



Opinion Science Podcast

Hosted by Andy Luttrell

Ambivalence with Iris Schneider

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Andy Luttrell:

When you're making a decision, it's pretty common practice to write out the potential pros and cons. So, let's say you're deciding what to watch on TV right now. Someone pulls up the Great British Baking Show. Is it worth putting on? Pros, it's delightful. There are cakes, the music is calming, they're in a whimsical tent. Okay, cons... Nothing comes to mind. I am uniformly in favor of the Great British Baking Show. All right, let's say instead we're considering the nine part Ken Burns documentary about the Civil War. Pros, it's important to understand the Civil War, it's a well-written and well-researched documentary series. Cons, it's boring. There are nine parts and it's really, truly very boring. Here I'm conflicted between the show's benefits and its drawbacks, so what will I watch? Well, bring out the sponges and biscuits, because it's time for the Great British Baking Show.

You're listening to Opinion Science, the show about our opinions, where they come from, and how they change. I'm Andy Luttrell and today I talk to Dr. Iris Schneider. She's a Junior Professor at the University of Cologne and she studies the psychology of ambivalence. It's that experience of being conflicted, of seeing something both positively and negatively. Now, ambivalence has come up again and again on this podcast. It's part of the fabric of our opinions. And I think it's important, so I probably tend to bring it up a bunch on previous episodes. But this week, it's all ambivalence, all the time. We're gonna dive deep. In our conversation, we talk about what ambivalence is, why people try to avoid it, and why it might actually be helpful to let ourselves be conflicted.

You know, one way to get this thing rolling is to talk about just ambivalence as a general thing, and it's kind of one of those words that when people use it, they may not always be using that word in the way that they think it means, right? So, people will say like, "I feel ambivalent," which just means like I'm confused, or I don't really care, but we know that that's not really what it means. So, let's just start by laying the groundwork and have you explain. What does it mean to be ambivalent about an opinion?

Iris Schneider:

I think to be ambivalent means to have both positive and negative thoughts and feelings about the same thing. So, I think examples that make that clear is, for instance, different food items, so a cake is very attractive, and it's tasty, but at the same time you know that it might interfere with

your diet or your health goals. And so, you have positive and negative feelings about that. But also, events in your life that are important and profound milestones can evoke positive and negative emotions at the same time. So, for instance, when people graduate or they leave their dorm, they might feel happy and excited about the future, but also sad because they're at the end of an era, closing off a period or a chapter in their life. And I think broadly that is when people experience ambivalence and it has to do with the presence and strength of positive and negative affect, thoughts, feelings associated with one topic, one opinion, one event, or person even.

Andy Luttrell:

So, when it comes to like knowing when someone is ambivalent, one of the challenges I know is that in a survey, the classic way of asking for people's opinions is on a scale from I don't like it to I like it. And the problem is that if people circle some number in the middle, it could mean that they don't care, it could mean that they haven't thought about it, but it could mean that they're so ambivalent that they can't pick a side, that they end up in the middle. So, what do we do? To get a little technical, how could we know that someone is ambivalent? What kind of method would we use to get that from someone?

Iris Schneider:

Yeah. It's interesting that you mentioned that, because I think it's so interesting that when it comes to ambivalence, there's such a disconnect between how psychologists have examined attitudes and opinions and the way people experience them. So, for instance, in psychology the typical way is to ask people how they feel or what they think on a scale going from something negative to something positive. So, it can go from not at all pleasurable to super pleasurable. It can go from unfavorable to favorable. And that assumes that the better something gets, the less bad something gets.

But that's not how things work in the human experience, because we know from decades of research on ambivalence that does acknowledge that, that people can experience positivity and negativity at the same time, and then when people are faced with such a scale in psychological research, but also in marketing surveys and everywhere where we're trying to assess what people think, that they don't know what to do. So, they're now in a situation where they want to be honest and they want to express their opinion, and that opinion is one that is conflicted, right? So, they feel positive and negative, so they will circle the middle of that scale. But at the same time, if people do not care, they will also circle the middle of that scale, so that's where ambiguity exists between people not caring looking the same as people caring a lot but caring about the positive and the negative sides.

