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## Ambivalence

We like some things yet dislike others, love some people but hate others, and sometimes feel happy and other times sad. From this perspective, feelings—generally referred to as affect, which includes such phenomena as attitudes, emotions, and moods—works in much the same way as weight. Just as temperature falls along a simple dimension ranging from hot to cold, so, too, does affect fall along a simple dimension ranging from positive to negative.

A closer look, however, reveals that affect may be more complex than it first appears. Consider your attitude toward ice cream. You may like ice cream because it tastes good but also dislike ice cream because that great taste comes at the expense of vast amounts of fat, sugar, and calories. If so, you would have what social psychologists call an *ambivalent* attitude toward ice cream. That is, you feel both good and bad about it, rather than simply good or bad. Many people are ambivalent not only about unhealthy foods, but about broccoli and other healthy foods as well. Similarly, many people are ambivalent about such unhealthy behaviors as smoking, as well as such healthy behaviors as exercising. As people who describe themselves as having love/hate relationships know, other people can also be a common source of ambivalence. For instance, many people are ambivalent about Presidents Bill Clinton or George W. Bush. Perhaps people feel ambivalent about politicians because they feel ambivalent about the social issues that politicians debate. In addition to disagreeing with each other over such troubling issues as legalized abortion, capital punishment, and civil rights, people often disagree with themselves.

Such instances of ambivalence suggest that the analogy between temperature and affect can take us only so far. It is impossible for liquids to freeze and boil at the same time, but it appears that people can feel both good and bad about the same object. According to John Cacioppo and Gary Berntson's evaluative space model, one implication is that it is better to think of positive and negative affect as separate dimensions rather than opposite ends of a single dimension ranging from positive to negative. From this perspective, people can feel any pattern of positive and negative affect at the same time, including high levels of both.

### Attitudinal ambivalence

Contemporary interest in ambivalence stemmed from social psychologists' enduring efforts to understand the nature of attitudes, which refer to people's opinions of people, ideas, and things. Social psychologists have long measured attitudes by asking people to indicate how they feel about attitude objects (e.g., ice cream) on scales with options ranging from extremely good to extremely bad. In his chapter on attitude measurement in the 1968 *Handbook*

*of Social Psychology*, William Scott pointed out that responses in the middle of bipolar attitude scales are difficult to interpret. Though typically assumed to reflect the absence of positive or negative feeling (i.e., indifference), Scott pointed out that such responses may in fact reflect ambivalence, or the presence of *both* positive *and* negative affect.

### Ambivalence toward social categories

Research has revealed that stereotypes and attitudes toward racial groups and other social categories are often ambivalent. For instance, many white Americans have ambivalent attitudes toward African Americans. These ambivalent racists sympathize with blacks for having been denied the opportunities afforded to other Americans, but also disparage blacks because they perceive blacks as having failed to uphold the Protestant work ethic. Peter Glick and Susan Fiske have explored men's ambivalent sexism, which is illustrated by the saying, "Women—you can't live with 'em and you can't live without 'em." Benevolent sexism involves a sort of protective paternalism in which men see it as their duty to care for women. In contrast, hostile sexism involves dominative paternalism in which men oppose women's entry into male-dominated professions and criticize bold, assertive women even though they praise bold, assertive men. More recently, Glick and Fiske have demonstrated that stereotypes about social groups generally represent a tradeoff between perceptions of warmth and competence. Whereas homemakers are seen as nurturing but incompetent, for instance, wealthy individuals are seen as hard-working but cold.

### Measuring ambivalence

In the early 1970s, Martin Kaplan had the insight to distinguish ambivalent attitudes from indifferent attitudes by modifying traditional one dimensional, bipolar attitude scales. Rather than asking people to rate how good or bad they felt about attitude objects, Kaplan asked them to rate how good *and* bad they felt about the attitude object on two *separate* scales. Kaplan quantified the amount of ambivalence as the smaller of the two ratings. In his formula, individuals who feel exclusively positive (positive = 5, negative = 0), exclusively negative (0, 5), or indifferent (0, 0) about some attitude object experience no ambivalence. On the other hand, people who have some combination of positive and negative feelings experience some level of ambivalence depending on the exact combination of those positive and negative ratings. For instance, if two individuals feel extremely positive, but one feels moderately negative (5, 3) and the other only slightly negative (5, 1), the first is quantified as having more ambivalence.

