

AMBIVALENCE IN ORGANIZATIONS

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Ambivalence in Organizations

The experience of simultaneously positive and negative orientations toward a person, goal, task, idea, and so on is quite common in organizations, but poorly understood. We explore the nature of ambivalence in organizations, its organizational triggers, and offer an integrative framework of four major responses to highly intense ambivalence (avoidance, domination, compromise, and holism) that is applicable to actors at all levels of analysis. We discuss the positive and negative outcomes associated with each response, and the conditions under which each is most effective and likely. Although ambivalence is uncomfortable for actors, it has the potential to foster growth in the actor as well as highly adaptive and effective behavior.

Keywords: Ambivalence, defense mechanisms, coping mechanisms, wisdom

Ambivalence in Organizations

Consider the popular imagery of the leader in an organization. For some of the many below him in the hierarchy, he is secure, knowing, decisive, powerful, dynamic, threatening, driving, and altogether remote, acting in clear or obscure ways to affect the future of the organization he leads. At eye level, he is more often seen as filled with troubled doubts as he tries to deal with the ambivalences and contradictions of his status. And if his feet are made of a substance more solid than clay, it is because on his climb to the top and with the aid of those who help hold him there, he has learned to still the doubts, to live with the ambivalences, and to cope with the contradictions of his position. (Merton 1976, p. 73)

As this quotation from Robert Merton suggests, ambivalence appears to be fairly common in organizational settings – and, as we argue below, not just among individuals but all organizational actors, from individuals to groups to organizations themselves. Actors are buffeted by complex and dynamic work environments, play multiple and at times contradictory roles, and confront multifaceted issues, goals, and so on (Wang and Pratt 2008). However, as the quote goes on to suggest, actors are often able to “live with the ambivalence” and “cope with the contradictions.” The quote thus begs the question, how do actors accomplish this difficult feat – how do they respond to the vexing mixed feelings and thoughts that characterize ambivalence and somehow move forward with a clear focus and coherent action?

Unfortunately the means by which organizational actors respond to ambivalence are poorly understood. This is regrettable because we do know that *how* actors deal with ambivalence matters. Sometimes ambivalence leads to negative outcomes such as behavioral vacillation and paralysis (see Pratt and Doucet 2000, Weigert and Franks 1989); but as implied above, it can also lead to positive outcomes such as creativity (Fong 2006) and trust (Pratt and Dirks 2006). The purpose of our paper, therefore, is to better understand *when*, *why*, and *how* organizational actors respond to ambivalence.

To build a foundation for addressing these issues, we first discuss what ambivalence is and why it matters. We then develop a process model of ambivalence that applies to individual members as well as collectives such as groups and the organization as a whole. We discuss the organizational triggers of ambivalence, and explore in-depth the issue of how actors respond to the resulting ambivalence. We offer an integrative 2x2 framework, suggesting that avoidance, domination, compromise, and holism are the major, more or less distinct, responses to ambivalence. We also discuss the conditions under which each

response is most likely and the positive and negative outcomes of each response. Our process model is summarized in Figure 1. Finally, we conclude by exploring implications for future research.

Insert Figure 1 about here

What is Ambivalence?

Ambivalence literally refers to the experience of two (*ambi*) opposing forces (*valences*), and is derived from the Latin *ambo* or “both” and *valere*, which means “to be strong” (Meyerson and Scully 1995). Although there have been some differences in how ambivalence has been defined (see Conner and Sparks 2002 for a review), there remains a high degree of convergence across definitions in psychological research. Specifically, we define ambivalence as *simultaneously positive and negative orientations toward an object*. Ambivalence includes cognition (I think about X) and/or emotion (I feel about X); ambivalence occurs when cognitions clash, emotions clash, or cognitions and emotions clash. Thus, ambivalence is often described as having “mixed feelings,” being “torn between conflicting impulses” and being “pulled in different directions.”¹

We adopt this view of ambivalence as simultaneous positive and negative orientations toward an object, but highlight four important points of clarification. First, following research on the psychodynamic roots of ambivalence (Freud 1950/1920, Horney 1999/1966, Sincoff 1990), we recognize that actors may not be conscious of their ambivalence. However, even if nonconscious, ambivalence may nonetheless affect actors (cf. Meyerson and Scully 1995). Second, we follow the lead of others (e.g., Horney 1999/1966) and focus on substantive rather than superficial ambivalence, as the latter (1) is likely to be ignored, (2) has little impact on behavior, and by extension (3) is of relatively little concern to management. Third, although some conceptualizations of ambivalence also include a behavioral

¹Ambivalence is related to, but distinct from, cognitive dissonance (cf. Baek 2010). Like dissonance, ambivalence is rooted in inconsistency, and is often associated with a motivational force for its resolution (Brickman et al. 1987). Ambivalence, in contrast, is broader in scope as it may involve feelings as well as thoughts and may be nonconscious as well as conscious. Extensions of cognitive dissonance also suggest that the primary root of these tensions is protection of the self (Aronson 1997, Greenwald and Ronis 1978); ambivalence, however, while often implicating identity (Wang and Pratt 2008), need not focus on self-preservation.

component, we focus exclusively on ambivalence as an emotional-cognitive construct.² Ambivalence, as it was originally coined by Bleuler in the early 1900s, focused only on cognition and emotion (Sincoff 1990). In addition, abundant research on the attitude-behavior relationship (see Sheeran 2002 for a review) indicates that various factors may dampen the link between the two, such as situational constraints and impression management concerns. Thus, we regard behavioral tendencies and behavior itself as probabilistic *outcomes* of ambivalence rather than part of its definition. Finally, with some notable exceptions, the literature tends to view ambivalence as more or less dysfunctional for actors (e.g., Bowlby 1982, Horney 1999/1966, Merton 1976). However, we will argue that ambivalence can be functional, dysfunctional, or perhaps not ironically – both.

Why Study Ambivalence in Organizations?

Historically, ambivalence has been associated with how individuals relate to one another. Psychodynamic theorists viewed ambivalence as central to social pathologies, such as neurosis, whereby individuals “moved towards,” “moved away from,” or “moved against” others (Horney 1999/1966). Weigert and Franks (1989, p. 205) suggest that ambivalence creates doubt, uncertainty, and indecisiveness, which causes individuals to question themselves, and “without firm feelings of who we are, our actions are hesitant, halting and incomplete.” In organizations, this questioning can result in paralysis, crippling one’s ability to adapt to the environment (Pratt and Doucet 2000, Westenholz 1993). Bowlby (1982) further saw ambivalence in relationships as dysfunctional, and contrasted ambivalent attachments with secure and thus healthier attachments between children and parents, and between adults. This relational thread continues today in organizational studies that describe ambivalent – but not necessarily pathological – relationships, within organizations (Pratt and Doucet 2000, Sluss and Ashforth 2007) and the ambivalence toward other individuals that arises in work-based interactions (e.g., Rothman and Wiesenfeld 2007). “Ambivalent” has also been conceptualized as a type of identification that an

² Given that cognition and emotion are typically intertwined (Elfenbein 2007) – particularly in cases of intense ambivalence – we will not explore differences between cognitive ambivalence and emotional ambivalence (see Lavine et al. 1998 for a treatment of affective-cognitive ambivalence, Conner and Armitage 2008 for attitudinal ambivalence, which combines cognition and affect, and Rothman and Wiesenfeld 2007 for emotional ambivalence.)

individual can have with an organization (Kreiner and Ashforth 2004, Pratt 2000, cf. Presthus 1978, cf. “schizo-identification,” Dukerich et al. 1998, Elsbach 1999) – and presumably with groups within the organization.

Brickman and colleagues (1987) have gone so far as to claim that ambivalence underlies some of our most basic and enduring commitments; anything we might doubt becomes grist for ambivalence and ultimately commitment. Indeed, Brickman et al. argue that without ambivalence, there is no need for a concept like commitment. Pirsig (1974, p. 134) observes:

You are never dedicated to something you have complete confidence in. No one is fanatically shouting that the sun is going to rise tomorrow. They know it is going to rise tomorrow. When people are fanatically dedicated to political or religious faiths or any other kinds of dogmas or goals, it's always because those dogmas or goals are in doubt.

Although put rather strongly, the point is well-taken: ambivalence may at times actually fuel commitment, and some organizations are set up to help members do so (Pratt and Rosa 2003).

Since ambivalence influences relationships and basic commitments, it influences organizational life as it does other life domains. However, unlike most treatments of ambivalence that discuss its impact on a particular individual, ambivalence in organizations has a broader scope – influencing both groups and potentially the entire collective. First, drawing on theories of emotional contagion and group cognition, Pratt and Pradies (In press) have noted that individuals can “spread” their ambivalence to others. This propagation is especially likely when the ambivalent individuals are organizational leaders. To illustrate, Rothman and Wiesenfeld (2007, p. 294) suggest that members expect consistency from their group leaders, and leaders’ ambivalent expressions create a “sense of uncertainty and doubt.” Second, because senior managers act on behalf of subunits and organizations, their experience of ambivalence implicates entire collectives (cf. Staw and Sutton 1993). For instance, Larson and Tompkins (2005) found that senior managers of an aerospace company sent mixed messages about the desirability of a shift in corporate values from technical excellence to efficiency. Specifically, the managers continued to reward employees for technical excellence while propounding the overriding need for efficiency, thereby sowing their ambivalence throughout the company and implicitly encouraging employee resistance to change.

