40 men; mean age = 33.23 years,  $SD = 12.17$ ) through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and paid them \$1 each for their participation. Research has shown that MTurk participants are representative of the U.S. population and provide a significantly more diverse sample than typical American college students do (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). We screened participants using three criteria: Participants had to be older than 18 years, they had to reside in the United States, and they had to be native English speakers. MTurk workers are anonymous to experimenters, which

**Table 2.** Comparison of Features of Studies 1a to 1d

Feature	Study 1a	Study 1b	Study 1c	Study 1d
Sample	Online	Online	M.B.A. students	Online
Real stakes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Unit of payoff	Points	Cents	Dollars	Cents
Fixed gain for other person	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Interactive negotiation	No	No	No	Yes

Note: M.B.A. = master of business administration.

removed participants' concerns about their reputation as a potential explanation for choices that benefitted the other party in the present study.<sup>1</sup>

**Procedure.** We asked participants to imagine that they were randomly paired with a hypothetical other person, whom we referred to as the "Other." Participants read that this other person was someone they did not know and would not knowingly meet in the future. They were then presented with nine resource-distribution choices, adapted from Kuhlman and Marshello (1975), involving the allocation of points to themselves and the hypothetical other person. The tasks were structured such that joint gain (i.e., the sum of payoffs to the participant and the other) was fixed. This meant that any gain to the other person came at an equivalent loss to the participant and vice versa. Selecting a personally disadvantageous option therefore could not be justified by a desire to increase joint gain.

Each participant was randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. In each condition, they saw a series of two-alternative forced-choice options (e.g., "You get 35, Other gets 40" and "You get 39, Other gets 36"; see the Supplemental Material available online for the task instructions). In the framed condition, one option was labeled "Agreement," and the other was labeled "Impasse." In the control condition, one option was labeled "Option A" and the other "Option B." Since the word "impasse" might have been unfamiliar to some participants, we noted in the framed condition that this option would "represent a situation where there is no agreement with the Other." In each allocation task, choosing "Agreement" or "Option A" provided fewer points to the participant and more points to the other person than choosing "Impasse" or "Option B." Thus, participants would be giving up value if they chose "Agreement" over "Impasse," or "Option A" over "Option B."<sup>2</sup>

## Results

Responses to the nine allocation decisions were highly correlated (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ). We calculated the average response score for the allocation decisions for each participant and found that those in the control condition

selected the personally disadvantageous option (i.e., "Option A") 33.88% of the time ( $SD = 31\%$ ), while those in the framed condition selected this option (i.e., "Agreement") 47.90% of the time ( $SD = 33\%$ ). This difference was statistically significant,  $t(82) = 2.00$ ,  $p = .049$ .<sup>3</sup>

As predicted, we found that the lower individual point allocation was selected more often when it was labeled "Agreement" rather than "Option A" (see Fig. 1). We also regressed participants' choice on condition while controlling for participant gender, age, and education. None of these factors significantly predicted participant choice.<sup>4</sup>

