The dynamics of ambivalence: Cognitive, affective, and physical consequences of evaluative conflict

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This dissertation began with the observation that in life, things are not always black or white. Instead, quite often, they are both. As people go about their lives, they encounter many instances that give rise not only to positive, but also to negative evaluations. A hamburger, for instance, can elicit positive evaluations pertaining to its tastiness and negative evaluations pertaining to its unhealthy characteristics at the same time. The simultaneous occurrence of both positive and negative evaluations about the same topic is what we call ambivalence.

Ambivalence is not a rare event. Au contraire, in daily life we are constantly confronted with situations and issues that have both positive and negative sides to them. These are topics about which we may feel conflicted, torn and mixed, in short: ambivalent. Examples of topics that we can be ambivalent about are fast-food, abortion, marriage, eating meat, euthanasia, ourselves, love, smoking and alcohol, to name but a few. The list of topics we can feel ambivalent about is seemingly endless, the only proviso being that the evaluations associated with these topics are strong and both positive and negative. As such, ambivalence is an ubiquitous part of daily life. The current dissertation aimed to shed light on some of the most fundamental aspects of ambivalence, namely its cognitive,
affective and physical consequences.

The first fundamental aspect of ambivalence under investigation concerned the cognitive dynamics that underlie evaluative conflict. What happens when we encounter an ambivalent object? Many scholars have speculated that ambivalence activates both positive and negative evaluations and that these evaluations are in conflict with each other until the system settles into equilibrium. To date, however, this idea was not tested empirically. Resolving this gap between theory and data, this dissertation has provided empirical evidence that indeed, both positive and negative evaluations are activated simultaneously when people have to evaluate an ambivalent topic (Chapter 2).

A second fundamental aspect of ambivalence that we investigated concerned its association with negative feelings. Ambivalence is an inherent inconsistency (i.e. it associated with opposing evaluations) and because people in general prefer consistencies, ambivalence has always been presumed to elicit negative feelings. However, previous research on ambivalence and negative feelings provided mixed results, suggesting that people do not feel bad about being ambivalent all the time. Instead, it is more likely that under certain conditions ambivalence feels bad whereas in others it does not. In this dissertation we identified one of these conditions for ambivalence to feel bad, namely conflict salience. Conflict salience refers to the degree to which people are aware that they are ambivalent about a certain topic. Our work shows that when people know that they are conflicted, they experience negative feelings as a result of their ambivalence. However, when they do not think about how conflicted they are, ambivalence does not cause negative feelings (Chapter 3).

Apart from affective consequences, ambivalence also affects us in an even more fundamental way, namely on the physical level. Mirroring the way people often talk about their experience of ambivalence (i.e. “wavering between opinions”), our work reveals
that people literally move more from side to side when they are ambivalent. In fact, this association is so strong, that when people move from side while thinking about an ambivalent topic, their experiences of ambivalence will be intensified.

Taken together, the work in this dissertation sheds new light on the nature of ambivalence. Additionally, it offers new methods of measuring ambivalence by introducing online measures of activation and conflict and measures of body movement to assess degree of ambivalence. As such, this dissertation adds to our understanding of what it means to experience ambivalence, on a cognitive, affective and physical level.