

# Transformative Events: Appraisal Bases of Passion and Mixed Emotions

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## Abstract

Mixed emotions are conceptualized as involving the co-occurrence of states opposite in valence. One might expect that combinations of opposites would show diminished overall emotion intensity. But is this always the case? If not, when will mixed emotions be characterized by high intensity, and when by low intensity? In this article, theories of emotion-eliciting appraisal and emotion intensity are employed to understand mixed emotions and phenomena of passion. It is proposed that intense emotions are produced by *transformative events*: perceived motive-relevant changes that are important, large, and rapid. Transformative events that can move a person between greatly motive-inconsistent and greatly motive-consistent outcomes constitute one potent path to passion. Illustrative phenomena of passion, mixed emotions, and related research are discussed.

## Keywords

emotion intensity, mixed emotions, passion, negative emotion, positive emotion

## Phenomena of Passion and Mixed Emotions

### *Political Passion, Transformative Events, and Mixed Emotions*

On June 12, 1982, nearly a million people converged on New York's Central Park in a passionate protest against nuclear weapons (Daley, 2012). It may have been the largest political demonstration ever in America (Schell, 2007). Many called for the US to initiate a moratorium on nuclear weapons production. Passionate voices were also raised *against* the Nuclear Freeze proposal. Counterdemonstrators carried signs reading "Peace is a Soviet Weapon of Conquest" and "Build Up or Freeze to Death" (Montgomery, 1982).

What engendered such passion? In the summer of 1983, I collected written materials from organizations supporting or opposing the Freeze proposal and conducted in-depth interviews with several activists on both sides, to delineate the opposing beliefs and the factors leading people to maintain them. I found that the ideologies of disarmament and defense each envisioned transformative events involving stark choices between alternative outcomes differing greatly in desirability (e.g., survival vs. annihilation; totalitarianism vs. freedom) contingent on supporting versus opposing the Freeze proposal (Roseman, 1994).

I gathered no data on activists' emotions. But demonstration participants and journalists (e.g., Lynch, 1982; Montgomery, 1982) reported multiple positive and negative emotions, some quite intense, corresponding to activists' beliefs, including:

- *fear*, about the possibility of disastrous outcomes,
- *anger*, toward opponents (e.g., arms merchants or dissidents) for harm-causing actions,
- *hope*, that good people would take action to save the day, and
- *pride*, at one's own group's power if members acted rightly.

In contrast to this mixture of intense emotions, some studies find reduced intensity when positive and negative emotions are experienced together (e.g., Larsen, McGraw, Mellers, & Cacioppo, 2004). So under what conditions will mixed emotions be diminished in intensity, and when will their intensity be high?

### *Transformative Events and Intense Emotion: A Classic Experiment*

In 1965, a study by Aronson and Linder systematically manipulated contrasting outcomes and then measured emotion. Two

undergraduates interacted in seven brief encounters. Between these meetings, the one who was the actual research participant repeatedly “overheard” how she was evaluated by her (confederate) partner. Depending on experimental condition, the evaluations (a) were all very positive; (b) were all very negative; (c) progressed from entirely negative to entirely positive; or (d) progressed from entirely positive to entirely negative. Participants liked the confederate most in the negative-to-positive evaluation condition, and least in the positive-to-negative condition.

In explaining why liking was more powerfully influenced by gain and loss of esteem than by a consistently positive or negative evaluation, Aronson and Linder quoted Spinoza’s *Ethics* (1677/1955). In Book III, prop. XLIV, Spinoza claimed one loves a person more intensely if one had hated that person previously—because the pleasure of removing the hatred is added to the pleasure of the newfound love.

Aronson and Linder’s (1965) study might plausibly have produced different results. For example, if opposite-valence outcomes neutralize (e.g., Russell & Carroll, 1999), then participants in the negative-to-positive and positive-to-negative conditions, recalling both positive and negative evaluations at the end of the experiment, should have liked the confederate less than in the wholly positive condition and more than in the wholly negative condition. But instead the transformation in the confederate’s evaluation, from disapproval to approval, elicited the most intense liking, and the transformation from approval to disapproval led to liking least.

