Opinion Science Podcast

Hosted by Andy Luttrell

A Mixed Bag with Geoff Durso

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Andy Luttrell:
Happy New Year! Alright, we made it to 2023. We're still getting our bearings—just a couple days into the new year. So we're gonna keep things laid back this week on the podcast. No fancy intro this week, but I guess I should still do my usual spiel—you're listening to Opinion Science, the show about our opinions, where they come from, and how they change. I'm Andy Luttrell.

And this week I'm excited to share my conversation with an old friend, Geoff Durso. Geoff is an assistant professor of marketing at DePaul University. But we first met more than 10 years ago. I was still a new graduate student at Ohio Statew when Geoff joined the lab I was in. Flash forward and I think Geoff is probably the person with whom I've been to the most happy hours. Many afternoons, evenings, and nights talking about science, entertainment, and nothing in particular. But very few mornings. Geoff's not a morning guy.

I'm calling this week's episode "A Mixed Bag." In part it's because it's a conversation we had catching up at a conference last year, so we cover a lot of ground. But also because Geoff studies the experience of facing mixed information. When a person does both good deeds and bad. When a product has a lot of positive attributes and a bunch of negative ones. When an option in front of us has a bunch of pros and cons. We generally call this experience ambivalence. This has come up on the show before—you can hop back to Episode 35 with Iris Schneider for her take on it.

But Geoff has come at ambivalence from a bunch of interesting angles. Should we always feel conflicted when information is mixed? When are we more or less bothered by the lack of a simple conclusion? He's got a bunch of cool work on this question, so let's hear about it! Here's my conversation with my old buddy, Geoff Durso.

Andy Luttrell:
So, what is the most weird about talking to people I know is I already know them.

Geoff Durso:
Yes.

Andy Luttrell:
So, for the show, it's way easier to talk to someone who I'm interested in, but I've never met them, or I only kind of know their work, and so then it's like I do a little bit of my research, but in the

end I'm sort of like figuring it out with them. Whereas I've known you for too long. I think I was a second year grad student when you joined the lab, right?

Geoff Durso:
Yeah. We're only a year apart.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. And so, whatever we're gonna talk about, I've seen it from the beginning.

Geoff Durso:
We have had more overlap I think than I've had with anybody else.

Andy Luttrell:
Probably. Yeah. Because not only do we have like a temporal overlap, but it's in the same lab, like one desk away from me. But what I do remember about you coming in is you were the ambivalence guy from the jump.

Geoff Durso:
Yes.

Andy Luttrell:
Like from day one, you were like, "I am here to study the phenomenon of ambivalence." And you seemed to know so well that that was your interest in a way that most people who start grad school don't actually have any real clue. So, like why was that your thing?

Geoff Durso:
Yeah. I started because of… I had a great final year of undergrad that I kind of considered almost year zero when I was at Indiana, year zero of grad school, because I got to take graduate level courses. I took a seminar in attitudes. I took two stats courses. And I was doing a ton of reading. I was in the lab. I was designing studies, so it felt like I was already going through a lot of that phase of discovery before I went to grad school, and so when I got to a lot of the inconsistency stuff and then applying that to attitudes, that's obviously gonna lead you right to ambivalence a lot of the time. So, I started off with the idea of implicit ambivalence, and so I was very interested in when our kind of gut reactions to things betray or are otherwise in the opposite direction of what we say we like or dislike.

And so, classic versions of that are racial attitudes, of course, so I just got done moderating an implicit bias session. The extent to which there's kind of like an acknowledgment of that too really fascinated me, and so that ended up being why I pivoted from implicit ambivalence. I was like, "I'm just kind of more interested in when people have both positive and negative reactions to things." And so, that's kind of been my drive since then.

Andy Luttrell:
You know, people do these, like you said, implicit ambivalence is often racial biases, where sort of these abstract notions I have of social groups, and I feel one way, and I express myself in a different way. Or people talk about ambivalence in issues, right? Like political issues, like I see

merit to one side of this and to the other side, and so I'm conflicted. Right? That's what ambivalence is. And what I found interesting is most of the work that you've ended up doing seems to be very person-centric ambivalence, which is, and you I'm sure can explain it better, but I'm gonna take a crack at it first, which is like there are people that you meet, and you go, "I don't know. There's reasons to think you're a good guy. There's reasons to question how good a guy you are. And so, I'm conflicted, right?" Or you make me laugh, and you make me feel good, but I know there's these ulterior motives maybe, so that's that moment of conflict. We face those with the people that we meet and our own people that we know, like your family, right?

Geoff Durso:
Yes.

Andy Luttrell:
People have ambivalent relationships with members of their own family.

Geoff Durso:
Yes.

Andy Luttrell:
So, maybe that captures it, but like for you, what is it about ambivalence when it comes to the person perception area that makes it kind of like this is the playground where you were-

Geoff Durso:
Yeah. You nailed a lot of it like you suspected you would. A lot of people are people experts, or kind of lay experts already, so it's a more motivating or easier method to use to investigate kind of how people think, and I like thinking about how people work, and so reflected in my methods too, which is people like thinking about other people too. And in particular, ambivalence is great because there's people that are acting in ways that you like and other ways that you're like, "What did they do right now?" That's almost the entire industry of reality television, is trying to figure out are they a good person? Or am I on their side? A lot of those questions people ask are I think ultimately about resolving ambivalence or playing with it in their minds, like, "I don't know what to think about this person."