## Study 1b

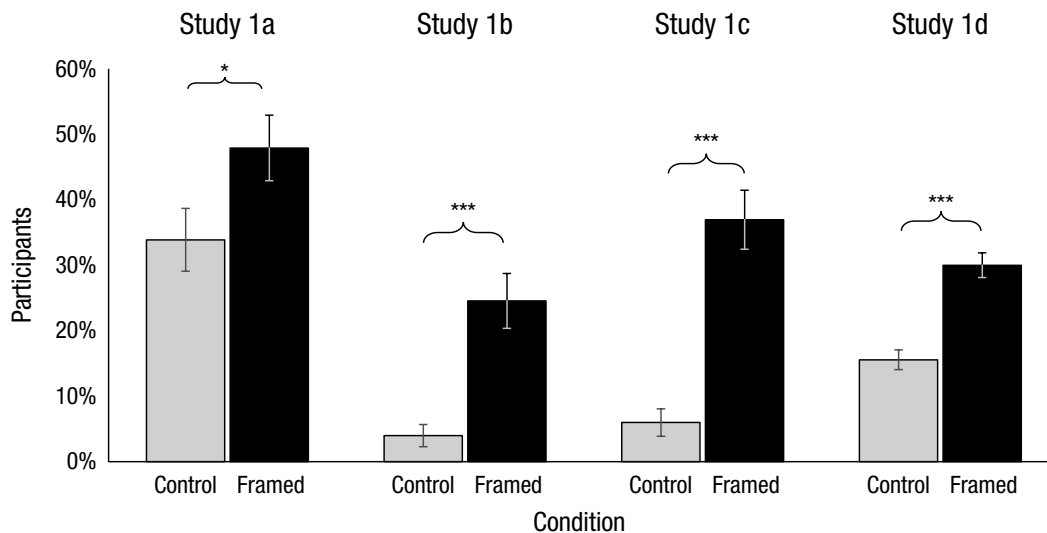
### Method

We recruited 82 anonymous participants (40 women, 42 men; mean age = 33.82 years,  $SD = 11.36$ ) through Amazon's MTurk. In Study 1b, we modified the task such that the allocation to the other person was held constant across the two options in each trial, and the only difference between the options was that participants themselves would obtain fewer points by selecting "Agreement" or "Option A" than by selecting "Impasse" or "Option B." This meant that the "Agreement" (or "Option A") choice was strictly inferior to its alternative, and choosing it would be sacrificing not only personal gain but also economic efficiency. Unlike in Study 1a, this choice could not be justified by gains to the other party, as the other party's points were fixed across the two options.

In this study, the cost of selecting "Agreement" was further increased by linking participants' monetary compensation to their choices (i.e., cents were used instead of points). Participants were informed that at the end of the study, a randomly selected individual would get a bonus in the amount that person had allocated to him- or herself.

## Results

Responses to the nine allocation decisions were highly correlated (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86$ ). On average, participants in the control condition selected the personally disadvantageous option (i.e., "Option A") 3.99% of the time ( $SD = 11\%$ ),



**Fig. 1.** Results of Studies 1a through 1d: percentage of participants who selected the personally disadvantageous option as a function of condition. Error bars show  $\pm 1$  SD. Asterisks indicate significant differences between conditions (\* $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ).

while those in the framed condition selected this option (i.e., “Agreement”) 24.55% of the time ( $SD = 28\%$ ). This difference was statistically significant,  $t(80) = 4.33$ ,  $p < .001$ . As in Study 1a, participants selected the disadvantageous option more frequently when it was labeled “Agreement” than when it was labeled “Option A” (see Fig. 1).

### Study 1c

#### Method

Individuals with business-related work experience could be less susceptible to the allure of agreement than individuals in other fields. Thus, in Study 1c, we tested our predictions in a sample of students with work experience who were enrolled in a negotiation class and were completing their master of business administration (M.B.A.). We also further increased the stakes by paying participants a larger bonus.

**Participants.** We collected data from 73 participants (31 women, 42 men; mean age = 29.11 years,  $SD = 3.46$ ) enrolled in two M.B.A. negotiation courses at a Southwestern university in the United States. All students who were present in class participated in the study. Eighty-five percent of the students were American, and they had an average work experience of 6.6 years ( $SD = 3.53$ ). Participants completed the survey as part of an online exercise before class. Participants were informed that the experimenter would randomly select 1 participant per class and pay him or her with an Amazon gift card for the average amount that person had allocated to him- or herself across the nine tasks. At the end of the study, 2 participants were awarded gift cards for \$36.00 and

\$36.78, respectively, based on their average allocations to themselves.

**Procedure.** As in the previous studies, each participant was randomly assigned to one of two conditions and asked to imagine that he or she was randomly paired with a hypothetical other person. The nine allocation tasks were identical to the ones presented in Study 1b, except that this time, amounts were presented in dollars rather than cents.

#### Results

Responses to the nine allocation decisions were highly correlated (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ). On average, participants in the control condition selected the personally disadvantageous option (i.e., “Option A”) 5.98% of the time ( $SD = 13\%$ ), while participants in the framed condition selected this option (i.e., “Agreement”) 36.93% of the time ( $SD = 27\%$ ). This difference was statistically significant,  $t(71) = 6.39$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Study 1c thus demonstrated that even when the gains accruing to the hypothetical other person were held constant and real money was at stake, participants with business-related work experience more frequently selected the disadvantageous option when it was labeled “Agreement” than when it was labeled “Option A” (see Fig. 1).