The dependent variable in Aronson and Linder’s (1965) study was intensity of liking. Are similar mechanisms in fact at work in determining the more intense emotional responses of Spinoza’s love and hate?

## The Place of Transformative Events in a Theory of Passion

### *What is Passion?*

*The American Heritage Dictionary* (passion, n.d.) gives six definitions of passion: (a) strong or powerful emotion, such as anger or joy; (b) a state of strong sexual desire or love, or the object of such desire or love; (c) boundless enthusiasm, or the object of such enthusiasm; (d) an abandoned display of emotion, especially of anger; (e) Jesus’ sufferings in the period following the Last Supper and including the Crucifixion, as related in the New Testament, or a representation of those sufferings; and (f) martyrdom. A common element across these meanings is intense emotion. Similarly, eminent emotion theorist Nico Frijda (2007) regarded passion as the “core characteristic” of emotions, whose increasing intensity (“strength”) is manifest in increasing “control precedence”: felt urge to act, and dominance over cognition and behavior (pp. 25–29). In line with Frijda’s formulation, this article offers an account of passion as intense emotion.

Particular intense emotions can be understood as varieties of passion. As particular emotions, in addition to intensity

they will have distinct determinants (e.g., appraisals), properties (e.g., phenomenology, action tendencies), and consequences (e.g., effects on decision-making and interpersonal relationships). Particular laypersons or theorists may focus on particular intense emotions (e.g., love, enthusiasm, anger) or their related motivational or behavioral properties (e.g., sexual drive, energy, aggression) when using the term “passion,” which nonetheless also share features (e.g., mental and behavioral preoccupation) and determinants of strong emotion.

### *Multiple Positive and Negative Emotions in Varieties of Passion*

Pertaining to the topic of this special issue, researchers have noted that several varieties of passion are each associated with multiple positive and negative emotions. For example, a frequently studied variety of passion is passionate (or “romantic”) love. Based on surveys, diaries, and personal accounts, Tennov (1979) identified characteristics of romantic love as including pleasure and buoyancy, hope of reciprocation, fear of rejection, and “a general intensity of feeling that leaves other concerns in the background” (p. 24).

Hatfield (1988) defined passionate love as “a state of intense longing for union with another” (p. 191). According to Hatfield and Sprecher (2011), its components (measured by their Passionate Love Scale) include “positive feelings when things go well” and “negative feelings when things go awry,” as well as other constituents, such as attraction, sexual arousal, preoccupation with and service to the partner, and maintenance of physical closeness.

Vallerand (2010) defines passion as “a strong inclination toward a self-defining activity that people love and find important and in which they invest time and energy” (p. 98). His “dualistic” model distinguishes *harmonious passion* (in which an activity, such as work, political activism, or sport, is freely chosen and flexibly pursued, in harmony with other activities) from *obsessive passion* (in which people experience an uncontrollable urge to participate in an activity that they enjoy, though it conflicts with other activities). His research finds harmonious passion associated with psychological well-being and good interpersonal relationships, and obsessive passion with negative outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and conflict in interpersonal relationships. Philippe, Vallerand, Houliort, Lavigne, and Donahue (2010) found effects of harmonious and obsessive passion to be fully mediated by positive and negative emotions, respectively.

Thus all the attempts at definition and empirically based conceptualization reviewed in this section relate passion to multiple intense emotions, both positive (e.g., joy, hope, love) and negative (e.g., suffering, fear, anger). Moreover, passion is at least sometimes associated with multiple intense positive and negative emotions experienced about the same object. For example, one item on Hatfield and Sprecher’s (2011) Passionate Love Scale is “Since I’ve been involved with \_\_\_\_\_, my emotions have been on a roller coaster.”

### *Determinants of Mixed Emotions and Their Intensity*

Appraisal theories propose that emotions result from the combination of motivation (e.g., sexual motivation, need for affiliation) plus cognition (e.g., perceptions of the consistency or inconsistency of events with motives; Roseman, 2001; Smith & Lazarus, 1990). Appraised consistency of an event with one's motives produces positive emotions, and motive-inconsistency gives rise to negative emotions. Events appraised as both consistent *and* inconsistent with a person's motives would elicit mixed emotions. For example, graduating from college (Larsen, McGraw, & Cacioppo, 2001) might be appraised as consistent with a young adult's autonomy motives (as it helps establish independence), but inconsistent with social motives (if it reduces closeness in existing valued relationships), and thus produce a mixture of happiness and sadness.

