

Smooth at one end and rough at the other: Influence of object texture on grasping behaviour

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Abstract

When picking up objects using a pinch-grip there are usually numerous places at which one could place the thumb and index finger. Yet, people seem to consistently place them at or close to the centre-of-mass (COM), presumably in order to minimize torque and therefore the required grip force. People also prefer to grasp objects by parallel surfaces and ones with higher friction coefficients (rough surfaces), in order to prevent the object from slipping when they lift it. Here we examine the trade-off between friction and COM. Participants were asked to grasp and lift aluminium bars of which one end was polished and therefore smooth and the other was rough. Their finger positions were recorded to determine how they grasped the objects. The bars were oriented horizontally in the frontal plane, with the centre aligned with the participants' body midline. The bars varied in the horizontal offset between the COM and the edge of the rough region. The offset could be 0, 1 or 2cm. We expected participants to grasp closer to the rough area than the centre of the bar. Completely rough bars and completely smooth bars served as control conditions. The slipperiness of the surface that was grasped affected the height of the grasping points, indicating that participants adjusted their grasping behaviour to the slipperiness of the surface. However, the tendency to grasp closer to the rough area was minimal. This shows that the judged COM largely determines how an object is grasped. Friction has very limited influence.

Introduction

Imagine the following situation: While baking, you want to add oil to the dough, but you see that the usual grasping point in the middle of the oil-bottle is really fatty and will probably be slippery. What would be the best

place to place your fingers? Here we investigated whether people deviate from their preferred grasping point when the object's surface varies in slipperiness.

To obtain a stable grasp there are usually many possible places at which one could place one's fingers. Even for a precision grip or pinch grasp, which involves only two fingers, the number of possible grasping points is generally huge. However, where people place their digits is usually quite predictable. There are obviously physiological and biomechanical constraints, like the maximal distance between the fingers, some postures and changes in posture being more comfortable than others, and some movements being more energy efficient (e.g. Zelik and Kuo 2012; Rosenbaum et al. 1990; Soechting et al. 1995; Paulun et al. 2014). The grip force that participants will need to apply to lift an object can obviously also be an important factor for choosing grasping points (Fu et al., 2010). Generally, positions at opposite sides of the object with respect to the centre-of-mass (COM) are chosen since grasping there minimizes torques. Grasping in this way is energy efficient and therefore makes maintaining a stable grasp easier. Bingham & Muchisky (1993) showed that humans can accurately judge the location of the COM using object symmetry. Lee-Miller et al. (2016) have shown that an object's COM is judged from its visual appearance and that anticipatory planning of digit forces and placement is done on the basis of this visual estimate of the COM. Lederman and Wing (2003) showed that subjects actually grasp in such a way that the grasp axis (axis between the thumb and index finger) passes near or through the COM (also see Kleinhodermann et al. 2007, Goodale et al. 1994, Wing and Lederman 1998, Endo et al. 2011). Especially for heavy objects, it is important to grasp as close to the COM as possible, because in that case small offsets can lead to substantial torques (Paulun 2014, Paulun 2016). However, there seems to be a bias towards the acting hand, leading to a more rightward shifted grasp if the right hand is used and a leftward shifted grasp if the left hand is used (Paulun et al. 2014).

In the above-mentioned baking example, however, the area around the COM is slippery (it has a low friction coefficient), so it might not be the optimal place to grasp the object because the object might slip. The additional grip force that is needed to prevent the object from slipping also results in a more energy consuming grasp (Edin et al. 1992, Cole et al. 1999, Hiramatsu et al. 2015). In a study that included a condition that was very similar to the slippery oil bottle, Paulun et al. (2016) presented participants with cylinders made of different materials (Styrofoam, wood, brass and brass covered in Vaseline) in different orientations. The participants had to grasp the cylinders and put them in a goal area. When analysing the grasping kinematics, they found that the grasp points varied more for cylinders with a high friction coefficient than for cylinders with a low friction coefficient, indicating less careful placing of the digits when the friction coefficient was high. Besides different friction coefficients the different cylinders also had different weights. More specifically, the rough object was very light whereas the slippery object was relatively heavy. For heavier objects grasping near the COM becomes more important in order to avoid torques. Therefore, besides the friction coefficient, the difference in weight could also account for the results of Paulun and colleagues. In a study by Wing & Lederman (2009) participants were asked to lift and place a bar with smooth and rough grips located left and right of the centre. When grasping the bar with a pinch grasp, the participants preferred the rough grip to the smooth one. Only when the rough grip was further away from the centre than the smooth one, resulting in higher torque, was the smooth grip preferred. The grips limited the choice of grasp point selection since participants could only choose between two positions. Here we investigated how a surface's friction coefficient influences grasping behaviour when grasping points are not pre-defined.

