Available online at www.sciencedirect.com
SCIENCE DIRECT®
Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 42 (2006) 252–258
Journal of Experimental Social Psychology
www.elsevier.com/locate/jesp

# Ambivalence, discomfort, and motivated information processing ☆

Loran F. Nordgren *, Frenk van Harreveld, Joop van der Pligt

*Department of Social Psychology, Universiteit van Amsterdam, Roetersstraat 15, 1018 WB Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

Received 1 June 2004; revised 12 November 2004
Available online 9 June 2005
Communicated by Fabrigar

**Abstract**

In two studies we examined the nature and consequence of ambivalent attitudes. In the first study, we assessed whether holding ambivalent attitudes was aversive, and tested whether this aversion was resolved through biased information processing. To do this we manipulated participants' attributions of the discomfort associated with an ambivalent message through a pill manipulation (tense vs. relaxed). Participants who attributed their discomfort to their ambivalence reported more negative emotions and generated more one-sided thoughts than participants who attributed their discomfort to the pill. In the second study, we examined the conditions necessary for ambivalence reduction. Results suggest that people spontaneously engage in biased information processing in order to resolve their ambivalence.
© 2005 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Ambivalence; Information processing; Consistency; Affect; Attitudes

Ambivalence reflects the co-existence of positive and negative evaluations of an attitude object. Considerable research has documented the properties of ambivalent attitudes, focusing particularly on the *strength* of ambivalent attitudes. Petty and Krosnick (1995) have conceptualized attitude strength using four dimensions. An attitude is said to be strong when it is: (a) resistant to persuasion, (b) predictive of behavior, (c) stable, and (d) affects information processing. Ambivalent attitudes are generally conceptualized as *weak* attitudes, as they are less predictive of behavior (Armitage & Conner, 2000; Conner, Sparks, Povey, James, & Sheperd, 2002), less stable (Armitage & Conner, 2000), and less resistant to persuasion (Armitage & Conner, 2000).

This body of results, however, is not without conflict. Bassili (1996) failed to replicate the finding that ambivalent attitudes are less stable and less resistant to persuasion. Jonas, Diehl, and Brömer (1997) likewise found ambivalent attitudes to be more predictive of behavioral intention. However, of Krosnicks and Petty's (1995) four characteristics of attitude strength, we believe that it is the assertion that strong attitudes impact information processing that most clearly challenges the view that ambivalent attitudes are weak.

Several studies have found ambivalent respondents to use more effort and deliberation in processing information (Brömer, 1998; Jonas et al., 1997; Maio, Bell, & Esses, 1996). Van Harreveld, Van der Pligt, De Vries, Wenneker, and Verhue (2004) found that ambivalent participants tend to select more attributes as being important to their evaluation of the attitude object and take longer to integrate their attributes into their evaluation. These findings tend to be explained in terms of the dual process models, such as heuristic–systematic processing model (Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989). Systematic processing involves a comprehensive effort to analyze and understand information, while heuristic processing involves the use of simple decisions rules for judging information. Such rules might include

☆ This research was supported in part by a J. William Fulbright Scholarship.
* Corresponding author. Fax +31 20 6391896.
*E-mail address:* L.F.Nordgren@uva.nl (L.F. Nordgren).

0022-1031/$ - see front matter © 2005 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2005.04.004

agreement with consensus or agreement with expert opinion (Chaiken et al., 1989).

Of particular importance here is the idea that information processed under the heuristic mode tends to be associated with less stable attitudes and less tied to subsequent behavior than information processed under the systematic mode (Chaiken et al., 1989). Systematic processing, on the other hand, is also expected to produce *strong* attitudes. So, while ambivalent attitudes are themselves considered weak, ambivalence is also said to induce a more effortful processing of information that in turn leads to stronger attitudes.

This tension may in part be resolved by gaining a greater understanding of the relationship between ambivalence and information processing. There is general consensus that ambivalence reflects the extent to which there is conflict in an attitude (Hass, Katz, Rizzo, Bailey, & Moore, 1992; Maio et al., 1996). Beginning with dissonance theory, Festinger (1957) research suggests that psychological conflict is an aversive experience that is eliminated by resolving the inconsistency that caused it. Perhaps then the aversion of holding both positive and negative evaluations of an attitude object motivates ambivalent people to seek out and scrutinize any information that might enable them to resolve their conflict.

This idea can be unpacked into two sets of predictions. The first prediction is that holding ambivalent attitudes is an aversive experience. Though widely suggested (Maio et al., 1996; Newby-Clark, McGregor, & Zanna, 2002), this notion has yet to be tested directly. Hass et al. (1992) has found limited empirical support in the context of racial conflict. They found that ambivalent respondents reported more negative feelings than non-ambivalent respondents. This effect, however, occurred only when ambivalent respondents were made aware of their evaluative conflict. In other words, ambivalence alone was not sufficient for invoking negative feelings but occurred only when ambivalence was made salient. One explanation for the interaction between ambivalence and evaluative conflict salience is that ambivalence was measured using a measure of potential ambivalence.[1] This reasoning parallels Aronson and Carlsmith's (1963) finding that awareness of cognitive inconsistency heightens aversion. A measure of felt ambivalence, which taps the direct experience of evaluative conflict, may have yielded more straightforward results.

The second prediction is that ambivalence can be resolved through biased information processing. Festinger (1957) has shown that one way to resolve psychological conflict is through the selective elaboration of favorable information. Therefore, ambivalence might be resolved by focusing on one side of the evaluative conflict. Previous research on ambivalence has neglected this issue. For example, while Jonas et al. (1997) found that ambivalent respondents generated more thoughts in a thought-listing task, they did not measure the valence of the thoughts generated, and could therefore not test for biased information processing.

In two studies, we examine the nature and consequence of holding ambivalent attitudes. In the first study, we directly assess whether ambivalence is indeed aversive, and test whether this aversion can be resolved through biased information processing. In the second study, we examine the conditions necessary for ambivalence reduction.

## Study 1

The goal of this study is to test the notion that ambivalence is indeed aversive. To do this, we manipulated participants' attributions of the discomfort associated with an ambivalent message through a pill manipulation—participants received a sugar pill that they were told would make them feel either tense or relaxed. If ambivalent attitudes are unpleasant, ambivalent participants given the tense pill should report less intense negative emotions toward the message as they attribute their discomfort to the pill, while ambivalent participants given the relaxed pill should report more intense negative emotions toward the attitude object as their discomfort is amplified by their expectation to feel relaxed.

We further examine whether ambivalent people attempt to resolve their ambivalence through biased information processing. To test this prediction, participants were asked to list their thoughts about the ambivalent object they were provided. We predicted that ambivalent participants would generate univalent thoughts that correspond with their initial evaluations, and that this selective elaboration would lead to a reduction in subsequent ambivalence.

### *Method*

#### *Participants*

Participants were 60 psychology undergraduates from the University of Amsterdam (36 female and 14 male), who participated for course credit. The age of participants ranged from 19 to 24 years ($M = 21.23$).

#### *Procedure*

In the context of a separate study, half of the respondents took a sugar pill they were led to believe caused them to feel tense while the other half took a sugar pill

[1] *Potential* ambivalence assesses positive and negative evaluations of an attitude object using two unipolar scales. This method conceptualizes ambivalence as a structural property of attitudes. *Felt* ambivalence, on the other hand, is measured by asking participants to rate how conflicted they feel about an attitude object, and thus captures the direct experience or feelings of evaluative conflict.

دریافت فوری ← متن کامل مقاله

ISIArticles
مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات