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Wanting other attitudes: Actual–desired attitude discrepancies predict feelings of ambivalence and ambivalence consequences ☆

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HIGHLIGHTS

- People can desire attitudes that differ in valence from their current attitude.
- Actual–desired discrepancies lead people to feel ambivalent.
- Discrepancies also reduce prediction of behavior and increase information interest.

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ABSTRACT

The experience of attitudinal ambivalence (subjective ambivalence) is important because it predicts key consequences of attitudes (e.g., attitude–behavior correspondence, attitude stability). However, the field's understanding of the antecedents of subjective ambivalence is still developing. We explore an unexamined antecedent of subjective ambivalence. Specifically, we examined discrepancies between participants' actual attitudes and their desired attitudes as antecedents of subjective ambivalence and ambivalence consequences. Six studies using a variety of attitude objects were conducted to test these ideas. The first four studies demonstrated that actual–desired attitude discrepancies predicted subjective ambivalence over its previously documented antecedents. Critically, two additional studies showed that actual–desired attitude discrepancies predicted important consequences of ambivalence. As actual–desired attitude discrepancies increased, participants' attitude–behavior correspondence decreased (Study 5), and desire to reduce attitudinal conflict increased (Study 6). Process data in these latter studies revealed indirect effects through subjective ambivalence that held after controlling for the objective presence of evaluative conflict.

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Introduction

Everyone has experienced evaluative conflict, or the simultaneous presence of positive and negative reactions towards the same object (e.g., de Liver, van der Pligt, & Wigboldus, 2007; Kaplan, 1972; Priester & Petty, 1996; Rosenzweig, 1938; Thompson, Zanna, & Griffin, 1995). One can love the taste of chocolate cake, but hate the calories; approve of a political candidate's foreign policy stances, but disapprove of his or her environmental policies; or have conflicting feelings (e.g., joy and anxiety) about a new romance. The term ambivalence broadly refers to these mixed evaluative reactions whether they stem from explicit or implicit discrepancies (Petty & Briñol, 2009). People can be ambivalent about a wide variety of topics (e.g., abortion, career choices) and domains (e.g., health, race, self), and the study of ambivalence has therefore interested scholars in psychology (Conner & Armitage, 2008; van Harreveld, van der Pligt, & de Liver, 2009), political science (Lavine, 2001; Rudolph & Popp, 2007), sociology (Hajda, 1968), and other related disciplines (e.g., Otnes, Lowrey, & Shrum, 1997) for decades.

Ambivalence is often experienced as an unpleasant state that results in negative affect and psychologically undesirable outcomes (e.g., Abelson & Rosenberg, 1958; Hass, Katz, Rizzo, Bailey, & Moore, 1992; Newby-Clark, McGregor, & Zanna, 2002; Newcomb, 1968; Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955; Rydell, McConnell, & Mackie, 2008). Understanding ambivalence is critically important for understanding attitudes. For example, the more ambivalence one experiences regarding an object, the less functional one's attitude becomes in orienting one's behavior (Armitage & Conner, 2000; Sparks, Harris, & Lockwood, 2004). Consistent with this idea, people with ambivalent (versus univalent) attitudes tend to be slower to report their attitudes (Bargh, Chaiken, Govender, & Pratto, 1992), are more sensitive to context effects in attitude expression

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(Batista & Lima, in press; Tourangeau, Rasinski, Bradburn, & D'Andrade, 1989), and are less extreme in their evaluations (Kaplan, 1972). Because ambivalence tends to be a negative state, people often attempt to reduce it. For example, the motivation to reduce ambivalence leads people to pay careful attention to information that might help them resolve their ambivalence (e.g., Briñol, Petty, & Wheeler, 2006; Clark, Wegener, & Fabrigar, 2008; Maio, Bell, & Esses, 1996; Rydell et al., 2008).[1]

Two related but distinct ambivalence constructs have been identified in prior work: objective ambivalence and subjective ambivalence. Objective ambivalence represents the actual presence of conflicting evaluative reactions within a given person (i.e., having both positive and negative reactions towards the same object). Subjective ambivalence represents the *experience* of evaluative conflict, including a sense of being conflicted, confused, torn, and mixed with regard to the attitude object (Priester & Petty, 1996; Thompson et al., 1995; van Harreveld, Rutjens, et al., 2009; van Harreveld, van der Pligt, et al., 2009). Subjective ambivalence can have cognitive (mixed reactions), affective (feeling conflicted), or behavioral (indecision) manifestations (Priester & Petty, 1996).

Subjective ambivalence is hypothesized to be the psychological driver of many of the outcomes discussed above and is often seen as the "gold standard" measure in research on ambivalence (e.g., Thompson et al., 1995). Because of the psychological importance of subjective ambivalence, it is vital to understand its antecedents. Research on ambivalence often only measures objective ambivalence (for exceptions, see e.g., Haddock, 2003; Priester & Petty, 1996, 2001), but researchers typically assume that objective ambivalence leads to subjective ambivalence (e.g., Maio et al., 1996). As described next, however, objective ambivalence is an inadequate predictor of subjective ambivalence. The present research builds on prior studies by proposing a previously unidentified antecedent of subjective ambivalence — discrepancies between a person's actual evaluation and their desired evaluation of an attitude object. Furthermore, whereas past research often only *assumes* that ambivalence-related consequences are due to the experience of conflict (i.e., subjective ambivalence), we sought to empirically test this assumption with respect to actual–desired attitude discrepancies.

Predictors of subjective ambivalence

Many attitude objects are best characterized as linked to separable positive and negative reactions (e.g., Cacioppo, Gardner, & Berntson, 1997; Petty, Briñol, & DeMarree, 2007), and this idea is central to many perspectives on ambivalence. Kaplan (1972) was the first to recommend what has become the most popular objective assessment of ambivalence, which involves separating a traditional bipolar scale into two unipolar scales (e.g., not at all favorable to extremely favorable and not at all unfavorable to extremely unfavorable; for an alternate strategy see Larsen, Norris, McGraw, Hawkley, & Cacioppo, 2009; see also Refling et al., 2013). In early research on ambivalence, researchers assumed that objective ambivalence invariably led to feelings of conflict regarding the attitude. They soon discovered that this was not always the case.

Several researchers developed mathematical formulae to predict how conflicted a person would feel based on their positive and negative unipolar attitude reports. To facilitate comparison among the various ambivalence theories that had developed over the years, Priester and Petty (1996) redefined the prevailing ambivalence formulae in terms of "dominant" reactions (D; the greater of the separate positive and negative evaluations) and "conflicting" reactions (C; the lesser of the two evaluations regardless of valence; cf., Scott, 1969). In this framework, Kaplan's formula reduces to expressing ambivalence simply as the magnitude of the conflicting reactions (C). Subsequent formulae became more complex (e.g., C × D; Katz & Hass, 1988; see also Thompson et al., 1995). Initial efforts to relate objective to subjective ambivalence showed that regardless of the specific ambivalence formula used, dominant and conflicting reactions consistently predicted subjective ambivalence only to a moderate degree (e.g., $rs = .36$ to .52 in Priester & Petty, 1996). That is, even the *best* formulae for objective ambivalence only predict about 27% of the variance in subjective ambivalence. This finding suggests that unless measurement error is the sole culprit, there are likely other determinants of subjective ambivalence besides the extent of dominant and conflicting reactions personally endorsed.

Individual and situational factors account for some variation in the strength of the relationship between objective and subjective ambivalence. For example, people high in preference for consistency (Cialdini, Trost, & Newsom, 1995) show a stronger objective–subjective ambivalence relationship (Newby-Clark et al., 2002). In addition, this relationship becomes stronger as both dominant and conflicting reactions become more accessible (Newby-Clark et al., 2002) or are held with an equal degree of certainty (Briñol, Petty, & DeMarree, 2008), as well as when a decision regarding the attitude object is imminent (van Harreveld, Rutjens, et al., 2009; van Harreveld, van der Pligt, et al., 2009). Again, however, the modest relationship under even the most favorable conditions suggests that researchers have not yet accounted for all of the determinants of subjective ambivalence.

Psychologists have also begun to identify additional antecedents of subjective ambivalence other than objective conflict between the individual's positive and negative reactions. Most notably, *interpersonal* ambivalence, the possession of attitudes that differ from those that close others are perceived to have, predicts subjective ambivalence over and above objective ambivalence, as least so long as the close others are liked (Priester & Petty, 2001). Similarly, anticipating the potential existence of unknown, attitude incongruent information can also lead to feelings of conflict (Priester, Petty, & Park, 2007) as can incongruence in meaning rather than valence (i.e., semantic oncongruence; Gebauer, Maio, & Pakizeh, 2013). The current research sought to extend the bases of subjective ambivalence to include another form of intrapsychic conflict — between individuals' actual current attitudes and the attitudes they would like to possess. We describe the relevant concepts and rationale for this prediction next.

Desired attitudes

Just as one's perceptions of one's own characteristics and accomplishments (actual self) can differ from the perceptions one wants to have (i.e., desired self; see Higgins, 1987, 1989; Markus & Nurius, 1986), the attitudes one holds towards a wide variety of objects, issues, or other people can be different from the attitudes one would like to possess. For example, a shopper might want to like an unavailable option less and an available option more, whereas an environmentalist might want to like gas-guzzling SUVs less and bicycling more. In a recent, relevant review, Maio and Thomas (2007) suggested that people sometimes have discrepancies between actual and desired opinions. Citing research on relationships (i.e., attitudes towards one's romantic partner) and the self (i.e., self-esteem regulation), Maio and Thomas argue that these discrepancies are important in the regulation of attitudes, and that people engage in a great deal of mental gymnastics to bring about their desired attitudes (e.g., self-persuasion).

The key goal of the current research is to examine the possibility that discrepancies between actual and desired attitudes could be a previously unidentified source of evaluative conflict, and therefore might account for some of the unexplained variance repeatedly observed in

[1] In several ways, ambivalence is related to dissonance (see e.g., Festinger, 1957; Rydell et al., 2008). That is, both involve inconsistent mental representations, which can create aversive feelings that people are motivated to reduce. However, attitude researchers typically have distinguished between these two constructs (see e.g., van Harreveld, van der Pligt, et al., 2009). For example, whereas the feeling of dissonance typically arises after one has committed to a specific choice, the feeling of ambivalence occurs to the greatest extent *prior* to making a choice (van Harreveld, Rutjens, Rotteveel, Nordgren, & van der Pligt, 2009). As such, ambivalence is likely to impact judgments that are inputs into choices. Of course, in some cases, such as in a spreading of alternatives paradigm (see e.g., Brehm, 1956), ambivalence towards either object before making a choice can serve as the fodder for dissonance creation once the choice is made (e.g., the negative component of one's attitude towards the chosen alternative creates dissonance — "I chose the Celine Dion CD, even though the third and fourth tracks annoy me").

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