

Running Head: BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

Between a Rock and a Hard Place:  
Damned if You Do, Damned if You Don't

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Abstract

Individuals are frequently forced to make decisions from among undesirable choice-sets. Raise taxes or cut social services? Lay off workers or go bankrupt? Go deep in debt or forgo a college education? The research presented here suggests that in such situations, decision-makers are often evaluated negatively regardless of the choice they make. In Experiment 1, participants read about a judge deciding to which of two seemingly unfit parents to award sole custody in a real-life divorce case. In Experiment 2, participants were led to believe that their partner in the experiment was forced to pick one of two unpleasant tasks for the participant to perform. In both cases, the decision and decision-maker were evaluated negatively regardless of the alternative chosen. Discussion focuses on the source, scope, and consequences of this phenomenon—as well as opportunities for debiasing.

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*Do what you feel in your heart to be right—for you'll be criticized anyway. You'll be damned if you do, and damned if you don't.*

—Eleanor Roosevelt

In the late 1980s, US President George H. W. Bush faced a dilemma. The deficit was rising and the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Budget Act mandated that he reduce it (Darman, 1996). He seemed to have two alternatives: cut social programs or go against his famous lip-reading pledge and raise taxes. He raised taxes.

It was not a popular decision. “Read my lips: I lied” was the headline of The New York Post the day after the tax-hike was announced (Childress, 2007). Secretary Marlin Fitzwater publically referred to the decision as the “single biggest mistake of the administration” (Brilleaux & Rozell, 2004). Some even attributed the President’s 1992 loss to Bill Clinton to the decision (MacKenzie, 1992).

Would the President’s fate have been any different if he instead cut social services? In a forced-choice between A and B, if A is the wrong choice, then it logically follows that B must be the right one. If raising taxes or cutting social services were indeed the only alternatives (by no means a foregone conclusion), would Bush have been lauded (or at least forgiven) for cutting social services instead?

We suspect not. First, recent research from the consumer behavior literature suggests that people tend to base their evaluations of purchase decisions on the features of the purchased item more than on the (equally relevant) features of the rejected alternative(s) (Kruger & Burrus, 2009), part of a more general tendency known as focalism (Chambers & Windschitl, 2004; Chambers, Windschitl, & Suls, 2003; Dhar &

Simonson, 1992; Hodges, 1997; Houston & Sherman, 1995; Kruger & Burrus, 2004; Kruger & Savitsky, 2009; Tversky, 1972, 1977; Windschitl, Kruger, & Simms, 2003).

This implies that any decision from an undesirable choice set may be evaluated negatively simply because people fail to sufficiently consider the desirability (or lack thereof) of the alternative(s).

Second, one non-trivial feature of dilemmas such as the Bush tax-hike is that their resolution impacts others—and by definition, rarely is that impact desirable. It may be that people misattribute their dissatisfaction with the decision *outcome* to their dissatisfaction with the *decision*. After all, there is no shortage of studies that attest to the tendency for people to use their immediate internal state as a judgment cue even if that state is only incidentally related to the target of judgment (Schwarz, 2002). In one classic example, participants were surveyed about their life satisfaction on either a rainy or sunny day. Participants reported lower life satisfaction ratings when it was raining than when it was not, but that difference disappeared when participants were simply queried about the weather *prior* to rating life satisfaction (Schwarz & Clore, 1983). Participants seem to have misattributed their dissatisfaction with the weather to their satisfaction with their lives. In much the same way, people may misattribute their dissatisfaction with the decision outcome to their satisfaction with the decision (and decision-maker).

Regardless of the cause, this suggests that decisions from undesirable choice-sets (and the individuals forced to make them) are likely to be evaluated negatively regardless of what they do. Importantly, should be true even with full knowledge of the choice-set, thus distinguishing the present phenomenon from the related “outcome bias” (Baron and Hershey, 1988; Gino, Moore, & Bazerman, 2009). The outcome bias refers to the

tendency for individuals to judge choices under uncertainty by their outcomes instead of the probabilities involved. For instance, the decision to perform a risky surgical operation is seen as a good decision if the surgery is successful and a bad one if it is unsuccessful. Although the present account makes the same prediction, the key distinction between the two accounts is that the outcome bias is unique to choices between alternatives with uncertain outcomes. In the surgery example, for instance, it is unclear whether the surgery will be successful. In the present research, in contrast, there is no uncertainty about the desirability of the alternatives.

### Experiment 1

Participants in Experiment 1 read a summary of a real-life child custody case between two seemingly unfit parents. Participants were told (correctly) that the judge awarded custody to one parent, but the supposed custody-winner varied. We predicted that participants would evaluate the decision and decision-maker negatively regardless of the choice made.

