Coping With Mixed Emotions: Exploring the Temporal Arousal of Positive Emotion Relative to Negative Emotion

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We examine characteristics within a mixed-emotional experience that enable successful coping and identify the specific coping process involved. Our studies indicate that relatively close temporal arousal of positive relative to negative emotion provides cognitive resources necessary for reappraisal of the mixed-emotional experience, lowering discomfort and resulting in favorable overall evaluations.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
People often rely on their past experiences as guide for their future decisions. Positive experiences are repeated, negative ones avoided. However, rarely are our memories purely positive or purely negative, but instead they are filled with both ups and downs. Rather than feeling pure happiness from a successful negotiation (Thompson, Valley, and Kramer 1995), financial windfall (Levav and McGraw 2009), or visit to “the happiest place on earth” (e.g., Disneyland; Sutton 1992), people often endure mixed emotions from such experiences presumed so clearly positive. Despite their ubiquity, complex experiences comprised of both positive and negative emotions have been studied much less than their single-valenced emotion counterparts, with existing mixed emotions research mostly focused on demonstrating that positive and negative emotions may arise simultaneously or sequentially within the duration of a given experience (Otnes, Lowrey, and Shrum 1997), identifying how and when they may be triggered (Kahneman 1992) and linking them to feelings of discomfort (Priester and Petty 1993; Thompson, Zanna, and Griffin 1995).

More recent research shows that people typically react negatively to mixed emotions unless they acquire the necessary skills to cope with or overcome the discomfort associated with them. For example, those more prone to accepting duality due to their own experiences with conflict accumulated over a lifetime appear better equipped to cope with and thereby respond more favorably to mixed emotions than those with fewer experiences or facing conflict. The elderly (vs. young), East Asians (vs. westerners) and biculturals (vs. monoculturals) represent such individuals likely associated with higher duality acceptance and thus lower feelings of discomfort with mixed emotions (Kramer, Lau-Gesk, and Chiu 2009; Williams and Aaker 2002).

Beyond examining individual differences, the literature is largely silent about moderators of the relationship between judgment and mixed emotions. Moreover, specific coping processes underlying more favorable reactions to mixed emotions have yet to be pinpointed. Thus, the present research aims to achieve three main objectives. First, it identifies properties that underlie recalled sequential mixed emotional experiences that may bolster or hinder successful coping. Specifically, we explore the temporal arousal of positive emotion relative to negative emotion, and how this property may facilitate coping processes. Varying the temporal arousal of positive, relative to negative, emotion leads us to our second objective of examining sequential patterns of mixed emotional experiences that range in valence and intensity. Most investigations of sequential mixed emotions have focused on two emotion events (i.e., one negative and one positive) and therefore two experiential patterns (negative to positive; positive to negative). In contrast, we focus on far more complex and previously unexamined mixed emotion sequences because of our focus on temporal arousal of positive, relative to negative, emotion. Third, this research pinpoints the specific coping processes involved that lead to more favorable reactions to mixed emotions that arise sequentially.

Specifically, we examine consumers’ overall evaluations of mixed emotional experiences varying in temporal arousal of positive versus negative emotion. We argue that relatively close (vs. distant) temporal arousal of positive emotion relative to negative emotion provides cognitive resources necessary to cope with mixed emotions and hence lower the discomfort otherwise associated with it. This in turn leads them to evaluate mixed emotional experiences favorably.

Four studies across a variety of contexts test our main thesis that greater cognitive resources become available to construe mixed experiences in a favorable light with close (vs. distant) temporal arousal of positive emotion relative to negative emotion. In particular, we rely on far more complex sequential mixed emotional experiences than previously investigated, ones that are comprised of multiple emotional events of either valence that vary in emotion intensity levels so that temporal arousal manipulations occur in the middle of the entire experience rather than at the beginning, end or both. This allows us to isolate any effects that may arise from temporal arousal. Indeed, prior studies have used at most three sequential events that vary on valence only (e.g., good and bad events: Linville and Fischer 1991; negative, neutral, and positive events: Lau-Gesk 2005). Specifically, we examine the effect of temporal arousal of the most intense positive emotion relative to the most intense negative emotion, given their robust influence on overall evaluations (Fredrickson and Kahneman 1993).

Study 1 relies on arcade patrons who experience sequentially close (vs. distant) temporal arousal of positive emotion relative to negative emotion, while playing a videogame. Study 2 manipulates temporal arousal of positive emotion relative to negative emotion, through a movie night experience. Results of these two studies show that consumers evaluate sequential mixed emotional experiences more favorably when the temporal arousal of positive emotion is close (vs. distant) to negative emotion. The next two studies examine reappraisal likelihood as the driver of the temporal arousal effect on evaluations of mixed emotional experiences. Study 3 manipulates reappraisal likelihood by imposing cognitive load on half of the study participants and finds differences in evaluations of a mixed romantic relationship experience due to close (vs. distant) temporal arousal of positive emotion relative to negative emotion, eliminated in these conditions. As further support for our theory, we measure reappraisal likelihood in study 4 and show that cognitive load will not moderate the effect of temporal arousal of positive, relative to negative, emotion on evaluation of a mixed emotional experience in a jelly belly sampling context, for those participants high in reappraisal tendencies because of their chronic use of reappraisal as their coping strategy. A suppression coping strategy is ruled out as well (Gross and John 2003).

REFERENCES


