My research focuses on the social consequences of emotions in organizations. In particular, I study: 1) how does the expression of complex, multi-dimensional emotions, such as emotional ambivalence, shape the emotional, cognitive and behavioral reactions of observers, relative to the expression of uni-dimensional emotions?; and 2) how does the experience of emotions like empathy, optimism and pride shape the decisions and behavior of people with power, and those in ambiguous work situations (i.e., independent contractors)? To this end, I am currently involved in several research projects that examine the intersection of emotion (both complex and singular), cognition and behavior using both experimental and field methods.

Taken together, my work enriches our understanding of how emotions are relevant for organizational behavior. It does so by showing implications of emotions for behavior in groups and teams, negotiations, leadership-subordinate interactions and among contingent workers. It also helps to build a more comprehensive understanding of emotions in organizational behavior, by focusing on an emotional experience -- emotional ambivalence -- that is likely to be quite common, but about which we know very little.

How does the Expression of Emotional Ambivalence Shape the Emotional, Cognitive and Behavioral Reactions of Observers?

A. Dissertation Research: Expressing Emotional Ambivalence in Negotiations

In my dissertation, “How to Lose Friends but Make Others Think: The Social Consequences of Expressing Emotional Ambivalence” (see enclosed summary), I examine the expression of emotional ambivalence -- which is defined as the simultaneous expression of opposing emotions in response to a person, situation, object, or idea. Given the complexity of organizational situations, emotional ambivalence is likely to be one of the most pervasive emotional experiences in organizations. Yet surprisingly little research has focused on this topic (Fong, 2006; Pratt & Rosa, 2003 are notable exceptions). Previous research on emotional ambivalence has focused on situational antecedents (Fong & Tiedens, 2002; Larsen, McGraw & Cacioppo, 2001) and implications of ambivalence for the person experiencing it (Fong, 2006; Pratt & Rosa, 2003), but previous research has not considered how the expression of emotional ambivalence by an individual influences observers, thus neglecting the central way in which emotional ambivalence functions in social situations. My work advances our understanding of emotional ambivalence by focusing on its social implications – the effects on others of expressing ambivalence. In particular, my dissertation explores two types of reactions people may have to the expression of emotional ambivalence in a first encounter: 1) emotional, cognitive and behavioral reactions toward the expresser and 2) cognitive reactions about the task.

My dissertation reveals an interesting paradox about the effects of expressing ambivalence in a first encounter: Whereas people are repelled from interacting in the future with someone who expresses emotional ambivalence, they also appear to become more motivated to think deeply about their upcoming work task, they become more tolerant of ambiguity and less closed minded after observing their future interaction partner express ambivalent emotions, relative to discrete single emotions. More specifically, with regard to observer’s emotional, cognitive and behavioral reactions towards the expresser, I find the effects of expressing emotional ambivalence are distinguishable from the effects of expressing positive emotions, such as happiness, and negative emotions, such as anger. Anger repels people because it elicits low self-efficacy in observers, whereas ambivalence repels people because it elicits feelings of frustration in observers. Expressions of ambivalence also elicit character judgments of indecisiveness and incompetence, and interpersonal attitudes such as distrust. In contrast to the social costs that stem from
expressing emotional ambivalence, I find that it also has benefits for observers’ depth of cognitive processing about the task. Non-consciously, observing another person express ambivalence, and therefore appear contemplative, may lead an observer to exhibit similar behavior. Evidence from my dissertation indicates that ambivalence elicits these cognitive benefits. Finally, because emotional expressions also serve as incentives or deterrents for other people’s behavior (Barry et al. 2004; Van Kleef et al., 2004a, 2004b, 2006), I also predicted and found that observing one’s future negotiation partner express emotional ambivalence shaped observers’ negotiation intentions. Specifically, observing a negotiation partner express emotional ambivalence leads observers to have a more competitive initial stance in the negotiation (i.e. first offer and recall of more competitive negotiation strategies), because ambivalence signals indecision and the ability to be influenced.

B. Expressing Emotional Ambivalence in Groups and Teams
Extending the implications of my dissertation research from dyads to groups, I am beginning to examine the effects of expressing emotional ambivalence in decision-making teams. In “The Social Consequences of Expressing Emotional Ambivalence in Groups and Teams”, in Research on Managing Groups & Teams: Affect and Groups (2007), E.A. Mannix, M.A. Neale, & C.P. Anderson (Eds.). Batia Wiesenfeld and I have developed a model that focuses on the social implications of expressing emotional ambivalence in a group or team context. We theorize that in addition to the important interpersonal-level effects that I explore in my dissertation, the expression of emotional ambivalence will also shape group-level dynamics, such as relationship-focused conflict, social cohesion and conformity. We also suggest that the expression of emotional ambivalence by an individual within a group will increase the cognitive complexity of the group’s decision making process, increase the level of information search and discussion, affect influence processes, and shape leadership emergence.

How Does the Experience of Discrete Emotions Shape the Decisions and Behaviors of People with Power?