Of course, one reason participants (and voters in the Bush tax-hike example, for that matter) might evaluate the decision-maker negatively is that they are unaware of the dearth of superior alternatives. To explore this possibility we varied not only the parent ostensibly chosen but also participants were aware of the alternative.

### *Method*

*Participants.* Participants in both studies reported in this manuscript were enrolled in a psychology course at a large US university and participated in partial fulfillment of a course requirement. The sample sizes were 65 and 45, respectively.

*Procedure.* Participants read about a court case in which a judge ostensibly had no choice but to award custody to one of two parents (see Appendix A). We orthogonally manipulated both the supposed custody-winner and whether participants learned about both parents or only the custody-winner. Participants then evaluated both the decision and the decision-maker on each of the scales listed in Table 1. These were averaged to create separate indices of each (both  $\alpha_s = .97$ ). We also report the results of each item separately in the table.

### *Results and Discussion*

Our first prediction was that because both alternatives were negative, the decision would be evaluated negatively as well—regardless of the option chosen. Separate one-sample *t*-tests against the null of zero (which in all of the scales was labeled as neutral) revealed this to be the case. When told (correctly) that the judge awarded custody to Parent A, participants tended to think that this was a bad decision,  $M = -1.27$ ,  $t(31) = 2.62$ ,  $p = .014$ . However, this was also the case when they were told that the judge picked Parent B,  $M = -3.65$ ,  $t(32) = 12.29$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Also as predicted, these evaluations of the decision appeared to trickle down to the evaluations of the decision-maker. Participants evaluated the judge negatively when they thought that he awarded custody to Parent A,  $M = -1.03$ ,  $t(31) = 2.18$ ,  $p = .037$ , but so too did participants who thought he did the opposite,  $M = -3.17$ ,  $t(32) = 10.08$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Of course, one reason for this derogation is that participants may have falsely assumed that superior alternatives were available. However, when we compared the evaluations of participants who knew about both parents with those who knew only about

the supposed custody-winner, we found no reliable difference in participants' evaluations ( $F_s < 2.6, p_s > .11$ ).

## Experiment 2

Experiment 2 was designed to conceptually replicate Experiment 1 while addressing some of that study's limitations. First, it may be that participants' evaluations were based not on the judge's decision per se, but on participants' general knowledge (or stereotypes) about judges. Second, although logic dictates that the quality of a decision is a function not only of the chosen alternative but also the rejected alternative, conversational norms may not make this distinction. When people colloquially speak of making a "bad decision," they occasionally refer to the outcome of the decision as opposed to the decision itself. Experiment 2 addresses these issues.

Pairs of participants were recruited for what they were told was a conceptual replication of the classic Ross, Green, and House (1977) "sandwich-board" sign study with the changes described in Appendix B. All participants were led to believe that they had been randomly assigned to the role of sign-wearer, tasked with wearing whichever sign their partner ostensibly picked from a choice-set of two extremely undesirable signs. In actuality, the "choice" was randomly determined. After learning his or her supposed fate, participants rated both the decision and decision-maker using scales similar to those in Experiment 1.

To the extent that both alternatives are unattractive, we predicted that participants would evaluate the decision and decision-maker negatively regardless of the alternative chosen. To ensure that both alternatives were unattractive, the signs' slogans were changed from the original 1977 "Eat at Joe's" and "Repent" to the considerably more

unpopular “Long Live Osama” and “Free Saddam,” respectively. (The study was conducted prior to Saddam Hussein’s execution in 2006.)

### *Method*

On arrival at the lab, an experimenter read the instructions listed in Appendix B. All participants were led to believe that they had been randomly assigned to the role of sign-wearer. The sign ostensibly chosen by their partner was experimentally manipulated. In an additional control condition, participants were not told which sign their partner picked.

Participants then evaluated both the decision (if applicable) and the decision-maker using the scales listed in Table 2. As in Experiment 1, these measures were averaged to create indices of each ( $\alpha s = .87$  &  $.98$ , respectively), and are also presented separately in the table.

Finally, participants evaluated the desirability of each task. Specifically, for each sign they were asked how fun, how embarrassing, and how stupid they would feel, each on a 1-to-10 scale. These three items were averaged (after reverse-scoring where appropriate) to create a single index of each (both  $\alpha s = .75$ ). All participants were then debriefed and informed (to their relief) that they would not be wearing either sign.

### *Results and Discussion*

As in Experiment 1, participants thought that the decision-maker made a poor decision regardless of whether he or she ostensibly picked the “Osama” sign,  $M = -1.97$ ,  $t(14) = 2.96$ ,  $p = .010$ , or the “Saddam” sign,  $M = -2.45$ ,  $t(14) = 4.71$ ,  $p = .001$ —despite the fact that they were the only options in the choice set. Remarkably, the former was true despite the fact that participants thought that the “Osama” sign was slightly less

offensive than the “Saddam” sign,  $M_s = 8.98$  and  $9.42$ ,  $t(29) = 2.47$ ,  $p = .019$ . In other words, participants thought that it was a bad decision to pick A over B despite the fact that they thought A was the superior alternative.