In summary, object properties like weight, roughness and the location of the COM all contribute to the selection of grasping points. In the present study, we brought two of the above-mentioned properties in conflict: placing one's fingers near the COM and placing them on a surface with a high friction coefficient. We presented participants with polished aluminium bars of two different lengths, and therefore two different weights. They had to pick these up using a pinch grip, and place them back on a table. The bars had high friction coefficient areas that were covered in anti-slip tape and low friction coefficient areas of polished aluminium. We expect participants to grasp towards the rough side of the object, as the results of Wing and Lederman (2009) would suggest. Furthermore, as baseline conditions, we presented rough bars that were completely covered in anti-slip tape, and smooth bars of which the surface was all of polished aluminium. Based on the work by Paulun and colleagues (2014; 2016) we expect higher grasping point variability for the rough bars compared to the smooth bars, and also higher variability for the smaller bars because the torque resulting from an off-centre grasp is lower for smaller objects than for larger objects.

Our main question is which grasping points humans choose when the generally preferred grasping point – the object's centre – is smooth, whereas an off-centre area is rough. Will the fact that they can see that the surface is less slippery at one side make them select grasping points that are closer to that side? We furthermore investigated whether the grasping point variability changes with object roughness, as it did in the studies of Paulun et al. (2014; 2016).

Material & Methods

Participants

In total 15 participants (age 23-30, 4 male) participated in this study. All participants self-reported to be right handed. They gave informed consent prior to the start of the experiment. This study was part of a project that was approved by the ethical committee of the faculty of Behavioural and Movement Sciences at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

Stimuli

Two sets of polished aluminium bars were used: large bars with a length of 26cm, a height and width of 4cm and a weight of 298g and small bars with a length of 13cm, the same height and a weight of 148g. As a baseline condition one large bar and one small bar were completely covered in anti-slip tape (Easy Work Antirutsch Antislip Klebeband) to increase the friction coefficient (see figure 1a, left side). Completely covered in anti-slip tape, the weight was 320g for the large bar and 160g for the small bar. Another large and small bar remained completely smooth. In addition to the baseline conditions there were trade-off conditions (see figure 1a, right side). In the trade-off conditions the border of the area with a high friction coefficient was not always at the centre. In these conditions, the bars varied in the horizontal offset between the centre of the bar and the edge of the high friction coefficient area, with offsets of 0, 1 and 2cm. In total 10 different bars were used. With the added weight of the anti-slip tape on one side of the bar, the COM was also slightly shifted from the centre of the length of the bar in the direction of the anti-slip tape (by 1.07mm – 1.16mm for the small bars and 2.27mm – 2.31mm for the large bars).

Task

Participants were seated in front of a table with their body midline aligned with the centre of the bars. The different bars were presented in a randomized order. The location of the rough area – whether on the right side or the left side of the bar – was also randomized. Each bar was presented 10 times, whereby (for the partially covered bars) the rough part of the bar was on the left for half the trials and on the right for the other half. In total, participants performed 100 trials. The participants' task was to move their hand from a starting position 36cm to the right of the centre of the bar (finger starting position) to the bar, grasp it with a pinch grasp, lift it and put it back down. The participants had 3s to perform the task. Infrared LEDs were attached to the nails of thumb and index finger to track their positions. The position and movement of the index fingers and thumbs of the participants were sampled with two Optotrak 3020 (Northern Digital Instruments) infrared tracking cameras at 300Hz.