And I think in my research there's been a lot of emphasis on that and my dissatisfaction with these I think limited ways of assessing the complexity of how people think and what they feel. And so, what we tend to do is use older methods that have been developed around 1970, and a lot has been in the '90s too, where you just ask how positive people feel and how negative people feel. You tell them, "You know, these are separate things. Tell us how positive and how negative you feel." And then we can sort of see whether they have both positive and negative feelings at the same time. So, there's two separate questions for positivity and negativity.

Or I think what is a great method in psychological research is to just ask people. I mean, there's criticism on asking people to self-report on things. At the same time, they're kind of the expert on their own inner life, so I do think it's a really good method and you just ask them to what degree do you feel mixed thoughts and feelings? Or do you feel conflicted about this topic? So, I think that is interesting and it works quite well, and in my own work I've tried to also look at more indirect ways to kind of assess the degree to which people feel positive and negative at the same time.

And what we've tried to do is to kind of use the fact that decision making is a continuous process and that kind of during the decision, you can see what side of the topic is most dominant in people's mind, so most active. Because when something is active, for instance when I think this is really positive, the motor systems associated with the response that could express that positivity are activated. So, what we do is that we ask people to indicate whether they think something is positive or negative, and as they move their mouse to the correct response, we record where their mouse is going. And from this data, we can see that when people are responding to ambivalent topics, so for instance different types of food, but also societal topics like immigration or gun control, we can see that the path that their mouse takes is a little bit curved. And that means that they are moving to one response, but they're also pulled to another response.

Kind of think about it in a way that if you would be super clear about where you want to go, your path is straight and direct. But if you feel like you're torn between two things, both positive and negative, your path will be a little bit more curved. And that's a method that we also used in my lab to kind of assess ambivalence in a way that people don't know that you're asking about it. And maybe sometimes also assess the structure, just like the underlying attitude, rather than the degree to which people are aware that this is the structure. So, I think that's how we do it and I think it's an interesting way.

Andy Luttrell:

So, just to clarify, in this case there's like a button for good and a button for bad, and you say, "Click the button that reflects your opinion of this." And if I know, if I'm unambivalent and I go, "This is only good," my mouse zooms straight to the good button. No wavering. But if I'm conflicted, I might still end up at the good button, but my mouse takes a little more of a circuitous path to get there. Is that right?

Iris Schneider:

Yeah. Yeah. That's totally right.

Andy Luttrell:

So, it kind of reminds me like in a grocery store, when you're faced with a choice, and you reach your hand out one direction and then you pull back, and then you reach out in another direction, and it... You know, one of the things I've thought about with ambivalence is that it is about one topic, right? How much do I think one topic is good or bad? But that choice in the store is about a choice between two totally different things, right? And people I think have that experience of feeling conflicted about a choice. Is that... Would you say that's the same thing as ambivalence, where I'm torn between I like this better than this? Is that the same as saying, "I think this is both good and bad."

Iris Schneider:

It depends a little bit on what you're looking at, right? So, conceptually and theoretically, they would definitely be different, right? Because there's only one thing versus two things. Do people experience that differently? I don't know. They probably will experience uncertainty, doubt, all the subjective feelings that they have from not being able to make a choice. And I think when we think about making choices, we often think about choosing between one or the other, but many choices that we make in life are also structured along, "Do I want this or not?" So, when we're presented with information or studies about for instance self-control, we will always be presented with, "Do you choose the cookie or the apple?"

But the funny thing is when I'm at a party, nobody comes along with a tray that has apples and cookies. They come along with a tray with cookies and then I have to choose do I take the cookie or not? So, I think we often forget when we do research on choice that we always think about picking between two things, but the real struggle is at the register, where you have to kind of decide not to have the candy bars that are so conveniently placed right there so that you buy them, and that I think is where ambivalence really plays a big role, because it's about a go-no go decision, basically. Do I want this or not? Do I take this or not? Will I go out to exercise or not?

You know, these are I think... Am I in favor of this policy or not? It's not like am I for this policy or that policy, although sometimes it is on ballots, but usually it's about yes or no to one thing. And I think that makes up... There's some research I think from the '90s that shows that this is about a third of decisions, and another third for two options, and then there's on big chunk of choices that people themselves report as when you ask them, what is an important decision that you made this week, so one chunk is about do I want this or not and one chunk is this or that, but a big chunk is also, "I'm going to." And people see that even as a decision, which is only a statement.

So, I think in research we often think about choice as between A or B, but I think in life it's often about other things, as well, and quite often it's about A or not A.

Andy Luttrell:

So, what is it then that happens if you're ambivalent, right? So, you say, "Yeah. Sometimes there are some opinions that I'm not ambivalent about. There are some opinions that I am ambivalent about." Ultimately, what does that matter?

Iris Schneider:

I think it matters because ambivalence can make people uncomfortable. Because I think we want certainty, we want clarity, we want things to be easy, basically, and that clashes a little bit with the fact that A, the world's not easy, and B, many topics are not easy. Many topics are complicated and associated with benefits and costs, with pros and cons, and with difficulty, but also with opportunity. And that can make people feel discomfort, even negative affect, or uncertainty, and then when they try to resolve that, they might take less than optimal strategies to do that. And I think that is problematic because you oversimplify the choice, or you make the wrong choice just to make a choice, and I think sometimes that can have detrimental effects and I think you just have to look around you at the polarization that we see all across Europe and the U.S. to see that maybe

having strong attitudes that are only black or only white is not always the best thing. It also doesn't just hamper you in making a choice, but it also hampers you in taking up information that might be relevant just because you want to stay on one side of your spectrum.

I mean, it's not for nothing that we are able to hold in mind positivity and negativity, pros, cons, at the same time. It serves the purpose that we can handle complex issues and complex situations in our lives, but when we feel so uncomfortable with that that we jump to conclusions basically, sometimes we jump from... How do you say it? From the pan into the fryer or something?

Andy Luttrell:

I don't know.

Iris Schneider:

It's just not making things better. Yeah, you now have a strong opinion, but is that the right opinion? And should you even have an opinion on this? Hm.

Andy Luttrell:

So, it sounds like people tend to be uncomfortable when they're conflicted. So, they don't like that, but you're saying it's not all that much better if you escape that conflict, right? You just enter a new problem.

Iris Schneider:

I think sometimes the cure is worse than the poison, and I think also there is some benefits to gain from being ambivalent, right? Because you're in a state where you can see both sides. And that puts you in sort of like a mindset that allows you to take into account a broader spectrum of opinions, information, to create new combinations of things. It's just more open minded. And it's uncomfortable, yeah. But some people don't like broccoli, but that doesn't mean that broccoli is bad, right? I think this is a little bit how I think about it and we know that there is some research that shows that when people have mixed emotions, they make broader associations and they become more creative. There's some work that people become more innovative, that they do better in negotiations, and so ultimately the outcomes beyond your current ambivalence can be good if you're able to sustain that ambivalence in a productive and constructive way.

And we've done some research on this looking at people who are more ambivalent than other people, so as a trait, and first of all we found differences. So, that means that some people in general are more ambivalent than other people, so they experience ambivalence about more topics and more often in their lives. And then when you look at how these people differ from people who are low on that scale, who are low ambivalence people, we see that they tend to be less biased in their decision making and in their social judgment, so they tend to judge others in a more balanced way, and they tend to also fall prey less to confirmation bias. And confirmation bias and fundamental attribution bias, these are strong biases, and they can be detrimental in decision making processes. Again, jumping to conclusions, even if they're false, just because they confirm what you already believe and we can see examples of that all around us, especially with people selecting information that they... Social media is like a buffet of information, so you can confirm any belief that you have there.

Is that a good thing? No. Maybe it's better to be a little bit ambivalent and not confirm only one side of your opinion, and the same is true for biases in judging others. People tend to judge others mostly in a way that defines their personality, so I could be walking along, and I slip on a banana peel and I'll be forever called clumsy. At the same time, there was a banana peel, and when people are higher in ambivalence, they acknowledge both. So, they say, "Well, maybe she's not... Maybe she's a little bit clumsy, but there was a banana peel, as well." Which I think is just more realistic and more balanced, and definitely better for treating people fairly, although the last part is speculative.

Andy Luttrell:

Do you have a sense of where the causal arrow points? Because one of the things I could imagine is that it's because a person doesn't fall prey to confirmation bias, that's the reason why they tend to have all these ambivalent attitudes. Because they go, "I'm unwilling to go all-in on one side and for that reason, I've never decided on anything because I'm always open to me being wrong." Whereas as you described, it kind of sounds like there's a personality type of ambivalence, and that's the reason why people avoid these biases. Do you have a sense of which way that goes?

Iris Schneider:

Probably both ways. I mean, I research ambivalence, so you will never get a strong answer from me one way or the other.

Andy Luttrell:

So, you're high on trait ambivalence. Yeah.

Iris Schneider:

Yeah, so probably yeah, or maybe I became high on trait ambivalence. Well, I think it's a little bit of both. I don't think that ambivalence is the trait probably associated, and it is, we know from research. It's associated with other traits that are probably also associated with confirmation bias, but we do see it on different indices. So, we see it when people make decisions, but we also see it in their information that they select. So, they tend to also select more confirming and disconfirming information.

And the underlying trait might be that people collect information that is positive and negative. That could be. I don't know of such a trait. But I do think that this thinking about this in terms of trait ambivalence gives us a way to understand the consequences of ambivalence beyond specific topics. So, in research we often examine ambivalence about X, right? So, we now examine ambivalence about junk food, and that's interesting, and we learn about ambivalence a little bit from that, a lot... Maybe a lot or little, who knows? But when you look at trait ambivalence only, you can kind of understand what this does beyond a specific topic. So, just to have a mindset that is prone to that, people thinking in an ambivalent way more than others, gives you kind of like a natural quasi-experiment to see what happens when people are high in that and low in that.

There is some research that has also looked at it in a causal way, so they do experimental manipulations. That means that they take one group, they make them ambivalent through for instance asking them to think about something that made them feel positive and negative. And they compare that group to a group who thinks only about a negative thing or only about the

positive thing. And there's research there that shows that people in the group that have been made to feel ambivalent, in that moment, also tend to seek out more information. Even on unrelated tasks. So, there is some empirical evidence that points to a causal relationship, but I also think that people... We have many ways to describe people's personalities. And the ways in which we describe them probably overlap a lot.

So, you know, people who are very disagreeable and never want to kind of agree with other people probably would be higher in ambivalence, as well, because that's just something that overlaps with each other.

Andy Luttrell:

When you're looking at whether someone tends to be ambivalent, are you just actually measuring their ambivalence about a lot of topics? Or are you asking them questions where people reflect on like, "Do I seek out both sides of an issue?"

Iris Schneider:

Yeah, so we've done both. So, for the research, where we looked at confirmation bias and other biases, we just measured it with a scale. We just asked them, "I tend to see the pros and cons. I often feel both positive and negative. I think there is..." So, what it basically reflects is people's chronic tendencies.

We don't ask about motivation. So, we don't ask whether they... We don't have items like, "I want to know the pros and cons." It's just that they report on what they usually do. So, a chronic tendency in that sense, why? Because that's an easy way to research it, because you need... They only need to answer 10 questions. And we've done this with U.S. samples, with German samples, with Dutch samples, and Singaporean samples, and it seems to work well. There's also cultural differences that you would expect, so in Singapore, people are generally more ambivalent than people in Germany and the U.S., which is in line with what we know about cultures that are more holistic in their processing and more tolerant to conflict.

What we've also done is use multilevel modeling, which is a statistical approach that you can apply to understand what part of your findings are explained by differences between people. This is not an easy approach, because you need a lot of data, so we had some data that we collected to kind of assess or kind of show that some of the psychological tools out there that use what we talked about earlier, that use scales that go from negative to positive, are actually hiding ambivalence. But we've repurposed that data and we used multilevel modeling, so this approach, to kind of tease out how much of this is actually caused by individual differences. So, how much of the difference that we see are because some people are just more ambivalent than other people? And what we find is that a substantial amount of the differences in how ambivalent people are about topics can be explained in those data sets by the individual. So, the differences between individuals.

So, that kind of bolstered our idea that there are individual differences that play an important role using this large data set. We don't usually use this approach, because you need a lot of people to rate a lot of topics. So, just for economic reasons, this is quite difficult to do. But we do feel confident that there is substantial variation between people. Some people are just more ambivalent

than others and more importantly, that these differences matter for the way they make decisions and the way they judge others.

Andy Luttrell:

I'm noticing that this kind of personality-ish approach to opinions has sort of taken off, I think, maybe the last five years or so, and I think it's really important. So, you're doing the work on ambivalence. I talked to Ken DeMarree for this podcast. He's done some work on certainty. Some people just happen to be more confident in their opinions than others. Paper from a little while ago shows that some people just tend to be more negative than others. We're doing some work on moralization. And I think why it's important is that for so long, we've had studies that look at one opinion at a time, right? And they go, "Well, if you are ambivalent about this topic, it makes you do this." But you never know how much of that is because I'm ambivalent about this topic versus I'm the kind of person who does a certain kind of thing that would result in me being ambivalent about this and all topics, right?

And we've actually started to do some stuff showing like how much of these results that we've been getting are because of the kind of person you are versus because really it's about this topic. Is it really because you're ambivalent about this, or is it that you have this disposition to see the world in a certain way? So, what do you... You've done a lot of work in this area. Where do you see sort of that going maybe in terms of thinking about these kinds of things as traits about a person?

Iris Schneider:

So, I think understanding the trait side of things is important, especially in attitude research, especially if you want to learn about how people form attitudes and not be limited to the attitude you're studying at that moment. And one way to do that is to study a gazillion attitudes, but of course, again, this is really difficult. At the same time, this research on trait ambivalence, I use it to understand how ambivalence works because ultimately personality traits are difficult to use when you want to solve problems. And when I think about my work, so what is the added value of my work in the grand scheme of things? You know, science is an emergent pattern, so not huge, but what I would like to do and what we're doing is to see how we can use our knowledge about ambivalence to solve problems that we are facing.

And like I said before, many topics that are complicated, but that are also relevant and important in today's society, are a source of ambivalence. So, for instance, one big problem is climate change and what to do about that and there is a lot of conflict that people have, both about their behaviors, right? I want to fly to the U.S. three times a year, but it's not optimal for the environment. I also want to be a good person. But also, I think we're right in the middle of a situation that causes a lot of ambivalence, like this global pandemic, and all the ways in which we're trying to alter behavior in order to reduce the danger and the negative consequences of the coronavirus that's spreading.

So, knowing how ambivalent some people are versus others will not help. In that sense, knowing how ambivalent they are about this situation will, because then we know, okay, do we need to push them there? Do we need to push them there? To the degree that we can. At the same time, when you study ambivalence as a trait, you can study it beyond the topic at hand. So, that gives you direct insight, more insight, or some insight into the mechanisms of that experience. And I think

that is super helpful because you have more generalization. But of course, you have to really, clearly understand the difference between what happens to a person chronically versus what happens in the moment, because when I feel chronically ambivalent, I'm not gonna feel bad when you ask me about it. But when I feel ambivalent about COVID-19 and that I have to stay home, then I might feel bad about feeling ambivalent again.

So, I think it's complicated and I think for me personally and for our lab, the trait ambivalence is a super important tool to understand the mechanics of ambivalence with the ultimate goal of using that knowledge and growing that knowledge so that we can solve some of the problems that we are facing. And we're far away from that, but that is our ultimate goal, solving I guess societal problems, or at least contributing to that.

Andy Luttrell:

You mentioned earlier that ambivalence can have these positive outcomes, right? That actually it could be useful to be ambivalent. And I wondered if you have any sense of how we can encourage people to be comfortable with that ambivalence to sort of gain those things, right? You say if I could just set aside how uncomfortable it feels, like the broccoli problem is solvable by just convincing people to get over their initial reservations and just eat the darn piece of broccoli. So, do we know anything about what we could do to get people to say, "I understand this is complicated and it's okay that it's complicated," and that mindset is gonna be helpful?