*The feeling of ambivalence*

Having ambivalent reactions toward the same thing often leaves people feeling torn between the two. Indeed, subsequent researchers found that ambivalence as measured by Kaplan's formula is correlated with ratings of tension, conflict, and other unpleasant emotions. Interestingly, however, the correlations tend to be relatively weak. Thus, having both positive and negative reactions does not necessarily result in feelings of conflict. Research has revealed a number of reasons for the weak correlation. One reason is that feelings of conflict are not only the result of ambivalent positive and negative reactions. Specifically, people sometimes feel conflicted even though they do not have ambivalent positive and negative reactions because they hold attitudes that are at odds with those of people important to them. For instance, students who greatly oppose studying (and are not in favor of it all) may nonetheless feel conflicted if their parents do like them to study. Thus, ambivalence is not only an intrapersonal phenomenon (i.e., one that happens within a single person), but an interpersonal phenomenon (i.e., one that happens between people), as well. Another reason for the weak correlation is that people's ambivalent positive and negative reactions toward an attitude object only produce feelings of conflict when the mixed reactions come to mind readily, which is not always the case.

*The role of personality*

There are also stable individual differences or personality characteristics that play a role in attitudinal ambivalence. In fact, a third reason for the low correlation between having ambivalent positive and negative reactions and experiencing conflict deals with the fact that some people have a weaker desire for consistency than others. As it turns out, Megan Thompson and Mark Zanna have demonstrated that these people are not particularly bothered about feeling both good and bad about the same thing. Perhaps that explains why these individuals tend to be more likely to have ambivalent attitudes toward a variety of social issues including state-funded abortion, euthanasia (i.e., "mercy killing"), and capital punishment. In addition, people who enjoy thinking tend to have less ambivalent attitudes, presumably because they manage to sift through and ultimately make sense of conflicting evidence for and against different positions on complex issues.

*Consequences of attitudinal ambivalence*

Ambivalence has a variety of effects on how attitudes operate. Attitudes are important to social psychology in large part because they help predict behavior. If we know that someone has a negative attitude toward capital punishment, for instance, we can predict with some certainty that they will vote to ban capital punishment if given the opportunity. Compared to other attitudes, however, ambivalent attitudes do not predict behavior very well. In addition, ambivalent attitudes are less stable over time than other attitudes. Thus, if asked about their attitude toward capital punishment one month and again the next, people who are ambivalent toward

capital punishment will be less likely than others to report the same attitude.

Ambivalence also affects how much people change their minds in the face of advertisements and other persuasive appeals, messages designed by one person or group of people to change other people's attitudes. For instance, Gregory Maio and colleagues found that when people are presented with a persuasive message dealing with issues that they are ambivalent about, they pay especially close attention to whether the message makes a compelling case or not. Thus, they tend to be more persuaded by strong arguments than people with non-ambivalent attitudes but also less persuaded by weak arguments. One explanation for this finding is that people with ambivalent attitudes scrutinize persuasive messages more carefully in hopes that the message will contain new information that will help them resolve their ambivalence. It appears that people with ambivalent attitudes are also more likely to change their attitudes to bring them into line with their peers' attitudes. The picture that has emerged is that when people feel ambivalent they will do whatever it takes to make up their minds, whether that involves the hard work of paying close attention to persuasive messages or the easier work of looking to their peers for guidance.

**Mixed emotions**

Contemporary work on attitudinal ambivalence has recently prompted research on emotional ambivalence. Whereas attitudes represent affective reactions to some object such as capital punishment or a political figure, emotions represent one's own current affective state.