I've done it before, and what I think was maybe underlying some of the questions that I think is interesting too is like, "Well, that has nothing almost at all to do with marketing, so how did that end up being a big part of what I'd use in my methods?" And that's mostly true. A lot of what I do in marketing now is about like kind of advertising campaigns, or brands and products that people use, and the way they kind of have policies that treat other people, not necessarily people they're thinking about directly, though. So, I like coming up with behaviors that people will do that are mildly positive that are sometimes very fun to me, and the mildly negative ones, as well, and then imagining a person just watching them throughout their day do all 20 of these ambivalent mixed behaviors. That entertains me too a lot, like what persuasion studies do with generating weak arguments about the packaging's amazing, and that's always to us like, "That's the argument you're making for this?"

So, that's a big reason, combination of reasons why I'm into the people stimuli with my studies.

Andy Luttrell:
So, in an experiment, what does that look like, right? So, if you present people with some social stimulus and people can be guided to see that in an ambivalent or an unambivalent way, what is it that people in your studies are actually doing?

Geoff Durso:
Yeah. Great. Great question. So, I am very much an experimentalist, so I really enjoy the process of coming up with a situation that feels psychologically real for any person that's getting to take it. So, I give them some kind of like cover story often that's going to be revolving around we're interested in how people make organizational decisions, or we're interested in how consumers learn about other consumers in the marketplace, or we're interested because we're working with clinicians in how do people that have mood disorders maybe act this way? Or how do people, just normal people, act in everyday life? So, we're gonna have this redacted info. We're gonna anonymously call this person Bob almost always in my studies. And Bob is going to give you some actually observed behaviors and you're gonna learn them one at a time, and we just ask you to briefly visualize it as it's happening, and so we control per kind of screen, they're gonna get like five seconds of like, "Bob stopped his car to help out another bicyclist while he was on his way home from work." And you get that, you get five to 10 seconds depending on the study to kind of read that, and then it's off, and then you're onto the next behavior.

"Bob found a wallet with $76 in it, and he kept the cash and threw it away." That's another thing that might happen in the day of Bob. And it's fun to think about these things, and I still remember an old RA for my first lab in undergrad in BJ Rydell's lab, her name's Jenny. Jenny was great because we would have… She would be our test subject, number zero a lot of the time, for running these studies. And so, my job was to come up with very conflicting materials, like your goal oftentimes is like you can do some kind of like online, in the moment kinds of ways of learning about people versus trying to remember who this person is at the end of the study and how would you describe it. Because those can recruit different interesting cognitive processes and how we learn about people, and it was just Jenny smiling and laughing while she was taking my last study. I was in the lab. She's like, "Bob is insane."

And I love that because that makes it… It's such dry material sometimes when you write it out in a method section, but then when you see a participant take it, you're like, "Yeah, this is working exactly as I wanted it to."

Andy Luttrell:
It was making me thinking of there's cool work in communication on how we respond to characters in media like you were saying with the reality TV thing, but we paint characters in fictionalized media in the same way, like to get an impression across, and we're all really well versed in forming impressions of people who don't exist in a way that makes that a psychologically real experience, where it's not like some vignette about a set of parameters that you'd be like, "I don't really…" A lot of psychology studies will do this, right? They'll go like, "Here's a brief scenario, and we manipulate different factors in that scenario, and we want to know what choice would you make." And that almost feels artificial because you're like, "When would I be in that scenario?" Whereas

if it's like, "Here's some guy. This guy does this, and he does this, and he does this, and he does this. How do you feel about this guy?" That's something we do constantly.

Geoff Durso:
Yes.

Andy Luttrell:
We form impressions of people even under these artificial situations. And they are real to us, right? We know we have these parasocial relationships with characters who don't even exist.

Geoff Durso:
Right. Exactly. Yeah. On Twitter with celebrities too, right? Yeah.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. And it's a cool way to then be like, "Yeah, we could actually, under the constraints of a lab experiment, really actually capture the thing even when we don't sacrifice the artificial controlled part of what we're trying to do."

Geoff Durso:
Yeah. Right.

Andy Luttrell:
And so, for your RA to have the visceral reaction of like, "This dude is crazy," is a thing that you would actually feel like if you were watching a short film and the character on screen was doing these things. You'd be like, "This doesn't make any sense."

Geoff Durso:
Right. And it is part of we've lost a lot of the ability to do theatrical experimental studies. You think of like Milgram, you think of bystander intervention, those were really fun because you get to see non-verbal behavior of people under study, and the scientific sense of it, but I think that's a kind of nice throwback to what we get to do, is like if I can get to… So, in our shared lab space from grad school, we got the one-way mirror, and so we'd get to see people, like you and I literally have collaborated on studies where we show people disgusting images and then they have to navigate the cursor to like extremely negative. That to me is very fun, because yeah, that's right. That's the normative answer. We just showed you something like worms on pizza and it's very gross.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. And that is as viscerally evocative as other things, right? We're responding to that in that way. Okay, so you have this guy named Bob.