Iris Schneider:

Well, I think you just answered your own question, because I think that is exactly what we need to do. Both in the way we research ambivalence, but also more broadly in society the tolerance for I think ambivalence or related constructs like indecision is low. And we see, again, we see this around the world. We'd rather have idiots with strong opinions than deliberate people who we call wishy washy or whatever, and I think there was a politician in the Netherlands, my home country, who mentioned that recently. He says, "If I stick to my opinion, I'm an idiot. If I change my opinion, you call me wishy washy." So, you know, what's going to be?

And I think we need to foster a norm that allows for complexity and that we see deliberation not as indecision, and in my lab we're really interested in this question because there is this inherent tension between leaders having to deal with very complex matters, and at the same time having to simplify them to a point that actually you're violating the nuance that is there. So, what we do here is we try to see if we can move around the context that people perceive to kind of move around how they interpret ambivalence. And one way we do that is by saying, "Okay, this person, their job is to gather information, to weigh all the options, to kind of inform everybody, to make a complete picture of the issue." And then we show people a description of a person and this person is sort of ambivalent or they're not, and what we see is when we kind of emphasize that the job is to kind of think about things, to be thoughtful, to be fair minded, to be balanced, then people recognize that you need ambivalence for that and they will say, "Okay, this person is competent, and this person is a really good fit for the job."

But if you don't, if you leave things as they are now, basically I think in many judgments that when we think about others, we want them to be decisive, we want them to not see both sides, we want them to come down on an issue hard and have strong opinions, and then you show them an

ambivalent person, they're like, "No. This is..." You know, what you would expect. "This person is not competent. We don't want him, and he shouldn't be doing this job."

And I think we overgeneralize this sort of demand for this kind of personality, because we associate competence with decisiveness and with kind of strong opinions. But I think competence is a little bit more than just having a strong opinion, especially there's many situations where you just want somebody who's thoughtful, and balanced, and who will weigh all the options, and that's what we're finding in our research. And it also extends to leadership issues, so what we've noticed for instance is that people recognize that somebody who is more two-sided is more moral, probably, is more fair minded, probably treat their employees a little bit better. At the same time, they're reluctant to give them power, because they're worried about the indecision.

And so, we're trying to kind of find out under what circumstances can you as a leader get away with being honest about the complexity of the situation. And I think this is super important, because we also want an informed democracy, and if we cannot tolerate the complexity and nuance of many things, I think that this is bad for well-functioning societies. So, that's something that we are interested in, so how can leaders kind of express ambivalence and benefit from it, and how can people elect leaders who have the skills to be fair minded, to be honest, to be moral, and still have confidence in them?

And I think it's not just laypeople who think about ambivalence in this way. I think a lot of psychological research, especially in the attitude research that's been done, sees ambivalence per definition as a bad thing, and that's understandable, because attitude research is concerned with predicting people's behavior. And as soon as people become ambivalent, their behavior on that topic becomes predictably unpredictable. And I think the frustration of researchers in attitude, or attitude researchers, has been that ambivalence is kind of like a nuisance. And so, they have kind of started thinking about this relatively ubiquitous experience for people as something that you shouldn't have, and it's kind of seeped through in how they investigate it, so when researchers ask people about ambivalence, they will say things, "So, how indecisive are you?"

And there is a connotation there that kind of reflects that per definition, people should feel bad about that. And I think it kind of mirrors how in society we think about people being ambivalent, and I think if we can change that norm in research, we're also going to see a lot more research that shows that ambivalence also has two sides. It's not just a negative thing or a nuisance. Because you might not be able to predict what somebody does on the topic that they are ambivalent about, but maybe we can start readily predicting how much information they will gather, or whether they will be more broad minded or closed minded, or other types of behaviors that are related to the decision making, not the decision, per se.

So, that's one side. The other side is what can people do themselves, right? So, one thing is I think, and I've not done research on this, this is a personal opinion, is just acknowledge that you don't know everything, and you don't need to know everything. You don't need to come down on one side or the other. If you can kind of sit with the fact that on some topics you're ambivalent and you don't have to decide, I mean, I think that would be a great improvement. Of course, there's going to be topics that you have to decide on.