Analysis

We determined the grasping points using the Multiple Sources of Information method (MSI-method) of Schot, Brenner & Smeets, 2010. The criteria used for determining the moment of grasping were: the distance between the index finger and thumb markers was smaller than 72mm (2mm more than the sum of the bar diameter of 40mm + 15mm for thumb and marker + 15mm for index finger and marker) and larger than 62mm (to exclude the start of the movement when the fingers touched each other), the velocity of the fingers was lower than 0.005m/s, and the thumb and index finger were at their lowest height after lift-off from the finger starting position. The grasping centre was calculated by taking the mean of the x, y and z-coordinates of thumb and index finger. We used the difference in position between grasping points when the rough side was on the right and when it was on the left as our measure of the bias towards the rough surface. To obtain a bias measure for a single movement we simply divided this value by two, ignoring the possibility that the direction might matter. Zero would mean that the participants ignored the surface roughness altogether (due to the handedness of the participants the preferred grasping point was shifted slightly towards the right of the centre of the object, but by comparing the two orientations of the bar the influence of any such shift cancels out). A positive value indicates that the participant grasped closer to the rough side of the bar. We also calculated the mean horizontal and vertical grasp point as well as the individual standard deviation (SD) for each participant in the baseline conditions. We averaged the individual standard deviations to get the mean variability in grasping points.

For the statistical analysis, we used a 2 (sizes) x 2 (cover types) repeated measures ANOVA to test for differences in grasping variability in the baseline conditions and a 2 (sizes) x 3 (offsets) repeated measures ANOVA for the mean grasp point in the trade-off conditions. We used two one-sided t-tests (for individual average grasping points for each bar size, irrespective of the offset) to examine whether there was any tendency to grasp closer to the rough surface at all.

Discarded trials

While grasping and lifting the bar it could happen that the participant, for a moment, accidentally blocked both cameras and thus created gaps in the movement recording. If those gaps occurred at a moment that interfered with one or more of the above mentioned criteria for grasp point selection or at the point of grasping, the grasp point detection failed. If that happened we discarded the trial. If 20% or more of the trials for one participant needed to be removed we excluded that participant. In total 3 participants were excluded. The remaining 12 participants had on average 4.3% of all trials removed. The removed trials were evenly distributed across bar sizes and positions of the rough surface (1-4%), except for the large rough bar in the baseline condition. In this condition 8% of all trials were removed, mainly because for one participant 50% of the trials in this condition needed to be removed. For all other participants, between 0% (eight participants) and 20% (one participant) of the trials in this condition were removed.

Results

Grasp point variability in the baseline conditions

In the baseline condition, we compared grasping point variability for large and small bars that were either rough or smooth. Figure 2a shows the mean grasping points for each participant as well as the grasping points averaged over participants and the corresponding standard deviations. The mean grasping points are close to the centre of the bar, but the previously reported rightward bias (Paulun et al. 2014; Kleinholdermann & Gegenfurtner 2013) is visible here too. Figure 2b shows the mean horizontal grasping variability. A 2x2 repeated measures ANOVA on the grasping point variability with size and roughness as within subject factors did not show any differences between sizes (large/small: $F(1,11)=0.73$, $p=0.4$) or between levels of roughness (smooth/rough, $F(1,11)=0.25$, $p=0.6$). The interaction of size and roughness was not significant ($F(1,11)=0.05$, $p=0.8$).

Figure 2c shows the mean grasping heights for the baseline conditions. There is a difference in the grasping height for rough and smooth bars. Participants grasped lower when the bar was smooth than when the bars were covered in anti-slip tape. A repeated measures ANOVA on the grasping height with the factors size and roughness revealed a significant effect of roughness ($F(1,11)=42$, $p<0.001$). There was no effect of size ($F(1,11)=0.03$, $p=0.9$) or interaction between size and grasping height ($F(1,11)=0.66$, $p=0.4$).

Grasping points in the trade-off conditions

The main question of this study was how humans adjust their grasping behaviour to a trade-off between the centre of mass and an off-centre area with a high friction coefficient. To examine this, participants were asked to lift bars with different offsets of the high friction coefficient area (see figure 1A, Trade-off Conditions). Figure 3 shows the bias towards the rough side of the bar, for the three different offsets of the high friction coefficient

area. A 2x3 repeated measures ANOVA on the grasping points with “bar size” and “offset” as factors showed no significant main effects (Size: $F(1,11)=4.4$, $p=0.06$; Offset: $F(2,22)=0.1$, $p=0.9$), but there was a significant interaction between size and offset ($F(2,22)=3.9$, $p=0.03$). The bias was larger for the small offsets when the bar was large, but larger for the large offset when the bar was small. To test whether there is any effect of roughness at all, we performed two t-tests comparing the mean bias with zero for the large and small bars. These t-tests showed a significant bias for the large bars ($t(11)=2.4$, $p=0.03$) and no significant bias for the small bars ($t(11)=0.5$, $p=0.6$).

Discussion

The goal of our study was to investigate how differences in object roughness affect grasp point selection when lifting objects. As baseline conditions we had small and large aluminium bars that were either completely covered in anti-slip tape to increase roughness or were polished aluminium bars, that were much smoother and therefore far more slippery than the rough bars. We expected grasp point variability to be larger for the rough bars than the smooth bars, because for objects with a larger friction coefficient the cost of grasping off-centre is smaller than for slippery objects. However, grasp point variability did not depend on the size or roughness of the object. In a previous study, grasp point variability was higher for objects that were both lighter and rougher (Paulun 2014). One explanation for the difference between the results is that our bars were much heavier (small: 148g, large: 298g) than the bars that Paulun et al. used in their study (42.3g and 0.8g). For heavier bars the cost of an off-centre grasp is larger due to the higher torques it would result in. Another explanation could be that the weight difference between the two bar weights (small vs large) was too small in our study. In the study of Paulun et al the heavier bar was about 53 times the weight of the lighter bar, whereas in our study the heavier bar was only twice the weight of the lighter bar. Even in the study by Paulun and colleagues (2014), the grasp point did not vary very much, even for the very light rough object, suggesting that the centre of objects is a preferred grasp point even if grasping off centre would not mean having to counteract much extra torque.

We observed that participants grasped significantly lower in the baseline conditions in which the bars were smooth. Paulun et al. (2016) also observed lower grasping points for more slippery objects. They argue that grasping lower might reflect a safety strategy. A lower grasp gives one more time to adjust the grasping force if the object starts to slip during the lift. Furthermore, placing the finger further from the top of the object might result in one using a larger part of the finger (more skin) to grasp the object, which will increase the friction. There are therefore good reasons to grasp smoother objects lower than objects with a higher friction coefficient. The differences between the vertical grasping points that we found in the current study indicate that participants did adjust their grasping behaviour to the slipperiness of the surface.

To test whether and how the grasping behaviour changes when a trade-off between the centre of the bar and the friction coefficient is induced we presented bars with variations in the position of the edge of a high friction coefficient side. We expected participants to grasp off-centre towards the area with the high friction coefficient (solid lines in Figure 3). Our results show that the grasping point is not influenced much, and not consistently, by an off-centre high-friction-coefficient area. The participants – on average – did not place their fingers completely on the rough part, as we initially expected. They did appear to sometimes have a modest bias towards the rough area, but we cannot attribute this to the high friction coefficient, because although the effect was signifi-

cant for the large bar, it is not even bigger than the actual shift of the centre of mass due to the added tape (dashed lines in Figure 3). Thus, any effect that is present could be due to realizing that the centre of mass has shifted rather than to the friction. Finding an effect for the 1cm offset condition of the 26cm bar could be caused by participants having misjudged the position of the edge of the rough surface to be the centre of the object because in this case the offset was less than 7.5% of the length of the bar, which is probably not enough to be conspicuously off-centre considering measured thresholds in a line bisection task (Olk et al., 2004).

Nevertheless, we cannot be sure that friction was not considered at all in the selection of the horizontal grasping points. The pattern of results for the large bar is not unreasonable in terms of aiming to increase friction. Keeping in mind that we use the middle of the fingernail as our reference, and the grasping area is larger than just this one point, the thumb and index finger do touch the rough part when the centre of the digit is still some distance away. Thus, when the offset is at the centre it may make sense to shift the grip slightly to make contact with the rough surface with a larger part of the digit's surface, and when the border is not too far away it makes sense to try to touch the high friction coefficient to some extent while also minimizing the torque. According to Peter, Hackeman and Goldreich (2009) the average fingertip area is approximately 350mm² for females and approximately 420mm² for males. Assuming that the touching area is more or less elliptical, with double the length of its width, that would mean that the short side of the grasping area has a radius of about 7.5mm for females and 8.2mm for males. A bias of 2mm would therefore be just enough to slightly touch the rough area in the 1cm offset condition. However, since participants also have other biases, they might sometimes shift more than 2mm and sometimes not shift at all, thereby making enough contact for it to be useful. When the border is further away there is no point shifting slightly, so better not shift at all. However, despite these possibilities, the fact that there is clearly no attempt to grasp the rough side of the smaller bars makes us reluctant to conclude that the friction had any systematic effect.