Third, ambivalence implicates collectives because the very nature of organizational life (e.g., its complexity) sets up conditions for ambivalence that must be dealt with at the individual, group, and organizational levels. As we discuss below, organizations are complicated systems that frequently embody hybrid identities, fragmented cultures, and pursue contradictory goals (Albert and Whetten 1985, Myerson and Martin 1987, Pratt and Foreman 2000). In some cases, these identities, cultures, and goals are allocated to separate subunits, as in the Atlantic Symphony Orchestra, where the musicians focus on artistic excellence while the managers focus on financial performance (Glynn 2000). The organization may or may not create mechanisms to foster ongoing “creative tension” (Cameron 1986) between the identities/goals, such as a matrix structure that intentionally juxtaposes a functional focus with a product focus (Galbraith 2009). In other cases, the identities and goals are jointly allocated to subunits, such as for-profit hospitals where the medical staff are expected to jointly weigh patient service and cost considerations (Shore 1998). In embodying hybrid identities and contradictory goals, ambivalence is an issue that must be dealt with at the collective level. As we adduce later on, whether faced by an individual, group, or organization, ambivalence is responded to in a similar fashion.

Organizational Triggers of Ambivalence

As Wang and Pratt (2008) note, sociologists have tended to view norms and roles as sources of ambivalence, whereas psychologists have tended to view individual differences and relationships as sources. Although psychological sources of ambivalence are relatively well-studied and understood, the contextual sources of ambivalence, in contrast, “have often been elusive or highly contingent” (Plambeck and Weber 2010, p. 705). However, given our interest in understanding how individuals and collectives respond to ambivalence, we focus here on the major organizational triggers of ambivalence.

The overarching contextual roots to ambivalence appear to be complexity and dynamism in the environment and the organization itself (cf. Weigert and Franks 1989). Organizations typically face complex and dynamic environments, where the meaning of events is ambiguous or equivocal, the future is fundamentally uncertain, and the numerous and often conflicting demands of diverse stakeholders must be addressed. This complexity and dynamism is associated with more proximal contextual roots in the

organization itself, as summarized in Figure 1. First, as environments become more complex and dynamic, organizations tend to become structurally differentiated and integrated (Lawrence and Lorsch 1967), often embodying contradictory goals (Brunsson 1989). Indeed, this is the essence of sociological ambivalence (Merton and Barber 1976). In a sense, ambivalence is institutionalized as a way of retaining the “requisite variety” (Ashby 1960) and flexibility to address the environment. Even in relatively simple and stable environments, organizational size and individuals’ political agendas may foster structural differentiation and contradictory goals (Mintzberg 1983).

Accordingly, individuals and collectives are typically required to juggle conflicting requirements and enact multiple identities (Burke and Stets 2009, Pratt and Foreman 2000), often operationalized in organizational studies as role conflict and identity conflict (Ashforth et al. 2008, Katz and Kahn 1979, Rosen 1970). For example, an individual may be a supervisor, subordinate, coworker, and friend. Although it is very common for work associates to become friendly, Bridge and Baxter (1992) note inherent conflicts between work-related and friend roles, including norms of impartiality vs. favoritism, evaluation vs. acceptance, and confidentiality vs. openness. As an example at the collective level, Herbert (1997) describes six distinct and at times conflicting “normative orders” that the Los Angeles Police Department strives to simultaneously maintain (i.e., law, bureaucratic control, adventure/machismo, safety, competence, and morality). The upshot for actors is that they may perceive mixed signals, inducing them to view their role with some ambivalence.

Second, and similarly, the literature on organizational dualities and related concepts – paradoxes, dilemmas, double binds, oxymorons, ironies, and dialectics – suggest that oppositional tendencies are endemic to organizations (e.g., Clegg 2000, Tracy 2004). Well-documented examples include continuity and change, a global and local focus, quality and efficiency, and competition and cooperation. Although ostensibly opposites on a continuum, where more of one necessarily means less of the other, a dualities perspective views them as facets of a natural wholeness (Graetz and Smith 2008). That is, the dualistic facets are complementary even though each may “seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously” (Lewis 2000, p. 760). For instance, service providers are encouraged to

manifest “detached concern”: empathetic concern for clients enables the provider to better understand clients’ needs, whereas detachment enables the provider to remain reasonably objective and unburdened by emotional involvement (Merton 1976).

Perhaps the most common dualities faced at the individual and group levels of analysis involve memberships in various groups within the organization, including the organization itself. Smith and Berg (1987) describe 12 membership dualities under the labels of “paradoxes of belonging” (e.g., maintaining individuality within a group), “paradoxes of engaging” (e.g., needing to trust group members before trust is established), and “paradoxes of speaking” (e.g., accepting dependence on group members in order to act independently). Accordingly, even the most effective groups are laced with many at least tacit dualities. For instance, Murnighan and Conlon (1991) found that members of successful string quartets managed the tension between the desire for democracy and the necessity for leadership by believing their quartets were democratic even though they typically deferred to the first violinist. Dualities are particularly likely to provoke ambivalence among actors because of their simultaneous injunction to do A and to do the opposite of A. Indeed, the more strongly that one dualistic quality is emphasized, the greater the need for the other (Erikson 1976, Smelser 1998). For instance, following Smith and Berg (1987), a strong effort to identify with a group may spawn a counter-desire to establish one’s individuality.

Third, jobs, relationships, policies, decisions, groups, ideas, and so on – indeed, any object of note in an organizational context – tend to be multifaceted (Merton 1976, Pratt 2001). Although an actor’s attitude toward particularly salient facets may exert a positive or negative “halo” (e.g., Feeley 2002) over other facets, it remains that an actor is unlikely to have a common attitude toward every facet since positive and negative aspects tend to surface over time (Wilson and Hodges 1992). Specifically, the more familiar an actor is with an object, the richer the store of information and the greater the probability of having encountered the object’s multiple facets and imperfections. Thus, research on personal relationships indicates that ambivalence typically characterizes even the most intimate of bonds (Thompson and Holmes 1996). Indeed, while seeing a prospective significant other through rose-colored glasses may facilitate early bonding, healthy relationships are more likely to endure if one recognizes the

negative as well as positive facets of the person; thus, “familiarity breeds ambivalence” (Brooks and Highhouse 2006, p. 105). As Thompson and Holmes (1996, p. 502) conclude, “a moderate level of ambivalence may actually indicate a balanced, realistic assessment of a partner.” Moving to organizational contexts, Oglensky (2008) concluded that even robust mentor-protégé relationships are inherently ambivalent; and Kreiner and Ashforth’s (2004, p. 20) study of employed graduates suggested that ambivalence was “not a rare existential experience” (see also Brief 1998 and Ziegler et al. In press).

Fourth, temporal influences tend to introduce ambivalence as well (Pratt and Doucet 2000). As noted, organizational contexts are typically dynamic; indeed, Lewin (1951) argues that seemingly stable states are really temporary equilibria held in place by opposing forces. Dynamism may introduce change, inconsistencies, ambiguities, and lags in objects or at least in how they are perceived. Piderit (2000) argues that the most prevalent reaction to organizational change is ambivalence – such that employees simultaneously support and resist a change. Ambivalence often results from the recognition of the benefits of change coupled with a negative response to the uncertainty and messiness of change. For example, Piderit discusses an employee who was frustrated when he learned that his incentive budget for distributors was cut late in his planning cycle (negative emotional response), but agreed with the logic for reallocating the funds (positive cognitive response).

Further, status hierarchies foster a desire for upward mobility and therefore, for all but the top actors, some dissatisfaction with the status quo. Similarly, the use of developmental feedback and continuous improvement necessitates that even under conditions of success, actors (particularly managers) need to acknowledge both the pros and cons (e.g., “The project was a success, but we can do better next time”). Fong (2006, p. 1017), citing Collins’ (2001) “Stockdale paradox,” adds that managers, with an eye to the future, must “acknowledge the difficulties and challenges that the organization faces, while also maintaining faith and confidence in its ability to prevail.” And research on counterfactual thinking indicates that reflecting on “what could have been” (Roese 1997, quoted in Fong 2006, p. 1017) may introduce ambivalence into otherwise positive events (“it could have been better”) and negative events (“it could have been worse”). Indeed, Olympic silver medalists were found to be *less* happy with

their achievement than bronze medalists because they “just missed the gold” (Medvec et al. 1995).

Finally, organizations may even deliberately instill ambivalence as a means of fostering attitude and behavioral change. Pratt and Rosa (2003) describe how network marketing firms “harvest” work-family conflict to transform individuals’ ambivalence about the firm into commitment. They recruit individuals who are at risk for work-family conflict and encourage them to frame work in terms of helping their family (e.g., “you’re doing this for your children”), to view other salespeople connected to their sponsor as a “family,” and to recruit their own family and friends to help with bookkeeping and distribution and to avoid those who would “steal the dream.” Pratt and Rosa found that newcomers experiencing little ambivalence ultimately had *weak* commitment to the firm. Similarly, the induction of ambivalence has been used to foster acceptance of corrupt practices (Ashforth and Anand 2003) and to “unlearn” practices deemed antithetical to organizations (Pratt and Barnett 1997).

In sum, as depicted in Figure 1:

Proposition 1: Ambivalence is positively associated with: (a) structural differentiation (i.e., contradictory goals, multiple identities) and integration; (b) organizational dualities; (c) multifaceted objects; (d) various temporal influences (as described above); and (e) deliberate organizational attempts to instill ambivalence.

It is evident, then, that the complexity and dynamism of organizational life engender a number of triggers of ambivalence. Indeed, if the environment and thereby organizations continue to become more complex and turbulent, ambivalence is likely to increase.

How do Actors Respond to the Experience of Ambivalence?

Consistency theories such as cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1957) and balance theory (Heider 1958) indicate that ambivalence tends to be aversive, that is, the sense of being simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by an object is typically discomforting. We posit that although ambivalence may be uncomfortable at times, ambivalence can also remain latent or be managed in ways that allow actors to function comfortably. The experience likely varies between actors as well as between situations for a given actor.

