

Expectancy Violations Theory: Why Surprises Change Minds

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Expectancy Violations Theory sees communication as the exchange of information that is high in relational content and can be used to violate the expectations of another, who will perceive the exchange either positively or negatively depending on the liking between the two people. Expectancy Violations Theory attempts to explain people's reactions to unexpected behavior. Expectancies are primarily based upon social norms and specific characteristics of the communicators. Violations of expectancies cause arousal and compel the recipient to initiate a series of cognitive appraisals of the violation. The theory proposes that expectancy will influence the outcome of the communication as positive or negative and predicts that positive violations increase the attraction of the violator and negative violations decrease the attraction of the violator.

History

Expectation Violations Theory has its roots in Uncertainty Reduction research. Violations of expected behavior cause arousal and uncertainty in people. People then look to explain the violation in order to better predict another's behavior. Early communication research that led to EVT was conducted by Judee K. Burgoon in 1976 and explored issues of personal space and how communicative functions could be seen through expectations and expectation violations. Burgoon had seen academic attention paid to personal space norms but recognized a gap in research regarding the use of space as communication. EVT evolved from a model designed by Burgoon, called the Nonverbal Expectancy Violations Model. This theory brings together two components: proxemics and kinesics. It involves the space between individuals, the 'proper' distance to be maintained (within contexts and relationships) and what happens when the boundaries are crossed. Also, the communicator, or violator, has a degree of power either in the present situation or a possible future one that influences the interpretation of his/her actions. The theory was later applied to other forms of nonverbal behavior and subsequently to other acts of communication, and is now referred to as EVT. It is considered a theory of communication processes, and more specifically a theory of discourse and interaction. Recently, the theory has undergone some reconstitution by Burgoon and her colleagues and has resulted in a newer theory known as Interaction Adaptation Theory, which is a more comprehensive explanation of adaptation in interpersonal interaction.

Theoretical Viewpoints

Three primary assumptions predicate Expectancy Violations Theory. First, people seek to reward others and seek to avoid punishing others, as explained by Social Exchange Theory. Second, behavior violations arouse and distract, calling attention to the qualities of the violator and the relationship between the interactants. Third, the evaluation of the violation is based upon the relationship between the particular behavior and the valence of the actor.

EVT proposes that observation and interaction with others leads to expectancies. The two types of expectancies noted are predictive and prescriptive. Predictive expectancies let people know what to expect based upon what typically occurs within the context of a particular environment and relationship. For example, a husband and wife may have an evening routine in which the husband always washes the dishes. If he were to ignore the dirty dishes one night, this might be seen as a predictive discrepancy. Prescriptive discrepancies, on the other hand, are expectancies based upon general social norms of what is deemed to be appropriate. For instance, if it customary in an organization to greet people with a firm handshake but an individual is greeted by a kiss on the lips, this could be seen as a prescriptive discrepancy.

Further, according to EVT, three factors influence a person's expectations: interactant variables, environmental variables, and variables related to the nature of the interaction (Burgoon & Jones, 1976). Interactant variables are the traits of those persons involved in the communication. Sex, race, culture, status, and age are some such variables. Environmental variables include amount of space available and nature of the territory surrounding the interaction. Interaction variables include social norms, purpose of the interaction, and formality of the situation. As the theory evolved, these factors also evolved into communicator characteristics, relational characteristics, and context. Communicator characteristics share much of the same qualities of interactant variables, but co orientation variables, which encompassed information about the relationship between interactants, have been broken out into their own category - relational characteristics. Context encompasses both environment and interaction characteristics.

A key component to EVT is the notion of violation valence, or the association the receiver places on the behavior violation. A violatee's response to an expectancy violation can be positive or negative and is dependent on two conditions: positive or negative interpretation of the behavior and the nature (rewardingness) of the violator. Rewardingness of the violator is evaluated through many categories - attractiveness, prestige, ability to provide resources, or associated relationship. For instance, a violation of one's personal space might have more positive valence if committed by a wealthy, powerful, physically appealing member of the opposite sex than a filthy, poor, homeless person with foul breath.

Expectancy Violations Theory Propositions

The above assumptions and discussion can be summarized into six major propositions posited by Expectancy Violations Theory :

People develop expectations about verbal and nonverbal communication behavior from other people.

Violations of these expectations cause arousal and distraction, further leading the receiver to shift his or her attention to the other, the relationship, and meaning of the violation.

Communicator reward valence determines the interpretation of ambiguous communication.

Communicator reward valence determines how the behavior is evaluated.

Violation valences are determined by three factors: (1) the evaluation of the behavior, (2) whether or not the behavior is more or less favorable than the expectation, and (3) the magnitude of the violation. A positive violation occurs when the behavior is more favorable than the expectation. A negative violation occurs when the behavior is less favorable.