### Study 1d

#### Method

Studies 1a to 1c documented people's willingness to pay a premium to reach agreement and avoid impasse. The

austerity of our experimental design allowed us to eliminate alternative explanations for this preference, such as ambiguity of payoffs and relational concerns. However, this austerity came at a cost, as it did not provide a realistic negotiation experience. To simulate such an experience, we told participants in Study 1d that they were negotiating with another party, and offers were embedded in messages from the ostensible counterpart. Further, it was clarified that choosing “Impasse” would mean that each party defaulted to “the option that is the best alternative to a negotiated agreement.”

Given the presentation of the study as a negotiation with some interactive elements, we wanted to ensure that participants' choices could not be explained by expectations of reciprocity from the counterpart (Pruitt & Kimmel, 1977). Thus, we also varied whether participants believed that they were negotiating with the same person during the nine short negotiations or a different person each time.

**Participants.** We recruited 561 anonymous participants (239 female, 322 male; mean age = 33.26 years,  $SD = 10.94$ ) through Amazon's MTurk. Participants were informed that at the end of the study, a randomly selected individual would get a bonus in the amount of his or her average self-allocation.

**Procedure.** Participants engaged in nine simulated negotiations in which they were sent a series of final offers. The payoff matrices were identical to those in Study 1c. We varied whether they received the offers from the same person or from a different person in each round. The offers were preprogrammed, but they ostensibly came from the negotiation partner. Participants first read an offer coming from their negotiation partner, such as “Hi there! Here's my offer: You get 35¢ and I get 40¢.” Participants were then given two options to choose from. Depending on the experimental condition, the offer from the other person was labeled “Agreement” or “Option A,” and the alternative option was labeled “Impasse” or “Option B.” As before, choosing “Agreement” or “Option A” allocated less money to the participant and more to the other person than choosing “Impasse” or “Option B.”

## Results

Responses to the nine allocation decisions were highly correlated (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ). On average, participants in the control condition selected the personally disadvantageous option (i.e., “Option A”) 15.56% of the time ( $SD = 25\%$ ), while participants in the framed condition selected this option (i.e., “Agreement”) 30.00% of the time ( $SD = 32\%$ ). This difference was significant,  $t(558) = 5.93, p < .001$  (see Fig. 1). A repeated-measures

logistic regression indicated that neither counterpart condition (i.e., whether participants were facing the same or a different negotiation counterpart;  $b = -0.011$ , n.s.) nor the interaction of counterpart condition with choice-framing condition ( $b = 0.055$ , n.s.) predicted participants' choice.<sup>5</sup>

Study 1d replicated our findings in a final-offer negotiation context. Participants were willing to choose the personally disadvantageous “Agreement” outcome even in one-shot interactions with a person they never heard from again and not any less frequently than in repeated interactions. While more tests are needed to assess the moderating role of repeated interactions, these findings suggest that repeated interactions are not necessary to make the personally disadvantageous agreement more attractive than impasse.

## Study 1e

### Method

Studies 1a to 1d were allocation experiments, not true negotiation studies, which allowed us to test our predictions in a controlled setting. In Study 1e, we tested whether the partiality to agreement also emerges in face-to-face negotiations in which parties exchange offers and counteroffers over multiple rounds. While this setting is less controlled, it would provide further support and external validity for our proposition if some participants showed a tendency to sign deals below their bottom line.

**Participants.** We collected data from 140 participants (38 female, 102 male; mean age = 37.25 years,  $SD = 4.34$ ) enrolled in an executive M.B.A. negotiation course at a Southwestern university in the United States.

**Procedure.** Participants engaged in a face-to-face employment-contract negotiation (adapted from Pinkley et al., 1994) as a class activity. One person in the dyad played the role of the recruiter, and the other played the job candidate. Negotiators' preferences were codified through points assigned to each issue in the negotiation, with a higher number of points indicating a stronger preference (e.g., negotiating 3 weeks of vacation time earned the candidate 600 points and the recruiter 0 points, whereas negotiating 2 weeks of vacation time earned the candidate 300 points and the recruiter 700 points). Parties could create value and earn more points if they conceded on the issues that were of low importance to them in exchange for concessions on the issues that were of high importance. Participants were told that their goal in the negotiation was to maximize their own payoff points, and the numerical codification of preferences removed any ambiguity about what those payoffs

would be. The zone of possible agreements was kept narrow to make it more difficult for the parties to reach a mutually beneficial agreement.