Most individuals at least occasionally experience such positive emotions as happiness, excitement, and relaxation, and such negative emotions as sadness, anger, and fear, just to name a few. Research on attitudinal ambivalence makes clear that sometimes people can feel both good and bad about the same object, but this does not mean that people can experience such seemingly opposite emotions as happiness and sadness at the same time. Indeed, one prominent model of emotion contends that happiness and sadness are mutually exclusive. In contrast, John Cacioppo and Gary Berntson's evaluative space model contends that people can sometimes experience mixed emotions.

*The historical debate*

This disagreement represents the latest chapter in a long debate over the existence of mixed emotions. Socrates suggested that, for instance, tragic plays elicit mixed emotions by evoking pleasure in the midst of tears. Centuries later, David Hume argued for mixed emotions but the Scottish philosopher Alexander Bain argued against mixed emotions. In the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, students of Wilhelm Wundt, Hermann Ebbinghaus, and other pioneering psychologists conducted more than a dozen experiments in hopes of gathering data that would answer the question of mixed emotions. In an illustrative study,

observers described how they felt after viewing pairs of pleasant and unpleasant photographs that alternated more than 100 times per minute. Nevertheless, researchers were unable to agree on how to interpret observers' descriptions of their feelings. As a result, this early literature has largely been forgotten.

#### *Contemporary evidence for mixed emotions*

Thanks in part to the development of more valid measures of emotion, researchers have recently been able to reopen the question of mixed emotions. The question is far from settled, but recent evidence suggests that people can feel both happy and sad at the same time. In a study conducted by Jeff Larsen and colleagues, movie-goers reported whether they felt happy, sad, and a variety of other emotions before or after seeing the tragicomic 1998 Italian film *Life Is Beautiful*, which depicts a father's attempts to keep his son alive and unaware of their plight during their imprisonment in a World War II concentration camp. Before the movie, nearly everyone felt happy or sad, not both. After the film, however, half the people surveyed felt both happy and sad. In similar studies, college students were more likely to feel both happy and sad immediately after graduating or turning in the key to their dormitories than during typical days on campus.

In other research, people played a variety of computerized card games in which they had the opportunity to win one of two amounts of money, such as \$12 or \$5. Winning \$12 instead of \$5 led people to feel good and not at all bad. Winning \$5 instead of \$12, however, led people to feel both good and bad. These outcomes can be seen as *disappointing wins*: winning \$5 feels good, but it also feels disappointing if there was an opportunity to win even more.

#### *Mixed emotions in children*

Developmental psychologists have studied the development of children's understanding of mixed emotions. In one study, children listened to a story about a child who had received a new kitten to replace one that had run away. During a subsequent interview, 4- and 5-year-olds rejected the notion that the child would feel both happy and sad about getting the new kitten. Older children, however, thought the child would feel mixed emotions. In a similar study, children were interviewed about their emotions after viewing a clip from the cartoon *The Little Mermaid* in which a mermaid must say goodbye to her father forever after marrying a human. Older children were more likely to feel mixed emotions of happiness and sadness than younger children. Taken together, the results of these studies suggest that both the understanding and experience of mixed emotions represent developmental milestones.

#### *Consequences of mixed emotions*

Little research to date has examined the consequences of mixed emotions. One notable exception is evidence that European Americans find advertisements that evoke mixed emotions more unpleasant than Asian Americans, who tend

to have a greater propensity for dealing with contradictory information. As a result, the advertisements were also less persuasive for European Americans than Asian Americans. Among European Americans, younger individuals find mixed emotional advertisements more unpleasant than older individuals, suggesting that the effects of age on mixed emotions demonstrated by developmental psychologists extend far beyond childhood.

#### **Conclusion**

People probably feel good or bad about most things and happy or sad most of the time. Indeed, it appears that ambivalence is a relatively uncommon phenomenon. It is nonetheless a particularly intriguing phenomenon because it gives us a unique glimpse into how affect works. It may appear that feelings fall along a simple dimension ranging from good to bad, but the evidence for ambivalence suggests that positive and negative affect are, in fact, separate processes that can be experienced at the same time.

#### **Further Readings**

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