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Putting Emotions into Affective Polarization

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Abstract

This contribution provides a brief commentary to Bakker's and Lelkes's plea to emotion researchers to engage more thoroughly with research on affective polarization. I begin by summarizing some of the main arguments and suggestions developed by Bakker and Lelkes and then make a number of suggestions that focus on how accounting for discrete emotions can make a particularly valuable contribution to affective polarization research. The first suggestion pertains to the intentionality of emotions, and specifically of political emotions in intergroup contexts. The second suggestion emphasizes that emotions coney meaning about social relations that is considerably richer that the information contained in affect alone. The third proposition highlights that relations characterized by discrete emotions also reveal information about the cultural value and appropriateness of these relations. Finally, I discuss how discrete emotions specifically contribute to processes of community building and social exclusion.

Keywords: affective polarization, intergroup emotion theory, group-based emotions, political emotions

Putting Emotions into Affective Polarization

Bakker and Lelkes (2024) in their article provide a much needed and highly convincing plea to emotion researchers, from psychology but also from other disciplines, to engage with the phenomenon of affective polarization. Emotion researchers' expertise, they argue, is needed to achieve a more comprehensive understanding specifically of the affective (and potentially also emotional) dimensions of political polarization. They identify the need for pooling disciplinary resources and expertise to address a still unsatisfactory conceptualization of affective polarization in its academic home discipline, political science. Providing a careful elaboration of the different forms of polarization and discussing whether it is more or less a placeholder for an increasing correlation of political ideology and partisanship, Bakker and Lelkes (2024) take the view that partisan identity is critical to understand affective polarization and to open-up avenues of collaboration with emotion researchers.

According to this view, partisanship is not simply a reflection of policy preferences (which might amount to ideological polarization), but rather a *social identity*. This means that party identification propels people to define the self, in certain situations, less as an individual person but more in terms of group membership (e.g., Turner & Reynolds, 2001). This opens-up possibilities for various types of intergroup dynamics, such as group-based social comparison, positive group distinctiveness, depersonalization, group behavior and a broad range of affective and emotional processes, in particular those related to in-group favoritism and out-group hostility.

Based on this fundamental conjecture, Bakker and Lelkes (2024) outline, both in theory and by providing stimulating empirical evidence, how approaches from emotion research can be used to inform research on affective polarization. In doing so, they mainly build on intergroup emotions theory (Mackie, Maitner, & Smith, 2009) and evidence from within and outside the bi-partisan context of the United States. Bakker and Lelkes discuss

which discrete emotions characterize the relations between Democrats and Republicans, how affective polarization is linked to anti-democratic attitudes, how (mostly negative) affect and emotions bias information processing in political contexts, and how positive emotions, such as joy, schadenfreude, and out-group love affect perceptions of and relations to in- and out-group partisans. They also provide novel insights into more nuanced conceptualizations and measurements of affect that go beyond the widely used feeling thermometer (which has become the gold standard in operationalizing affective polarization), specifically focusing on physiological measures of valence and arousal as key dimensions of affect.

In the following, I will build on these lines of argument and provide constructive, so I hope, criticism of some of the paper's key claims and propose some additional perspectives on how to integrate emotions into research on affective polarization. Specifically, I will suggest taking a more succinct position with regards to the relations between affect and emotions, to include an understanding of political emotions into the study of affective polarization, to account for the cultural meaning and informational value of discrete emotions, and to take a broader approach to how group-based emotions affect cohesion and social exclusions.

Linking emotion research with the study of affective polarization could further profit from a more straightforward conceptualization of how affect and emotion are related. Some parts of the paper read as if Bakker and Lelkes (2024) use the terms affect and emotion almost interchangeably, and they only clarify this relation in more detail in the – highly informative – section on conceptualizing and measuring affect. I fully agree that affect is probably best conceptualized as a dimensional construct involving valence and arousal (and maybe also potency, as in *Affect Control Theory*, e.g., Heise, 2007). At the same time, affect is typically assumed to be a sort of bodily, physiological experience or state that lacks intentionality. Affect signals the organism that something occurred in the environment that is of import, but affect does not direct consciousness awareness to these matters of concern (e.g., Barrett &

Quigley, 2021). This intentionality is typically reserved for concepts such as attitudes, sentiments, feelings, or emotions (e.g., Goldie, 2002). Yet, in widespread use of the term, affective polarization usually entails this type of in- or out-group directed intentionality, which is why concepts such as emotions or sentiments seem even *necessary* to unlock the full potential of affective polarization as an epistemological tool (see below). This is precisely what Bakker and Lelkes (2024) achieve when they emphasize the relevance of intergroup emotions theory.