All participants were informed that they had a moderately attractive alternative to the current negotiation. The candidate had an alternative job offer, and the recruiter had an alternative candidate. Each negotiator in a dyad had a point value associated with the alternative that could be defaulted to if he or she were not able to reach a more advantageous agreement (i.e., a higher point value) with their negotiation counterpart. Negotiation outcomes were directly linked to participants' course grades, such that accepting a deal worth less than the alternative meant receiving a lower grade than reaching an impasse (see the Supplemental Material for details about the negotiation task).

## Results

Forty-three dyads reached an agreement. For 31 of these dyads (72.09%,  $SD = 45\%$ ), the accepted deal was worth less to one party than the value of that party's alternative. These individuals thus sacrificed a better outcome in the negotiation (and their course grade). The number of dyads in which one party reached a disadvantageous deal was significantly different from zero,  $t(42) = 10.42$ ,  $p < .001$ .

In a sample of individuals who are being trained to be effective negotiators and who were given clear information on their bottom line as well as on the payoffs associated with each deal, we again found that reaching an economically suboptimal deal could be more appealing than reaching an impasse. In approximately three out of four dyads that reached an agreement, one party settled for a deal that was detrimental to his or her economic interest in the negotiation simulation and course grade. These results further support those from Studies 1a to 1d in a real, more complex face-to-face negotiation.

## Discussion

Taken together, the results of Studies 1a to 1e strongly suggest that people are willing to give up value to reach an agreement and to avoid an impasse. Participants paid a premium when payoffs were unambiguous and when concerns about the relationship with the other person or about their reputation were nonexistent. Study 1e provided evidence for the external validity of this finding.

## Studies 2a and 2b

In a real negotiation, while reaching agreement means avoiding impasse and vice versa, the motivation to approach agreement is psychologically distinct from the

motivation to avoid impasse. Studies 2a and 2b tested the relative strength of these two motivations.

If people perceive agreement as good and impasse as bad, as we claim they do, the motivation to avoid impasse should be stronger than the motivation to seek agreement, based on the principle that "bad is stronger than good" (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). This principle suggests that the effect of the bad is bigger than the effect of the good across a wide range of psychological phenomena. For example, negative effects of unfriendly interactions are stronger than the positive effects of friendly interactions (Manne, Taylor, Dougherty, & Kemeny, 1997; Okun, Melichar, & Hill, 1990), and the quality of close relationships depends more strongly on the presence and absence of negative than positive elements (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991). Studies 2a and 2b tested the prediction that the negative effect of impasse would be more aversive than the positive impact of reaching agreement.

We modified the decision task such that people could choose between "Agreement" and a more advantageous alternative (one that is not labeled "Impasse") or between "Impasse" and a more costly alternative (one that is not labeled "Agreement"). If people are motivated to reach an agreement, they should select the more costly "Agreement" option over an alternative arrangement, even if that arrangement is not impasse. Similarly if motivated to avoid impasse, they should select a more costly alternative to impasse even if that arrangement is not agreement. By comparing the size of these preferences over the alternative, we could estimate the relative strength of the two motivations.

## Study 2a

**Method.** We recruited 202 anonymous participants (96 women, 106 men; mean age = 35.02 years,  $SD = 12.19$ ) through Amazon's MTurk. We screened participants using three criteria: Participants had to be older than 18 years of age, they had to reside in the United States, and they had to be native English speakers. Participants were paid \$1 for their participation.

As in Study 1, we asked participants to imagine that they were randomly paired with a hypothetical other person. Participants read that this other person was someone they did not know and would not knowingly meet in the future. They were then presented with a series of 18 resource-distribution choices, similar to those presented in Studies 1a to 1d, involving the allocation of points to themselves and the hypothetical other person.

In this study, participants no longer chose between "Agreement" and "Impasse" (or "Option A" and "Option B"). Instead, they chose between "Agreement" (or "Option A") and an option labeled "Alternative," and between

“Impasse” (or “Option B”) and “Alternative.” We randomly assigned each participant to one of two experimental conditions. In the framed condition, participants made 18 allocation choices, 9 of which were between options labeled “Agreement” and “Alternative,” and the remaining 9 between options labeled “Alternative” and “Impasse.” In the control condition, participants also made 18 allocation choices, 9 of which were between options labeled “Option A” and “Alternative,” and the remaining 9 between options labeled “Alternative” and “Option B.”