Though we did not find strong effects of object texture on grasping behaviour in this study, we cannot generally exclude that there might be an influence of object texture in more extreme cases. Future research could for instance address whether an influence of object texture can be observed in cases such as the slippery oil bottle from the introduction or objects partially covered in Vaseline. However, it is important to note that in such cases, the oil or Vaseline will also stick to the participants' fingers and participants might not want to grasp the oily part for reasons other than slipperiness per se. It is also for this reason that we chose to use actual surface textures rather than manipulate slipperiness using coatings of varying viscosity. Our results suggest that participants are reluctant to grasp off-centre, irrespective of any differences in the friction coefficient along the object, which is in line with previous research (Paulun et al. 2014 & Paulun et al. 2016). When the participants in the Paulun studies grasped very light non-slippery objects, they grasped close to the centre although the torque that would arise from grasping far off-centre would be very small. Thus, our findings are consistent with previous studies by Paulun et al. (2014), Goodale et al. (1994) and Wing and Lederman (2003) that report a strong preference for grasping near the centre of an object. We found that instead of grasping off-centre by an area with a high friction coefficient, participants try to compensate for the low friction in the centre by grasping lower.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent:

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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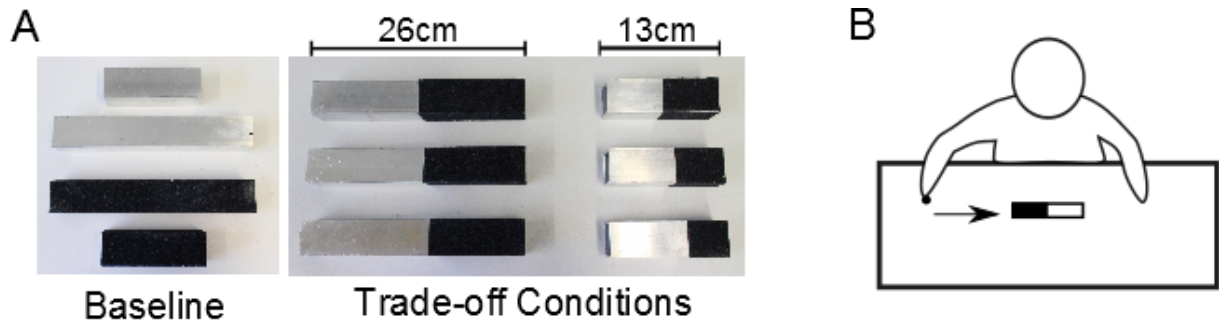


Fig. 1 a) The stimuli. Left side: baseline stimuli which were either covered in anti-slip tape or left blank (only polished aluminium), Right side: trade-off inducing stimuli which were partially covered in anti-slip tape. b) The setup. The participant was seated in front of a table with the body-midline aligned with the middle of the bar. The dot marks the starting point. The arrow indicates the direction of the grasping movement

