When Does Taking a Break Help in Negotiations? The Influence of Breaks and Social Motivation on Negotiation Processes and Outcomes

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Abstract

Most negotiations are interrupted from time to time to reflect on the negotiation or to do other pressing tasks. This study investigated how these breaks and the thoughts during these breaks influence subsequent negotiation behavior. Prosocially motivated dyads, with a tendency to think cooperatively, and proself-motivated dyads, with a tendency to think competitively, engaged in a negotiation in which there was a 3-min break. During this break, either they could reflect upon the negotiation or they did a distraction task. After the reflect break, but not after the distract break, prosocial dyads displayed more concern for other, engaged in more cooperative negotiation, and reached more agreements than proself dyads. We conclude that breaks are constructive if, and only if, negotiators reflect on their negotiation when having a prosocial orientation.

Negotiation scientists have long argued that temporary breaks in negotiations and conflicts may help parties to switch from competitive to more cooperative interactions (Ury, 1991; Walton & McKersie, 1965). As Ury (1991, p. 48) noted, "If you need more time to think, you should take a break. (...). Negotiations are more productive when they are broken up by frequent time-outs". However, there is also evidence suggesting that reflection during a break may increase competitive intentions and leads to bad negotiation outcomes (Harinck & De Dreu, 2008; Rusting & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998). To reconcile these putatively opposing positions, the current research invokes the motivated information-processing model (MIP model) (De Dreu & Carnevale, 2003). We expect that breaks in negotiation are beneficial if, and only if, the negotiators are both willing and able to think cooperatively, but not when they are thinking competitively.

Negotiation and Breaks

Negotiation is a discussion between two (or more) parties with the aim of resolving their diverging interests (Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993). It often involves strategic decision making about what moves to make and what information to disclose, in response to the other party's moves and countermoves. Negotiation often follows a *differentiation-before-integration pattern* (Harinck & De Dreu, 2004; Olekalns & Smith, 2005; Walton & McKersie, 1965). In a differentiation-before-integration pattern, people start a negotiation with competitive negotiation behavior, such as threatening the other party or arguing for one's own interests. After a while, when they realize that they run the risk of no agreement, they may switch into more cooperative negotiation behavior including information exchange and logrolling.

A break in a negotiation may be the perfect moment to reflect upon the negotiation and to realize that one is heading for an impasse. A break in a negotiation is a moment in which parties temporarily stop negotiating without having reached an agreement (Harinck & De Dreu, 2004, 2008). During a break, negotiators can consciously reflect about the negotiation (reflect break), or they can distract themselves from the negotiation by actively doing something else (distract break). As noted earlier, negotiation scientists have long argued that breaks in negotiations and conflicts may help parties to switch from competitive to more cooperative interactions (Harinck & De Dreu, 2004; Ury, 1991; Walton & McKersie, 1965). The idea is that it is good to take a temporary break from a frustrating activity, in order to step back from the ongoing negotiation and take a more objective look at the issues at hand and then come back refreshed and with a better idea of how to continue the activity.

Recent research (Harinck & De Dreu, 2008; Olekalns & Smith, 2005), however, has shown that reflect breaks can also deteriorate negotiation outcomes. Harinck and De Dreu (2008) had dyads engage in car sales negotiations in which they were given a break of 3 min. During this break, the dyad members were not allowed to talk to each other and they could either reflect upon the negotiation or not reflect upon the negotiation owing to a distraction task (counting backward). The results showed that negotiating dyads reached lower-quality agreements after a reflect break compared to a distract break. The researchers' explanation was that competitive thinking during the break led to higher levels of competitive behavior after the break and concomitant lower-quality agreements. Indeed, in a second experiment—in which they manipulated competitive versus cooperative thinking during the break by means of scrambled-sentences tasks (Smeesters, Warlop, Van Avermaet, Corneille, & Yzerbyt, 2003)—they showed that competitive thinking during a break led to lower-quality agreements than cooperative thinking. Moreover, both studies showed that competitive thinking during the break led to lower-quality agreements than a control condition in which dyads did not experience a break. Cooperative thinking during the break did not increase the quality of the agreements, but competitive thinking decreased the quality of the agreements—compared to a no-break condition.

