

illUminate Blog Transcript: Naomi Rothman on the Value — and Potential Pitfalls — of Ambivalence

Recorded July 28, 2023. Listen to it [here](#).

- ANNOUNCER: 00:06 [music] This podcast is brought to you by ilLUMinate, the Lehigh Business blog. To learn more, please visit us at business.lehigh.edu/news.
- JACK CROFT: 00:18 Welcome. I'm Jack Croft, host of the ilLUMinate podcast for Lehigh University's College of Business. Today is July 28th, 2023. And we're talking with Naomi Rothman, a leading expert in the study of ambivalence. Dr. Rothman is an associate professor of management at Lehigh's College of Business, where she holds the Scott Hartz '68 Term Professorship. She also is associate dean and director for undergraduate programs for the College of Business. Welcome to the ilLUMinate podcast, Naomi.
- NAOMI ROTHMAN: 00:51 Thanks so much, Jack. It's a pleasure to be here with you.
- CROFT: 00:55 Now let's start by defining what ambivalence is and what it isn't. For example, in common usage, it often has a negative connotation, getting conflated with indecisiveness or being wishy-washy and is viewed largely as a sign of weakness. So has ambivalence gotten a bad rap? And how should we understand ambivalence?
- ROTHMAN: 01:21 That's a great place to start. So scientifically, ambivalence is defined quite simply as the simultaneous experience of positive and negative emotions or thoughts, attitudes, about one thing. So a single target. And that target can be a person, a situation, an object, an event, an idea. It can be about your work, right? It's best thought of as strongly positive and negative at the same time, that you're pulled in two different directions. And it creates these internal feelings, a lot of the time, of being torn and conflicted. And so it really shouldn't be confused with words like indifference or indecisiveness. So indifference is kind of not caring. It's more like a shoulder shrug, right? But that's the lack of emotional reaction, right? Ambivalence is having both positive and negative reactions at the same time. And so as a social scientist, I'm really interested in understanding these ambivalent thoughts and feelings without providing judgment about them. For instance, removing any normative judgments. But I think you're right. Yes, in Western cultures, like in North America, ambivalence often really gets a bad rap. And there are some really interesting reasons that this may be the case. Ambivalence, I think, may go against our preferences in Western cultures for dominance and agency, for speed, for positivity, right? And so I think you're onto something with this notion that ambivalence may be getting a bad rap and has for a while.
- CROFT: 03:10 Yeah. Now, what was it that first drew you to ambivalence as a focus for your academic research?
- ROTHMAN: 03:15 Well, I think the best way to answer this question is to tell you a little bit about where I come from. So my father spent years, I think nearly six years, studying for a PhD in renaissance literature at UC [University of California] Berkeley in the late 1960s and early 1970s, before he became a writing professor and provost at UC Santa Cruz. And what this means is that he spent years reading Shakespeare, Michel de Montaigne, Giordano Bruno. And that's quite relevant, actually, for the construct of ambivalence because in the second half of the 16th century, that was a time in which contrariety

was widespread. So much so that one of the primary intellectual modalities of that period was this idea of contrariety. And so people like [Baldassare Castiglione], Paracelsus, even maintain that contrariety was the dominant principle of experience, that it could be positive, it could be healthy. In 1644, John Milton even asserted we learn by what is contrary. And so I was raised by my father and mother, who were really interested in the renaissance, who took me every summer of my childhood to ... Santa Cruz [Shakespeare] to see Shakespeare plays. And my father would talk to me about the complicated relationships in these plays, like between Cordelia and King Lear, and in other texts, like in my English classes. And by doing this, he explicitly helped me notice and identify ambivalence in the world, but he did another thing as well, which was that he taught me to value ambivalence through the way in which he used ambivalence as a tool in his own teaching. He used it in his leadership style. He used it in his communication style at the dinner table, with my mom and dad and brother.

ROTHMAN: 05:12

He got us to think more deeply, to reconsider our assumptions, to explore ideas more expansively, to try to be less biased, to try to be more creative, to try to be less defensive when our beliefs were questioned, and my beliefs were often questioned because my brother's an economist and I'm a psychologist. But he would kind of rarely outright reject what we said, but he would also rarely outright agree with what we said. He was often quite ambivalent. And so I was raised to believe that ambivalence was this good thing. It could be a tool for learning. And I had seen it work in the way my dad interacted with us. And then imagine my astonishment when I moved to New York City in 2002 to start my PhD in organizational behavior at New York University and I witnessed some things in the world that made me start questioning this belief that ambivalence was good. So in one case, John Kerry was being lambasted for being ambivalent, a flip flopper, right? And I was really, really intrigued by this conundrum, right? How could ambivalence be this tool for learning, as I had seen growing up and that my parents had taught me, and yet be so costly for leaders? And so I basically embarked on 20 years of research on this one construct, ambivalence.

CROFT: 06:27

You've said that you have two primary research questions that drive your work in this field. One is, is there a bias against leaders and managers who express emotional ambivalence? And the second is, what is the evolutionary function of emotional ambivalence? So how did you land on those particular questions to kind of frame the work that you're doing?

ROTHMAN: 06:53

I think considering how much I'd seen ambivalence improve decision making and intellectual thought processes and collective dialog through observing my own father, it really seemed to socially and intellectually engage other people. And so I found it really perplexing that it seemed detrimental for leaders. And I think that's where the original question I studied in my dissertation and have since studied a bit more of, is there a bias against leaders and managers who express ambivalence? And I really wanted to understand that paradox. But in order to be able to present that there was a bias, I needed to establish that there were benefits of experiencing and sharing this experience or sharing our ambivalence with others. To show that there was misalignment between how we judge these individuals who are ambivalent and the benefits that they actually accrue from having ambivalent feelings and thoughts and showing it to others.

CROFT: 07:54

Now, you've analyzed what you call the social functions of ambivalence from four different perspectives. So let's take them one by one in order. The first looks at how expressing ambivalence affects interpersonal outcomes. So what do you mean by that and what are some of your key findings been in that area?

ROTHMAN: 08:16

Let me just take one step back and say that this idea that ambivalence could be beneficial for us, when we feel it and when we show it, the social functions of approach, broadly speaking, this approach takes the perspective that emotions exist for a reason, right? And so that may go against some of your intuitions about, "Oh, well, emotions actually get in the way of rational decision making." We often have this assumption that we should be non-emotional. But this approach on the evolutionary study of emotions or understanding their benefits suggests that when we feel an emotion, it really provides us with information, right? It tells us about our environment. And so it can actually also help us respond appropriately to that environment in ways that might help us survive and thrive. And that even when we share our emotions with others, it also provides those other people with information about us. It might signal something even beyond what we're feeling. It might signal something about our personality or our intentions, how we are likely to behave when we negotiate with you, for instance. And so when I'm talking about the interpersonal level, I'm talking about what happens when I show my ambivalence when I'm in a social interaction with you? What happens when I show my ambivalence when we're negotiating with one another, when I'm your leader in a team, right? How is it that you respond to me? How do you perceive me and how do you behave in reaction? And so in my original kind of initial research on this topic, many, many years ago, I started to test these interpersonal effects. So I hired an actor from the [NYU] Tisch School of the Arts. I trained her to express emotional ambivalence in her face and her body.

ROTHMAN: 10:11

And so that really looks like the person is torn and conflicted between the positive and negative pulls, right? And I also trained her in separate video clips to express happiness, anger, and neutrality. And I made these short video clips of her negotiating with another person. I actually turned the sound off in these video clips so that it was just the non-verbal behavior that I was utilizing to convey the intended emotion. And so I invited people to the lab and I had them engage in a variety of different activities, depending on the study. In all the studies, they were randomly assigned to either see the ambivalent video, where she showed ambivalence in the negotiation or happiness or anger or neutrality. And so they thought, "Okay, I'm going to see this video and then I'm probably going to interact with this person right now. I'm either going to negotiate with them or I'm going to have some meeting with this person, depending on the study." In the first study, they were told they were about to have an upcoming meeting with the person they saw in the video. They're going to try to come to an agreement on some issue relevant to them, and they would then have to explain their position to the experimenters. A little bit competitive. And so after they watched the video, I asked them, what do they think about the other person, how did they perceive her and how did they think they were-- how did they plan to act in this upcoming meeting, right? Were they going to be open minded to this other person or were they going to be close minded and try to dominate the discussion, shut her down? And what I found was that participants who had been randomly assigned to the ambivalent video where they saw their partner express emotional ambivalence, and then they thought they were about to interact with her in a meeting, come to a

decision with her, they intended to be a whole lot more closed minded to her ideas than participants who had seen her express happiness, anger, or neutrality.

ROTHMAN: 12:10

But then I wanted to see if there were material costs. So how do people behave when money is on the line, when they have an ambivalent negotiation partner? And so in this next study, I had them do a traditional ultimatum bargaining game where there's \$10 that they were tasked to split between themselves and the person they viewed in the video. These were separate participants, by the way. These are all separate studies. And in this simple ultimatum bargaining game, basically all the participants had the opportunity to split the \$10. But in these games, the other person gets to say yes or no. If the other person, in this case, the person in the video, said no, nobody gets any money. But if the other person says yes to your offer, then they split the money and they get to walk away with their proceeds. What I found was that participants who had viewed the ambivalent video, who thought they were negotiating with an ambivalent negotiation partner, took significantly more money from her than individuals who saw her express happiness, anger, or neutrality. And I also tested why this was the case. So what were the perceptions that they were developing about their ambivalent negotiation partner? Why were they taking more money from her? Why were they intending to be more closed minded towards her in this upcoming meeting? What information does ambivalence provide to other people? And it turned out that people took more money from her because they saw her as less dominant. They perceived her as somebody who was less assertive and less dominant. And so they saw it as an invitation to take more money. The reason they saw her as less dominant was she seemed more deliberative. She seemed more thoughtful. So I want to be really clear, though, about these studies. They were actually all relatively competitive, right?

ROTHMAN: 14:07

So kind of zero sum context, where my gain is your loss and your gain is my loss. Their goal was to earn as much for themselves as possible. And so in that context, ambivalence in the partner, in the negotiation partner, invited more dominant behavior. But I wasn't fully satisfied with these findings. I didn't think it told the complete story. I wanted to know if sharing your emotional ambivalence with another person could also be an invitation for social and intellectual engagement, like I had seen with my father. And I thought, "It's probable that the social norms matter." When my dad showed his ambivalence, he was often in a teaching context, or he was sitting around the dinner table and we were all in a conversation together. We weren't pitted against one another, right? We were kind of metaphorically sitting on the same side of the table. And so I really wondered if the norms mattered, right? Maybe in more cooperative relationships, in which we're kind of emphasizing our mutual benefits, our mutual gain, that sharing ambivalence could actually be really helpful. And so I ran another set of series of experiments in the negotiation context. I used the same videos that I'd used for my dissertation research. Before I had negotiators start negotiating, I reminded them that their goal was to try to do well themselves, but also to try to help their partner do well. I made the norms much more cooperative. And what I found was that in these studies, when people negotiated with somebody who they saw as ambivalent in the video, they actually created the highest total value. So they were able to make trades over multiple issues according to preferences. Maybe they gave in on the things they cared a little bit less about, right?

