

# Expectancy violation theory – intimate in an elevator – not! essay

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How often do you take an elevator to get to your destination? In looking at a typical week, I use elevators at a minimum thirty times. During each elevator ride, I adhere to a set of rules governing elevator etiquette.

These rules, based on common sense, were not presented to me in written form, but were learned over time through communicating with others. Some of the more common elevator rules include waiting for passengers to exit prior to boarding, holding the door for someone who is just seconds away, not talking on cell phones, keeping personal information to yourself, and, as much as possible, allowing others around you their personal space. This paper will focus on the last rule, allowing others around you their personal space. Space expectations are often violated while riding in elevators. I have chosen to analyze space violation with the Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT). Since space violations often involve intimate and personal space expectancies being violated, it is considered part of the socio-psychological communication tradition and is associated with the intra and interpersonal communication contexts.

One day I joined three other co-workers for lunch. We entered the parking garage elevator at the third floor level, pressed the button for the ninth floor, and stood against the back wall. Three additional passengers boarded the elevator bringing the total number of people on the elevator to seven. This number of passengers in this particular elevator would have allowed for everyone in the elevator to have a comfortable amount of space for the ride to his or her floor. A man from the second group that entered the elevator stood directly in front of one of my co-workers named Ross. He was standing with his back only inches away from Ross's face.

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The man had plenty of room to move forward in the elevator but chose not to. He stood so close that there was no room for Ross to move without the two of them touching. Ross remained still for a few seconds thinking the man would move forward. As the elevator began ascending, the man did not move.

Ross made several attempts to make sure his presence in the elevator was more conspicuous including clearing his throat and talking to us. I could see the look on Ross's face and was aware of his immediate tension formed by this person's actions as well as the resulting irritation when the person would not move. Once we all were able to exit the elevator, Ross made the comment, " I am not sure but I think I just got married. " We all laughed and continued on our way to lunch. Obviously, in this scenario, the other elevator passenger unduly violated Ross's intimate space expectations while riding in the elevator.

Space violations are socio-psychological traditions since they are based on a cause and effect communication. The effect felt by one individual is caused by the actions, or lack thereof, of another. The space expectation violations that occur in elevators work within the intra and interpersonal contexts since one person feels the violation internally when involved in direct verbal and/or nonverbal communication with another. The socio-psychological tradition and intra/interpersonal contexts align with the Expectancy Violation Theory. This theory focuses on one's body language when others act as they are expected to or deviate from those expectations.

If someone violates our space, our non-verbal reaction will either reward or punish them for their actions. To properly use EVT to analyze this event, there needs to be an understanding of space (proxemic zones) and territories. The four proxemic zones identified by Hall (1966) include intimate, personal, social and public distances. The three types of territories that exist are primary, secondary, and public (Altman, 1975; Lyman, 1990).

The Expectancy Violation Theory assumes that human interactions are based on expectancies, behavior expectancies are learned from communicating with others, and people interpret nonverbal behavior of others. Some of the factors that may influence a person's expectancies include individual, relational, and contextual. When a person's expectations are violated, EVT examines the types of arousal that occur. Arousal can be either cognitive, physical or both. After the arousal occurs, then the threat threshold must be determined prior to issuing a reaction. The violation is then evaluated on a valence. Violation valence requires making sense of a violation through interpretation and evaluation (Burgoon & Hale, 1988).

The result of the violation ends in the communicator reward valence. This is either the reward or punishment and is dependent on the communicator and his or her value of the violation. In applying the Expectancy Violation Theory to the lunchtime elevator event with Ross, I will begin by taking a closer look at space relations with respect to proxemic zones and territories.

When discussing the amount of space in an elevator, I can really only apply two of the proxemic zones, intimate and personal. A person's intimate distance consists of a very close range, from zero to eighteen inches away

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from their body. For most people, this distance is reserved for family. When an elevator is crowded, it is a safe assumption that a person's intimate space may be invaded. Most would not have an issue with this type of violation as everyone is in the same situation and there is a generalized violation occurring.

A person's personal distance begins at eighteen inches away from their body and extends to out to four feet. This distance is more commonly associated with elevator rides and is considered an acceptable distance. Remember the unwritten elevator rule; allow others around you their personal space. The lunch group that day complied. When we boarded the elevator, we acted according to how we were expected.

We pressed the appropriate button for our floor and moved to the back wall to allow others to board. The other rider, the one who stood in Ross's intimate space, showed no regard for space or the negative effect he was causing. It seemed that since Ross was standing behind him, the man did not feel any discomfort with the distance between them.