Participants also provided unflattering evaluations of the decision-maker,  $M_{Osama} = 2.17$ ,  $M_{Saddam} = 1.68$ . To put these numbers in perspective, the mean evaluation of participants in the control condition (who did not know which sign the sign-chooser picked) was  $3.43$ ,  $t_s > 3$ ,  $p_s < .005$ .

Importantly, as Table 2 reveals, these results were reliable for virtually every individual measure, including whether participants wished their partner had picked a different task for them to perform. This question presumably cannot be construed as one about the outcome of the decision as opposed to the decision itself (nor, of course, can the questions about the decision-*maker*), thus ruling out a conversational norm interpretation of the results. This finding also provides a conceptual replication of the work of Brenner, Rottenstreich, Sood and Bilgin (2007), who found that the endowment effect (the reticence to trade goods of equal value) reverses for negative items.

### General Discussion

Individuals frequently make decisions. Often, those decisions are easy. The choice-set is desirable, and one alternative is clearly better than the other(s). But on other occasions, decisions are difficult and no alternative is desirable.

The present research suggests that in such situations, decision-makers are often evaluated negatively regardless of what they do. In Experiment 1, participants read about a child custody case between two parents with serious behavioral or drug problems. In Experiment 2, participants were led to believe that their partner in the experiment was

forced to pick one of two unpleasant tasks for them to perform. In both experiments, the decision and decision-maker was evaluated negatively regardless of the alternative chosen.

Importantly, this was true even with full knowledge of the choice-set. (Indeed, in Experiment 1 we varied this awareness and found that it had no effect on participants' evaluations.) This feature of the design thus distinguishes the present phenomenon from the related "outcome bias" (Baron and Hershey, 1988), in which people judge decisions between uncertain alternatives by their outcomes. In the present research, there was no such uncertainty.

That said, we do not wish to imply that this result will generalize to all situations and all undesirable choice-sets. Some choice sets are considerably more undesirable than others, and we would expect the size of the "damned if you do, damned if you don't" effect—and even whether it occurs at—to depend on that variable. Indeed, when we conducted a follow-up to Experiment 2 involving a considerably more innocuous pair of signs, we found no evidence of this effect. Although there were numerous changes to the design that may have led to these more magnanimous evaluations (including one very significant one we discuss in a moment), we suspect that it is no coincidence that the choice set was less intimidating than it was in Experiment 2.

What can account for the results of Studies 1 and 2? At first blush, the results appear to be a classic case of dispositionalism, and the fundamental attribution error in particular (Ross, 1977). People may fail to appreciate the difficulty of the situation and in a sense, blame the victim, especially in light of the fact that the personal outcome is negative (Jones & Davis, 1965). Or perhaps participants assumed that the decision-

maker was happy with the chosen (undesirable) alternative, which is consistent with Miller & Nelson's (2002) contention that people tend to see the avoidance-motivated actions of others as approach-motivated. Although possible, note that neither of these explanations can parsimoniously explain unfavorable evaluations of *decisions*, however, thus seem unlikely candidates with respect to the present phenomenon.

A more plausible explanation is focalism. Recent research suggests that when people evaluate the decision of A over B, they focus on the features of A more than the features of B (Kruger & Burrus, 2009). As a result, if A is evaluated negatively, the decision and decision-maker may be evaluated negatively as well—even if B is just as (if not more) negative.

That said, we suspect that there is more to the phenomenon than mere focalism. As already mentioned, one possibility is that people misattribute their dissatisfaction with the decision outcome to their satisfaction with the decision (and decision-maker). If so, then merely prompting participants to consider the true source of their dissatisfaction (the outcome) should attenuate that derision (c.f., Schwarz & Clore, 1983).

In the follow-up study described earlier, that is precisely what we found.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the change described above (and several others), half of the sign-wearers were asked to evaluate the pleasantness (or lack thereof) of the upcoming task *prior* to evaluating the decision and decision-maker. As expected, sign-wearers provided significantly more favorable evaluations of the sign-chooser's decision when they reflected on the unpleasantness of the outcome prior to evaluating the decision and decision-maker, consistent with a misattribution explanation.