In addition to my focus on emotional ambivalence, I also study a variety of other emotional states and the effects of these states on decision-making and behavior of powerful people.

A. Emotions of Powerful People as Guide for Silencing and Advice Taking Behavior
In a theoretical chapter, “Silence and the Dynamics of Power” (Morrison & Rothman, Forthcoming in Voice and Silence in Organizations, G. Greenberg, M.S. Edwards & C.T. Brinsfield (Eds.)), Elizabeth Morrison and I argue that a much fuller understanding of organizational silence can be gained by developing a clearer understanding of the psychological mechanisms and interpersonal dynamics at the root of silence. We consider the effects that power has on managers’ and subordinates’ emotions (in addition to their cognitions and behaviors). For instance, research has shown that individuals who feel highly powerful, and thus have an activated approach system, experience more positive than negative emotions, and more positive emotions than those who feel less powerful (Berdahl & Martorana, 2006). We suggest a likely implication of these effects is that power-holders will tend to have an overly positive assessment of their current effectiveness and future likelihood of success. They will be more likely to feel that “all is well.” As a result, they will be less likely to see value in, seek out, or listen to negative feedback or other input. That is, they will be less likely to convey the openness that subordinates need in order to feel comfortable voicing their concerns. In this chapter, we highlight how the emotional states of both managers and subordinates are part of the foundation for employee silence.

In empirical research with Kelly See, Elizabeth Morrison & Jack Soll (“How Power Affects Confidence, Positive Emotions, and Advice Taking”, in progress), I am also exploring the mechanisms by which power influences advice taking. Recent research (Keltner, Gruenfeld & Anderson, 2003; Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006) suggests that being in a position of high power may lead to more action-oriented behavior and less attentiveness to others. In our work we explore whether power reduces
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the extent to which people incorporate others’ advice into their own judgment. We consider the mediating effects of elevated confidence, as well as the role of emotions such as optimism and pride.

B. Leader’s Empathy as Guide for Unjust Managerial Decisions in Teams
I have also been studying the effects of experiencing empathy on social decision-making. In our paper, “Empathy, Fairness & Preferential Treatment: Paving the Road to Unfairness with Good Intentions” (Blader, Rothman & Gonzalez; submitted to Academy of Management Journal), we examine the relationship between empathy and preferential treatment. In a series of studies, we find that empathy leads group leaders to engage in preferential treatment of workers in need because it shapes their perceptions of fairness. Specifically, high levels of empathy lead to the perception that preferential treatment is fair, and these perceptions of fairness mediate the effects of empathy on helping behavior. However, empathy only has this effect when the group leader is not accountable for his/her decisions. When leaders anticipated that their decisions or behaviors would be linked with them personally (i.e. they were identifiable), these leaders were not influenced by their feelings of empathy, and did not provide more preferential treatment than the leaders in the low empathy condition. This research therefore identifies accountability as a factor which limits leaders’ use of empathic emotion and its effect on preferential decision-making.

C. Fear and Optimism as Guide for Decisions to Stay or Leave Independent Contracting
Finally, in “What Keeps Freelancers Freelancing?: Financial and Emotional Risk” (Rothman & Anteby, working paper), we analyze a survey of approximately 2,000 independent contractors, and explore emotions, in particular increased anxiety and reduced optimism, as an important mechanism by which experienced downtime leads contractors to persist or leave this work arrangement. We find that downtime leads to greater intentions to become a traditional employee because it increases anxiety and reduces optimism about contracting. This research takes the perspective that emotions are a resource that help guide action in ambiguous situations.

Future Research Agenda

In the future, I will continue to build a body of research that advances our understanding of the social implications of experiencing and expressing complex emotions, such as emotional ambivalence. I am very excited about the prospect of studying issues of emotional ambivalence in the field, in particular, among leaders of organizations. In future studies, I plan to extend my dissertation by exploring whether people react differently to expressions of ambivalence from low versus high power others. Observer reactions to ambivalent expressions are likely to change when the expresser is of high relative power. For instance, a common expectation is that leaders and high power individuals will be clear, resolute, and decisive. When leaders are ambivalent, observers are likely to feel particularly frustrated, as well as to judge the leader as incompetent. Thus the social consequences of expressing emotional ambivalence may differ for high and low powered expressers. I also plan to extend my dissertation by continuing to explore the ways in which ambivalence is distinct from single negative emotions. In one study, I plan to examine the way in which nonverbal expressions of ambivalence are distinct from nonverbal expressions of similar, but less complex emotions, such as sadness. In a second study, I plan to examine people’s differing motivation to repair others’ sadness vs. ambivalence. Some interesting preliminary results show participants feel more sympathy for sad people than for ambivalent people, suggesting people may be more inclined to provide social support to someone expressing sadness than to someone expressing ambivalence.
REFERENCES


Blader, S., Rothman, N.B., & Gonzalez, C.M. Empathy, Fairness, & Preferential Treatment: Paving the Road to Unfairness With Good Intentions (Under Review).