Our discussion focuses on cases of high intensity ambivalence. *Intensity* refers to the extent to

which the actor experiences opposing orientations as strong and sharp. The greater the felt strength of both orientations, the more intense the ambivalence. We assume that an intensity threshold exists where ambivalence becomes intolerable, and although the threshold likely varies from actor to actor, the experience will be similar once this level is reached. The more intense ambivalence becomes, the more the actor will be motivated to take action to reduce the discomfort.

Generally, intense ambivalence is salient to the actor, where *salience* is the extent to which the actor is consciously aware of the opposing orientations. Intensity tends to trigger salience (the discomfort provokes awareness) and, to a lesser extent, salience may reinforce intensity (awareness of a contradiction is itself disturbing). However, it is possible to experience ambivalence that is intense yet not be aware of it. This is the primary focus of Freudian theories of defense mechanisms, where individuals are argued to struggle nonconsciously to keep intense but socially undesirable thoughts and feelings from breaking into consciousness (Baumeister et al. 1998, Cramer 2006).

Conversely, most ambivalence research in psychology – and the goal in lab studies – focuses on at least moderately intense and highly salient ambivalence. Harrist (2006) found the experience of such ambivalence to be characterized by “disorientation,” described as a sense of disequilibrium, confusion, apprehension, and loss of control, where it feels wrong to have more than one feeling toward an object. Research suggests that during the experience of ambivalence this sense of disequilibrium and discomfort may motivate heightened awareness of information and surroundings (Rudolph and Popp 2007), and prepare one to take on new schema that are more adaptive (Pratt and Barnett 1997).

A 2x2 Framework of Responses to Ambivalence

Research in psychology and, to a lesser extent, sociology offers many responses to ambivalence (e.g., Coser 1966, Horney 1999/1966, Katz and Glass 1979, Tracy 2004, see Pratt and Doucet 2000 for a review). However, what is lacking is a clear conceptual framework for organizing these disparate responses to ambivalence and applying them systematically to organizational contexts. In this section, we offer a 2x2 framework to explain when and why certain responses are most likely to occur across levels of analysis in organizations (see Figure 2). Prior work that was most instrumental to our framework includes

Horney's (1999/1966) very basic typology of moving towards/away from/against the object of ambivalence (see also, Pratt and Pradies In press), and research on interpersonal conflict-handling styles (Blake and Mouton 1964, Rahim 1985, Thomas 1992).

Insert Figure 2 about here

Ambivalence is decomposed into an emphasis on the positive orientation toward the focal object and an emphasis on the negative orientation, as reflected by the two axes. The axes are partitioned into "low" and "high" for pedagogical purposes, suggesting four more or less distinct approaches for responding to ambivalence. First, *avoidance*, similar to "moving away," is associated with a low emphasis on each orientation. Second, *compromise* is associated with a moderate emphasis on each orientation. Third, *domination*, similar to "moving toward" and "moving against," is associated with a high emphasis on one orientation and a low emphasis on the other; thus domination appears twice in the figure. Fourth, *holism* is associated with a high emphasis on each. We deliberately use "is associated with" rather than "occurs when" because each approach is both a cause and effect of the dual orientation toward the focal object. For example, a low positive emphasis and a low negative emphasis make avoidance more likely, and avoidance may in turn reinforce the dual low emphasis. Table 1 provides examples of each of the four responses at the individual, group, and organization levels of analysis.

Insert Table 1 about here

At first blush, it would appear that holism is the optimal response to dealing with ambivalence as it seems to signify a "win-win" or integrative approach. However, we argue that there are both positive and negative outcomes associated with each response, and that each is more effective and therefore likely under certain circumstances (cf. Rahim 1985). Each of the four responses is discussed in detail below. It should be noted that although we will be referring to studies that provide evidence of the responses, the authors of those studies did not use the terminology of avoidance, domination, compromise, and holism. In other words, we are inferring the existence of the responses from the descriptions the authors provide.

To embed the discussion in organizational contexts, we assume that ambivalence is attributable to the organizational triggers discussed earlier. We also assume that the triggers either lack a ready pragmatic solution or that the actor opts out of such a solution (e.g., quitting the job). Given the triggers, many issues are inherently difficult to resolve (e.g., structural inconsistencies). Finally, because conscious and nonconscious processes tend to be intertwined, it should be noted that the responses may be enacted consciously, nonconsciously, or both.

Avoidance

If intense ambivalence is intolerable ambivalence, how is it possible that an actor can maintain a low emphasis on both the positive and negative orientations to the object? The answer, we contend, is through the use of *defense mechanisms* and *coping mechanisms*. Following Cramer (1998, p. 920, 2006), defense and coping mechanisms are means by which actors protect themselves from the “emotional consequences of adversity.” Defense mechanisms are nonconscious (in terms of awareness and effort) and unintentional, whereas coping mechanisms are conscious and intentional. Coping mechanisms focus on alleviating tension (what Lazarus and Folkman 1984 refer to as “emotion-focused coping”) and/or resolving the problem (“problem-focused coping”). Because defense mechanisms and the emotion-focused coping mechanisms utilized in this cell of Figure 2 enable the actor to avoid directly dealing with the ambivalence and perhaps even acknowledging it, this cell is labeled “avoidance.”

Defense mechanisms. Perhaps the most commonly used defense mechanisms for warding off ambivalence are denial, splitting, and projection. Denial, and the related concept of repression, protects the actor from threat by actively but nonconsciously rejecting, reinterpreting, forgetting, or minimizing disagreeable information (Baumeister et al. 1998, Sincoff 1992). Argyris (1990, p. 30) asserts that most organizational cultures actually facilitate and reward defensiveness because norms favor care for people within the organization over facing tough issues that could upset or offend them, meaning that “defense routines are protected and reinforced by the very people who prefer that they do not exist.” For example, David Stockman, a highly-skilled economist, was appointed to assist the Reagan administration with changing the economic landscape. He felt conflicted because he wanted to correct budget problems that

the president and his cabinet didn't necessarily understand, but did not want to make their incompetence salient. Stockman and a sub-committee unwittingly created a structural way to avoid facing the situation by creating a budget that appeared favorable to all, but contained a "magic asterisk" stating "future savings to be identified, 44 billion in cuts" (p. 34). All parties involved acted as though the cuts were not an issue or had already been made.

In splitting, the actor nonconsciously separates the positive and negative orientations so that the dualism is not perceived. (Related concepts include doublethink, isolation, bracketing, and compartmentalizing; e.g., Baumeister et al. 1998, El-Sawad et al. 2004, Giddens 1991). For example, Johnson (1997) describes how tenant farmers in Brazil wrestled with their strong dependence on and resentment toward their landlords. Tenants dealt with the ambivalence by idealizing particular landlords as father-like and good (affirming the value of dependence) while demonizing others as bad (affirming the value of resentment). As a result, a tenant's views of a given landlord were relatively unconflicted.

Finally, in projection, one actor nonconsciously attributes or "projects" their own undesirable characteristics, motives, thoughts, or feelings onto a second actor so as to avoid perceiving them in the first actor. It is an externalization of inner qualities, a transfer to the second actor of schema pertaining to the first actor.³ A prime example in organizations is scapegoating, where an actor is made to bear responsibility for the problems caused by others, freeing the latter from culpability. Although many instances of scapegoating reflect a cynical ploy to simply foist blame onto another actor, other instances reflect a nonconscious projection of the actor's own negative attributes on the other actor (Eagle and Newton 1981, Wexler 1993). Even more insidiously, Eagle and Newton (1981, p. 299, our emphasis) found that "the people who became scapegoats are often subtly *encouraged* by the group in the activity for which they are attacked": the scapegoat is set up for failure and sacrificed on behalf of others.

Coping mechanisms. Perhaps the most commonly used coping mechanisms in organizations for protecting against the tension associated with marked ambivalence are suppression, escape or distraction,

³ Newman et al. (1997) argue that projection is actually a byproduct of suppression (i.e., conscious denial). That is, attempting to suppress thoughts about an actor's own undesirable attributes makes them cognitively accessible such that they are more likely to be used in forming impressions of other actors.

relaxation, and emotional release. Because these mechanisms are commonly associated with all manner of stressors, our discussion will be brief. Suppression involves a conscious effort to dismiss anxiety-provoking thoughts about the issue in question. For example, Ashforth (2001) argues that individuals undergoing role transitions such as a promotion may engage in “selective forgetting,” that is, willfully suppressing those elements of their prior role that are inconsistent with the new role (e.g., a new sales manager who unlearns the habit of being a self-focused salesperson and learns to be a team-focused manager). Escape or distraction involves diverting one’s attention away from the problematic issue. A team experiencing strong ambivalence about a pending decision might immerse itself in another, more welcome task. Relaxation techniques like meditation may be used to calm anxiety. Finally, emotional release refers to venting the anxiety, as when a group member complains loudly about a problematic situation or uses humor to express otherwise socially undesirable emotions. Rosen (1988) describes how members of an advertising agency performed skits at the firm’s Christmas party that lampooned senior management and the firm, thereby venting the ambivalence members felt toward the organization. Parsons (1951, p. 208) notes that similar ritualistic behaviors “prevent the conflicting elements from a direct confrontation with each other, resulting in the transformation of a latent into an open conflict.”

Positive and negative outcomes. At first blush, avoidance may appear to be a dysfunctional response to ambivalence in organizations. Because avoidance reduces the immediate tension associated with ambivalence, it may prevent the actor from even recognizing the ambivalence, thereby inhibiting learning and problem solving (Argyris 1993). Also, avoidance may prove futile in any event because unwelcome thoughts are not easily denied or suppressed (Wegner 1989), and focusing on unwelcome emotions through emotional release may only render them more salient (e.g., Brown et al. 2005). Thus, the defense mechanisms of denial, splitting, and projection have been labeled “immature” defenses (e.g., Andrews et al. 1993) and emotion-focused coping mechanisms have been found to predominate when an actor believes that a stressor must be endured rather than constructively managed (Folkman and Lazarus 1980).

However, there is a functional side to avoidance in organizations. Defense and coping

mechanisms help reduce tension to a more tolerable level, enabling the actor to perform more effectively. Further, defense and coping mechanisms may even facilitate subsequent compromise and holism by reducing debilitating tension while preserving the ambivalent qualities. For instance, Schneider (2003, p. 33) argues that splitting, by preventing “premature closure,” creates a “generative space” where actors have an opportunity to confront and work through the resulting tension.

Generally, avoidance is most effective and therefore most likely if the issue prompting the ambivalence is relatively unimportant or insoluble. Keeping tensions at bay through avoidance may be all that is truly needed or possible and may even promote longer-term well-being and performance (cf. Cramer 2006). Indeed, it appears that most actors continue to perform effectively even though ambivalence is more the norm than the exception in various domains of life, presumably including organizations (Smelser 1998).

In sum:

Proposition 2: Ambivalence will likely lead to the response of avoidance to the extent that the issue in question is relatively unimportant or difficult to resolve.

Proposition 3: (a) Avoidance reduces tension to a more tolerable level, facilitating performance and the other responses to ambivalence. However, avoidance (b) may prevent recognition of ambivalence, thereby inhibiting learning and problem solving, and (c) may prove futile and even backfire.

Domination

Domination is a defense mechanism (i.e., a nonconscious process) and/or coping mechanism (i.e., a conscious process) through which actors convince themselves that one orientation will suffice.

Domination is thus characterized by a high emphasis on one orientation and a minimal emphasis on the other, and therefore appears in two quadrants of Figure 2. As Harrist (2006) notes, domination does not mean that all of the conflicting thoughts and feelings necessarily dissipate, only that the actor is able to choose one orientation over the other.

Defense mechanisms. Nonconscious forms of domination include reaction formation and response amplification, where the actor essentially exaggerates positive or negative responses to the object so as to override the other orientation and thereby relieve ambivalence (Baumeister et al. 1998,

Bell and Esses 2002, Katz and Glass 1979). Although these concepts hale from different literatures, the core argument underlying each concept is essentially the same; thus, we will use response amplification to refer to both.

Nonconsciously pushing one orientation out of awareness is analogous to denial as discussed under “Avoidance”; however, in the case of avoidance, the actor is denying the entire ambivalence, whereas in domination the actor is denying just one orientation and allowing the other to “dominate.” For example, drawing on Gouldner’s (1954) study of a wildcat strike, Bowles (1991) describes how management defined the strike as simply a contest for power, thereby enabling them to deny their uncomfortable culpability for the various ethical issues that helped fuel the strike. As with denial generally, it is important to note that domination does not mean that the actor has permanently erased the opposite pole; rather, it may persist nonconsciously (Kets de Vries and Miller 1984).

Response amplification may also be part of a nonconscious macro-oscillation that occurs over time, representing a shift from one domination cell in Figure 2 to the opposite domination cell, such that the actor experiences an entire paradigm shift. Kets de Vries and Miller (1984) provide an example. An artistic director and an administrative director of an opera company seemed to be inseparable, never differed in opinions, and consistently presented a united front in board meetings. This zealous relationship persisted for two years, until the administrative director violated the authority of the artistic director. Despite the interdependence of their roles, the two men quit interacting and the artistic director vilified his colleague until the board fired him. The authors suggest that the relationship between the executives was not perfect prior to the falling out, but the negative feelings were forcefully held in abeyance, eventually gaining enough momentum to shift the positive relationship to its opposite. The change from extremely positive to extremely negative was a paradigm shift that resulted in the termination of their relationship.

Coping mechanisms. Intense ambivalence may also lead to conscious domination processes. Having acknowledged both orientations prior to making the decision, conscious domination is typically a way of ignoring the importance of one orientation rather than ignoring its existence. Conscious domination can be as simple as actively deciding to commit to one extreme and dismiss the other, if only

for the sake of relieving discomfort, and can be as complex as a tempered radical “deferring radical commitments until a foothold is established” (Meyerson and Scully 1995, p. 592). In an effort to be a change agent, a tempered radical might conform to organizational norms until she is in a position of power and can more safely advance an opposing agenda to change norms (Meyerson and Scully 1995).

Research indicates that ambivalence is positively associated with processing information about the object as a means of resolving the ambivalence and thus reducing the aversive state, but often in a manner that is biased toward whatever orientation is initially stronger or more salient (Clark et al. 2008, van Harreveld et al. 2009). Thus, although domination is expedient, it may often short-circuit detailed consideration of the foregone orientation. Indeed, research suggests that ambivalent attitudes are more susceptible than nonambivalent attitudes to a variety of (often specious) primes, including mood, recent cues about the object, and consensus information (i.e., what others think) (Bell and Esses 1997, Hass et al. 1991, Hodson et al. 2001). It’s as if the actor is looking for a way out, however trivial.

Further, conscious domination is likely very prone to rationalization because the actor needs a reassuring justification to bolster the choice – particularly if the actor is accountable to other actors (Tetlock 1985). Through rationalization, actors can convince themselves that one orientation is superior to the other, or trivialize an orientation until the favored one can be enacted with greater ease (van Harreveld et al. 2009). We acknowledge that domination is not the only process in Figure 2 where there may be a need to rationalize, but the need here is particularly acute. According to neutralization theory, actors who feel conflicted about a future action may actively neutralize guilt and blame, allowing themselves to move forward (Sykes and Matza 1957). In a study of employees performing “necessary evils” (i.e., tasks that cause harm to others in order to serve a greater purpose), Margolis and Molinsky (2008) observed the behaviors of conflicted employees, such as police officers tasked with evicting tenants from their homes. Faced with the tension between an obligation to do their job and an aversion toward causing hardship for those who could not pay their bills, some officers focused only on the task, while downplaying emotions and any information that personalized the evictees.

Positive and negative outcomes. Generally, domination is most effective and likely under one or

more of the following conditions. The first is when the actor *must* choose between orientations – and that is precisely when ambivalence becomes particularly intolerable (van Harreveld et al. 2009). For example, a top management team holding mixed feelings about a job candidate may not be uncomfortable until it is forced to decide whether or not to hire the candidate. Emphasizing only one orientation enables an actor to align current attitudes (“we really like this candidate”) with anticipated behavior (“we will decide in favor of the candidate”), mitigating the intolerable discomfort.

The second condition where domination is likely and effective is when one orientation is actually counterproductive. For example, intense ambivalence could be caused by a need to complete a work-related project coupled with a fear of failure. Focusing on task completion while neutralizing the fear would provide an effective resolution to the ambivalence. That said, the rejected orientation may rear its head in unexpected ways (even when successfully chased out of conscious awareness); as Lewis (2000, p. 763) notes, rejecting “one side of a polarity intensifies pressure from the other.” The final condition is when the core of both the positive and negative orientations does not need to be preserved. In this case, decisive action is appropriate as it enables actors to relieve the intolerable ambivalence and align their thoughts and feelings with their behavior.

Conversely, domination can be very dysfunctional in situations that require maintenance of both orientations. For example, tension in the mission of a natural food cooperative required the simultaneous enactment of pragmatic business values and idealistic values that set the co-op apart from other grocers (Ashforth et al. 2010). In order to stay afloat, neither the pragmatic nor idealistic values could dominate over time. Domination would be a dysfunctional resolution that either destroys the co-op’s mission (if pragmatic values prevail) or bankrupts the co-op (if idealistic values prevail). Additionally, domination may be dysfunctional when the decision is based solely on relieving discomfort. Gray (1999) suggests that choices made under negative emotional states are often biased toward the alternative that will cause the least discomfort at the time. Taking the path of least resistance may seem desirable in the moment but have negative long-term consequences, particularly if the relative benefits of the chosen response are artificially exaggerated through response amplification.

In sum:

Proposition 4: Ambivalence will likely lead to the response of domination to the extent that: (a) the actor must choose between the positive and negative orientations; (b) one orientation is actually counterproductive; or (c) the core of both orientations does not need to be preserved.

Proposition 5: (a) Domination reduces tension and, given the conditions in P3, enables the actor to focus on the most functional orientation. (b) However, domination may be biased toward the least uncomfortable orientation rather than the most effective.

Compromise

Compromise is associated with a mid-range emphasis on both the positive and negative orientations (see Figure 2). Compromise involves a give-and-take between the incompatible orientations such that they are mutually accommodated. It can be characterized as a coping mechanism in that it is typically a conscious and intentional process, whereby the actor acknowledges the simultaneous existence of the polarized orientations and recognizes the desirability of partially honoring each. In this way, compromise – especially the form we refer to below as “black and white” – is more akin to “problem-focused coping” than “emotion-focused” as the emphasis is on resolving ambivalence by dealing with the cause rather than regulating the tension associated with the ambivalence (Lazarus and Folkman 1984).

As a discrete action, compromise can take one of two forms. First, actors can “average” or combine the black and white into gray such that a middle ground is found that is not really true to either black or white. Such “gray compromises” are common in organizations and diverse; two examples will suffice. For one, actors experiencing ambivalence about a task may choose to self-handicap when they want to succeed but doubt their capability to do so. Self-handicapping enables an actor to externalize failure by deliberately acting in ways that inhibit performance (Berglas and Jones 1978). An employee preparing for a presentation may procrastinate, making it impossible to prepare thoroughly. By telling coworkers that she prepared the slides just minutes before the meeting, she has an excuse if the presentation does not go well. Ambivalence was thus “resolved” by neither completing the task as well as possible (black) nor delegating the task to a coworker (white). As another example, Weick (1979) explains a fire captain’s choices in responding to a call from an area noted for false alarms. If the captain compromises by sending all the firefighters, but at a slower speed than usual, the response is inappropriate

whether there is a fire or not. If there is a fire, the firefighters will not arrive soon enough; if there is not a fire, all the resources have been needlessly sent to the false alarm. As these examples illustrate, gray compromises tend to be problematic when at least the core of each orientation needs to be preserved.

A second type of compromise is where neither orientation is sacrificed, nor are the orientations wholly honored to the point that they are incompatible. This can be termed a “black *and* white compromise.” To illustrate, the fire captain can act as if there is a fire and as if there is not a fire by very promptly sending only some crewmembers. If there is a fire, the crew has arrived as quickly as possible; if there is not a fire, all of the resources are not wasted. This example describes compromise as a discrete action where one simultaneously respects the core of each orientation, even if in a give-and-take form. Black and white compromise may also occur sequentially in the form of vacillation, where the actor alternates orientations based on the context (Pratt and Doucet 2000, Tracy 2004). These short-term fluctuations differ from the macro-oscillation discussed under “Domination,” where the actor experiences an entire paradigm shift. The short-term fluctuations, considered as a set, respect both orientations, even if each alternation seems to abandon one orientation for the other. For example, Pratt and Dutton (2000) found that the director of a library gave money to homeless patrons at times, and asked them to leave at other times; and one librarian would sometimes call social services to request help for the homeless, and sometimes call the police to remove them from the library. We posit that it is precisely *because* these individuals opted for a negative orientation toward the homeless at one point that they opted for a positive orientation at a later point, and vice versa (Ashforth and Mael 1998, see also Kosmala and Herrbach 2006, and Kunda 1992). Long-term compromise is attained via short-term vacillation.

Positive and negative outcomes. As suggested above, compromise is generally most effective and likely when it is realized that neither the positive nor negative orientation alone will be sufficient, and black and white compromise is particularly likely when at least the core of each orientation needs to be preserved. However, intense polarities often do not lend themselves readily to negotiation; thus the process of compromise may prove difficult and actual resolutions may be hard to discern and enact.

As further noted, black and white compromise can also occur over time by vacillating between

two orientations – and as Merton (1976, p. 105) puts it, “this delicate process of alternating phases is a little like walking a tightrope, with all its attendant risks and successes.” If the core of black and/or white matter and are lost, the compromise tends to become dysfunctional. Additionally, given organizational norms for consistency (Staw 1980), vacillation may lead observers to infer that an actor is inconsistent, indecisive, and perhaps even deliberately hypocritical, particularly if the vacillation is prompted by nonconscious – and therefore difficult to justify – impulses (cf. Rothman and Wiesenfeld 2007). Rothman and Wiesenfeld (2007) add that such inferences may elicit frustration in others and inhibit liking and trust.

In sum:

Proposition 6: (a) Ambivalence will likely lead to the response of compromise to the extent that neither the positive nor negative orientation alone will be sufficient. (b) Black and white compromise is particularly likely when at least the core of each orientation needs to be preserved.

Proposition 7: (a) Compromise maintains the core of each orientation. However: (b) the process may be very difficult, and outcomes may prove elusive; (c) one orientation may co-opt the other; and (d) observers may infer that the actor is inconsistent, indecisive, or hypocritical.

Holism

Unlike compromise where the actor negates (gray) or diminishes (black and white) the integrity of each orientation, or domination where only one orientation is given expression, holism involves the complete, simultaneous, and conscious acceptance of both opposing orientations. As such, holism represents a coping mechanism. Holism is in the same spirit as black and white compromise, but represents less of a win-lose trade-off between the orientations and more of a win-win embracing of both orientations. Accordingly, holism tends to be somewhat more proactive and less reactive than compromise. Because holism is more complex and less well understood than the other responses to ambivalence, we will discuss it in detail.

The notion of holism raises the question: if ambivalence is “intolerable,” how can an actor consciously retain it, and thus “tolerate” it? One answer, we contend, is through sensemaking. Holism involves developing a more comprehensive understanding of the duality at the heart of ambivalence – a synthesis of sorts of the “thesis/antithesis” that the dualism represents, a transcendence of the particulars. However, in holism the thesis and antithesis do not disappear; holism thus enables the actor to appreciate

that the aspects of the object that engender the opposing orientations are integral to the object and perhaps even complementary and desirable (cf. Lewis 2000). Indeed, a holistic approach implies that ambivalence is not only sustainable but advantageous (Plambeck and Weber 2009). For example, the literature on organizational ambidexterity suggests that embracing the apparent contradiction between the need for exploration and the need for exploitation can lead to more nuanced and jointly optimizing actions (e.g., Raisch and Birkinshaw 2008, Smith and Tushman 2005).

Holism does not mean that the negative orientation is necessarily converted into a positive orientation, only that the actor is able to make sense of the object in such a way that the totality of the object and the ambivalence it spawns is accepted and perhaps even embraced. This also does not mean that the discomfort that attends ambivalence is necessarily reduced, given that the opposing orientations are actively sustained. Rather it speaks to the actor coming to terms with the experience of ambivalence. To illustrate, Wright (2009, p. 319) notes how some internal organizational consultants view the tension of being simultaneously regarded as insiders (employees) and outsiders (roving consultants) as a “positive source of strength and distinctiveness.”

Research on wisdom (Weick 1998, 2004), commitment (Brickman 1987, Pratt and Rosa 2003), and trust (Pratt and Dirks 2006) illustrates holism as a process. Weick suggests that wisdom involves “balancing” both knowing and doubting, that wise actors hold an ambivalent attitude whereby they are ready to act as if they know and yet as if they do not know. Specifically, ambivalence involves “the co-existence of competing tendencies, and can be seen as simultaneous efforts to adapt yet retain adaptability and to treat past experience as a guide as well as a trap” (Weick 2004, p. 663). Or, as Kenneth Johnson put it, “Education is man’s going forward from cocksure ignorance to thoughtful uncertainty” (Quotes 2010). Clearly this suggests that holding onto the whole of ambivalence may be functional, and points to holism as a possible means of approaching ambivalence. However, while this view of wisdom shows the promise of ambivalence, it sheds little light on how an actor comes to cultivate this attitude.

Brickman’s (1987) work on commitment provides strong clues as to how this is done. He suggests that commitment is the “antidote” to ambivalence. How he views commitment, however, is

much different from behavioral/escalation approaches (Salancik 1977) or attitudinal approaches to commitment (see Pratt and Rosa 2003). In Brickman's view, actors must first know the positive and negative "elements" associated with forming an attachment to a person, idea, or other object. These positive and negative elements are not divisible from the object. For example, when hiring a new CEO, it is consciously known that by selecting one person, the organization not only gains the advantage of that person's involvement, but it foregoes other possible CEOs. For Brickman, commitment involves the binding of these positive and negative elements – and the "binding" involves choice. That is, commitment involves *choosing* to hire a particular person despite the attendant ambivalence. Because ambivalence is at the heart of these actions, sometimes the negative elements will be salient (similar to "being committed" to an asylum), while at other times, the positive elements will be more salient. But at its core, both positive and negative elements always remain. Thus, commitment as a holistic action differs from vacillation or domination where some ambivalent element is escaped or discarded – either temporarily or more permanently.

Pratt and Dirks (2006) make a similar argument about ambivalence and choice when discussing the concept of trust in organizations. Trust involves being vulnerable so as to achieve something positive in a relationship in the future (Rousseau et al. 1998). They suggest that trust involves choosing both a positive (future reward) and negative (vulnerability) element simultaneously.

Brickman's (1987) and Pratt and Dirks' (2006) analyses thus indicate a second answer to the question we started this section with – what in these depictions makes intolerable ambivalence tolerable? – namely, *choice* (cf. Plambeck and Weber 2010). Choosing to accept the contradictions takes what is often outside the actor's control – such as conflicting norms – and transforms it into something the actor has at least some control over (Harrist 2006, Meyerson 2001). Thus, an actor may not choose to be *exposed* to ambivalence, but can choose how to *respond* to it – to accept that ambivalence as an essential element for wisdom, commitment, or trust. For instance, Ashcraft (2001) describes the "organized dissonance" of a feminist bureaucracy that assisted victims of domestic violence. Faced with ambivalence about relying on a traditional hierarchy, the organization opted to embrace the ambivalence and utilize a

hierarchy in a non-traditional manner with informal, egalitarian practices such as consensual decision-making and challenging heavy-handed supervision.

The third answer to what makes intolerable ambivalence tolerable is *differentiation* (complemented with integration). Earlier, we noted that hybrid organizational identities and contradictory goals may be assigned to separate subunits, and that the organization may create mechanisms to foster ongoing creative tension between the identities/goals. In short, ambivalence at one level may be “resolved” by activities at another level. For example, Raisch and Birkinshaw’s (2008) review of the literature on organizational ambidexterity suggests that one way organizations may address the efficiency-innovation trade-off, and the ambivalence it triggers, is by assigning each orientation to separate subunits, with senior management providing the strategic integration. And a group may designate a specific member to play the role of devil’s advocate and represent the misgivings of other group members, thereby releasing the other members from the burden of mixed feelings (Smith and Berg 1987). In both cases, what appears to be domination at the lower level can foster holism at the higher level. As Bierly et al. (2000, p. 597) note, “organizations can act wisely even though it may not be possible to ascribe wisdom to any individual actor within the organization.”