The earlier work by Harinck and De Dreu (2008) had some limitations. First, they did not measure or manipulate participants' thinking in Study 1, so there was no direct proof of what participants were thinking during the break. And second, they directly manipulated participants' thoughts during the break in Study 2, so they did not measure natural, spontaneous break thoughts. To follow up on these prior studies and to increase the ecological validity, we wanted to investigate the effects of naturally occurring cooperative or competitive thoughts during a break in the current study.

Motivated Information-Processing Model

The opposing ideas about the positive or negative effects of breaks can be reconciled by the MIP model. The MIP model was introduced by De Dreu and colleagues (De Dreu, Beersma, Stroebe, & Euwema, 2006; De Dreu & Carnevale, 2003). The central idea in this model is that negotiation performance depends on one's social motivation, one's epistemic motivation, and their interaction. Social motivation is the preference for a particular distribution of outcomes between oneself and the counterpart (McClintock, 1977). People with a prosocial motivation have the cooperative goal of finding a fair distribution that maximizes both parties' outcomes. People with a proself motivation have the competitive goal of maximizing their own outcomes without taking the other party's outcomes into account. People can have a prosocial or proself motivation by nature (Van Lange, Otten, De Bruin, & Joireman, 1997), or it can be manipulated by situational factors, such as giving people cooperative—do good as a dyad—or competitive—do good for yourself—monetary incentives (De Dreu, Weingart, & Kwon, 2000). In general, a prosocial motivation leads to a more cooperative attitude than a proself motivation (Balliet, Parks, & Joireman, 2009; De Dreu et al., 2000).

Epistemic motivation is the desire to develop and hold a rich and accurate understanding of the world, including the negotiation problem at hand (Kruglanski, 1989). People with a high—compared to low—epistemic motivation are more willing to engage in effortful, deep, and systematic thinking to gain a deep and thorough understanding of the situation at hand. People can have a low or high epistemic motivation by nature, or epistemic motivation can be manipulated by situational factors such as time pressure and noise or by holding people accountable for their actions (De Dreu et al., 2006).¹

The MIP model predicts that high-quality agreements are reached when negotiating parties are willing to look for win-win solutions that benefit both parties (a prosocial motivation/goal) and when they are able to think deeply about the negotiation situation (high epistemic motivation) to discover these win-win solutions. The model was tested in several experiments, and in line with the predictions, the results showed that

¹For a more detailed discussion of epistemic motivation, see De Dreu et al. (2006).

prosocial dyads reached higher negotiation outcomes than proself dyads, but only when their epistemic motivation was high rather than low (De Dreu et al., 2006).

We argue that negotiators will have a stronger motivation to engage in deep and systematic thinking about the negotiation in a reflect break than in a distract break. Breaks in which a person can reflect upon the negotiation can be viewed as situations of high epistemic motivation; breaks in which a person is distracted can be viewed as situations of low epistemic motivation. The effects of those breaks will then depend on the negotiators' social motivation. Negotiators with a prosocial motivation will think more cooperatively, which in turn will foster cooperative negotiation behavior and increases the possibilities to reach an agreement. Negotiators with a proself motivation will think more competitively, which increases competitive negotiation behavior and will hurt the possibilities to reach an agreement (De Dreu et al., 2006). In the distract break, people are occupied with other activities so they will be less able to think about the negotiation at hand; the potential positive effect of cooperative thinking will be diminished by the distraction, but also the potential negative effect of competitive thinking will be softened by the distraction. In short, our expectation is that a reflect break-in which people can reflect upon the negotiation-will show stronger effects of social motivation than a distract break-in which people think less because they are occupied with other activities.

Current Research

The current research is designed to test the different effects of breaks depending on the negotiators social orientation. We conducted a laboratory experiment (N = 51 dyads) in which dyads with a cooperative or competitive motivation engaged in a negotiation and experienced a reflect break or distract break after 5 min.

Method

Design and Participants

The study had a 2 (motivation: prosocial vs. proself) by 2 (break: reflect vs. filler task) factorial design.

One hundred and two undergraduate students—34 men and 68 women—of Leiden University participated; their mean age was 21.53. They received course credit or money (\notin 5.50, equivalent to \$ 6.50) for their participation. The study was run in dyads with 9–14 dyads randomly allocated to each condition.