Geoff Durso:
Yes.

Andy Luttrell:
Here's a bunch of stuff that he does.

Geoff Durso:
Right.

Andy Luttrell:
And one of the versions of that is like he does a bunch of great stuff, and he also does a bunch of terrible stuff.

Geoff Durso:
Yep.

Andy Luttrell:
Which we would say like by the book, definition, that is an ambivalent stimulus.

Geoff Durso:
Or a two-sided, depending on how we need to talk about our operations or whatever. But yeah, I would feel comfortable saying that's ambivalent, but in a technical methods report, it might help to separate out that and call it two-sided rather than ambivalent.

Andy Luttrell:
Okay. I'll roll with it. So, that is the premise of a lot of the work that you've done, and so I guess the question that arises is like what is it that people experience differently when they meet a Bob who does a bunch of good stuff and a bunch of bad stuff versus when they meet a Bob who's exclusively good or exclusively bad? Experientially, why is this a domain that sort of sets the stage for other questions?

Geoff Durso:
I would take it very well from your setup here that a lot of times our studies and our understanding of how people learn information, we generally present only positive stuff or only negative stuff, and that to me is actually not that realistic. It's a lot of the times what helps us navigate the world is to generalize things into generally good or generally bad stuff, so that's what I'm fascinated by is when people encounter truly mixed kind of situations and people. What are they gonna do next about it?

And so, the big findings, of course, are you want to learn more a lot of times. If you have to deal with Bob, let's say hey, you're gonna talk with Bob, or you're gonna read more about Bob. What kind of info would you like to learn about him? That can make people feel kind of like, "Oh, no," like tense about it, because the other option is that you just avoid him. You're like, "I don't know how to make sense of this person." It's not even that they're just necessarily bad. It's just that you don't want to have to even have to deal with the conflict in your head about whether he's gonna be good to you, or kind to you and your spouse, or if he's gonna be mean to you and maybe mean to you or insulting to your spouse. Those are some of the described behaviors that we have in that.

And it's fun too to… I think when we talk about these contexts, it's loosely in the sense of the world at large, but I have done… So, in the final study of that recent paper, we put it into a workplace context, because I think a lot of us who have ever worked have had coworkers that we

find a little conflicting to put it a certain way, and so that's… It's good grist for it, too, because then in that context there's a more appropriate use of decision making about other people, right? So, there's do you recommend this person stay on your team or do you recommend not continuing a project lead with that person? You have to make decisions that essentially require judging other people and making a decision to stay or go, or learn more info, or just avoid it altogether, and so those are things that I think are understudied compared to our vast research as a collective on how do we navigate ambiguity.

Like when something's ambiguous, we end up having lots of different ways to affect people. Priming, or their prior attitudes, or their prejudices, and so on.

Andy Luttrell:
But basically, what you're saying is people have this craving to see a person as good or bad. If I need to make a decision about you, I need to just figure out. I need to put you in the good bin or the bad bin. And so, I will choose you if you're a good one, and I'll reject you if you're a bad one. But when people have this like, "Well, there's good stuff and bad stuff." Then there's a problem. And I just need to know. Tell me. Is it a good or a bad? You present me with the opportunity to learn more information? Yes, please. Anything else you can tell me about this guy to help me figure out what I do with him.

And in the language of ambivalence that's a feeling of conflict.

Geoff Durso:
Yes. Right.

Andy Luttrell:
Something's wrong here. I have this need to figure out what's going on.

Geoff Durso:
That is actually also a major… Because earlier, to your question about like why am I so interested in ambivalence, I think a lot of the attitude theory assumptions I thought were kind of silly because people are silly, though, in that why do we want to categorize people as generally good or generally bad? That's not that useful if it's like more accurate to describe them as mixed, or they're good in this context, but don't trust them in this context. That kind of thing.

Some of the studies I've done where we kind of manipulate whether Bob here, this person in my studies, is going to be very reliably good in a work context, but at home he's actually kind of a jerk. Or we flip that and say he's kind of a schlub at work but man, he's a great dad, he has a great home life. Those kinds of things are ways to help us segment out information about people we learn, or anything we learn about, and that's something I think is interesting about how a mind works and how we learn information in general, and people in particular we do that with all the time. It's easier to think of like, "Bob's at work. Don't give him a deadline. He's just gonna whiz by it and not give you anything to do. But invite him to your kid's game or help him coach up the soccer team or something like that, he's excellent with kids in that sense." So, we do that a lot. We kind of say what we're good at and what we should avoid doing because we're bad at it, and we do that for a lot of the other people in our lives, too.

So, those are things that I think are fun ways to get at it, but that's also what started the expectations project. I'm like why don't people expect people to be more mixed? And it turns out, well, they don't, so here's some expectations, and here's seven studies to look at it and figure it out.

Andy Luttrell:
And the idea there is kind of like the point about craving an answer. It's sort of like we just expect there to be an answer. When I meet someone, I expect for them to either be a good person or to be a bad person, and that's why it's such a problem when you can't give me that answer and I go, "Oh, great. This is… I feel so conflicted about this person because I just wanted them to be a good one or a bad one. And now they're a both one?" So, if you kind of walk us through some of the studies that you do to sort of get at the like… Yeah, that's actually what's happening, right? Part of this problem is that we are entering the scenario expecting people to be one way or another, whereas if we could maybe change that expectation and be like, "Hey, guys. That's not necessarily how the world is," these moments of ambivalence stop being the same kind of problem.

