



Affective responses to ambivalence are context-dependent: A facial EMG study on the role of inconsistency and evaluative context in shaping affective responses to ambivalence



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We used facial EMG to investigate affective responses to ambivalent information.
- Mere processing of ambivalent information elicits the same direct affective response as positive stimuli.
- Affective responses to ambivalence when a choice had to be made resembled responses to negative stimuli.
- This effect was qualified by context: ambivalent information has to be inconsistent in the context to cause negative affect.
- The possibility to resolve ambivalence in the evaluative context affected facial muscle activation within 500 ms.

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ABSTRACT

It has long been debated whether attitudinal ambivalence elicits negative affect and evidence for such a link is inconclusive. Using facial EMG, we tested the idea that affective responses to ambivalence are dependent on the inconsistency of evaluations in the current situation. In a person perception task, participants were presented with positive (e.g., friendly, intelligent), negative (e.g., jealous, dominant), or positive and negative information (e.g., intelligent, dominant) about different target persons. When participants were only exposed to the information without having to respond, ambivalent information elicited the same affective response as positive stimuli, participants showed more zygomaticus (positive affect) and less corrugator activation (negative affect) than to negative stimuli (task 1). When participants had to make a choice, ambivalent information elicited the same affective response as negative information (task 2). This was qualified by the possibility to resolve the inconsistency between evaluations. Specifically, ambivalence only led to a relative decrease in positive affect when evaluative context did not help resolve the inconsistency between ambivalent evaluations and created a choice conflict (e.g., “Bob is intelligent and dominant. Do you think Bob is a good collaborator?”). When the same ambivalent information (e.g. “Bob is intelligent and dominant”) was presented in a context in which the opposing evaluations were not inconsistent (e.g., “Do you think Bob can write a good research paper?”), participants reported to experience lower levels of conflict and displayed more positive affect (i.e., more zygomaticus activation). The current data contribute to the reconciliation of previously inconclusive results on affective responses to attitudinal ambivalence. The results suggest that ambivalence only leads to relatively more negative affect (i.e., a decrease in positive affect) when ambivalent information is inconsistent in a current situation and thus creates conflict. Implications of these findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Humans can evaluate effortlessly, and many evaluations help us behave appropriately in a given situation: we generally approach and explore positively evaluated stimuli and avoid or attack negatively evaluated ones (Chen & Bargh, 1999). Often, though, evaluations are not that straightforward and we have to deal with contradictory information

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that makes us evaluate a stimulus positively and negatively at the same time. This ambivalence (i.e., the simultaneous presence of positive and negative associations with an attitude object; Kaplan, 1972; Thompson, Zanna, & Griffin, 1995) thus reflects conflict between evaluative responses, and as such has been suggested to elicit negative affect (e.g., McGregor, Newby-Clark, & Zanna, 1999). This idea is traditionally based on Festinger's work on cognitive dissonance and the suggestion that inconsistent thoughts about a reference object produce negatively valenced arousal (Festinger, 1957; Gawronski, 2012). However, evidence for a relation between ambivalence and negative affect has been mixed, with some studies reporting a positive relation (Hass, Katz, Rizzo, Bailey, & Moore, 1992), some a negative relation (Maio, Greenland, Bernard, & Esses, 2001), and others showing that a negative affective response to ambivalence is contingent on having to make a dichotomous, consequential choice (Van Harreveld, Rutjens, Rotteveel, Nordgren & Van der Pligt, 2009). In the current study we aim to contribute to reconciling previously inconclusive results on the affective response to ambivalence by proposing that affective responses to ambivalence are context-dependent. We suggest that affective responses to ambivalence are only negative if ambivalent evaluations are inconsistent in the current situation and thus create evaluative conflict.

According to Festinger's original formulation of cognitive dissonance theory, consistency is a fundamental human motive and it has recently been argued that we should revive the idea of consistency as a core motive (Gawronski, 2012). Two thoughts, beliefs, or feelings (x and y) are inconsistent "if not- x follows from y " (1957; p. 13; e.g., Bob is friendly and Bob is unfriendly; see also Gawronski, 2012). Ambivalence can represent such an inconsistency, however, specific to ambivalence is that the inconsistency always occurs on the valence dimension (e.g., 'I like and dislike Bob'). Along this reasoning, ambivalence is thought to elicit negative affect (e.g., Briñol & Petty, 2005; McGregor et al., 1999; Van Harreveld, van der Pligt & Liver, 2009). Newby-Clark and colleagues (Newby-Clark, McGregor, & Zanna, 2002), for example, suggested that simultaneous accessibility and awareness of opposing evaluations lead ambivalent individuals to experience 'discomfort' (often equated with negative affect in the ambivalence literature; see Van Harreveld, Nohlen, & Schneider, 2015; Van Harreveld, van der Pligt, et al., 2009). In their study, individuals reported to be more conflicted and feel more torn about a controversial societal issue if they were repeatedly asked to write down both, their positive and negative, evaluations regarding the issue. Similarly, Hass et al. (1992) reported that exposing racially ambivalent participants to controversial (pro and con) racial statements was related to a greater increase in self-reported negative mood than exposing less ambivalent participants to the same statements. Some studies also report that valence-incongruence between subliminally presented primes and supraliminally presented target information leads to greater self-reported discomfort (i.e., negative affect; Rydell, McConnell, & Mackie, 2009). However, other studies have not replicated the direct relation between ambivalence and negative affect. For example, Van Harreveld, Rutjens, et al. (2009) only reported negative affective responses to ambivalence in the context of a consequential forced choice and found no relation when participants read ambivalent information outside of a choice context. Additionally, Maio et al. (2001) observed no relationship between ambivalence and self-reported negative affect in an intergroup context (Study 2), and even found a negative correlation between ambivalence and physiological arousal measured by skin conductance (GSR) when participants were asked to report their attitude toward groups of different nationalities (Study 1).