So, you'll go to a restaurant and you'll have to decide whether you'll have the cake or not, whether you will have this or not, and that's fine, and that will be a little bit uncomfortable, but this will be offset by the fun you'll have with the cake. But there needs to be some acceptance to the fact that you might feel discomfort around some attitudes and that's fine, and there might be discomfort around the fact that you're not decided and that this is a complicated issue, and that's fine. And there is some research now looking into the relation with mindfulness, and it seems so far that for ambivalence, that people experience less discomfort around ambivalence when they're more mindful.

And kind of makes sense, because we also know that more Eastern cultures, just to generalize it grossly, also have less problems with conflict because of the more holistic Confucius tradition that acknowledges that there's yin and yang, and there's always dynamics and fluctuation, and of course it's kind of mindfulness comes out of this Zen Buddhism, so it kind of makes sense that you'll be acknowledging that there is positivity and there is negativity, and yeah, there might even be discomfort, and yeah, okay, fine.

I think a final thing is to realize, and maybe, I don't know, maybe this would be cheating a little bit, but to realize that ambivalence is a state that reflects nuance and sophistication in your thinking. And for some, some people might feel that this is a good thing. So, I think also telling people that ambivalence is not difficult because it's something you need to resolve, but it's difficult because it's important and because it reflects some level of cognitive flexibility and intelligence, I think that people would be... If they could remember that, or see ambivalence as that, I think it would also help them to accept a relatively difficult state.

Andy Luttrell:

That reminds me of there's work on when people's opinions come to mind really quickly, right? Oftentimes you go, "Oh, those are the opinions people tend to be really confident about, they are harder to change because they're just so well connected to people's memories." But the work shows that if you can convince people that, "Oh, that means you haven't really thought. You didn't really think very carefully about this."

Iris Schneider:

Yeah.

Andy Luttrell:

If it came to mind that quickly, you didn't think about it. All of a sudden, people now go, "Oh, I don't feel so confident in that anymore." Or there's even work like when you say resistance, if you are resistant to new information, that either means that you have a strong, considered opinion, or it means you're-

Iris Schneider:

You're closed minded.

Andy Luttrell:

Yeah. You're closed minded, you're not willing to see the other side, and so yeah, I think how we think about the meaning of these things does matter, right?

Iris Schneider:

Yeah.

Andy Luttrell:

So, ambivalence could mean, “Oh God, I need to make up my mind. It’s so horrible that I can’t come up with a conclusion.” Or it could mean, “Thank goodness that I’m taking the time to thoughtfully consider all the information that’s available without jumping to conclusions.”

Iris Schneider:

Yeah. I love that. I think that’s totally on point. And you see this in other domains, as well, so there’s work on identity-based motivation. It’s a completely different field, but one of the tenets there is also that how people interpret difficulty, for instance, in their education, or in their studies, determines how successful they are. So, you can interpret difficulty as I don’t belong here, I’m an idiot, or you can interpret it in a different way and say, “Okay, this is difficult, so this must be really important that I do this right.” And I think if we move a little bit to this side of importance and nuance, and reflecting that you’ve thought about things, being thoughtful and being fair minded, I think that we can maybe shift the perspective a little bit both in laypeople, but also in researchers. And I think it’s happening already, and especially coming a push from what they call emotional ambivalence, where there’s a lot more research on positive effects and cognitive flexibility.

But I think in the attitude literature, again, because of the tradition of wanting to predict behavior, it’s a little bit different still. But I think it’s moving.

Andy Luttrell:

I will keep my fingers crossed that we get there someday. I just want to say thanks for talking about ambivalence and I’ll be interested to see what new stuff comes out of your lab.

Iris Schneider:

Thank you. I had a good time.

Andy Luttrell:

All right, that’ll do it for another episode of Opinion Science. Thank you to Iris Schneider, or you know what, she gave me permission to pronounce it Iris Schneider, the way my American face wants to say it, but I thought I would try to give it a go. Anyhow, thank you so much to her for talking about her work and sharing her thoughts on the role ambivalence plays in our lives. You can check out the show notes for a link to her lab website and links to the research we talked about. To learn more about this show, head on over to OpinionSciencePodcast.com, subscribe to the show on Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Spotify, whatever you use, and leave a nice review to let the world know what the show’s all about. Okie doke, that’s it for now. See you in a couple weeks for more Opinion Science. Bye-bye!