What determines emotion intensity? According to appraisal theories, the greater the *motive strength*, the more intense will be one's emotional response to an event appraised as consistent or inconsistent with that motive. Supporting this hypothesis, Griner and Smith (2000) found that higher affiliative orientation was associated with stronger feelings of interest in an interpersonal task.

A second determinant of emotion intensity is *change* that is of relevance to motives. According to Frijda's (2007) *Law of Change*, "Emotions are elicited not so much by the presence of favorable or unfavorable conditions but by actual or expected changes in favorable or unfavorable conditions" (p. 10), with greater change resulting in stronger emotions. For example, after initially strong reactions to favorable changes such as the birth of a child or unfavorable ones such as disability, studies have found that people sometimes do adapt to some extent, resulting in decreased emotion, though adaptation is often incomplete and new affective baselines may be established (Diener, 2012).

Third, emotion intensity is affected by the *rate* of change in motive-relevant events. For example, Carver and Scheier (1998) proposed that emotions are produced by one's rate of progress toward goals or away from anti-goals, in comparison to a desired rate; larger differences from this "reference rate" elicit more intense emotions. Thus Hsee and Abelson (1991) found participants were more satisfied with faster (rather than slower) increases in desirable outcomes, and least satisfied with faster rather than slower decreases.

Building on this work, it is proposed that, in addition to the influence of *motive strength*, emotion intensity is a function of the *amount of actual or potential change* perceived in motive-relevant events (Roseman, 2008), and also the *rate of change* (Roseman, 2011), with more important, larger, and faster changes producing more intense emotions. Thus, we can understand why passion, as intense emotion, might be produced by change that is central to one's self-concept (as with the self-defining activities in passion studied by Vallerand, 2010), by the threats to survival that pro-Nuclear Freeze activists perceived (Roseman, 1994), and by rapid increases in intimacy (Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999).

### *Transformative Events as Arousing Passion*

To summarize: the prospect or actual occurrence of large and rapid changes of relevance to important motives, termed here "*transformative events*," is proposed as producing passion, conceptualized as intense emotion. All else being equal, events that decide between opposing positive versus negative outcomes should be appraised as involving particularly large changes (larger, for example, than similar changes in either direction from a neutral point). Thus participating in a rally perceived as turning the tide against nuclear weapons production, learning that one's feelings for another are reciprocated rather than rejected, and discovering a voicemail suggesting spousal infidelity may elicit passionate hope, passionate love, and passionate rage, respectively.

### **Alternative Versus Intermediate Outcomes as Determinants of Emotion Intensity**

Can applying these appraisal and emotion intensity theories help resolve when combinations of positive and negative outcomes will lead to heightened versus diminished emotion?

#### *Alternative Outcomes Predict High-Intensity Emotions*

According to appraisal theories, if a situation is appraised as presenting the possibility of *either* a positive outcome *or* a negative outcome, the amount of potential change at stake (the distance between mutually exclusive alternatives) is relatively large. Insofar as amount of change is a key determinant of emotion intensity, outcomes appraised as mutually exclusive positive versus negative alternatives should generate higher intensity emotions. Applying this framework, recall that disarmament-oriented Nuclear Freeze activists saw the world's fate hanging between the mutually exclusive outcomes of survival versus extinction, and defense-oriented activists saw a crossroads between totalitarianism versus freedom. Both could feel either intense hope or intense fear (depending on which outcome they focused on, in contrast with its alternative). In Aronson and Linder's (1965) study, the confederate's initial evaluation of the research participant was *reversed* by her subsequent evaluation. Liking (or disliking) was greatest when the confederate appeared to change her mind, coming to believe that her initial opinion had been wrong.

#### *Intermediate or Offsetting Outcomes Predict Low-Intensity Emotions*

In contrast, if a situation is appraised as an intermediate outcome (in between polar alternatives), then the amount of change at issue is relatively small. For example, Aronson and Linder (1965) ran an additional condition in which evaluations of the participant changed from neutral (rather than from negative) to positive. Liking for the confederate was (marginally, in a small sample) less intense than in the negative-to-positive condition.

The same is true when positive *and* negative outcomes (or positive and negative aspects of a single outcome) are summed or integrated on a common value dimension. For example, analyzing data from the American National Election Studies, Meffert, Guge, and Lodge (2004) found that simultaneously held favorable and unfavorable opinions (e.g., about positive and negative traits of presidential candidates such as Bill Clinton) predicted less extreme ratings on feeling thermometer scales.

### *Determinants of Low- Versus High-Intensity Mixed Emotions*

A transformative events theory may also be able—and particularly able—to account for low- versus high-intensity *mixed* emotions, insofar as it encompasses multiple outcomes that could each elicit its own emotional response.

For example, Larsen et al.'s (2004) participants, given disappointing wins, indicated they experienced both good feelings (presumably because they won some money) and bad feelings (they won less money than they might have)—and their good feelings were diminished in proportion to the size of the disappointment. Analogous decrements in bad feelings were observed, together with good feelings, in instances of relieving losses. In these cases, as predicted by the transformative events view, responses to intermediate outcomes (e.g., winning something, but less than one could have) were low-intensity emotions.

In contrast, Tennyson's (1979) participants were uncertain about the contrasting outcomes of reciprocation versus rejection. As predicted by the transformative events view, they felt both fear and hope intensely, often in quick succession (the “roller coaster” experience assessed by the Passionate Love Scale).

### **Phenomena of Passion Resulting From Transformative Events**

I next briefly discuss a number of cases in which events appraised as transformative produce the intense emotions that are characteristic of passion. In all these instances, a *combination* of alternative negative and positive outcomes produces a different (here, more intense) emotional response than would result from one outcome alone.

#### *Infatuation is Based on Little Knowledge, and Romantic Passion Tends to Fade*

“Infatuation” refers to an early phase of some romantic relationships, before one knows one's partner well. It is often characterized by idealization of the partner, euphoria when (s)he shows romantic interest, despair when (s)he seems insufficiently responsive, and heightened passion (Eastwick & Finkel, 2009). A transformative events account contends that the situation eliciting such infatuation is appraised in terms of the disjunctive combination of mutually exclusive alternative outcomes. Contemplating the possibility of a relationship, one is more likely to think either that (s)he loves me *or* (s)he loves me not,

rather than (s)he loves me (somewhat; in some ways) *and* (s)he loves me not (somewhat; in other ways); and one may vacillate between elation and distress accordingly, or feel hope mixed with fear. Note that infatuation could also exist without uncertainty, responding to perceptions of great change from one's prerelationship existence.

When one knows another better, idealization and perceptions of polarized alternatives are diminished, and infatuation is less likely to occur or endure. Even apart from infatuation, passionate love tends to fade over time (Hatfield, Pillemer, O'Brien, & Le, 2008). A transformative events account can explain this as reappraisal integrating increasingly recognized negatives (qualities or events attributed to the partner) with prior positives. It could also explain a decline in passion in terms of adaptation, as one's outcomes within the relationship no longer seem so different from previous experience (Bao & Lyubomirsky, 2013).

#### *Preexisting Fear or Anxiety Can Increase Romantic Passion*

In the classic Dutton and Aron (1974) study, men who met an attractive female experimenter immediately after crossing a shaky rope bridge expressed more romantic interest (by later calling her) than men who crossed a stable stone bridge. Dutton and Aron interpreted this finding as misattribution of fear symptoms to sexual attraction. A transformative events account focuses on the combination of contrasting states—the unpleasant experience of fear on the bridge and the pleasant one of meeting the attractive experimenter afterwards. Wolpe (1978) offered a similar anxiety-relief sequence theory to explain participants' increased sexual arousal after viewing a gruesome accident videotape. Consistent with a transformative events interpretation, Eastwick and Finkel (2008) found that experimentally increasing awareness of partner-specific attachment anxiety increased reported passion for a partner.