Holistic behaviors. What behaviors might flow from a holistic approach to ambivalence? First, in recognizing the integrity underlying the aspects of the object that give rise to ambivalence, the actor may respond to the whole object, not just to its favored aspects (as in domination). Further, the actor does so in a manner that honors that integrity, rather than betrays animus toward its constituent parts. Lüscher and Lewis (2008) describe an intervention for production managers at Lego Company in the wake of a major restructuring from a traditional hierarchy to self-managing teams. Rather than be paralyzed by the resulting dilemmas that invited ambivalence (e.g., empowering teams vs. controlling them), managers were encouraged to embrace the dilemmas and forego simplistic either-or thinking in favor of both-and thinking. The authors conclude: “Such awareness was empowering, reducing tendencies to blame executives [for sending mixed messages] and shifting responsibility to the managers to find means of living with tensions” (p. 234). Similarly, Plambeck and Weber (2010, p. 694) found that CEOs who were

the most ambivalent about the enlargement of the European Union engaged in “strategic ambidexterity,” where the orientation of the firm was simultaneously offensive and defensive, increasing the spectrum of information considered in strategic actions.

Second, if an actor desires the creative tension noted earlier, the actor may actively keep the ambivalence in play. Research on organized dissonance (Ashcraft 2001), organizational ambidexterity (Raisch and Birkinshaw 2008), and organizational dualities (Ashforth et al. 2010), provide examples of how organizations may eschew one-time resolutions of ambivalence in favor of an ongoing juxtaposition of the positive and negative orientations fueling ambivalence. We mentioned Ashforth et al.’s (2010) study of a natural food cooperative, where ambivalence over business values and idealistic values was kept simmering. Member meetings served as crucial forums for airing the ambivalence, and certain rituals (e.g., appeals to collective interest, apologies for rudeness) helped regulate the resulting conflicts. Similarly, Ashcraft (2001, p. 1315) writes of the need for periodic “group reflection as a safety valve that keeps contradiction alive.” However, leaders walk a difficult line in keeping ambivalence in play. As noted earlier, followers expect consistency and decisiveness from their leaders rather than expressions of ambivalence (Rothman and Wiesenfeld 2007), suggesting the importance of clearly articulating the organizational need for creative tension.

Third, while recognizing the integrity of the object, the actor may attempt to redress the negatively viewed aspects where possible, nudging the object and wider system at opportune moments. Meyerson (2001) describes a senior vice president of a financial firm who enjoyed the privileges of office but felt the distribution of the privileges was unfair to women and minorities. Unlike other executives, she responded to the entreaties of working parents by offering more flexible work arrangements to accommodate their family obligations, and the firm eventually institutionalized such arrangements. Meyerson describes various behaviors through which such individuals approach ambivalence holistically, from “turning personal threats into opportunities” to “leveraging small wins” to “organizing collective action” (p. 8).

Positive and negative outcomes. The discussion above suggests that holism is generally most

effective and likely when the full integrity of both orientations needs to be preserved. Further, a holistic approach is more likely when the actor has sufficient discretion or agency to enact both the demanding process and the (typically) complex resolution.

Our discussion above also suggests the following advantages of holism: (1) the full integrity of both orientations is indeed preserved; (2) growth in the actor's understanding and appreciation of the object, fostering commitment to and trust in the object; (3) adaptability, that is, retaining the capacity to act in multiple and seemingly inconsistent ways, depending on the situation; and (4) acting as a change agent, that is, nudging the object in positive ways even while expressing the actor's belief in the integrity of the object. However, a problematic feature of holism is that the requisite attitude of wisdom is very difficult to cultivate and sustain, and it is often unclear what specific behaviors should flow from this attitude in any event. Not surprisingly, then, Weick (1998) acknowledges that the pursuit of an attitude of wisdom – ambivalence that tempers knowing with doubting – can undermine the actor's confidence and impair action. Further, by actively keeping both orientations alive, holism may not relieve the discomfort that attends ambivalence. Finally, as with the vacillating form of black and white compromise, holism may result in behaviors that appear to others to be inconsistent in the short run – even if, when considered as a series over time, they are actually quite nuanced and respect the totality of the object. In short, because the effectiveness of holism is often only revealed over time, holism may lead to the actor being perceived as indecisive, inconsistent, or hypocritical. For example, Cha and Edmondson (2006) studied a company whose CEO espoused employees' best interests as a key value. When the company more than doubled in size over three years, employees made hypocritical attributions about the CEO's actions, viewing this growth as threatening their best interests (e.g., loss of camaraderie). However, the CEO actually viewed growth, in part, as a vehicle for employee development and wage growth.

In sum:

Proposition 8: Ambivalence will likely lead to the response of holism to the extent that: (a) the full integrity of both the positive and negative orientations needs to be preserved; and (b) the actor has discretion or agency.

Proposition 9: Holism (a) maintains the full integrity both orientations, facilitating growth in

understanding and appreciation of the object; (b) facilitates adaptability; (c) enables the actor to serve as a change agent; and (d) reinforces wisdom. However: (e) the process may be very difficult and outcomes may prove elusive, making the appropriate resulting behaviors unclear; (f) holism may not relieve discomfort; and (g) observers may infer that the actor is inconsistent, indecisive, or hypocritical.

To summarize, the 2x2 model in Figure 2 offers a conceptual framework for organizing actors' responses to ambivalence in organizational settings and underscores that each response is associated with certain trade-offs that may make it, depending on the situation, functional or dysfunctional. We summarize the main arguments in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

How Avoidance, Domination, Compromise, and Holism Relate to Each Other

Thus far we have treated the responses separately, begging the question of how they may relate to one another. Although the responses generally serve as substitutes (e.g., domination may obviate the need for holism), a given response may prove inadequate at rendering the ambivalence less intense, thus provoking other responses. Table 2 summarizes the conditions under which each response is most effective and therefore likely. Holding these conditions constant, in this section we discuss the most likely temporal connections between the responses, thereby adding a dynamic element to the model.

One general trajectory is to move “up the ladder” toward more conscious and effortful responses in the search for a resolution of the intense ambivalence (i.e., avoidance/domination/gray compromise/black and white compromise/holism). Conversely, if a given response proves inadequate, an actor may instead bail out by moving “down the ladder.” The actor may be overwhelmed by the tension caused by the failure, or may dismiss more conscious and effortful responses as untenable, or may not even consider the possibility of such responses. We consider each trajectory in turn.

Up the Ladder

All else equal, we argue that the most likely first response is avoidance. Avoidance is a frequent response to low-salience ambivalence (and often reinforces the low salience), and thus may “kick in” before the ambivalence becomes sufficiently intense to provoke conscious discomfort. Radsma and

Bottorff (2009) found that nurses who smoked were ambivalent about their responsibility for advising patients against smoking because it aroused personal discomfort. When a patient's need for such advice appeared to be low (e.g., the malady was unrelated to smoking), nurses tended to avoid advising patients against smoking. However, when a patient's need appeared to be high, nurses tended to engage in domination, advising the patients not to smoke while rationalizing away their own smoking (e.g., they smoked less than the patients).

Further, avoidance does not require the often difficult choices implied by domination, compromise, and holism, and thus tends to be seductive. However, as indicated by Proposition 2, even if avoidance proves inadequate, it may nonetheless reduce debilitating tension, thereby facilitating one of the other responses. Accordingly, avoidance may give way to domination, compromise, or holism.

Domination appears to be the second most likely initial response to ambivalence. Like avoidance, domination is frequently a response to low-salience ambivalence; however, domination usually entails more cognitive effort than avoidance as the actor builds up one orientation while minimizing the other. We argued earlier that domination is particularly prone to rationalization processes, as the actor works to promote one orientation over the other. If domination proves inadequate, perhaps because the rationalizations are unsustainable (e.g., others challenge them, performance suffers), we argue that domination is most likely to give way to compromise, followed by holism. Both compromise and holism explicitly recognize both orientations, but compromise tends to be less taxing than holism and the likelihood of determining an actual "solution" tends to be greater. By the same token, gray compromises tend to be more attractive than black and white compromises, even if gray compromises are ultimately less functional because they do not preserve the core of each orientation. Of course, it is theoretically possible for people to get "stuck" at domination. Response amplification may induce a paradigm shift, such that the form of domination (e.g., high positive, low negative) transposes into its opposite (low positive, high negative). But given the great magnitude of this shift, it is likely that such domination → domination transitions (such as the one discussed below regarding Gilbert's 2006 study) are quite rare.

Just as domination is more likely to give way to gray compromise than to black and white

compromise or holism, so gray compromise is a more likely first response than black and white compromise or holism. Gray compromise requires only that the actor find some middle ground between the orientations rather than embracing at least the core of both. However, we argued earlier that precisely because they sacrifice the integrity of each orientation, gray compromises tend to be problematic if both orientations need to be preserved. Accordingly, if a gray compromise proves inadequate, the actor may strive for a black and white compromise or even a holistic solution. By the same token, if a black and white compromise proves inadequate, the dualism that is already inherent in the compromise may pave the way toward an embrace of holism.

It is possible that individuals can skip a rung going up the ladder. At first blush, it might seem that the domination → holism trajectory is relatively rare, not only because of the difficulty of the holistic process and the rarity of holistic solutions, but because the commitment to one orientation and rejection of the other under domination works against the requisite embracing of both orientations that undergirds holism. However, if domination proves inadequate, leverage may be created for rethinking the wholesale rejection of one orientation, leading to a more holistic embrace of both orientations. Gilbert (2006) discusses how a newspaper organization initially framed the emergence of the Internet as a major opportunity, but in the face of setbacks, reframed it as a major threat (implying domination → domination). With continued experience, the organization came to frame the Internet as both an opportunity (for its online division) and a threat (to its print division), with the corporate level providing the strategic integration (holism).