ROTHMAN: 16:07

They gave in to their partner and they let them have the things they cared about, but they asked for what they really wanted on the topics and issues that they cared the most about. And we were actually able to replicate these effects in several different negotiation experiments, and we found that in these studies, in fact, ambivalence again signaled low dominance. But that wasn't a problem in these more cooperative negotiations. It actually inspired the negotiators to problem solve in a kind of mutual-- to come to mutually agreeable solutions that made everyone better off, right? Win-win situations. Win-win outcomes. It didn't inspire them to try to take charge and take advantage. And so in summary, this work at the interpersonal level of analysis, I've found that the expression of ambivalence represents a liability in a more competitive context, right? It's an invitation for other people to be dominant over you, right? They might take more money, they might take more air time from you if you show your ambivalence in a competitive context. But you can really benefit from expressing ambivalence in more cooperative contexts. In fact, in these more cooperative contexts, it's an invitation for other people to become more socially and intellectually engaged in problem solving. You can actually create better win-win agreements if you show your ambivalence in more cooperative contexts.

CROFT: 17:38

That's fascinating. Now, individual decision making is the next kind of grouping of research you've done in this, how experiencing ambivalence shapes individual decision making. And what role does the concept of cognitive flexibility play in your research here? And, again, what are some of the main findings?

ROTHMAN: 18:02

Sure. So I just want to remind you the background, which is when we feel an emotion, it provides us with information about our environment. It helps us respond to our environment in ways that can help us survive and thrive. So what does ambivalence tell us, right? Well, we know that ambivalence often occurs in situations that involve contradiction and change, like college graduation day can provoke emotional ambivalence. People have used the movie *Father of the Bride* to provoke ambivalence in laboratory experiments. I would say many of us felt emotional ambivalence during COVID as a result of all the contradiction and change that was going on, contradictory policies and decision rules, all the change that was happening in our lives. And the interesting thing about contradiction and change is that they call for balance and flexible thinking. They demand that we get a little bit more flexible and balanced. I don't know about you, but for two-- during COVID, with two young children at home and putting my leadership class online for the first time, I had to be extremely flexible in the way I thought about how to do work. You and I were just talking about where we work. We're in our homes and how we moved where we work in our homes during COVID in order to adapt to this complex and contradictory work from home situation, right? And so the more anxious I felt, the less cognitively flexible I was. The more ambivalent I felt, both positive and negative, the more flexible I became. And that's actually exactly what my co-author, [Shimul \[Melwani\]](#), and I had theorized that ambivalence could do for us.

ROTHMAN: 19:48

We even suggested in a paperback in 2017 that ambivalence may have developed as this mechanism, this affective mechanism, that lets us or enables us to more flexibly respond and adapt to our complex and changing circumstances, right? It's telling us that the world is complex. And it's drawing our attention to complex information, and we are then motivated to try to respond in a way that will help us respond adaptively. So we actually now have growing empirical evidence across numerous studies that support this claim, that feeling emotional ambivalence, right? When we ask people,

"Recall a time in which you felt really happy and really sad at the same time." And they write about this experience in depth, such that if somebody were to read it themselves, they would feel those same ambivalent feelings. That when we ask people to do that, they become more cognitively flexible. They respond to measures of cognitive flexibility. They have higher scores on measures of cognitive flexibility. They also have higher scores on measures of things like open mindedness. They seek both positive and negative feedback, for instance, about a job candidate, instead of just affirmatory, positive information or disconfirmatory, negative information. They become less defensive to feedback, for instance, that they may have prejudice towards another social group. So they are less likely to derogate and see the test results as invalid. They become more accurate in their forecasts and are more aware of bias in themselves and society.

ROTHMAN: 21:30

And so one way of describing this effect overall across these numerous studies and papers is that feeling emotionally ambivalent actually helps us see the bigger picture compared to when you feel a singular, one valent emotion, like pure happiness or pure sadness or pure anxiety.

CROFT: 21:50

Now, from individual decision making, you next have been looking at leader decision making. So how does experiencing ambivalence shape the way leaders make decisions? And you've talked some about this already, but I'd be curious, what else you found?