So, ball's in your cart. What's the story?

Geoff Durso:
All right. I'll lean on the one that actually gives almost no expectancy granting information, where all we… We don't warn people. We don't give them any context. We just say everyone gets the same info about here's what… We're gonna have you learn about a person, and this person is just kind of a person that we've seen, and we're writing about him for some other purposes, but we're just interested in how you learn about them. Dry. No expectation kind of granted info about this. And everyone learns the exact same 20 behaviors, 10 of which are good and 10 of which are bad. And the only way we change between two groups of people learning about Bob, then, is what order they see those behaviors. And that, it turns out, is exactly how expectations work. You're trying, you're using information as you learn it to come up with like, "Well, how is he going to act next? How is he gonna act next?" So, if you get all 10 of those positive behaviors, like one after the other, like Bob helped your kids at the soccer game, Bob donated to charity from his bonus payment or something like that, and you keep getting one after another positive info, and then at number 11, negative. He's running over bicyclists on his way home. He's yelling at kids to get off his lawn kind of thing. And he keeps doing bad things. Bad number four, bad number five. The people in that condition are very confused and they feel highly undecided and conflicted about Bob.

The only thing I need to change to make people feel less undecided and less conflicted about Bob is I kind of just intersperse that info in a predictable pattern. So, you know, Bob sometimes is great with kids at soccer games, but when they go on his lawn he yells at them. Sometimes he's really generous with his time and money. Other times he's not going to leave a tip to the barista at the café. And now you start to because it's an expectation granting pattern of information, so the way that we kind of learn about people is that well, we don't know necessarily whether there's going to be always good or always bad trajectory, and if we get info like that, that means we're gonna be in for a major surprise which we would say is expectancy disconfirming. Whereas if it's more interspersed, people can say, "I don't really understand Bob, but I at least know what to expect of him." And that's a key distinction we like to make.

Andy Luttrell:
And so, with the interspersed thing, it's almost like hey, right off the bat, Bob's not a simple character.

Geoff Durso:
Yes. Right.

Andy Luttrell:
Just so you know, you'll figure it out right away that this guy's great, also terrible. And then it's just a lot of this guy's great, also terrible. And you go, "Okay. Well, all right. That's just who he is." As opposed to like, "Oh, this guy seems amazing," and then all of a sudden like, "Oh, whoa, whoa, whoa. What's he doing? I thought this guy was amazing."

Geoff Durso:
And people will generate explanations. They want to figure out like what happened to him. Did he have a brain injury? Or did he get a divorce? And those are all major life events that could end up being kind of like… And they don't necessarily mean the villain story from good to bad. Somebody that's terrible could have a life-altering history, like getting in a major car wreck, and then suddenly, "Oh, I've lived my life so terribly to now, and now I'm an amazing person." You'll still feel conflicted about that person, though, because you're like, "Who's the real Bob now?" And is this something…

And there's this implied course of time over which these behaviors may or may not be happening, and so we kind of like to naturally infer that they're happening in order even though they may not be. But people, when there's that much of a disconfirmation, that's something I love about the expectations research, is that it's exactly kind of how the mind works. It's what people want to do, is they want to be able to figure out things before having to deal with them, so if I know what to expect, I can prepare, or I know how I'll feel about it in advance, or I know what will happen next after that when I encounter a Bob. I don't know when I will, but I'll know what to do once I do because I have accurate expectations of him now.

So, ambivalence is fun to me because it's almost like this fun little maxim that goes expect the unexpected, which is silly to me, but it means like don't have expectations, really. And so, the more you have expectations, the more likely they are to be disconfirmed, and thus you're kind of left without knowing what to do. So, it's a functional thing too, to feel like when it comes to people, and products, and just life in general, maybe don't think everything's gonna be either awesome or perfectly terrible.

Andy Luttrell:
It's funny, so the person I was talking to just before you for this, and in the context of the podcast when it comes out I don't know who's gonna be first or whatever but is a guy who does research on the psychology of magic.

Geoff Durso:
Oh, I love that. Yes, of course.

Andy Luttrell:
And sort of like misdirection. When I asked him to define attention, because I was like, "Hold on, so what actually is it? Let's back all the way up. What's attention?"

Geoff Durso:
Philosophical.

Andy Luttrell:
And part of it is like it's a predictive model, right? We attend to where we think information is going to be relevant.

Geoff Durso:
Right. Yeah.

Andy Luttrell:
And you know, a lot of what magic is is sort of exploiting the fact that we have predictions and saying like, "I know exactly where you think the important stuff is gonna be. I know what you think this object is." And so, I can then go like, "Well, then I just disconfirm it, and then either that's the deception or that's the big reveal." In either case, it's like at our core, because I asked him, like what's the fundamental thing we learn about psychology by looking at magic? And it kind of seemed like his answer was, and listeners, if you end up hearing that you can see if I'm right or not about what happened just an hour ago, but it was kind of like it's the fact that we're prediction machines, that we're constantly in… We rely on these predictions we make constantly more than we realize. And because we don't realize we do it, that's what can sort of lead us astray. And the whole time I was like, "I know I'm about to talk to Geoff about this expectancy stuff," which is another example of that. We don't necessarily appreciate that I expect people to be one way or another. And I'm just setting myself up for chaos by thinking the world is that simple.