It is also possible that one response may facilitate rather than substitute for another. We already mentioned how avoidance may reduce tension and thereby enable the more proactive responses of compromise or holism. For instance, domination may provide a temporary refuge from ambivalence, enabling actors to marshal the necessary resources to ultimately embrace holism. Gutierrez et al. (2010) describe how certain individuals dealt with their profound ambivalence toward the Catholic Church in the wake of revelations that the Church had covered up the sexual abuse of minors by priests. These individuals formed Voice of the Faithful (VOF), continuing to identify strongly with the Church's

“normative elements (Church teachings, beliefs, and practices)” while disidentifying with its “organizational elements (governance structure and activities of members of the Church hierarchy)” (p. 650). This domination provided a short-term coping mechanism for the ambivalence, ultimately enabling VOF’s members to engage in longer-term efforts to repair the Church’s organizational elements. Without domination to sustain the members’ identification with the Church, it seems unlikely that the members would have had either the collective will or capacity to work toward holistic solutions (see also Lüscher and Lewis 2008).

Down the Ladder

What if an actor instead bails out and moves “down the ladder”? As typically the most conscious and effortful response to ambivalence, holism represents the top of the “ladder.” As noted, however, holism as a process tends to be very difficult to enact, and holistic resolutions of ambivalence are typically hard to find. As also noted, a prime condition under which holism is most effective is that the full integrity of both orientations needs to be preserved. Accordingly, because compromise – particularly black and white – continues to recognize both orientations, albeit in more muted form, it becomes a more attractive fallback option if holism fails than is either domination or avoidance (cf. Rahim 1985).

By the same token, if a black and white compromise proves untenable, a gray compromise is likely to be more workable and yet still preserve both orientations. If a gray compromise proves untenable, the actor may shift to either avoidance or domination as relatively expedient means of responding to the ambivalence. Further, compromise may be a slippery slope to one orientation ultimately co-opting the other such that the actor loses sight of the desirability of both (Meyerson and Scully 1995). Cohn’s (1987) study of defense industry analysts focused on how individuals could come to speak of catastrophic weapons and attacks using dispassionate language. During participant observation, the researcher attempted to strike a balance between fitting in and maintaining critical objectivity. However, the longer she was in the context, the less shocking the language became to her; she eventually found herself using phrases such as “collateral damage” to refer to human deaths. She commented, “Soon, I could no longer cling to the comfort of studying an external and objectified ‘them.’ I had to confront a

new question: How can *I* think this way? How can any of us?” (p. 688, her emphasis).

Because attempts at compromise are typically made consciously, it is difficult to then enact either domination or avoidance nonconsciously (as Cohn’s 1987 introspection illustrates). Further, whereas attempts at compromise implicitly view both the positive and negative orientations toward the object as more or less necessary or valid, the fallback responses of avoidance and domination require the abnegation of the duality. Such an active abnegation of the duality is likely difficult, suggesting that both avoidance and domination will be accompanied by effortful suppression, rationalization, and so on. The upshot is that the actor may struggle to “un-know” the ambivalence, leading to what may be termed “willful ignorance.” For example, a company may experience ambivalence about a potential change in response to competition. After struggling to implement the change (through holism or compromise), the company may abandon the effort and rationalize that the change was not necessary after all (domination).

In sum, although avoidance, domination, compromise, and holism generally serve as substitutes, if a given response proves inadequate, there are two general response trajectories over time. Actors may move “up the ladder” toward more conscious and effortful responses; conversely, they may bail out and move “down the ladder.”

Discussion

Although previous research has identified various defense mechanisms and coping mechanisms for addressing ambivalence in organizations, it lacked a conceptual framework for organizing these responses. Crossing two dimensions – an emphasis on the positive orientation toward the object in question and an emphasis on the negative orientation – we argued that there are four main responses to ambivalence: avoidance (where the emphasis on each is low), compromise (each is moderate), domination (one is low and one is high), and holism (each is high). A key observation is that there is no one best way to address ambivalence; as summarized in Table 2, each response has advantages and disadvantages and is most appropriate under certain conditions. However, holism is perhaps the most difficult to attain as it requires accepting and perhaps even embracing both orientations simultaneously, suggesting an “attitude of wisdom” (Weick 1998) where actors balance confidence with doubt. An image

of the ambivalent and wise actor starkly contrasts with the popular image of an ambivalent actor as confused and indecisive (i.e., a weak).

Implications for Future Research

Our analysis suggests numerous possibilities for future research. We offer three examples. First, we discussed four major responses to ambivalence, depending on the relative strength of an actor's orientation toward each side of the particular issue (see Figure 2). Because relatively little research on ambivalence has been done in organizational settings, we suggest that case studies be employed to further elaborate on the rich phenomenology of avoidance, domination, compromise, and holism. Case studies would be particularly helpful for capturing the dynamics over time within and between the responses. For example, we articulated functions and dysfunctions for each of the responses. What factors influence whether certain functions or dysfunctions prevail? We noted that in domination, one side is often denied but remains nonconsciously alive. What dynamics might lead to the actual eradication of one side, as in Ashforth et al.'s (2008, p. 355, cf. deletion, Pratt and Foreman 2000) notion of "identicide," where an uncomfortable facet of self is effectively killed off? What dynamics might prompt a shift between seemingly incongruous pairs of responses, like holism to domination or compromise to avoidance?

Second, the discussion of holism suggests that rather than view ambivalence as necessarily dysfunctional, ambivalence should at times be actively sought – encouraged rather than discouraged – as a means of promoting personal growth, adaptation, and so on. In particular, the provocative notion of an attitude of wisdom merits investigation. For example, what reinforcing effects might wisdom have on ambivalence? On one hand, wise actors may be said to be more prone to maintain ambivalence (Weick 1998, 2004). As F. Scott Fitzgerald (1945, p. 69) famously stated: "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise." On the other hand, wisdom is acquired through the acquisition of tacit knowledge over time and is best developed through dialectical processes (Sternberg 1998); therefore the more ambivalent experiences one has, the more opportunities one has to wrestle with divergence. This suggests that one

may enact a “virtuous” spiral of wisdom and ambivalence. Recognizing this link may also encourage the development of a holistic system that promotes and reinforces wisdom. Wise actors can create a wise system in which the holistic approach to ambivalence reinforces and further develops wisdom. And organizational systems that enact dualisms provide the seedbed for members themselves to develop wisdom. Future research might explore means of attaining and sustaining a more judicious balance of knowing and doubting, of confidence and caution, such as through the use of external reviews, devil’s advocates, and training in counterfactual thinking (cf. remedies for groupthink and escalation of commitment; e.g., Ku 2008).

Third, we argued that responses to ambivalence are relatively isomorphic across levels of analysis, raising the question of whether there are limits to this isomorphism. For instance, the avoidance techniques of splitting and projection may be easier to sustain in a group than individually because group members can help socially construct and sustain a reality that objective observers would disavow (e.g., Choo 1996, Hardin and Higgins 1996), and there is no individual-level analog for the group- and organization-level holistic technique of differentiation. Future research should determine the applicability and boundary conditions of the various techniques for managing ambivalence at each level of analysis.

Conclusion

Far from indicating a rare and negative experience, ambivalence is ubiquitous in organizational settings and – although uncomfortable – ambivalence has the potential to help foster growth and richly nuanced behavior. By providing a process model, the paper helps integrate our understanding of when, why, and how actors are likely to respond to ambivalence and with what positive and negative effects, so that actors can make more informed choices about managing the experience.

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Table 1: Examples of Avoidance, Domination, Compromise, and Holism at the Individual, Group, and Organizational Levels of Analysis

	Avoidance	Domination	Compromise	Holism
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tenant farmers in Brazil resented their strong dependence on their landlords. Some tenants dealt with their resulting ambivalence by idealizing their own landlord as father-like and good (affirming the value of dependence) while demonizing others as bad (affirming the value of resentment). (Johnson 1997) • Nurses who smoked were ambivalent about their responsibility for advising patients against smoking. When a patient’s need for such advice appeared low (e.g., the malady was unrelated to smoking), some nurses tended to avoid advising patients against smoking. (Radsma and Bottorff 2009) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Police officers were conflicted about evicting non-paying tenants from their homes. Some officers focused only on the task, downplaying information that might personalize the evictees and evoke sympathy. (Margolis and Molinsky 2008) • Arribas-Ayllon, Sarangi, and Clarke (2009) discuss the ambivalence felt among professionals involved in genetic counseling when parents seek a genetic test for their child without considering the ethical and psychological implications. The professionals alleviated their ambivalence by citing “extreme case scenarios” (p. 183) that painted the parents as unreasonable. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals ambivalent about their ability to succeed at a task engage in self-handicapping behaviors that obstruct their performance, such as setting unreasonably high performance goals (Greenberg 1985). This enables the individual to attribute failure to the obstacle, or attribute success to outstanding aptitude (Berglas and Jones 1978). • Librarians ambivalent toward homeless library patrons felt responsible to eliminate the disruption to other patrons and also to their humanistic concern for the homeless. Librarians responded inconsistently, at times calling police to remove homeless patrons and at other times calling social agencies to provide help. (Pratt and Dutton 2000) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal organizational consultants occupy the “ambivalent identity” of being both insiders (employees) and outsiders (roving consultants) (Wright 2009, p. 309). Wright found that some consultants viewed this insider-outsider tension as a “positive source of strength and distinctiveness” (p. 319). • Plambeck and Weber (2010) found that CEOs who were the most ambivalent about the enlargement of the European Union oriented their firms to be simultaneously offensive and defensive. This “strategic ambidexterity” (p. 694) increased the diversity of information considered in strategic actions.
Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coaches often serve as expedient scapegoats for a sports team’s poor performance. Firing the coach is thought to purge the team of his or her “bad” influence, enabling the “good” team to regroup and rebound. (Rowe et al. 2005) • Ironic humor was used by a management team to express (and presumably vent) the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In times of relatively low firm performance, outside directors on corporate boards underestimate how much their fellow directors share their ambivalence about the firm’s current strategy, ultimately leaving the tension for and against the current strategy unexplored, resulting in collective support of the current strategy. (Westphal and Bednar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benedictine sisters identified with the Catholic Church, but felt excluded by its male-dominated rituals. The sisters chose to modify certain Church-mandated rituals so that they were more inclusive of women. (Hoffman and Medlock-Klyukovski 2004) • Staff at a Girl Scout camp worked conscientiously to present a professional image when 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experimental groups that utilized a devil’s advocate to critique the group’s decision-making procedures – thereby presumably inducing some ambivalence about the status quo – were less likely to escalate their commitment to a losing course of action. (Greitemeyer et al. 2009) • Middle managers at Lego Company were trained to embrace the dilemmas associated with a major