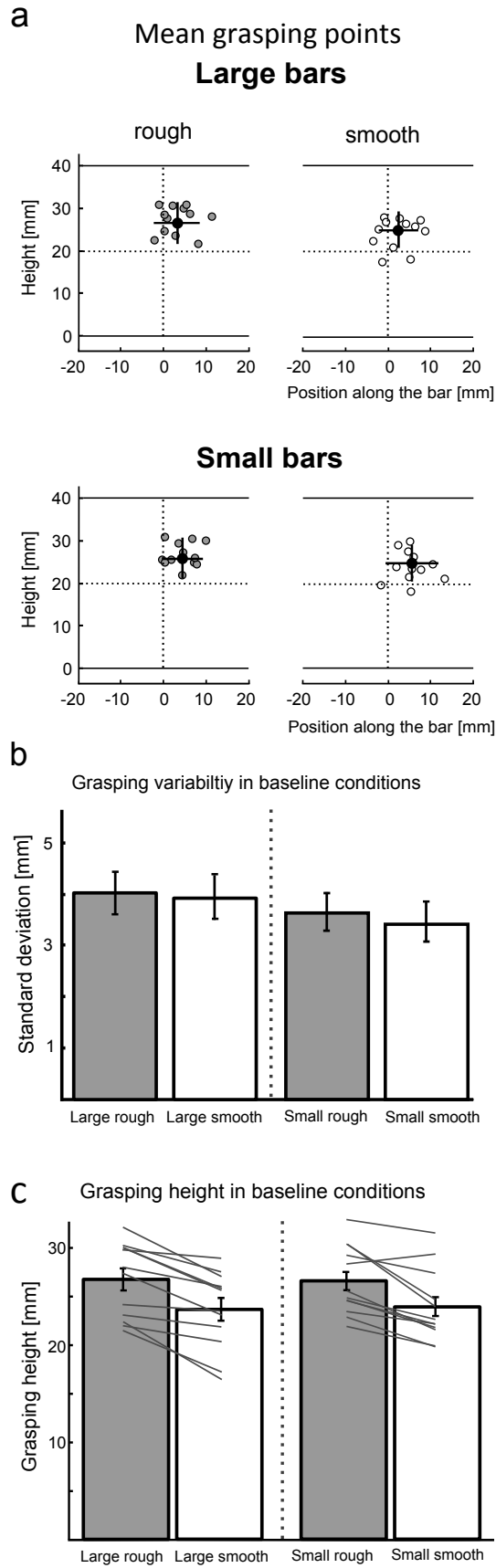


Fig. 2 a) Grasping points for the different bar sizes and surfaces. The dashed lines mark the bars' centres of mass in the vertical and horizontal direction. The solid lines are the top and bottom of the bar. The grey and white

circles are the mean grasping points of individual participants for the rough and smooth bars, respectively. The black dot marks the mean of all the individual mean grasping points, with a cross indicating the standard deviations. The top plots show the results for the large bars; the bottom plots for the small bars. b) Grasping point variability in the horizontal direction in the baseline conditions. The dark bars show the average of the standard deviations of all participants for the rough baseline bars. The white bars show the average for the smooth baseline bars. The error bars are the standard errors across participants. c) Mean grasping heights (bars) with standard errors across participants (error bars) as well as individual mean grasping heights (grey lines) for the different baseline conditions

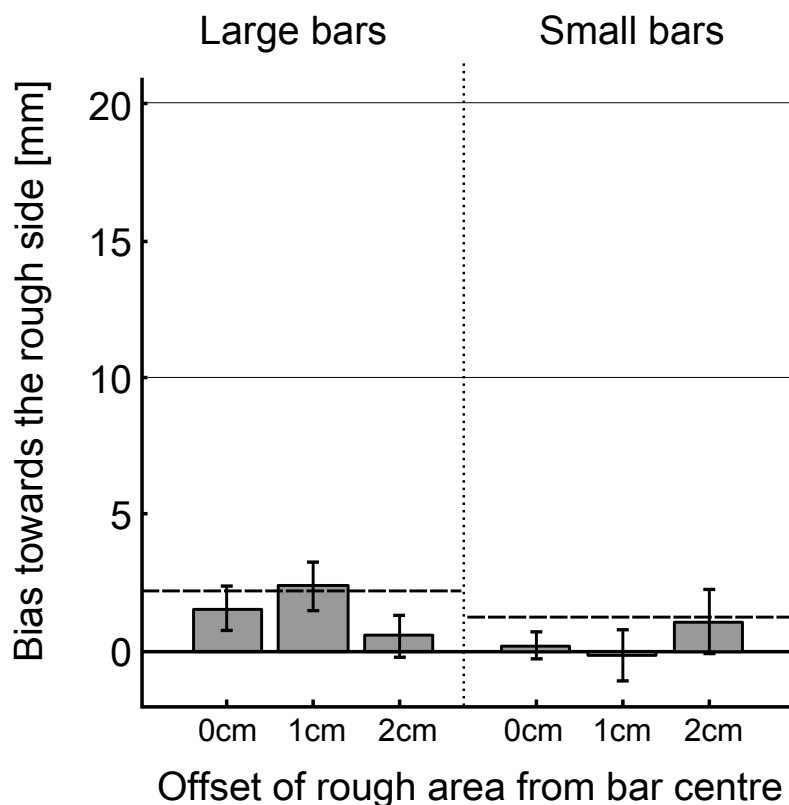


Fig. 3 Influence of bar size. The left side shows data for the large bars and the right side data for the small bars. The y-axis shows the bias towards the rough side of the bar in mm (with respect to the midpoint of the bar). The x-axis shows the offset of the rough area from the midpoint of the bar. A positive bias means that the participants grasped closer to the rough side of the bar. The x-axis shows the offset of the rough area from the midpoint of the bar. The error bars indicate the standard error across participants. The dashed horizontal lines indicate the positions of the centre of mass, which was shifted slightly from the midpoint of the bar due to the rough tape. The solid horizontal lines indicate the positions of the edge of the rough surface (when it does not coincide with the midpoint).