#### *Forbidden Fruit*

DeWall, Maner, Deckman, and Rouby (2011) found that inducing people in romantic relationships to look away from images of attractive strangers had the effect of *increasing* memory for those faces and increasing participants' reported favorability to infidelity. A transformative events account accommodates the authors' reactance theory interpretation, which involves a transition from threatened self-determination to asserted freedom. In other instances interpretable as fear or anger mixed with interest or desire, Bushman (2006) found the presence of warning labels increased reported desire to view violent TV programs; and studies find that restricting foods increases desire for them (e.g., Jansen, Mulken, & Jansen, 2007).

#### *Parental Interference: The Romeo-and-Juliet Effect and Failures to Replicate It*

Driscoll, Davis, and Lipetz (1972) found that offspring reports of parental interference in romantic relationships were associated

with increased reported love over a 6-month period. In contrast, a meta-analysis by Sinclair, Hood, and Wright (2014) found that friend and family *approval* is associated with reported love. In a rejoinder, Driscoll (2014) suggests there is a relatively brief window in which the effect may exist, “between the time that parents first object and the youngsters unite and stand together, and somewhat later when the youngsters are worn out by the continuing turmoil” (p. 312). He notes the action in Shakespeare’s play takes place over just 5 days. A transformative events perspective could accommodate the brief intensification of love that Driscoll et al. (1972) observed, as couples feel distress about the interference combined with hope for a positive outcome. But appraising parental interference as undesirable and associating it with mounting problems over time should eventually limit the transformation from negative to positive, thus accounting for the more typical finding of other researchers.

### *Betrayal*

The instances of passion considered thus far in this section focus on intense positive emotions (romantic love, sexual passion, interest, hope) elicited by appraised transformations from negative outcomes to positive outcomes. But as noted, negative emotions (e.g., fear, anxiety, frustration, anger) can also occur—before, after, or together with the positives. Indeed, a transformative events account predicts strong negative emotions (such as passionate rage) will result from transformations from very positive states to very negative ones.

One such transformation that has been studied is betrayal. Betrayal can be defined as a violation of implicit or explicit trust (Freyd, 1996), and occurs in contexts where a positive relationship has been established (as in a marriage or friendship) or is assumed (e.g., parent–child, teacher–student, clergy–laity, or doctor–patient relationships). Salient instances include sexual infidelity, sexual abuse, and treason. Betrayal has been found to produce intense negative emotions, including anger, indignation, or rage, among others (e.g., Joskowicz-Jablonek & Leiser, 2013). Jones and Burdette (1994) maintain betrayal is more devastating than rejection, as it disrupts an established relationship in which one is invested, rather than a potential relationship. As in the example of infidelity, intense negative emotions at betrayal may mix with (in ambivalence) or displace preexisting positive feelings.

### *Violent Extremism and Revenge*

A review of radicalization theories by Dandurand (2015) suggests “there is a huge emotional dimension” to the process (referred to as a transformation by King & Taylor, 2011). Hafez and Mullins (2015) cite studies which lead them to conclude that association with a radical milieu brings some individuals into contact with ideologies that

those feeling marginalized and excluded [with] personal empowerment and status (p. 964).

Silke’s (2008) review of the literature on jihadi radicalization notes that “in many communities joining a terrorist group increases the standing of a teenager or youth considerably” (p. 116). He agrees perceived injustice is a major catalyst in radicalization, and says that “for most terrorists a key motivation for joining a terrorist organization ultimately revolves around a desire for revenge” (p. 113).

Both large and small instances of revenge can be transformative. Frijda (1994) regarded revenge as one of the most powerful emotional phenomena, and cited horrific instances undertaken in response to perceived significant, unjustified, intentional harm. He maintained that revenge can provide relief from pain, repair an imbalance of suffering, and restore security (by deterring further harm), power, lost self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Crombag, Rassin, and Horselenberg (2003) found that 74% of Dutch university students describing an instance of revenge reported feeling satisfied or triumphant after their action (suggesting a mixture of anger and happiness or pride). Here the theory of transformative events encompasses cases in which passionate aggressive action promises, on the group and individual levels, to accomplish a transition from an aggrieved or painful state to a proud or exalted one.