Geoff Durso:
Or even more chaos.

Andy Luttrell:
Yes. Right, right. Or not even chaos was the word I was looking for, but like I'm setting myself up for confusion if I go, "This is how people are." Whereas what your work is showing across all these studies is like if instead your expectation is that this person is actually complicated, then when I find out, I don't have that reaction of, "This guy's insane." I just go, "Oh yeah, that's the guy that I-"

Geoff Durso:
That fits.

Andy Luttrell:
As promised, this person is both. So, what are other… One of them is you naturally let people come to these expectations, but what else can you do to sort of see whether these expectations change the way people process two-sided individuals?

Geoff Durso:
How else do… Oh, with what other consequences?

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. How do you set up the expectations?

Geoff Durso:
Oh, so you can tell people. Literally. I mean, it's we try to keep it dry. Don't give them too much other unnecessary exposition or information. So, we say his colleagues say he can be good. Sometimes he's bad, though. And some colleagues really like working with him. Other colleagues do not like working with him. It's as simple as that sometimes. We've made it even more minimal, and that's in part, so that's literally one of the names of the studies in that particular article, is minimal expectations, and that's not even just the pattern of good, good, good, good, bad, bad, bad versus good, bad, good, bad, good, bad. This is more like we had to write the difference between conditions of about six words, and it was something like Bob is known to have both good and bad qualities, and then in the other group it was Bob is known to have many qualities.

And that alone can have a difference in how conflicted people feel about and how undecided they are about this person they just met. It's just… It's almost like the simplicity of that is essentially almost a prime, and that could be then used to interpret all sorts of kinds of information. Other directions we think that are interesting to take, though, is if we have a really strong expectation for mixed information, and then you only get one-sided info, then people will feel maybe a bit like at an advantage, because they'll know, like, "I know what to expect now, though, so even if you surprise me later, I won't be as surprised with this countervailing information, like he's actually a jerk or he's actually a saint. He was just lying about this the whole time to save the children and the puppies."

There's a lot of those fun scenarios where people work those into even stories, like movies and TV, where a lot of these seemingly negative things that this person is doing were actually for this great cause, right? But having an expectation going into that of just like this doesn't quite seem… They can't be this bad, right? That's a classic. That's essentially, when people say that, that's about saying you're kind of expecting ambivalence. If you're thinking it's too good to be true, that's the name of a project I also have in marketing. That's expecting ambivalence because you're like, "Where are the side effects? Where are the downsides to this thing that I'm considering buying or using?"

So, those are all different ways of instantiating kind of an expectation that things will have both positive and negative qualities. There will be all these other qualities too that I'm like, "I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing yet. But that doesn't mean I need to shoehorn it into a good or a bad category." Yeah.

Andy Luttrell:
In the studies with expectations that I've seen, the expectations are usually about the stimulus, right?

Geoff Durso:
Yes.

Andy Luttrell:
So, like Bob is this way. But kind of the implications that we've been circling around are broader, where it's just like do I approach the world with a mindset that things are complicated, that no one is just good or just bad?

Geoff Durso:
Right.

Andy Luttrell:
Do we know anything about how that… Could we confidently translate that to an approach to the world?

Geoff Durso:
Oh, I imagine.

Andy Luttrell:
But you've not done that. You haven't instantiated those kinds of beliefs.

Geoff Durso:
I'm familiar with your work.

Andy Luttrell:
I was not thinking of that, by the way.

Geoff Durso:
Well, we had talked about it for years on dialectical thinking in the sense of just being able to allow contradictions to be present without having to resolve them necessarily. In a broad brush, that's essentially what a lot of the differences in being more or less of a dialectical thinking person allows, and that's something that you could reverberate that in a more ambivalent expectation specifically about it doesn't need resolution for this person to be both good and bad. That could be… The resolution is that's what I saw. And so, it's about then almost like a world view being like, "If I'm thinking about people, the category of people and persons out in the world, they're probably not gonna be amazing 100% of the time. They're also probably not gonna be terrible 100% of the time. And it's actually gonna be far more in that middle. Maybe it'll skew positive in these groups or these communities that matter to me, like psychologists."

We're in that group of psychologists for us because we chose this, so we'll probably like talking with each other a lot. And then another group where they can have their own community, like lawyers, I'm like, "I don't think I'm gonna particularly like a lot of their conversations, so I don't think it's gonna be all terrible all the time to talk to lawyers. I don't think it's always gonna be awesome to talk to psychologists. But it is something to be said about yeah, sure, it'll trend one certain way or another. It just doesn't need for me to be so black and white in a sense of like 100% one or the other direction."

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. You mentioned in the middle, and in the dialecticism work they refer to it as the middle way in a lot of ways, which, just to fill in the pieces, right? This is… What do they call it? Like a naïve belief about the world, which just means like the beliefs that we carry about the world. Some of the people of the world have the perception that things are one way or the other, right? It's black or it's white. It's right or it's wrong. It's good or it's bad. Or you could adopt a different perspective, which is everything is kind of everything, and there's always some good in the bad, and there's some truth in the falsities and some falsehoods in the truths.