Negotiation Task

The negotiation task was adapted from the study of Harinck and De Dreu (2008); participants engaged in a 15-min buyer–seller negotiation about a car and had to reach agreement on eight issues (warranty, delivery date, color, price, extras, radio, payment, and maintenance) (see Appendix for payoff schedules).

Procedure and Manipulations

The procedure was similar to the study of Harinck and De Dreu (2008).² Participants entered the laboratory in randomly paired dyads and were placed face-to-face at a table. The experimenter gave participants written instructions about their role in the negotiation—seller or buyer. After the participants read the negotiation instructions, the experimenter introduced the social motivation manipulation, based upon research by Beersma and De Dreu (2005). Prosocial dyads were told that the two negotiating dyads with the highest collective outcomes each would receive a 20-euro bonus—four persons in total, 10 euros per person. Proself dyads were told that the four negotiating individuals with the highest individual outcomes each would receive a 10-euro bonus.

The dyads filled out a first questionnaire after this information and started negotiating upon a sign of the experimenter. The break manipulation was similar to Harinck and De Dreu (2008); the negotiation was interrupted 5 min after the start for a reflect break of 3 min or a filler task of 3 min. In the *reflect-break condition*, the participants were told that they had 3 min to reflect upon the negotiation and to think about how they wanted to continue the negotiation. They were left alone for these 3 min but were not allowed to communicate with each other. In the *distract-break condition*, the participants had 3 min to do a distraction task; they had to count backward from 3,600 in steps of 13 and carefully write down each step. The distract break lasted as long as the reflect break, but participants in the distraction condition were less able to reflect consciously upon the negotiation, because of the backward counting.

After this break, the participants continued the negotiation for 10 more min (or less, if they needed less time to reach agreement on all eight issues). After the negotiation, participants filled out a questionnaire, were debriefed, paid, and thanked for their participation. The bonuses were awarded when the data collection was finished.³

Dependent Variables

Epistemic Motivation

Two items (r = .83, p < .001) measured the extent to which parties were able to reflect upon the negotiation during the break. The items were "I could think quietly during the break" and "During the break I carefully thought about my decisions" (1 = totally disagree, 7 = totally agree).

Concern for Other

As a measure of a general cooperative attitude toward the other negotiator, we measured concern for other's interests (Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994) before the negotiation (but after the instructions and manipulations) and after the negotiation. Concern for

²For details about the task and the procedure, see Harinck and De Dreu (2008).

³We expected effects of break condition or social motivation on joint outcomes. Therefore, we randomly chose two dyads in the prosocial condition and four individuals in the proself condition to receive the bonuses when the data collection was completed.

other's interests was measured with two items. The items were "In the negotiation I think it is/was important to take the other's interests into account" and "In the negotiation I am/was willing to take the other's interests into account" (1 "*totally disagree*", 7 "*totally agree*") (r = .83, p < .01 before the negotiation and r = .84, p < .01 after the negotiation).

Number of Agreements

For a more refined look on the extent to which dyads reached agreement, we also counted the number of issues that dyads reached agreement on $(\min = 0, \max = 8)$.

Joint Outcomes

We calculated the joint outcomes separately for the integrative issues (guarantee, delivery, extras and audio), the compatible issue (color), and the distributive issues (prize, payment terms, and maintenance).⁴

Negotiation Behavior

Negotiation behaviors were measured after the negotiation with items derived from the Dutch Test for Conflict Handling (DUTCH, Janssen & Van de Vliert, 1996).⁵ Participants had to indicate to what extent they engaged in certain negotiation behaviors after the break on seven-point scales (1 "not at all" to 7 "very much"). Cooperative negotiation behavior was measured with four items ($\alpha = .80$). Examples of items were "I tried to find a compromise" and "I searched for a solution that satisfied both our interests". Competitive negotiation behavior was also measured with four items ($\alpha = .72$). Examples of items were "I did anything to win" and "I fought for a good outcome for myself."

Results

To account for within-dyad statistical interdependence, we averaged individual ratings across both dyad members and used the dyad as unit of analysis. Dependent variables were analyzed using ANOVA with break (reflect vs. distract) and social motivation (proself vs. prosocial) as between-dyad factors, unless mentioned otherwise.