### *Genocide*

After studying genocides in Nazi Germany, Cambodia, and Armenia, and mass killings in Argentina, Staub (1989) described a process in which difficult life conditions (especially a country’s defeat in war) create strong needs (e.g., to avoid anxiety and have hope), which under certain sociocultural conditions (such as a tradition of using violence to deal with problems) leads to turning against a historically devalued subgroup as causing the problem or standing in the way of its solution. Sémelin (2007) analyzes instances of genocide in the Holocaust, Rwanda, and Bosnia, as responses to imagined existential threats, in which perpetrators seek to “destroy ‘them’ to save ‘us’” (p. 48); in doing so, society can be purified and the threatened group can emerge “victorious; it is regenerated by destroying ‘them’” (p. 17). Weitz (2003) observes that genocides in Germany, Cambodia, the former Yugoslavia, and Stalinist Russia all occurred at moments of “extreme societal crisis,” in which leaders saw not only “dread dangers” but also “great opportunities” to create “transformations” to utopian societies (pp. 14–15). Thus several analyses of multiple instances of genocide include envisioned transformations from highly negative to positive states, in which mixtures of strong negative and positive emotions, including fear and hope, play central roles.

### **Pathways and Obstacles to Passion**

In these and other cases, individuals or groups may perceive the possibility of moving rapidly between negative and positive outcomes of importance, and feel passion (and more passion

[C]ould appeal to idealists seeking to transform an unjust world, and . . . to lost souls and criminals seeking a new path to personal redemption. It could provide restless youth with excitement or sense of purpose, or

than would be experienced when moving to the same outcomes from a neutral baseline). The combination of positive and negative outcomes produces more intense positive and negative emotions—successively or simultaneously—than would result from either outcome alone (cf. Petty, Tormala, Briñol, & Jarvis, 2006).

An interesting implication is that experiencing a very negative outcome (e.g., a threat to a romantic relationship, the defeat of one's country in war) can create an especially intense negative emotion (such as passionate rage or distress) insofar as it involves a dramatic change from a prior positive state; or it can put one "at risk" for the more positive type of passion, by providing a far-from-neutral starting point from which transformation to a positive outcome would create (and motivate) an especially intense positive emotion, such as hope or love. However, passion in the latter case is dependent on being able to believe in the possibility of the positive outcome, and the prior negative outcome can also inhibit this belief. Thus political revolutions tend to take place not when oppression is at its worst, but when negative events occur in the context of improving conditions which suggest that change is possible (Davies, 1962). It is for this reason that depression is particularly antithetical to passion. When characterized by hopelessness, depression is often manifest in loss of libido and "paralysis of the will" (Beck & Alford, 2009).

In addition, a transformative events theory suggests two pathways from unequivocally positive outcomes to passion. First, straightforwardly, the actual or potential occurrence of an extremely positive event may constitute a dramatic contrast with a prior state, and thus elicit passion. Second, an extremely positive event or situation can lead to concern over its loss. Before meeting one's romantic partner, having a relationship may be seen as moderately desirable. Having fallen in love, losing the relationship may be appraised as a calamity (see Hatfield & Sprecher, 2011).

## Transformative Events, Passion, and the Mixed Emotion Debate

The theory of transformative events presented here is compatible with both bipolar (Russell, 2017) and bivariate (Larsen, 2017; cf. Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994) hypotheses about mixed emotions. Consistent with the bipolar view, passion could be felt about transformations between negative and positive outcomes successively (as when a relationship fluctuates between rejection and reciprocation). Indeed, several of Tenno's passionate informants (1979, pp. 42–61) describe alternating between hope and fear. Consistent with the bivariate view, passion could be simultaneously felt about potential change in both directions (e.g., if one feels both fear and hope when first asking someone out, or when opening a letter from a college admissions office). Also consistent with the bivariate view, Franklin, Lee, Hanna, and Prinstein (2013) report evidence from startle eyeblink and postauricular reactivity that removal of physical pain decreases negative affect while simultaneously increasing positive affect.

Considering phenomena of passion offers other cases in which the bipolar and bivariate hypotheses might be studied, such as a mix of happiness and sadness when recalling good times spent with a lost love, or the disappointing win (or thrilling defeat?) of getting part way to a sexual objective. The transformative events theory does not resolve whether such mixed emotions occur simultaneously or in succession. But in proposing that outcomes appraised as intermediate or offsetting lead to milder emotions while those appraised as mutually exclusive elicit stronger ones, it can help to explain the intensity of the positive and negative emotions in the mix.

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