And this is often mapped onto cultural differences, at least in the early days of looking at this, that like Western cultures tend to have this less dialectical, like we come from a culture of debate, and rigor, and you're wrong, and I'm right. Whereas in East Asian cultures, where philosophies have more typically emphasized this kind of Daoist notion of like the yin-yang is the visual depiction of this, right?

Geoff Durso:
Right. Exactly.

Andy Luttrell:
There's always some white in the black and some black in the white. And so, work that I've done, and others, show like when people adopt this kind of dialectical mentality of the way that world is is just a world of mixedness, then when we're exposed to things that are not only good or only bad, that doesn't feel as challenging, or wrong, or uncomfortable to us.

Geoff Durso:
Right. Yeah.

Andy Luttrell:
And so, I guess some of that work does actually manipulate telling people, "Hey, the world isn't so simple." And those instructions, like saying, "Hey, Bob has some good things going for him and he's got some problems," those kind of accomplish the same thing in two different ways, where it's just like setting expectations, right? Don't come into this thinking that it's gonna be one way or the other. That's a misguided approach to what you're about to face.

And the nice thing is that when you set those expectations, it seems like people go, "All right." Well, do they, though? So, I wonder at the mean level, so yes, people become more comfortable with the fact that Bob is good and bad under these revised expectations. But do they become totally cool with it?

Geoff Durso:
Yeah, it depends. So, in a finding in a retrospective of all of the studies we ran in that particular project made perfect sense, is that the more minimal our expectations induced, either via that pure behavioral pattern, or this designed minimal expectation, those people still feel pretty surprised in all cases. Because they barely have a leg to stand on expectation wise. That was the design of it.

But if you give them a pretty good verbal induction and say, “Hey, here’s a paragraph, like a brief one, like four sentences about Bob. Some of the people he works with, they like him. Some of the other people he works with, they don’t like him. So, he’s known to have both positive and negative qualities.” That little… That has a robust effect in that it just very simply conveys the core info about the evaluation of Bob. How do people think about him? How will then you test what you think about him going forward?

So, some people are gonna use these expectations more when they feel like there’s a lot more kind of meat to them, and other times when it’s just kind of like a brief little gust of an expectation on route to learning about somebody, then those won’t be as useful. They’ll be a little bit useful. It just doesn’t-

Andy Luttrell:
It takes the sting away.

Geoff Durso:
Yeah. It takes the immediate impact, but you still feel some impact of like, “This is a conflicting person.” But at least I kind of got a little whisper of an indication of that as an expectation beforehand.

Andy Luttrell:
Because it kind of seems still that like, okay, I saw it coming, but it’s still kind of weird, right? That you are the same person who robbed a bank as who donated to the charity.

Geoff Durso:
Yeah. You robbed the bank to donate to the charity.

Andy Luttrell:
And even if you did, I don’t know. What do I do with you?

Geoff Durso:
Do I? And those are usually fun questions, like a lot of what your work in morality is really interesting. In general, all of moral psych is because it’s oftentimes trying to create scenarios that make people feel kind of torn.

Andy Luttrell:
A dilemma. They call them moral dilemmas.

Geoff Durso:
Right. Yeah, exactly. So, those are all designed to challenge you and think about pros and cons or ambivalent reactions towards one of two or three different options, and so I do enjoy it from that perspective. As the ambivalence view of it, at least.

Andy Luttrell:
But even still, the point is just like… So, that example was dilemma-y, but if it’s just two distinct things that are true about this guy, that he helped his neighbor unpack and that he yelled at a kid

in the neighborhood. Still, you go like, "Yeah, Bob's a mixed character, eh?" You go, "Okay, so I'm not as surprised, but still, what person does both of these things? I still wish it was just one or the other." And then I don't know if you deal with this here, but in your other work it's like if I have to now make a decision about you, do I hire this guy?

Geoff Durso:
That's the last study. Yeah.

Andy Luttrell:
Oh, is it? Okay, so-

Geoff Durso:
Yeah, so we adapted that whole power and inaction stuff for that final study, and that was… I mean, obviously we had the materials ready to do that and we were like, "This will make decision making kind of a fun outcome to see."

Andy Luttrell:
So, what happens, like let's not talk about the power part yet, but if I still see this person as a good character and a bad character, and I now have to make a choice, what is the choice that people want to make?

Geoff Durso:
So, a lot of people want to say or ask for… So, what are you gonna decide on? And we think the probably normative answer and which our data show is true is people go for the midpoint when they're provided a kind of like, "I'm in between the two." But even when we do that and we tell people like, "Which way are you leaning? Are you leaning to firing him or maintaining him? Are you leaning to promote him or not promoting him?" Depending on the frame we want to use. We can find people generally will make about the same choice. They'll just take longer to do it to the extent it's more surprising.

So, when we give people these accurate expectations to expect a mixed Bob, they're gonna be more decisive about like, "I am in the middle." So, instead of waffling at the moment where they have to make a decision, we allow them to say, "You can just say you're in between and that will be more helpful to move on," and then say, "Well, once I know I'm in the middle on this guy, now it's time to learn some more info." And that's what a bunch of other work has been able to show in ambivalence, is that there's all sorts of other predictions of where you'll seek for info in a biased manner, or in a maybe too inundated manner, like you just want to learn everything before because you're so undecided and tense about it.

