

Ambivalences
Proposal of a social and cultural scientific frame of reference
Kurt Lüscher

Preface

The starting point of my understanding of ambivalence is the observation that the term is common in many fields of life and in several scientific disciplines. I make suggestions for its transdisciplinary use in theory, research, and practice. These are not meant to be axiomatic, but rather should allow comparisons of different perspectives.

Main conceptual elements

We begin the discussion with the colloquial usage. Here the term is used to express conflicting points of view or being torn; sometimes it is used synonymously with indecision as well as ambiguity.

(1) To be more precise, I propose to use the term ambivalence for a mode of human *experience*. Fundamental to this definition are dual descriptions of dynamical processes such as feeling, thinking, willing, acting, and shaping of relationships and the way these experiences are expressed and dealt with. – Analogously, the term can be used to analyze collective, macro-social processes.

Experiences of ambivalence emerge primarily in intimate relationships and forms of life. For example, they are referred to in care as well as with formative life events such as motherhood, at biographical turning points, in life crises, and in rituals related to them. Ambivalences are also observed in social and cultural fields of tension and upheavals. Furthermore, individual and collective experiences in complex typical patterns of action are described as ambivalent; for example, jealousy, trauma or shame. Ambivalences are also relevant to the way social roles are practiced. Some examples include the roles of mother, father, professions that require both professional closeness and distance, or roles that require dramaturgical skills. Of exemplary importance are ambivalences in intergenerational relationships.

(2) Viewed *structurally*, experiences of ambivalences are characterized by the simultaneous perception of polar opposites in people's relationships to each other and to social, cultural and ecological environments that are more or less explicitly verbally expressed. In an extended sense, *significant differences* can also constitute the structural basis of experiences of ambivalence. Examples include experiences due to gender, age or social origin.

(3) Viewed in a *processual* manner, experiences of ambivalence are dynamic, characterized by temporary or permanent movements of back and forth, hesitation, procrastination, pausing, restarting and doubting. This complex dynamic can be paraphrased as vacillating, a term based on the Latin "vacillare". This experience of time is related to the figure of what is also called an "extended present".

(4) As a *thesis*, we can postulate the following: The pragmatic relevance of experiences of ambivalences consists in the fact that they accentuate the development and unfolding of important facets of *individual* identity (i.e. of the self), e.g. its elucidating, affirming, questioning or reshaping. One can also say the following: By deciding between the alternative options for action suggested by experiences of ambivalence, I can have a better understanding of facets of my *personal identity*. – In an analogous way, experiences of ambivalences are relevant for *collective identities*, namely for the notion of what defines empirically or symbolically the commonality of the members of social collectives, of groups and communities.

(5) The use of experiences of ambivalence and their representation can also be seen as relevant to characterizing the singularity of works of literature, art, music, dance, or other aesthetic expressions, or a whole oeuvre. – Reference to ambivalences is a possible way to distinguish between art and kitsch since in the latter ambivalences are overemphasized or suppressed.

(6) Conversely one can postulate the following: When talking about identities (individually or collectively), experiences of ambivalence are – overtly or covertly – involved.

(7) In a schematic summary one can say that the elaborated understanding of ambivalences proposed here is characterized by

- the interplay of experiences of fundamental opposites and significant differences,

- their vacillating dynamics,
- the resulting consequences for the presentation of individual and collective identities.

Definition

As a *heuristic definition* I therefore propose the following: Ambivalences denote experiences of vacillation between polar differences in feeling, thinking, willing, and social structures. Its pragmatic scope lies in characteristic patterns of people's relations to each other, to cultural objects, in the search for attributing meanings to actions, and therefore in accentuating facets of individual and collective identities.

This definition is heuristic because it names the facts to be observed when working with the concept of ambivalence, leading to theoretical considerations. This can be done in a more or less systematized way.