Positive violations produce more favorable outcomes than behavior that matches expectations, and negative violations produce more unfavorable outcomes than behavior that matches expectations.

Common Expectancy Violations in Close Relationships

It is important to note that EVT can apply to both non-relational interaction and close relationships. In 1998, more than twenty years after the theory was first published, Afifi and Metts conducted several studies to catalog the types of expectancy violations commonly found in close relationships. They arrived at nine :

Support or confirmation is an act that provides social support in a particular time of need, such as sitting with a friend who is sick.

Criticism or accusation is critical of the receiver and accuse the individual of an offense. These are violations because they are accusations not expected.

Relationship intensification or escalation intensifies the commitment of the communicator. For instance, saying "I love you," signifies a deepening of a romantic relationship.

Relationship de-escalation does the opposite. An example might be spending more time apart.

Relational transgressions are violations of the perceived rules of the relationship. Examples include having an affair, deception, or being disloyal.

Acts of devotion are unexpected overtures that imply specialness in the relationship. Buying flowers for no particular occasion falls into this category.

Acts of disregard show that the partner is unimportant.

Gestures of inclusion are actions that show an unexpected interest in having the other included in special activities or life. Examples include invitations to spend a special holiday with someone or disclosure of personal information, or inviting the partner to meet one's family.

Uncharacteristic relational behavior is unexpected action that is not consistent with the partner's perception of the relationship. A common example is one member of an opposite-sex friendship demanding a romantic relationship of the other.

Afifi and Metts later collapsed the support or confirmation category into acts of devotion and included another category, uncharacteristic social behavior. These are acts that aren't relational but are unexpected, such as a quiet person raising his or her voice.

Metatheoretical Assumptions

Ontological Assumptions

EVT assumes that humans have a certain degree of free will. This theory assumes that humans can assess and interpret the relationship and liking between themselves and their conversational partner, and then make a decision whether or not to violate the expectations of the other person. The theory holds that this decision depends on what outcome they would like to achieve.

Epistemological Assumptions

EVT assumes there is one truth. This truth is that there are norms for all communication activities and if these norms are violated, there will be specific, predictable outcomes.

Axiological Assumptions

This theory seeks to be value-neutral because the study was done empirically and seeks to objectively describe how humans react when their expectations are violated (Burgoon, 1978).

Related Theories

As mentioned above, EVT has strong roots in Uncertainty Reduction Theory. The theory also borrows from Social Exchange Theory in that people seek reward out of interaction with others. Two other theories share similar outlooks to EVT - Discrepancy-Arousal Theory and Patterson's Social Facilitation Model. Like EVT, DAT explains that a receiver becomes aroused when a communicative behavior does not match the receiver's expectations. In DAT, these differences are called discrepancies instead of expectancy violations. Social Facilitation Model has a similar outlook and labels these differences as unstable changes. A key difference between the theories lies in the receiver's arousal level. Both DAT and SFM maintain that the receiver experiences a physiological response whereas EVT focuses on the attention shift of the receiver. EVT posits that expectancy violations occur frequently and are not always as serious as perceived through the lenses of other theories.

Criticism of the Theory

One critique of Expectation Violations Theory lies in the scope of thought and research devoted to the theory. A large amount of attention has been narrow in scope and has shown violations to be highly consequential acts, negative in nature, and uncertainty increasing. As Afifi and Metts (1998) point out, literature and anecdotal evidence illustrate that expectancy violations vary in frequency, seriousness, and valence. While it is true that many expectancy violations carry a negative valence, numerous are positive and actually reduce uncertainty because they provide additional

information within the parameters of the particular relationship, context, and communicators.

Other critics of EVT believe most interaction between individuals is extremely complex and there are many contingency conditions to consider within the theory. This makes the prediction of behavioral outcomes of a particular situation virtually impossible.

Further Use and Development of the Theory

The concept of Social Norms Marketing follows expectancy violation in that it is based upon the notion that messages containing facts that vary from perception of the norm will create a positive expectancy violation. Advertising, strategic communications, and public relations base social norms campaigns on this position.

Interaction Adaptation Theory further explores expectancy violations. Developed by Burgoon to take a more comprehensive look at social interaction, IAT posits that people enter into interactions with requirements, expectations, and desires. These factors influence both the initial behavior as well as the response behavior. When faced with behavior that meets an individual's needs, expectations, or desires, the response behavior will be positive. When faced with behavior that does not meet an individual's needs, expectations, or desires, he or she can respond either positively or negatively depending on the degree of violation and positive or negative valence of the relationship.