Taking the approach that inconsistency, not ambivalence itself, is responsible for a negative affective response to ambivalent information may reconcile these inconclusive results. More specifically, dependent on the level of analysis, ambivalent evaluations are not necessarily inconsistent. Evaluations are based on specific associations with a stimulus that has a certain positive or negative value. For example, I may like Bob, because he is intelligent (= positive), but at the same time I may

dislike Bob, because he is dominant (= negative). Whereas my general attitude toward Bob then represents an inconsistency ("I like and dislike Bob"), the two associations that make up the ambivalent attitude are not inconsistent: Bob being intelligent does not logically exclude Bob from being dominant. As stimuli are rarely interpreted outside of context, a negative affective response to ambivalence should thus depend on whether such ambivalent evaluations are inconsistent in the current situation. For example, when determining whether Bob can write a good article, the inconsistency of ambivalence (like and dislike) is present but irrelevant, because whether one thinks that Bob can write a good article may be determined by his intelligence, but has nothing to do with whether one finds him dominant or not. In this case, evaluative context can be used to change the weight of associations with the stimulus that can help represent the stimulus in a less conflicted way. However both evaluative aspects are relevant if you have to decide whether Bob is a good collaborator. In this situation, evaluations are thus inconsistent and ambivalence should be experienced negatively. Indirect evidence for the idea that inconsistency may be responsible for negative affective responses to ambivalence is provided by Van Harreveld, Rutjens, et al. (2009). When presenting participants with ambivalent information about a new labor law, they found that being ambivalent only resulted in more physiological arousal and negative affect when individuals had to commit (i.e., forced choice) to one side of their evaluation. When forced to make a choice on an ambivalent topic, individuals behave inconsistently (and interestingly also consistently) with their attitude since choosing one response (either positive or negative) consequently means choosing against the other. This creates an inconsistency between cognitions (i.e., thoughts, feelings, or behavior) in Festinger's (1957) terms in that one's evaluation is incongruent with one's behavioral response. This interpretation of the results is additionally supported by the finding that an increase in negative affect was only observed after the choice had been made, thus when individuals had chosen inconsistently with their attitude. Choice may thus serve as an evaluative context that creates inconsistency in two ways, by forcing individuals to behave in contradiction with their attitude (i.e., a one-sided choice based on a two-sided evaluation) and by determining whether the inconsistency of the general ambivalent attitude is relevant (e.g., Bob is intelligent and dominant: Bob as a collaborator vs. Bob's writing skills).

The current study was designed to test the preconditions for negative affect elicited by ambivalence, and explore whether evaluative context can regulate a negative affective response to ambivalence by determining whether ambivalent evaluations are inconsistent. The experiment tasks were designed to combine the testing of previous ideas on affective responses to ambivalence with testing the current idea that affective responses to ambivalence are dependent on the immediate inconsistency of ambivalent evaluations. We first investigated whether the simultaneous accessibility of opposing positive and negative evaluations directly elicits negative affect as suggested by McGregor et al. (1999). Even though a study using GSR (Van Harreveld, Rutjens, et al., 2009) suggests that ambivalence does not elicit physiological arousal in the absence of a forced choice context, we aimed to test this hypothesis using a physiological measure that can assess positive and negative valence (facial EMG). Second, we tested whether ambivalence elicits more negative affect and less positive affect when a choice has to be made on the (conflicting) valence dimension (cf. Van Harreveld, Rutjens, et al., 2009). Third, we were interested if and how evaluative context in the choice moment itself influences affective responses to ambivalence. That is, if evaluative context helps resolve inconsistency between evaluations, is this reflected in implicit measures of affect (i.e., facial EMG) as well as self-reported conflict?

2. The current study

Using facial EMG in a person perception paradigm we assessed affective responses to ambivalent and univalent information. Facial

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