We defined the terms “Agreement” and “Impasse” in the framed condition and explained that participants could choose from “Option A” and “Option B” in the control condition. Participants in both conditions were also told that “a third option will be called ALTERNATIVE and represent an alternative arrangement.” These instructions were intended to prevent participants in the framed condition from assuming that the alternative to an agreement was impasse and vice versa.

In these studies, as in Studies 1b to 1d, allocations to the other person were constant within each allocation task, while participants’ allocations to themselves varied. Each allocation matrix was presented twice. One time, the higher value to the participant was labeled “Alternative” and the lower value “Agreement” (or “Option A”). The other time, the higher value to the participant was labeled “Impasse” (or “Option B”) and the lower value “Alternative.” Consequently, across the decision tasks, the cost of agreement over the alternative arrangement was equal to the cost of the alternative arrangement over impasse. This equivalence allowed us to compare the relative values people put on reaching an agreement versus avoiding impasse. The 18 allocation decisions were presented in random order (see the Supplemental Material for the experimental instructions and allocation tasks).<sup>6</sup>

**Results.** Responses to the nine allocation decisions between “Agreement” (or “Option A”) and “Alternative” were highly correlated (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .81$ ), as were responses to the nine allocation decisions between “Impasse” (or “Option B”) and “Alternative” (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .89$ ). On average, across all nine responses, participants who chose between “Option A” and “Alternative” selected the personally disadvantageous option (i.e., “Option A”) 11.22% of the time ( $SD = 20\%$ ), while participants who chose between “Agreement” and “Alternative” selected this option (i.e., “Agreement”) 16.11% of the time ( $SD = 22\%$ ). This difference approached but did not reach statistical significance,  $t(200) = 1.66$ ,  $p = .098$ , Cohen’s  $d = 0.23$ .

When comparing the other set of allocation decisions across all nine responses, we found that participants who

chose between “Option B” and “Alternative” selected the personally disadvantageous option (i.e., “Alternative”) 10.24% of the time ( $SD = 20\%$ ), while participants who chose between “Impasse” and “Alternative” selected this option (i.e., “Alternative”) 19.67% of the time ( $SD = 29\%$ ). This difference was significant,  $t(200) = 2.69$ ,  $p < .01$ , Cohen’s  $d = 0.38$  (see Fig. 2).

A within-subjects comparison of choices also showed that participants in the control condition did not select the personally disadvantageous option at significantly different rates whether it was labeled “Option A” or “Alternative,”  $t(101) = 1.38$ ,  $p = .17$ . In contrast, participants in the framed condition were more likely to select the personally disadvantageous option when it was presented as an alternative to impasse than when it was presented as an alternative to agreement,  $t(99) = 1.95$ ,  $p = .05$ .

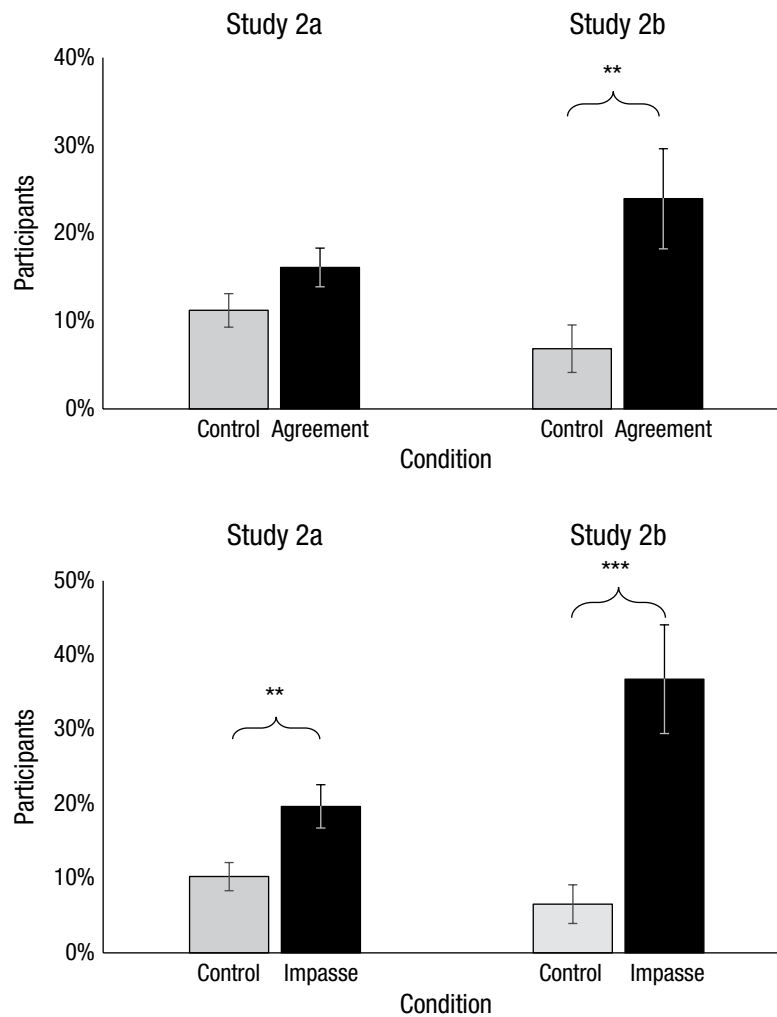
These findings suggest a small effect for the motivation to seek agreement, which did not reach significance, and a larger effect for the motivation to avoid impasse. Next, we tested the generalizability and robustness of our findings with a different population and larger stakes.

## Study 2b

**Method.** For Study 2b, we collected data from 60 participants (15 women, 45 men; mean age = 38.17 years,  $SD = 5.36$ ) enrolled in executive M.B.A. negotiation courses at a Southwestern university in the United States. All students present in class participated in the study. Sixty-eight percent of the students were American, and they had an average work experience of 16.68 years ( $SD = 6.22$ ). Participants completed the survey as part of a class exercise before class.

The procedure mirrored that of Study 2a, except that dollars were used instead of points. Participants were informed that the experimenter would randomly select 1 participant per class and pay him or her with an Amazon gift card for the average amount that person had allocated to him- or herself across the 18 choices. At the end of the study, 2 participants were awarded gifts cards, each with a value of \$32.50, based on their average allocations to themselves.

**Results.** Responses to the nine allocation decisions between “Agreement” (or “Option A”) and “Alternative” and the nine allocation decisions between “Impasse” (or “Option B”) and “Alternative” were highly correlated (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ s = .87 and .92, respectively). Participants who chose between “Option A” and “Alternative” selected the personally disadvantageous option (i.e., “Option A”) 6.86% of the time ( $SD = 16\%$ ), while participants who chose between “Agreement” and “Alternative” selected



**Fig. 2.** Results of Studies 2a and 2b: percentage of participants who selected the personally disadvantageous option as a function of condition. Results are shown separately for the comparison between the control and agreement conditions and the control and impasse conditions. Error bars show  $\pm 1$  SD. Asterisks indicate significant differences between conditions (\*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ).

this option (i.e., “Agreement”) 23.93% of the time ( $SD = 29\%$ ). This difference was significant,  $t(58) = 2.87$ ,  $p < .01$ , Cohen’s  $d = 0.75$ .

For the other set of allocation decisions, we found that participants who chose between “Option B” and “Alternative” selected the personally disadvantageous option (i.e., “Alternative”) 6.54% of the time ( $SD = 15\%$ ), while participants who chose between “Impasse” and “Alternative” selected this option (i.e., “Alternative”) 36.75% of the time ( $SD = 37\%$ ). This difference was also significant,  $t(58) = 4.29$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen’s  $d = 1.12$  (see Fig. 2).

A within-subjects comparison of choices revealed that participants in the control condition did not select the personally disadvantageous option at significantly different rates whether it was labeled “Option A” or “Alternative,”  $t(33) = 0.27$ , n.s. In contrast, in the framed

condition, participants were significantly more likely to select the personally disadvantageous option when it was framed as an alternative to impasse than when it was framed as an alternative to agreement,  $t(25) = 2.17$ ,  $p < .05$ . In other words, participants in the framed condition were 53.57% more likely to choose the personally disadvantageous alternative when it allowed them to avoid impasse than when it allowed them to reach agreement.