Interestingly, this debiasing manipulation did not lead to more forgiving evaluations the decision-*maker*, however. Although unexpected, this discrepancy is not entirely surprising. Trait inferences are categorically different from judgments of decisions. Among other things, trait inferences—especially negative ones—tend to be especially “sticky” (i.e., strongly linked to actors) (Carlston & Skowronski, 2005). As such, they are likely more difficult to debias than evaluations of decisions. To paraphrase Eleanor Roosevelt in the quote that began this manuscript, when stuck between a rock and a hard place, it appears that people are damned if they do and damned if they don’t.

Footnote

- 1 We thank Jerry Clore for suggesting this study.

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focalism on people's confidence in competitions: When what affects us equally affects me more. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, 389-408.

Table 1

Evaluations of the decision and decision-maker by condition, Experiment 1.

Evaluation	Parent A	Parent B
<b>Decision</b>		
Satisfaction with decision	-1.44*	-3.94*
<i>-5 (very unsatisfied with choice) to 0 (neither) to +5 (very satisfied with choice)</i>		
Decision quality	-1.19*	-3.56*
<i>-5 (bad choice) to 0 (neither) +5 (good choice)</i>		
Decision-maker made “right decision”	-1.09*	-3.45*
<i>-5 (wrong decision) to 0 (neither) to +5 (right decision)</i>		
<b>Decision-maker<sup>a</sup></b>		
Intelligent	-0.75	-3.03*
Good judge of character	-1.27*	-3.58*
Caring	-1.25*	-3.00*
Wise	-1.00 <sup>†</sup>	-3.12*
Competent	-0.91 <sup>†</sup>	-3.12*

<sup>a</sup> Evaluations of the decision-maker were made on a scale from -5 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very*).

\*  $p < .05$  in a one-sample  $t$ -test against a null of zero.

†  $p < .10$  in a one-sample  $t$ -test against a null of zero.

Table 2

Evaluations of the decision and decision-maker by condition, Experiment 2.

Evaluation	"Long Live Osama"	"Free Saddam"	Control
<b>Decision</b>			
Satisfaction with decision	-2.87*	-3.20*	—
<i>-5 (very unsatisfied with choice) to 0 (neither) to +5 (very satisfied with choice)</i>			
Wished decision-maker picked different task	-1.93*	-2.07*	—
<i>-5 (yes) to 0 (neither / I'm indifferent) to +5 (no)</i>			
Decision quality	-1.93*	-2.93*	—
<i>-5 (bad choice) to 0 (neither) +5 (good choice)</i>			
Decision-maker made "right decision"	-1.13	-1.60*	—
<i>-5 (wrong decision) to 0 (neither) to +5 (right decision)</i>			
<b>Decision-maker<sup>a</sup></b>			
Compassionate	2.00*	1.60*	3.13
Considerate	2.00*	1.47*	3.33
Friendly	2.47*	2.07*	3.53
Helpful	2.13*	1.73*	3.40
Kind	2.33*	1.60*	3.60
Nice	2.20*	1.87*	3.87
Sympathetic	2.07*	1.53*	3.33
Thoughtful	2.13*	1.60*	3.27

<sup>a</sup> Evaluations of the decision-maker were made on a scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very*).

\*  $p < .05$

Note: Evaluations of the decision were compared against a null of zero in separate one-sample *t*-tests and evaluations of the decision-maker were compared against the evaluations made by participants in the control condition in separate ANOVAs.

Appendix A

Experiment 1 Parent Descriptions

Parent A

33 years old

Had an affair while married to Parent B

Originally from North Dakota

Has multiple convictions for marijuana possession

Has 1 brother

Past use of crack cocaine

Parent B

32 years old

Frequently locks self in bathroom and comes out only to eat

Originally from South Dakota

Spends very little time with the children

Has 1 sister

Addicted to pornography

## Appendix B

### Experiment 2 Instructions

“Today you are going to be taking part in a social judgment study. Before we begin, I’d like to give you a little background research. Prior work has found that people tend to exaggerate the extent to which their own preferences are shared by others. For instance, fans of rap music tend to think that there are more fans of rap music out there than do fans of classical music—and vice versa. You may have heard of this in your intro psych class—it’s called the “false consensus effect.” In one of the best known studies of this, student participants were asked whether they would be willing to walk around campus wearing an embarrassing sign around their necks. After making their choice, the students estimated how many of their fellow participants would have chosen the option they did. As predicted, participants tended to assume that the option they chose was the option the other participants would have chosen.

In the present study we are going to conduct a replication of this study, but with a twist: Instead of having each of you pick the task you are going to perform like in past research, we’re going to have *someone else* pick the task for you. Specifically, each of you will be assigned to pairs. Within each pair, one person will be randomly assigned to role of “sign-chooser” and the other to the role of “sign-wearer.” The sign-wearer will be asked to walk around campus with a large sign around his or her neck for 20 minutes, and the sign-chooser has to decide which sign the sign-wearer has to wear.”