However, Bakker and Lelkes (2024) do not dig deeper into the characteristics of group-based emotions as *political emotions*. While the vast majority of research on group-based emotions looks into political contexts, little attention has been paid to the political nature of most group-based emotions. Conceptualizing this political dimension will also reveal novel insights for affective polarization research. Although there are many theories of political emotions, the approach developed by Szanto & Slaby (2020) seems particularly fruitful to advance our understanding of the role of discrete emotions in affective polarization. Szanto and Slaby (2020) argue that the political, i.e., the sphere in which we negotiate plurality and difference, for example regarding freedom, power, autonomy, or recognition, is essentially an emotional sphere. This is because the political deals with what matters to citizens, what they value, fear, or desire, as individuals, but also as groups and as a political community.

Distinct from emotions that are simply experienced in a political context, political emotions proper are *jointly* felt, not just based on interactions between citizens, but on affectively shared evaluations that disclose concerns of political import. Furthermore, and this seems particularly relevant to intergroup relations, political emotions have a "double affective-intentional focus": "on the same matter of political import" and "on the political community itself" (Szanto & Slaby, 2020, p. 6). Against this background, the frequency of emotions survey respondents felt when thinking about the 2018 US congressional election

(Bakker & Lelkes, 2024, Figure 3) is also an indication of the frequency with which respondents actualized the matter of concern (i.e., the election) and their respective political community (i.e., their partisan identities).

Further extending this view, I suggest taking a closer look at what it actually means when individuals are related to one another not only in terms of rather diffuse affective comportments of valence and arousal, but when their relatedness is characterized by specific discrete emotions such as disgust, hate, anger, or resentment. Different from basic and non-conceptual affective stances, discrete emotions carry the weight of culturally derived and linguistically circumscribed prototypical and intentional relations to matters of concern and import (von Scheve & Slaby, 2019). In other words, emotions do not only matter in terms of the affective signatures they carry or represent, as suggested by circumplex models of emotion (e.g., high arousal, negative valance for anger, or low arousal, negative valence for sadness; see Russell, 1980), but they also matter in terms of the specific relationships with the environment they represent and the cultural meanings societies attach to these emotions.

Take anger and fear, for example. In Russel's (1980) circumplex model of emotion, they are high arousal, negative valence emotions, so one might expect similar characteristics of or consequences for affective polarization, when understood solely as a dimensional construct of valence and arousal. However, fear and anger have considerably different meanings and implications based on their underlying appraisals and their core relational themes (e.g., Smith & Lazarus, 1993; Lazarus 1993): Anger typically signals a relation of offensiveness, whereas fear (and anxiety) signal threats and dangers. In the philosophy of emotions, these properties of emotions are often referred to as their *formal objects*, which are supposed to make emotions intersubjectively intelligible based on criteria of "appropriateness" or "fittingness" (e.g., Teroni, 2007).

If, then, relationships between partisan in- and out-groups can be shown to be characterized by specific discrete emotions, these emotions can be seen as an indication of the

specific type and quality of the relationships between (members of) these groups. Furthermore, we can assume that once these emotions are being expressed and articulated, for example in political debate and public discourse, they not only signal to others a specific way of "being affected" by the respective out-group members, but also serve as beacons for social inferences, for example regarding the appraisals, beliefs, and desires underlying out-group members' emotions. This is, for example, well documented by the *Emotions as Social Information* framework (van Kleef, 2009). Moreover, the social sharing (Rimé, 2009) of those emotions that characterize affectively polarized relations may also bear strong normative implications, in the sense of "descriptive emotion norms" (Mackie, Smith, Banerji, & Munasinghe, 2023), but also with regards to the types of social relations these emotions indicate.

Aside from this social informational value of discrete emotions, which seems much richer in content than the informational value of a relation solely characterized by valence and arousal, discrete emotions have specific cultural meanings and implications, which vary historically and culturally. To think of a relation as characterized by specific intergroup emotions will almost always carry thoughts about the situational appropriateness of a specific emotion, its social desirability, and its cultural connotations and value.