Overall, participants selected the outcome that was personally advantageous (and led to higher joint gains) 94% of the time when the choices were framed as “Option A” or “Option B” versus “Alternative.” But when the disadvantageous outcome was labeled “Agreement,” participants selected the more profitable “Alternative” outcome only 76% of the time, and when the more advantageous



outcome was labeled “Impasse,” participants selected it only 63% of the time.

## Discussion

Dissociating the motivation to reach agreement from the motivation to avoid impasse, we have shown that both contribute to the documented effect. And yet the motivation to avoid impasse is stronger. Perhaps because of the psychological salience of agreement and impasse in a negotiation class, we observed larger effect sizes in Study 2b than in Study 2a. This difference highlights the need for an exploration of moderators in future research.

## General Discussion

We have shown that people give up objective value to obtain a nominal agreement outcome and to avoid a nominal impasse outcome. They do so in the absence of uncertainty or confusion about prospective gains and outside of a social or relational context. This suggests that agreement is itself a source of utility and impasse a source of disutility. Consistent with the principle that bad is stronger than good, we also found impasse aversion to be stronger than agreement attraction.

While our studies primarily relied on a minimal-setting paradigm to eliminate alternative explanations for suboptimal agreement choices, Study 1e demonstrated that some people prefer agreement over impasse in more complex, face-to-face negotiations. Even when people are able to meet their bottom lines, the rush to agreement may lead them to forego opportunities to create or claim more value.

Our findings also have implications for language use in negotiations. Given the positivity associated with agreement and the negativity associated with impasse, the mention of either prospect may add fuel to the desire to reach agreement. It is also possible that the mention of a possible impasse, even if not framed as a threat, will build tension and forestall cooperative discussions. Thus, the strategic use of prospective references to agreement and impasse in negotiations has yet to be determined.

Our results show that avoiding impasse and reaching agreement are strong motivations, in the pursuit of which people give up real value. An intriguing question is whether this motivation to cooperate is distinct from other social motives, such as fairness and altruism. We encourage future research to pit these motivations against each other to uncover their distinct effects on individuals' choices.<sup>7</sup> Given the potential costs associated with the rush to agreement, attention should also be paid to moderators that might exacerbate or eradicate this tendency and to how training might reduce it.

## Author Contributions

All authors developed the study concept and contributed to the study design. E. Tuncel, S. Kesebir, and R. L. Pinkley collected the data, and A. Mislin analyzed the data. E. Tuncel drafted the manuscript, and A. Mislin, S. Kesebir, and R. L. Pinkley provided critical revisions. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

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## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

## Supplemental Material

Additional supporting information can be found at <http://pss.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data>

## Open Practices



All data have been made publicly available via Open Science Framework and can be accessed at <https://osf.io/4tzv3/>. The complete Open Practices Disclosure for this article can be found at <http://pss.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data>. This article has received the badge for Open Data. More information about the Open Practices badges can be found at <https://osf.io/tvyxz/wiki/1.%20View%20the%20Badges/> and <http://pss.sagepub.com/content/25/1/3.full>.

## Notes

1. We specified our sample sizes *ex ante* (except for Studies 1c and 1e, in which class size dictated sample size) and did not exclude any participants from analyses. We report all measures and conditions.
2. In Studies 1a to 1d, participants completed demographic measures after the resource-allocation tasks. For exploratory reasons, we included measures of participants' emotional states and their social-value orientation (Van Lange, Otten, De Bruin, & Joireman, 1997) in Study 1a, and a measure of personality (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003) in Study 1d.
3. We analyzed the results for all studies using a repeated measures logistic regression and replicated the finding that condition was a significant predictor of participant choices.
4. Controlling for participants' gender, age, and education also did not change the pattern of results in Studies 1b to 2b.
5. We also measured expertise as a negotiator (five items adapted from O'Connor & Arnold, 2001), confidence as a negotiator (five items adapted from Sullivan, O'Connor, & Burris, 2006), and propensity to negotiate (four items adapted from

Bear, 2011) as potential moderators of the documented effect. We found that the first two were marginally significant moderators (at a 10% level of significance), while the third was not significant. Further research is required to fully explore the moderators and boundary conditions of this relationship.

6. We specified our sample size ex ante in Study 2a and included all students present in class in Study 2b. We did not exclude any participants from analyses. We report all measures and conditions.

7. We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this idea.

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