ROTHMAN: 22:10

So this is, I think, a really exciting path in my research because a common concern that people have is that ambivalence in leadership will cause inaction, right? It'll cause hesitation and procrastination and delays, right? I've even been told by people, "Ambivalence kills people." But I've always had this model in my father of ambivalence actually being a leadership strength. And so I was always pretty skeptical when I heard this feedback from people. And so we originally wrote a theory, Shimul and I, about how ambivalence could be helpful to leaders, particularly in context that involved change in complexity. And we've now tested this theory in numerous empirical studies and here's what we found. In one paper, we found that when leaders experience ambivalence, maybe they're mixed and conflicted about their consulting work project, those leaders tend to be more likely to seek and utilize the knowledge and ideas of their team members. They actually seek more information from their team members. They don't just rely on their own expertise and knowledge. They're not just the sole hero or heroine, right? And what's even better is that through a social learning process, those team members then start to seek more information from each other, right? So the leader is modeling how to be an effective teammate. And they're fostering an environment where people seek others' expertise, and that becomes the norm for behavior. And you know what's even better? Those teams perform better on objective performance measures. And we've tested this both in the laboratory and with real teams and consulting firms, where the consulting clients report the performance of those teams, right, so it's completely independent measures of performance.

ROTHMAN: 24:06

And so what we see is that this flow of benefits are, in fact, even more likely to occur when the projects are really complex, right? And so ambivalent leaders are paying attention to the task context. They're saying, "This is a really complex project. So I'm going to ask my team members what they know, what they perceive, what they can tell me about how to solve this problem." And they're more likely to do that, these

ambivalent leaders, when the projects are complex. And they're not going to do it when the projects are simple, right? And so this tells us that the leaders are able-- the ambivalent leaders are able to adjust and adapt their behavior according to the situational requirements. They're not simply just relying on other people to do their work. They're noticing that the problems are complex and would benefit from a more diverse pool of information in order to solve it. So what's more, we've recently found in a series of studies that we're writing up for another journal article that when leaders show their emotional ambivalence to their team members, so they express it and their team members are even able to detect it or perceive it, those team members perceive those leaders, those ambivalent leaders, as more open to input and better listeners than the less ambivalent leaders. And this actually inspires the team members to speak up with constructive ideas and to be more innovative. And the reason for this, and I think this is absolutely the best part as an educator, is because ambivalence increases their team members' intellectual curiosity. I just think that's so cool.

CROFT: 25:42

Wow, that is. Now, flipping it to the next one, which is looking at how expressing ambivalence shapes the outcomes of followers in groups and teams, there seems to be an interesting paradox here that when team members or followers show ambivalence, it actually enhances their performance. But because they don't necessarily look like leaders the way other people perceive them, it actually harms their chances of being promoted. So what's going on with that?

ROTHMAN: 26:17

Yeah. And this is our warning signal, right? Because we, as a society, have certain stereotypes in our minds about what leaders look like, right? And those leaders tend to be these stereotypes in our minds, at least, tend to be decisive and dominant, agentic and positive. And we don't always gain from showing our ambivalence. And so what we found is that even though ambivalence cultivates these ways of thinking that we need in our leaders - we need cognitively flexible leaders. We need open minded leaders. We need leaders who are open to balance both positive and negative feedback, right? Who are less defensive, who are more accurate in forecasting and more aware of bias - ambivalence does not help you get into a leadership position. So it actually won't help you get promoted. It can even lead you to get lower raises, particularly if you have bosses who are low in humility. So if we go back to where we started this conversation, ambivalence where I started in my dissertation research was in negotiations, right? When you show your ambivalence in a competitive negotiation, where there's a win or lose dynamic, you end up getting dominated, taken advantage of. People take your air time, take air time in a meeting and they take more money from you. Here, we're showing, "Yeah, and if you show your ambivalence as a subordinate or a team member, you may actually not get the promotion that you're looking for. And you may not get higher raises or raises that are as high as somebody who's less ambivalent."

ROTHMAN: 28:13

And this suggests to me that ambivalence appears to be "wrong" in status contexts, right? These are contexts where we really value independence, dominance, agency, right?