Our expectation was that a reflect break—in which people can reflect upon the negotiation—would show stronger effects of social motivation than a distract break—in which people think less because they are occupied with other activities.

Table 1 shows the correlations between the main dependent variables. Concern for other after the break—but not before the break—was related to reaching agreement. Cooperative negotiation behavior was marginally positively related to reaching agreement, and competitive negotiation behavior was negatively related to reaching agreement. Cooperative negotiation behavior was negatively related to compatible outcomes,

⁴However, because of the distributive nature of the issues, their joint outcomes always add up to 10,400.

⁵The DUTCH has shown high convergent validity between self- and peer assessments and observed behavior (De Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer, & Nauta, 2001).

		M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.	Reflection during break	3.96 (1.65)	_						
2.	Number of agreements	6.41 (3.07)	.18	_					
3.	Concern for other (before)	4.21 (1.03)	.10	.16	-				
4.	Concern for other (after)	4.34 (1.19)	.00	.35*	.68**				
5.	Integrative outcomes:	11,785 (1,942)	30†	_	.06	.26			
6.	Compatible outcomes‡	2,186 (493)	.08	11	20	11	24		
7.	Cooperative negotiation behavior	5.25 (0.84)	14	.26†	.32*	.56**	.49**	34*	
8.	Competitive negotiation behavior	4.60 (0.67)	.23	48**	16	45**	34*	14	15

Table 1 Correlations between the Main Dependent Variables (N = 51)

*p < .05; **p < .01; †p < .10.

These outcomes were only calculated for dyads that reached full agreement (N = 39).

which points out that cooperation can sometimes be problematic if people are too nice to ask for what they want; they might miss opportunities that benefit both parties.

Epistemic Motivation

This manipulation check was analyzed using ANOVA with break (reflect vs. distract) as between-dyad factor. Dyads in the reflect break were more able to think and reflect during the break (M = 5.17, SD = 0.81) than dyads in the filler-task break (M = 2.35, SD = 0.92), F(1,47) = 126.86, p < .001, $\eta^2 = .73$.

Concern for Other before the Break

Concern for other before the break was analyzed using ANOVA with social motivation (prosocial vs. proself) as between-dyad factor. In line with the manipulation, there was a main effect of social motivation, F(1,49) = 4.25, p < .05, $\eta^2 = .08$, showing that prosocial dyads had more concern for the other party (M = 4.47, SD = 1.10) than proself dyads (M = 3.89, SD = 0.88).

Concern for Other after the Break

Prosocial dyads showed more concern for the other after the break (M = 4.71, SD = 1.14) than proself dyads (M = 3.89, SD = 1.10), F(1,47) = 5.54, p < .025, $\eta^2 = .11$. However, this effect was qualified by a Social Motivation × Break interaction, F(1,47) = 5.98, p < .02, $\eta^2 = .11$, showing that prosocial dyads only had more concern for the other after the reflect break, F(1,48) = 13.91, p < .01, but not after the filler-task break, F(1,48) = 0.01, *ns* (see Figure 1).

Number of Agreements

The number of agreements showed a main effect of social motivation, F(1,47) = 5.88, p < .02, $\eta^2 = .11$, and a main effect of break, F(1,47) = 4.74, p < .04, $\eta^2 = .09$. Prosocial dyads (M = 7.14, SD = 2.52) resolved more issues than proself dyads (M = 5.52,



Figure 1. The effect of break and social motivation on concern for other after the negotiation.



Figure 2. The effect of break and social motivation on cooperative negotiation behavior.

SD = 3.48). Dyads also resolved more issues when they experienced a reflect break (M = 7.21, SD = 2.14) compared to a filler-task break (M = 5.36, SD = 3.77).

Joint Outcomes

The integrative issues showed a marginally significant effect of break, F(1,35) = 3.05, p < .09, $\eta^2 = .08$. Dyads in the reflect conditions reached agreements that created less value (M = 11,344, SD = 1,869) than dyads in the filler-task conditions (M = 12,571, SD = 1,879). The compatible issue was not affected by breaks, social motivation, or their interaction, all p > .10. The distributive issues, by definition, always added up to the same joint outcomes of 10,400—6,000 prize, 2,000 payment terms, and 2,400

maintenance—regardless of which agreement was reached on these issues. Therefore, the distributive joint outcomes were not affected by the manipulations, and ANOVA could not be performed.