Take anger as an example. When it comes to affective polarization, it is almost prototypical in political commentary to describe relations between polarized partisan camps as characterized by anger. In some cases, this political anger is portrayed as an inadequate and inappropriate emotion to experience and to express in political debate, which has become particularly evident with regards to angry supporters of populist parties on the right. The perceived inappropriateness of this anger can be interpreted as an outcome of historical efforts to contain and control anger in the United States (Stearns & Stearns, 1986). At the same time, however, we see attempts at the cultural rehabilitation of anger as an emotion that is even necessary to direct attention to certain political grievances and to mobilize collective action.

This is evident, for example, with regards to feminist (Chemaly, 2018) and anti-racist (Cherry, 2021) political struggles. As Rosenwein's (2020) historical account shows us: anger, as well as other emotions, are sometimes vices, sometimes virtues, and this historical and cultural contingency substantially qualifies how we assess (and support or disapprove of) affectively polarized relationships in society.

Similar arguments for the cultural significance of affect and emotions, and thus for the very meaning of affective polarization, can be made with regards to the affects people ideally like to have. Tsai (2007) suggested the concept of *ideal affect* to denote which types of affects individuals value and ideally like to experience. Hence, even though the evidence suggests that there is a positive correlation between party identification and the strength of certain emotions experienced in political contexts (e.g., Bakker & Lelkes, 2024, Figure 3), this does not necessarily imply that these are affective states citizens ideally like to experience. From a normative political theory standpoint, one might also look at the emotions that characterize polarized relations and ask how conducive or detrimental they are to a liberal democratic polity (Nussbaum, 2013).

The importance to account for discrete (intergroup) emotions in political polarization also becomes clear when looking at the potential of emotions (as opposed to mere affect) to become the nexus of processes of cohesion and social exclusion. In the partisan contexts discussed by Bakker and Lelkes (2024), social identity is a key driver of affective polarization: citizens engage with the world not from a personal or individual vantage point, but from the perspective of group- or category-membership. I argue that accounting for emotions in affective polarization also opens-up further perspectives on group and intergroup dynamics. In the case of partisanship, the expression and articulation of intergroup emotions are likely to validate and reinforce the attitudes and beliefs that constitute partisanship. Shared intergroup emotions not only indicate that partisans have similar opinions on policy issues, but also signal that they are united in (a) their subjective emotional experiences, and (b) in

their appraisals and affective stances towards out-group members. Shared intergroup emotions may thus increase group identification but may also create feelings of we-ness and togetherness amongst the in-group (Smith & Mackie, 2015, p. 351f). Instead of just "rallying around the flag", group members also rally around shared emotions such anger, resentment, or indignation, as, for example, the *Indignados* movement in Spain (an anti-austerity politics movement between 2011 and 2012), thereby fueling in-group favoritism and out-group demarcation.

In most cases, this sharing of intergroup emotions requires emotions to be expressed, labeled, and named, and in this articulation and categorization lies a crucial difference to affective polarization, where affect usually is not verbalized nor sorted into linguistic categories. The naming and articulation of emotions in intergroup relations inevitably renders them the subject of public and political discourse. This means that political actors have various opportunities to strategically attend to, manage, and manipulate citizens' emotions to serve their interests. This is probably best seen with regards to political populism because a key ingredient of populism is an affectively polarized relation between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" (e.g., Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), but it also typically includes various other intergroup emotions, especially towards minorities and disadvantaged groups in society.

Because (especially populist) political actors often seek to establish a view of the world that follows an "us-versus-them" logic, they have an interest to imbue these relations with an affective meaning that promotes and underscores in-group favoritism and out-group hostility. Using nonverbal emotion expressions and emotion words to describe these relations can accomplish this task, as can be seen, for example, in Donald Trump's "angry populism" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018) and in various political strategies to nourish forms resentment and *ressentiment* between in-and out-groups (Salmela & von Scheve, 2018). Specifically looking at these discrete emotions in affectively polarized relations will allow researchers to better

understand the different dimensions of affective polarization and how they are driven and actively shaped by political actors.

Taken together, Bakker and Lelkes (2024) have written a timely and thought-provoking article on how affect and emotion research from psychology and other disciplines can inform and advance research on affective polarization. Their contribution makes important theoretical arguments for a more comprehensive understanding, conceptualization, and measurement of affect in affective polarization and at the same time provides intriguing evidence on the insights that can be gained by such an approach. My commentary suggested to expand this endeavor even more into the direction of discrete (intergroup) emotions and outlined ways in which attention to these discrete emotions will yield additional insights into the affectively polarized relations in society.

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