Further clarifications

- In practice, the distinction can be made between *constructive* and *destructive* experiences of ambivalence, i.e. those that are conducive to the shaping of relationships and the articulation of independent identity, and those that prove to be burdensome and detrimental to this.
- It is useful to distinguish between *manifest* and *latent* ambivalences. Manifest ambivalences are those that are obvious and are often named as such; latent ambivalences are those that are hidden or that are expressed in other terms.
- Since ambivalences occur in many disciplines and fields of life, understanding them can help with the exchange of knowledge and insight between disciplines. Often, common knowledge and scientific knowledge are intertwined in this process – in an ambivalent manner. Therefore, ambivalence can be used as a so-called *bridging, wandering or sensitizing* concept.
- Since the recognition of ambivalence implies the possibility of alternatives, their thematization can, in turn, generate experiences of ambivalence. This is consistent with the postulate of principled openness in scientific thinking.

Further theses

- There is much to be said for the assumption that people differ in their sensitivity for *ambivalences*, for example, to talk about them, to take them into account in their actions and to perceive them in the conduct of others. This sensitivity for ambivalences is primarily evident in professional relationships, because in these fields, tensions between distance and empathy, or dependency and autonomy are particularly pronounced.

- Sensitivity for ambivalences is relevant in many ways to how someone expresses themselves artistically through writing, painting, composing, making music, dancing, or other aesthetic expressions. It corresponds to a sensitivity for ambivalences in those who deal with aesthetic works and artistic activities, interpret them and let them inspire their own thinking and acting. Sensitivity for ambivalence can establish an *imaginary pact* between the parties involved.

- Sensitivity for ambivalences can be promoted by situational conditions and by social milieus, for example in the culture of organizations.

- Attentiveness to sensitivity for ambivalences lends itself as a reference point for unbiased differential analyses of disability, impairment, and discrimination.

- Sensitivity for ambivalences is based on specific experiences of *learning*. In other words, forms and theories of learning differ, depending on whether they take the idea of ambivalence into account or not, as well as the ways it is taken this into account.

- *Macro-sociologically*, experiences of ambivalence are promoted, diminished or suppressed by the organization of social orders, by power, and by domination. Accordingly, they are institutionally shaped and defined. They can be characteristic of cultural contexts.

- Experiences of ambivalence leave traces in *individual and collective memory*.

Metatheoretical considerations

- *Logically*, ambivalence corresponds to the idea of *as well as* (or *both for and against*) as opposed to *either or*. There is a relationship to the figure of thought of the “neither-nor”.

- *Anthropologically-philosophically*, we are interested in how one can conceptualize the possibility that humans can have experiences of ambivalence. The focus is on premises for living and experiencing from "eccentric positionality" (Plessner) and the accompanying possibilities of understanding oneself in relation to the social environment and the ecological environment. This includes recognizing and naming "differences" and otherness.

- In a *meta-theoretical-sociological* perspective, one can secondarily postulate that certain theories and approaches also generate experiences of ambivalence.

Discussion

The outlined understanding of ambivalence can be characterized primarily as working in a sociological-pragmatic "perspective of middle range". This refers to scientific work that mediates between general theories, concrete research findings and exploratory, experimental practices, and ultimately between everyday knowledge and scientific knowledge. This corresponds to the methodological characterization of ambivalence as a so-called "*sensitizing concept*."

The conceptualization proposed here *differs* from other understanding, especially those in which ambivalence is spoken of as a *subject*; that is, as an independent force or as an acting entity, or in which the concept is used *essentialistically*.

With this I want to suggest (at least) *three basic orientations* that can be identified for the theoretical justification of the idea of ambivalence: a pragmatic orientation with reference to "human experience" (in a comprehensive sense), an ontological orientation (with reference to the essence of being in the world, i.e. the duality between consciousness and unconsciousness), and a postmodern orientation, close to structuralism and post-structuralism, with reference to the human ability of language and cognition (Bauman, Derrida, Butler). These are ideal-typical paraphrases. When working with the concept, they can interpenetrate, overlap and mix.

In view of the *rhetoric of current public discourses* on fundamentalism, political correctness, and identity politics, the recourse to ambivalence is suitable for exploring the scope of thinking in alternatives and about diversity in different fields of life.

Sometimes the objection is raised that the concept of ambivalence describes a universal fact of the "condition humane" and is therefore not suitable for scientific analysis. On the other hand, it can be argued that an elaborated, differentiated-systematic understanding of ambivalence makes it possible to describe, explain, and understand specific aspects of human coexistence (as illustrated by the examples in this orientation framework) in a more differentiated way than other terms might allow.

Source: www.kurtluescher.de