Cooperative Negotiation Behavior

Cooperative negotiation behavior showed a marginal effect of social motivation, F(1,47) = 3.24, p < .08, $\eta^2 = .06$, and an interaction of Social Motivation × Break, F(1,47) = 6.15, p < .02, $\eta^2 = .12$. In line with our expectation, simple main effects showed that the effect of social motivation was stronger in the reflect break, F(1,48) = 10.59, p < .01, than in the filler-task break, F(1,48) = 0.09, *ns.* (see Figure 2).

Competitive Negotiation Behavior

Competitive negotiation behavior showed no effects of break or social motivation. Prosocial and proself dyads did not differ in their competitive behaviors.

Discussion

This study investigated how breaks in negotiations—in combination with dyads' social motivation—influence subsequent negotiation behavior. Prosocial and proself dyads engaged in a negotiation in which there was a 3-min break. During this break, they could either reflect upon the negotiation—high epistemic motivation—or not reflect upon the negotiation—low epistemic motivation—owing to a filler task. In line with the motivated information-processing model (De Dreu & Carnevale, 2003; De Dreu et al., 2006), we showed that prosocial dyads had more concern for the other party's interests and showed more cooperative negotiation behavior than proself dyads, but especially if they were able to think deeply about the negotiation during the break.

These findings corroborate earlier findings by Harinck and De Dreu (2008) in a more natural setting. Harinck and De Dreu (2008) either inferred but did not measure whether thoughts during the breaks were cooperative or competitive (Study 1) or directly manipulated thoughts during the break (Study 2). In the current study, we indirectly manipulated cooperative and competitive thinking by giving participants a prosocial or proself motivation prior to the negotiation. The results showed that also when people are not directly manipulated to think cooperatively or competitively during a break, their basic motivation to cooperate or compete may influence their thinking during a break and as a result may influence negotiation processes and outcomes. Moreover, by this distant and indirect manipulation of cooperative and competitive thinking, we have a very conservative test of our expectations. By choosing for social motivation—a naturally occurring preference for the distribution of own and other's outcomes—we also add to the literature of social motivation by showing that its effects increase in a reflect break and decrease in a filler-task break.

Unlike our earlier experiments about breaks in negotiations (Harinck & De Dreu, 2008), the quality of the negotiation agreements in the current experiment was not directly affected by our manipulations. Instead, contextual performance measures—interpersonal behaviors that support the social and motivational context of the

task—were influenced by the combination of break activity and parties' social motivation, for example the level of concern for the other party and the level of cooperative negotiation behavior (Borman & Motowidlow, 1993; De Dreu, Harinck & Van Vianen, 1999). These concepts in turn were related to the number of issues parties resolved during the negotiation.

We expect that these more contextual performance measures become relevant when the relationship between the negotiation parties is important, for example when parties need to negotiate with each other in the future. In those situations, if the atmosphere is friendly and the other party seems cooperative, it might be safe to leave the other party alone during the break and give him or her time to think or relax. If the atmosphere is tense and the other party is a competitive person, then it might be important not to leave the other party alone during the break, but to give him or her something to do or something—not the negotiation—to think about during the break. However, these effects of atmosphere and a clear cooperative or competitive negotiation partner in combination with a break should be investigated in future research.

Limitations and Future Research

A reader may ask whether a prosocial motivation in combination with a reflect break is good for a negotiation-compared to a neutral condition-or whether a proself motivation in combination with a reflect break is bad for a negotiation-compared to a neutral condition. The current research shows that a prosocial motivation results in more cooperative negotiation behavior relative to a proself motivation but does not inform us about the level of cooperative behavior compared to a situation in which there is no break or a neutral break. As mentioned in the introduction, the earlier work by Harinck and De Dreu (2008)-in which they used the same paradigm and the same break manipulations⁶-showed in two separate studies that the joint outcomes of a negotiation with a reflect break and a cooperative motivation were similar to a situation of no break and that the joint outcomes of a reflect break and a competitive motivation were lower than a no-break condition. From these earlier studies, we concluded that competitive thinking is bad for a negotiation. When we generalize these findings to our current research-which seems plausible, as the paradigm and the participant population are the same-we would argue that the proself dyads probably did worse than a neutral dyad, rather than prosocial dyads doing better. However, future research, including a control condition with a neutral break or no break, is needed to empirically support these expectations and to see whether this generalization is valid.