So, the main dependent measure when we talk about behavior from ambivalence that I favor is actually… It's the lack of behavior. I'm really interested in the how much delayed people are to make the exact same decision. I think that's an interesting way to think about behavior because if you don't know, then just say you don't know. We'll even provide the answer for you. And they still kind of are hesitant about it when it's less expected.

Andy Luttrell:
But the kind of canonical version is like you have to hire this person. Well, you don't hire or fire a person, but you hire this person-

Geoff Durso:
You have to recommend hiring or firing.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. Recommend hiring or firing.

Geoff Durso:
That's how we frame it.

Andy Luttrell:
Well, would the same candidate be a logical hire and a logical fire? You have to already work there if you're gonna get fired.

Geoff Durso:
Yeah, so it's a good operational point, actually, and when we do these studies we'll actually counterbalance whether it's a promotion frame or a firing frame because you're right. We ran into that design issue where that's almost never going to be the decision. It's not going to be whether we're gonna give you a bonus versus you're fired. You generally know before that decision which trend you're directing it in.

But what we do is whether it's an action or inaction in that frame, and so inaction is supposedly something that ambivalence would favor greatly, but when it's time to actually just say like, "Yeah, go for it, what do you recommend?" They still hesitate to even recommend not doing anything. So, it's inaction about whether we're acting or not.

Andy Luttrell:
So, should we promote this person or not, right?

Geoff Durso:
Yes. Right.

Andy Luttrell:
And if you're conflicted you should just say like, "No. I don't have enough information so let's just not do it." But instead, it sounds like people just go like, "Oh, I don't know."

Geoff Durso:
Yes. Right. And it's fantastic to me because it competes then against like clearly there's one version of this prediction… We should say people are very quick once they're highly ambivalent to say, "Boom. Press the button. Not promote because I'm undecided." But that also means, well, that's kind of a decision, and people I think are actually making that inference psychologically, where once you make a recommendation, that's your recommendation now. And now that's what they're hesitating on is almost the expression of one over the other.

Andy Luttrell:
Because I'm saying in the don't promote, I'm still saying like, "I recommend us not promote this person."

Geoff Durso:
Right. I'm against promotion.

Andy Luttrell:
I'm against it. Yeah. Right. Whereas if I'm conflicted about this person, I don't know. I'd much rather be like, "Come back to me later. I don't want to make this decision now."

Geoff Durso:
That's right. And that's what powerful people do. They like to delegate.

Andy Luttrell:
Yes. Okay, so to wind us up, or to wind us down, this power stuff is cool because it sort of brings in this perspective that would have made maybe other predictions. So, what is it about powerful people and the decisions they make that get mucked up when we account for the fact that we can be conflicted about our decisions?

Geoff Durso:
Yeah, so powerful people, there's lots of different theories of how power changes us psychologically, and in particular they almost all agree you're more goal directed, so you're more decisive. You act more. If I make you feel powerful, you're gonna do more stuff. Whatever it is. For good or for bad. So, everyone kind of already agrees that the power corrupts is a psychological naïve theory. It's just a saying people like to throw around because we see politicians all the time act that way potentially, but that has to do a lot of times with describing the situation, or the person they find themselves in once they have power, because people with power that are generally in a good situation look like they're doing great things with that too. You can think of Jeff Bezos's ex-wife, MacKenzie. MacKenzie Scott. As soon as she got the divorce and all of the money, she gave away like tons of it, so she had so much power very all of a sudden. That didn't corrupt at all. She was giving away more than the next nine billionaires in the world combined in one single year.

So, there's a lot to say about power makes people like… Once you have it, and it turns out you don't even need to have the power. You don't need the resources, or the time, or the money. You can feel that way. You can feel powerfully different and that'll make you want to act more too.

And so, what happens when powerful people have ambivalence? That's the whole premise of the paper. And so, there's a lot of fun old work that I cited, and it's called old sergeant syndrome, and that is when a commanding officer in the middle of an intense battle or some… They're the ones that are going to have to decide whether to push the advance or retreat with the troops, but what happens is staying put, in other words doing nothing, the status quo, is the worst option. And that's what happens a lot of times with the old sergeants in this syndrome is that they're paralyzed by the indecision because they know either way they decide something, people will die, or their own position, or their country, their forces will be in a weaker position if they make the wrong decision.

So, what they do is they make actually the worst one, which is doing nothing. And I thought that was interesting because it's literally the person with the most power in that kind of position right there.

Andy Luttrell:
Who should be decisive. Who should be the person who just goes, "Let's do it."

Geoff Durso:
That's what power is for oftentimes. And so, the original version of that paper, which I'm still kind of mad it got edited out for trimming it for a different version article format, but small potatoes. But it was about how George Bush, once he won reelection, was, "I didn't come here just to sit around. I came here to get things done." That's what a lot of people think power does and he's right. A lot of psych theories agree with that.