People use elevators to move between locations within a structure. Elevators can be considered public and secondary territories. They are public territories since they are available to anyone who enters the building. For people who park in the garage and work in the building, the elevator becomes a secondary territory. It is not their primary territory, but it allows them to move between two of their primary territories, their office and their vehicle. In talking to others, I believe that most people consider the elevator

as an extension of their working environment and will act in accordance with their workplace manners.

The actions of this individual violated the expectations that Ross and the rest of the group held with regards to riding in elevators. The expectation was that everyone would board the elevator and then shift accordingly to allow each person their allotted amount of personal space. This is how I approach each elevator experience. If an elevator is overcrowded, the acceptable notion is to wait for another elevator. Since this gentleman did not respond according to expectations, Ross experienced both cognitive and physical arousal. You could see Ross's face turn slightly red as a result of his frustration. Ross's immediate response was to show us that he was uncomfortable by using facial expressions and hand gestures.

Some of the actions included pretending to hold his breath and motioning with his hands to push him away. He then made noise by clearing his throat to let the person know he was standing behind him. When that did not generate a response, Ross began a conversation with us causing the guy to be caught in the middle of the conversation. The man had no reaction to our conversation and remained in Ross's intimate space.

These actions posed an obvious threat to Ross. Burgoon (1978) defines threat threshold as the " distance at which an interactant experiences physical and physiological discomfort by the presence of another" (p. 30).

Burgoon maintains that " when distance is equated with threat, closer distances are perceived as more threatening and farther distances as less

threatening" (p. 134). Since the intimate space is reserved for close welcoming encounters, the threat threshold of this space violation is low. Ross did not receive any reward for this man's behavior nor did he welcome such behavior from this person. In order to assess the violation valence, there is to be an understanding of why the expectation was violated. Why was this person insistent on standing this close when it was not necessary? What was the man trying to prove? Was he just that ignorant or was he simply that arrogant? Is it a cultural issue? Since no one asked the man the reason for his actions, I cannot fully understand what caused him to behave the way he did.

I was able to assess how Ross perceived the violation and thus the violation valence is considered negative. Ross was very uncomfortable. He made a joke at the end of the event to deflect the violation and to remove the attention the violation had caused. This person's lack of regard for others was not welcomed and has been responded to with a punishing communicator reward valence. This person's actions on this day have allowed for him to be viewed unfavorably.

Since this event, those of us that were on the elevator and those we have told about and identified this individual to will not hold the door for him or ride on the elevator with him. So, what was the point of analyzing this elevator communication event? In analyzing this event, I confirmed my thoughts that a person's intimate space is very important to them and should not be violated unless absolutely necessary. In this instance, the

violation of space was not necessary and could have easily been avoided. If a violation is necessary, one should seek permission prior to the violation.

If obtaining permission is not an option, then an apology and/or an explanation of the violation should be given. It is important to point out that there are things that Ross could have done to handle the situation differently. He could have asked the man to move forward. He himself could have simply moved.

If he had moved, his movement would have caused contact between the two of them, which would then transfer some the violation experience to the other person. The resulting influence of a violation, whether negative or positive, will have lingering effects as it becomes part of that person's field of experience and will provide support for future communication events. I personally have not had to deal with this particular situation, but as an outcome of this analysis I know what actions I would employ should I experience this type of encounter. Also, by doing this analysis, I have learned that it is not always easy to determine why people behave the way they do. Everyone has expectations of how others should behave. When those expectations are not met, then they feel a sense of violation.

I will never know why the guy stood so close to Ross. I don't know if he has done that to other people. I am not completely sure if he knew how close he actually was. I was able to determine that the violation was negative for Ross because of his nonverbal and verbal communication about the situation.

Ross did not say why he did not ask the guy to move forward or why he did not just move out from behind the guy. Without further information from

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those involved the analysis ends with the experience being a negative one with no positive rewards. By using the Expectancy Violation Theory to analyze a communication event focusing on space violation, the lunchtime elevator event confirmed a space expectation violation occurred while riding in the elevator. The violation was to the intimate space and occurred on a secondary territory.

The threat threshold of the violation was low and the violation valence was negative. The violator received punishing rewards and has left a lasting impression on others. So the next time you take a ride in an elevator, remember to allow others around you their personal space even those who might be standing behind you. References Altman, I. (1975). The environment and social behavior.

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