	<p>tension caused by the normative expectation that a major event would be framed positively despite the team’s negative experience of the event. (Hatch 1997)</p>	<p>2005)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bowles (1991) describes how management defined a wildcat strike as simply a contest for power, thereby enabling them to deny their own missteps that helped trigger the strike. 	<p>interacting with campers and the public. Behind closed doors, however, they distanced themselves from the strict wholesomeness of the Girl Scout identity by defacing the camp uniform, parodying camp songs, and playing pranks that mocked authority. (Wells 1988)</p>	<p>restructuring (e.g., empowering teams vs. controlling them) and forego simplistic either-or thinking in favor of both-and thinking. (Lüscher and Lewis 2008)</p>
<p>Organization</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tracy (2004) found that correctional facilities propounded contradictory organizational norms regarding the behavior of correctional officers toward inmates (e.g., nurture vs. discipline). However, the correctional facilities’ cultures made the complex tensions seem straight forward and strongly discouraged officers from asking questions, thereby promoting avoidance of the ambivalence. • A skilled economist appointed by the Reagan administration was ambivalent about openly disagreeing with the cabinet to correct budget issues. Instead, he placed a “magical asterisk” indicating billions of dollars in cuts that allowed everyone to avoid the issue, acting as though it had already been resolved. (Argyris 1990) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Because of the financial rewards, organizations are often tempted to engage in unethical practices. However, an “organizational architecture designed to counter corruption” (Luo 2005, p. 145, e.g., training, detection, deterrence) may resolve the ambivalence and encourage an organization to forsake such practices. • Ombudspersons handle the organizational ambivalence of advocating for the best interests of employees who file complaints and for the efficiency and minimal disruption of organizational operations. Ombudspersons studied by Kolb (1987) tended to embrace one set of norms or the other, resolving the tension by being either a “helping” ombudsperson or “fact-finding” ombudsperson. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic alliances involve certain dialectical tensions (e.g., cooperation-competition, rigidity-flexibility, short-term-long-term orientation) that are likely to provoke ambivalence. Accordingly, strategic alliances may opt for “balancing” the opposing tensions (Das and Teng 2000, p. 84). • For-profit hospitals have a dual identity as a business and a health care center. These identities may at times conflict, creating ambivalence about each identity, which is often resolved by jointly weighing cost considerations and patient service. (Shore 1998) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A feminist bureaucracy that assists victims of domestic violence was faced with ambivalence regarding the use of a traditional hierarchy. The organization opted to embrace the ambivalence and utilize a hierarchy in a non-traditional manner with informal, egalitarian practices such as consensual decision-making and challenging heavy-handed supervision. (Ashcraft 2001) • A natural food cooperative experienced tension between its idealistic values (which supported the organization’s mission) and its business values (which kept the organization financially sound). The organization kept the resulting ambivalence in play by member meetings that tacitly surfaced the tension, complemented with certain rituals that helped regulate the resulting conflicts (e.g., appeals to collective interest, apologies for rudeness). (Ashforth et al. 2010)

Table 2: Actor Responses to Ambivalence

	Avoidance	Domination	Compromise	Holism
Description	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The nonconscious and/or conscious evasion of the ambivalence caused by the opposing orientations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The nonconscious and/or conscious adoption of one orientation and rejection of the other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A typically conscious give-and-take between the opposing orientations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gray compromise Black and white compromise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The simultaneous and conscious acceptance of both opposing orientations
Outcomes: Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduces tension to a more tolerable level, enabling performance and the other responses to ambivalence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alleviates tension, aligns thoughts and feelings with behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintains the core of each orientation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both orientations are fully embraced, facilitating growth in understanding and appreciation of the object Facilitates adaptability Enables acting as a change agent Reinforces wisdom
Outcomes: Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May prevent recognition of ambivalence, inhibiting learning and problem-solving May prove futile; may backfire and render ambivalence more salient 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If integrity of both orientations matters, domination sacrifices that integrity As the path of least resistance in “resolving” ambivalence, domination is biased toward the least uncomfortable orientation rather than the most effective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Process may be difficult and the outcomes elusive Observers may infer the actor is inconsistent, indecisive, or hypocritical 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficult to cultivate and sustain attitude of wisdom Often unclear what behaviors should result May not relieve discomfort Observers may infer the actor is inconsistent, indecisive, or hypocritical
Conditions under which it is most effective and likely	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The issue is relatively unimportant and/or difficult to resolve 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The actor must choose between the orientations One orientation is actually counterproductive The core of both orientations does not need to be preserved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The core of both orientations needs to be preserved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The full integrity of both orientations needs to be preserved The actor has discretion or agency

Figure 1: A Process Model of Organizational Ambivalence

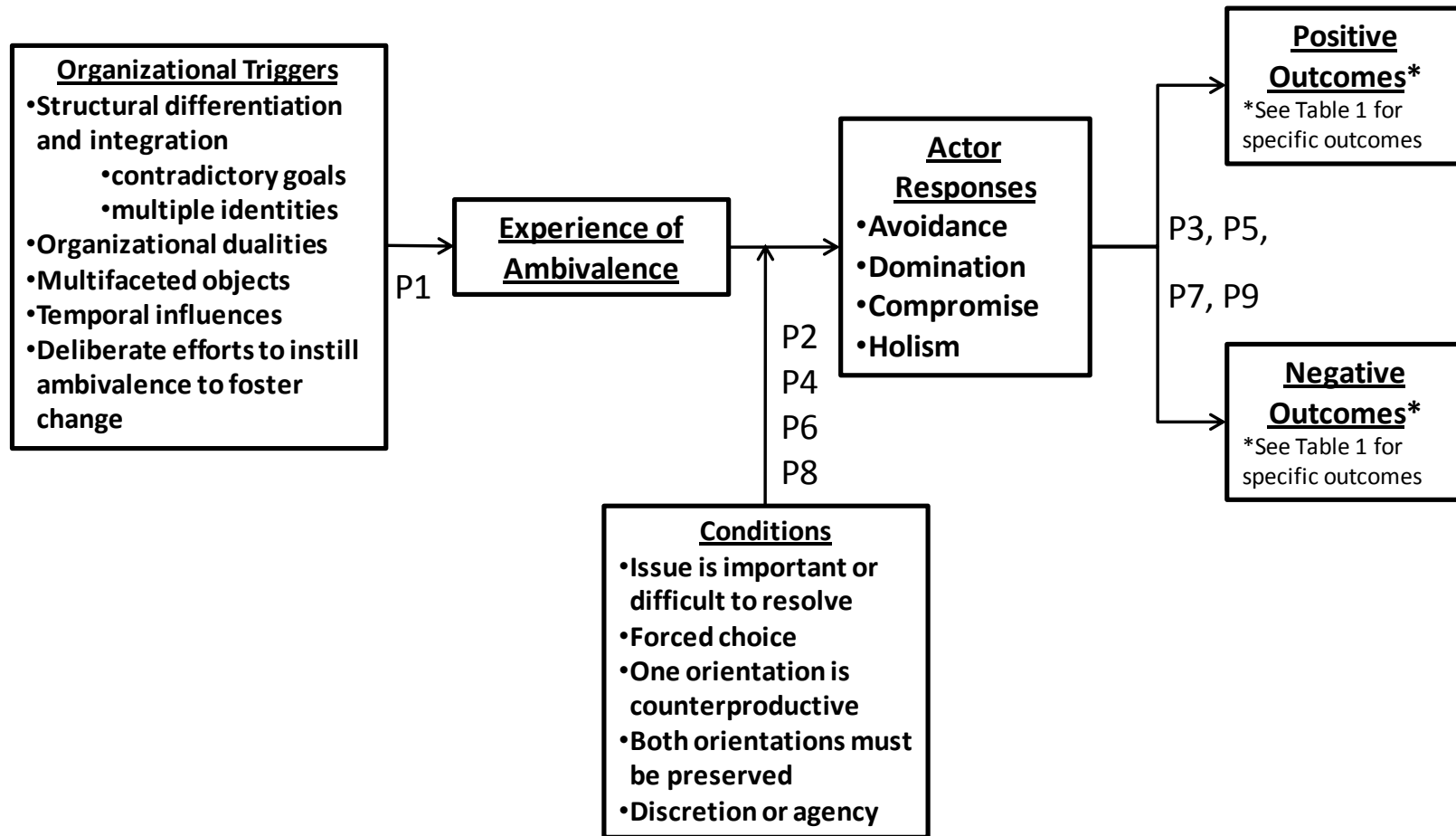


Figure 2: Actor Responses to High Intensity (Intolerable) Ambivalence