Well, then during the course of his presidency he has to make this decision on Iraq, the troop surge, back in the middle of his second term as president. Then his tune changes and he says, "Well, I'm not gonna be rushed into making a decision," and it's like, "Hey, what changed?" And the answer is ambivalence, right? So, it turns out yeah, it's easy to make decisions when the path is clear. If you give people very consistent info about some employee that is crushing it, you're like, "Boom, boom. Hit the promote button all day and do it quickly." So, that's one of the things we show and replicate in those studies is if you give people a promotion decision and this employee is killing it, absolutely crushing it, if you give people making them feel more powerful, not having… You don't have to give them a role. You don't have to give them resources or money or anything. Just say, "Here's some material that'll make you feel more powerful." They push the button to promote faster. They're more quickly making the same decision.

Well, what if he's mixed? What if Bob has instead got some really great qualities, like he's killing the sales numbers too, but then he's also kind of like showing up to work a little drunk, or leaving early, and he's made some rude comments at party functions? Then people are like, "Do we promote this guy?" Then you give… The same person who was so decisive about promotion earlier is now the one that's most likely to hesitate. So, they're taking the longest to make a decision. The most powerful people in other words take the longest when it's an ambivalent or two-sided thing you're thinking about making a decision about.

So, I like the juxtaposition of those two theories a lot. It was very clean, and it worked out really nicely in the studies we ran.

Andy Luttrell:
So, the quickest and the slowest decisions are made by the most powerful.

Geoff Durso:
That's right.

Andy Luttrell:
Is a way that you could frame it.

Geoff Durso:
Yes. Exactly right.

Andy Luttrell:
And so, so often we just are only looking at one half of that story, where you go like, "Oh, if the answer is clear, power is a very clear like oh, I know what I'm doing, that looks good, let's do it."

Geoff Durso:
That's right.

Andy Luttrell:
So, ultimately what is it, though, about power that slows people even further down if they feel ambivalent? Why? Kind of doesn't actually make sense, so make it make sense, Geoff.

Geoff Durso:
Yeah. You got it. Well, I'm sure not just me, but a lot of you, your guests, and you, yourself, of course, have probably covered this, is about the idea that sometimes we vary in how much we think our thoughts are true, or useful, or valid in some ways, and so this kind of thought validation perspective is a lot of where the power theory predicts thing interesting ways. So, with power, if I feel more powerful, it's not just that I'm going to just act more, behave more. It seems that feeling more powerful makes you feel like you can be more confident in your judgments, in your thoughts. So, if you have thoughts while you're feeling powerful, they feel more right. You like them more. They feel like they're gonna be more correct and useful. And that's what's helping power propel this behavior, is it's making people feel like my thoughts are correct so I'm gonna go with them right now.

And of course, getting a bunch of money, like people that suddenly come into a lot of money, they suddenly do stuff. And when you see that, oftentimes that's because they're probably like, "This is what I've wanted to do. Now I have it. I feel like I can do this so I'm going to do that more." And so, that was the perspective that our paper takes is that well, when it comes to ambivalence, people that are feeling very powerful trust both of their mixed reactions. They trust that Bob is really good at these things, and he's also bad at these other things, and they believe those thoughts are both equally correct.

And so, when you believe in your ambivalence to be valid as a reaction, you're more likely to hesitate even more, so it magnifies the kind of dominant effect of your thoughts in terms of predicting your behavior. And in the case of ambivalence, it's fun because it's literally a lack of behavior that we're observing.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. So, it's kind of like in this case of this person being not obviously good or obviously bad, it's like someone is saying, "Yeah, I don't know. I don't know what to think." And if I'm in a position of power, I'd go, "Yeah, I'm right. I don't know."

Geoff Durso:
That's right. Yes.

Andy Luttrell:
I'm even more sure I don't know, so I must slow down.

Geoff Durso:
Right.

Andy Luttrell:
Whereas without that sense of confidence, people go like, "Well, I don't know, but what do I know?"

Geoff Durso:
Right. What do I know?

Andy Luttrell:
I don't know, but what do I know?

Geoff Durso:
Lacking power is best I think thought of when you're low in power is when people shrug and say, "But what do I know?" That's the ultimate I think good equivalence, verbally speaking, of when people feel like they don't feel very powerful at all. They're kind of, "What do I know?"

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. Okay. All right. This has been fun, but I know we have to wrap up, so I just want to say thanks for taking the time to share all this stuff with us, and it was great to catch up.

Geoff Durso:
All right, man. It was a lot of fun. Yeah.

Andy Luttrell:
Alright, that'll do it for another episode of Opinion Science. Thanks to Geoff Durso for taking the time to come on the podcast. We actually sat down and recorded this in May 2022, but with a backlog of other stuff, you're only just hearing it now! You can find out more about Geoff and his research by visiting links to his work in the show notes and by going to GeoffDurso.com – that's G. E. O. F. F. Make sure you're subscribed to the podcast, follow it on social media or other media apps. Go to OpinionSciencePodcast.com for transcripts and previous episodes. Email me feedback, cookie recipes, or your adoring praise. Leave a review on Apple Podcasts. Have I given you enough homework? That's it for me. I'm gonna go try and recover from this cold and enjoy these first moments of a fresh year. See you back in a couple of weeks for more Opinion Science. But in the meantime, buh bye…