

# Expectancy violation theory essay



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Expectancy Violation Theory Introduction “ Expectancy violations exert significance on people’s interaction patterns, on their impressions of one another, and on the outcomes of their interactions” (Burgoon 1993: 40).

In other words, Judee Burgoon, founder of the expectancy violation theory, concluded from various experiments that people evaluate communication with others in a negative or positive regard, based on their expectation of the interaction and their opinion of the communicator. When people do not act in accordance with ones expectations, one resorts to evaluating their communication behavior, be it verbal or non verbal as well as how this behavior makes one feel. The following essay will further explore and explain the expectancy violation theory, as well as provide the reader with an application of the theory regarding the initial relationship between myself, Shanaaz and my brother’s girlfriend Nishad. Explanation of selected theory Burgoon (1993: 33) defined personal space as an “ invisible, variable volume of space surrounding an individual which defines that individual’s preferred distance from others”. If a stranger had to stand too close to you in elevator when there are just two of you in the elevator, your natural reaction would be a heightened sense of arousal and discomfort because one does not expect an unfamiliar person to get inside his/her personal space.

The expectancy violation theory explains this feeling of uneasiness.

Individuals set their own definition of personal space depending on both the situation they are in and the relationship they have with the other people involved. Naturally, people feel more comfortable interacting closely with people they are intimate with than standing next to complete strangers.

Firstly, the theory suggests that personal space expectations are influenced

by two factors: “ the social norm and the known idiosyncratic spacing patterns of the initiator” (Burgoon & Walther 1990: 235).

The distance people are used to in situations, which vary in every culture, is their social norm. Whereas, idiosyncratic norms are defined by knowledge of an individual’s unique interaction style (Burgoon 1993: 31). Social norms, such as conversational distance norms, are affected by various characteristics such as age, gender, and personality, as well as culture. Secondly, recent findings of the theory applicable to both verbal and non verbal behaviour suggests a two stage process. In this it states that a person first attempts to interpret a violation and then goes on to evaluate it based on the interpretation attached and the sender.

. “ The amount of deviation from proxemic expectations influences the amount and direction of the effects” (Burgoon & Walther 1990: 235). In other words, people feel rewarded when someone they like stands near them, and punished when someone they dislike or don’t know stands near them (Bachman & Guerrero 2006: 944). According to Burgoon and Afifi, positive regard is often directed toward attractive, powerful, or credible sources, while negative regard can be associated with unattractive, powerless individuals (Burgoon & Afifi 2000: 205).

This is why some violations are seen as negative and others as positive. An important point to remember is that a violation ultimately has a valence attached to it that defines the violation as positive or negative, and the interpretation of the as well as the desirability of it decides whether negative or positive valence will be attached to the behaviour. Brief description of the

relationship used for the application At some point in a person's life, he or she will experience something that violates his/her behavioural expectations. The degree of deviation from their initial expectations will determine the valance attached to the behaviour (positive or negative). According to Burgoon, " personal space invasions produce anxiety responses and efforts to increase distance, which implies that close distances are threatening and produce discomfort," (Burgoon 1993: 35).

In order for my story to make sense I have to go back to my brothers previous relationship with my friend Candice. Candice and I had been friends for about three years before she and my brother started dating. So obviously when they did start dating, I was very enthusiastic about their relationship. They dated for about 7 months and even made plans to move to Johannesburg together. This is where I stay so I was very excited.

Unfortunately things did not quite work out as planned. My brother Khalid, moved to Johannesburg two months before Candice did and in that time he met someone else. Her name is Nishad. As a result of meeting Nishad, the relationship between him and Candice fell apart.

This left my friend broken hearted. Obviously I was furious about the whole situation and vowed that I would not pursue any form of a relationship and stick to a maximum of polite conversation with Nishad. So even before I met her, I decided I did not like her, for the simple reason that she was the reason my friend Candice was now broken hearted and alone in Johannesburg. When I did finally meet Nishad I was cold and distant and I almost instantly made up my mind that she was not right for my brother.

This I quickly made clear to both of them with my disapproving looks and unsociable attitude.

Nishad is a very loud outgoing person so even though I was cold and distant, this did not stop her from trying to get closer to me and in a way forced me to converse with her on numerous occasions which made me very uncomfortable and even angry that she was violating the distance I had created between us. At first I stuck to my guns and kept up the cold, not interested attitude. But the more she forced herself into my life, the more I was forced to get to know her. This resulted in me letting my guard down and reciprocating the effort she made to get to know me, which surprisingly resulted in what has now bloomed into a very special friendship.

Analysis of the Relationship “ The initial assumption we make is that people develop evaluations of others in an interaction. These evaluations may be based on their first impressions or on the history of past interactions with the same individual” (Burgoon 1993: 33). I did not expect that Nishad and I would form a relationship and become friends. Nishad, the ‘ punishing’ initiator in this case had initially caused a large negative discrepancy in my norm even though she did not do anything to me personally.

People expect certain proxemic patterns in particular circumstances based on past experiences (Bachman & Guerrero 2006: 944 ). In this case, my past experience had led me to have a negative opinion of Nishad. I was not used to or open to interaction with Nishad. When she forcefully pursued a relationship with me I initially experienced my “ threat threshold” or the distance at which an interactant experiences physical or psychological

discomfort by the presence of another (Burgoon 1993: 44). I also viewed our interaction as negative because it violated my expectations. While Nishad was sending me positively valued nonverbal and verbal messages by being friendly and open to a relationship, I was sending her negatively valued messages or ‘punishment’ when I rejected her attempts to form a relationship with me.

We both received violating acts from each other, although I don’t believe Nishad interpreted my behaviour as negative because that would have stopped her from pursuing a relationship with me. Apart from Nishad violating my expectations, I violated my own expectations by letting my guard down and starting to like her. One minute I was being cold and ignoring her and the next minute I find myself speaking to her everyday and our bond getting stronger. As a social norm, most people value and are loyal in their friendship which is what I believed I was doing with regard to my friendship with Candice. I believed that being cold to Nishad showed my loyalty to Candice.

My behaviour towards Nishad was viewed as negative by Khalid, whereas I believe if Candice knew Nishad and I were now friends, I would have violated her expectations of me and she would view me in a negative light.

Conclusion Interactants develop expectations about the verbal and nonverbal communication of others. People react differently to communication behaviours. Violations of communication expectations are arousing and distracting, causing an attentional shift to communicator, relationships, violation characteristics and meanings.

Enacted behaviours that are more favourably evaluated than expected behaviours constitute positive violations; enacted behaviours that are less favourably evaluated than expected are negative violations. Every human interaction either challenges or conforms to our expectations. With regard to Nishad and my relationship, she violated my expectations of ‘the new girlfriend’ and although I found her behaviour offensive at first, later I saw something in her that changed my negative valence into a positive. I enjoy her loud outgoing attitude that at first irritated me. And we are now very good friends.

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