A reader may also ask whether the results of this study would generalize to natural breaks in real negotiations. As mentioned in our earlier work (Harinck & De Dreu,

⁶The only difference between the current study and the earlier two studies is the addition of two distributive issues—number of payment terms and maintenance—to the negotiation. We added these two issues to increase the negotiation time.

2008), we would like to stress that our results may not generalize to the intense, high-stake negotiations that Ury (1991) has in mind when offering his advice to take a break. Indeed, it may be that when emotions run high and reason flies out of the window, taking a break may be more helpful than continuing the negotiation. It could also be argued that in purely distributive negotiations in which the parties' interests are diametrically opposed to each other, competitive thinking—rather than cooperative thinking—is better for one's individual outcomes. In a purely distributive negotiation, competitive thinking and competitive behavior may yield the best individual outcomes, at the expense of the other's outcomes—probably at the expense of the relationship with the other party. So indeed, if a person enters a one-shot, purely distributive negotiation competitive thinking may be better for individual outcomes.

A third issue is that in real-life negotiations, parties can communicate or interact with each other during the break. The current study did not investigate this opportunity to caucus, but there is anecdotal evidence from political coalition negotiations that especially this informal communication—behind the scenes—might be crucial to keep a negotiation going. For example, during formation negotiations in the Netherlands, members of opposing political parties regularly took a cigarette break together during difficult periods in the negotiation. These informal talks were beneficial to the negotiation because the parties kept on speaking to each other at an informal level while being stuck at the official negotiation table. We think that a positive interaction during the break might make parties more cooperatively motivated, and as a result, this motivation could be beneficial in the continued negotiation.

A final issue is the timing of the break. We gave our participants a break 5 min after the start of the negotiation, regardless of whether they needed a break. This situation resembles negotiations that are interrupted by third parties from outside or by events that affect both parties (such as dinner being served, toilet breaks, or unexpected phone calls). It might be that breaks are better for negotiations when they are taken at the moment that a party needs it—for example when a negotiation is stuck—than when a break is forced upon the negotiating parties. Future research could investigate whether the timing of the break matters for its effects.

Conclusion

Taking a break can be beneficial when parties are motivated to cooperate but can be harmful for the negotiation when parties are motivated to compete because the initial willingness to cooperate is exacerbated by the break. Parties who initially have a low concern for the other party—a competitive motivation—care even less after a break in which they can reflect upon the negotiation. Parties who initially have a high concern for the other party—a cooperative motivation—care even more after a break in which they can reflect upon the negotiation. The higher the level of concern for the other party after the break, the more agreements parties reached. Thus, the advice to "take a break" might have different effects on the negotiation depending on the parties' cooperative or competitive motivation.

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	Seller	Buyer
Guarantee (months)		
6	1,600	0
12	1,200	1,000
18	800	2,000
24	400	3,000
30	0	4,000
Delivery (week[s])		
5	4,000	0
4	3,000	400
3	2,000	800
2	1,000	1,200
1	0	1,600
Color		
Yellow	1,200	1,200
Green	900	900
Blue	600	600
Red	300	300
Black	0	0
Prize		
€ 12.000	6,000	0
€ 11.500	4,500	1,500
€ 11.000	3,000	3,000
€ 10.500	1,500	4,500
€ 10.000	0	6,000

Appendix: Seller and Buyer Payoff Schedules

	Seller	Buyer
Extras		
0	3,200	0
1	2,400	200
2	1,600	400
3	800	600
4	0	800
Audio		
None	800	0
Radio	600	800
Radio/cassette	400	1,600
Radio/CD	200	2,400
Radio/CD/Navigation system	0	3,200
# Payment terms		
1 term	2,000	0
2 terms	1,500	500
3 terms	1,000	1,000
4 terms	500	1,500
5 terms	0	2,000
Maintenance		
None	2,400	0
1 free check-up	1,800	600
2 free check-ups	1,200	1,200
3 free check-ups	600	1,800
4 free check-ups	0	2,400

Appendix: continued

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