CROFT: 28:29

Now, it sounds like the world would be a better place if more people were free to experience and express ambivalence if they weren't afraid to show it for fear of appearing weak. How do we bridge that gap?

- ROTHMAN: 28:45 I'm not sure. I think if we feel our ambivalence instead of suppressing it, the evidence suggests we might make better decisions, especially when we're making complex decisions, right? And I think if we share our ambivalence with others, the evidence does suggest we might be better at socially and intellectually engaging with others. And this can help us achieve win-win innovative solutions to big problems, right? So you might argue that the world would be better if more people became effective, complex decision makers, and better at socially and intellectually engaging others towards win-win innovative solutions. But that might also depend on your opinion. Those may not indicate a better world for some people.
- CROFT: 29:38 Okay. Now, what are some of the next directions you see your research regarding ambivalence heading in?
- ROTHMAN: 29:47 So I'm really interested in the context. So the cultural values and norms that make ambivalence "right" and the context, the cultural values and norms that make ambivalence "wrong". I really love the psychologist [Dov Cohen](#)'s research on cultures of honor in the South that indicate that we have different norms within the United States that dictate how we respond to being insulted, right? And so I've wondered, inspired by his work, if there could be different geographic regions or different subgroups or subcultures that have different norms that shape how we react to ambivalence. Having moved from California, Santa Cruz, California to New York, and then to the Midwest and then now to Pennsylvania and New Jersey, I've witnessed very interesting cultural differences in our own country. And I think it's fascinating to understand those differences and to unpack them and how they shape our reactions to different emotional displays. I'm also really excited about the research I'm doing with [McKay Price](#) and [Corinne Post](#) on CEO ambivalence in earnings calls and the impact that that ambivalence can have on abnormal market returns and how those reactions of the marketplace to CEO ambivalence depend on the gender of the CEO. And I'll let you guess how gender works there.
- CROFT: 31:21 Okay. Now, finally, is there anything about your research on ambivalence that we haven't talked about that you think our listeners should know or would be interested in?
- ROTHMAN: 31:32 Sure. I think some people, many people, I've spoken with have let me know that this wasn't a construct that they had been taught. That this was a new construct, a new word for an experience that they know they have felt, but that they maybe didn't have the word for. And I think that's entirely plausible. And I think it's really interesting to think about what does it mean to now have the word and the construct to help us understand our internal experiences, right? And for me, having that word and having a value system in place to tell me that it was an asset and not a liability to feel ambivalence has been quite helpful, in that I don't see it as threatening. I would say perhaps to try to pay attention to your ambivalence. To notice when you're feeling torn and conflicted on the inside, positive and negative about some decision or idea and try to refrain from judging it, right? Notice when others are ambivalent and try to refrain from judging it. Remind yourself that it's not something to necessarily rid yourself of, but rather to settle into it. It doesn't need to be a liability and it doesn't also need to make you feel threatened. In fact, it can actually be a source of open mindedness, cognitive flexibility, creativity, awareness. It can be a source of social and intellectual curiosity and engagement when we share it with others. And it also can improve our decision making and our performance as

collective decision makers. And so I think I would encourage us to be curious about it instead of trying to control it, or shut it down in ourselves and others.

CROFT: 33:32

I think that optimistic note is a good way for us to conclude. So Naomi, thanks so much for being with us on the iLLUminate podcast today.

ROTHMAN: 33:43

Thank you so much, Jack. It was a pleasure.

CROFT: 33:45

I'd like to once again thank Naomi Rothman for being with us on iLLUminate today. Naomi has written on topics related to ambivalence in numerous academic journals and her research has been covered in various media outlets, including New York Magazine, Fast Company, Forbes, The Wall Street Journal, ABC News, the BBC and National Public Radio. This podcast is brought to you by iLLUminate, the Lehigh business blog. To hear more podcasts featuring Lehigh business thought leaders, please visit us at business.lehigh.edu/news. And don't forget to follow us on Twitter at Lehigh Business. I'm Jack Croft, host of the iLLUminate podcast. Thanks for listening.
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