

The Expectancy Violation Theory and *Just Friends*

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Introduction

Expectations are a daily happening for people. They are sometimes bad and sometimes good. They are sometimes controllable and other times not. A theory that works to explain this phenomenon is the expectancy violation theory. The expectancy violation theory has evolved from a model of Judy Burgoon that sees communication as a prediction of what will happen. An artifact that represents this theory well is *Just Friends*. *Just Friends* is a film about two best friends in high school (one male and one female) reuniting. The comedic film illustrates continual expectancy violations as the two, Chris and Jamie, seek to rekindle their long lost friendship.

Summary of Theory

In 1978 the original purpose of the expectancy violation theory was to understand proximity violations and interactions (Gudykunst 150). Judee Burgoon's research and work hones in on how communication works to characterize the nature of relationships (Signorielli 43). Burgoon introduced the expectancy violation theory which was based off of Edward Hall's idea of "proxemics" which is people's use of space. Burgoon sees this personal space or proxemics to be the "invisible, variable volume of space surrounding an individual that defines the individual's preferred distance from others" (Griffin 85). Therefore, the expectancy violation theory includes verbal and nonverbal expectations and violations (Gudykunst 150). Emory Griffin gives us the four different zones of proximity held by Americans. The first is the intimate zone which is about zero to 18 inches. The second is the personal space containing 18 inches to four feet. Third is the social zone which has a diameter of four to ten feet. The last zone for proximity is the public zone which is ten feet and beyond (Griffin 85). In other words, these distances are what the majority of Americans expect in given situations. However, Burgoon does argue that sometimes it is better to violate one's space because it is "a superior strategy to conformity" (Griffin 86).

Furthermore, there are three core concepts that make up the expectancy violation theory. They are *expectancy*, *violation valence*, and *communicator reward valence* (Griffin 89). To define *expectancy*, author William B. Gudykunst says it is the continual pattern of predictable verbal and nonverbal conduct (Gudykunst, 151). Another definition given by Griffin states that expectancy is "what people predict will happen, rather than what they desire" (Griffin 89). Basically, the term "expectancy" is what a person assumes will happen in any given situation. Therefore, expectancy is not based off of one's desires. In Nonverbal Communication in Close Relationships we learn that expectations are predictive and prescriptive. Predictive refers to what will happen in a given circumstance and prescriptive refers to what should happen in a given circumstance. An example of a predictive expectation is that a child might expect a present from her parents for their birthday because they always receive one. An example of a prescriptive expectation is a child might expect their parents to give them a gift because that is what parents do (Guerrero 35).

Additionally, people hold expectations that can arise from the *context* of the situation, the relationship factor, and the communicator characteristics. The context represents the cultural norms. Context is also the setting of the conversation. The relationship factor takes account of the similarity, familiarity, liking, and relative status. Communicator characteristics include things such as the person's demographics (Griffin 89). So, for example, if I have not seen my boyfriend for a month, I would expect our next encounter to begin with a great big hug. This expectation is formed because of the context of not seeing him for an extended period of time and in it is a cultural norm in the United States of America. Also, our relationship would support

this expectation since we are dating. Last, the communicator characteristic is relevant because a hug is part of the culture in which he was raised. Therefore, anything less than a hug would violate my prediction of what would happen.

Moreover, *violation valence* is an important concept of this theory. Griffin says it is “the positive or negative value we place on a specific unexpected behavior, regardless of who does it” (Griffin 90). So when we have an expectation it can be violated both negatively and positively. The person whom the violation is against decides the valence of the violation. A person’s reaction to a violation is unique to their character, upbringing, values, and experiences. However, a large factor in deciding if the violation valence is positive or negative is dependent on the culture in which someone is born. For instance, an individualist culture would be more likely to respond aggressively to proxemic violations, where as a collectivist culture would most likely withdraw (Gudykunst 154). An example of a positive violation would be my boyfriend surprising me with flowers when he picked me up for a date. I had no expectations of flowers because usually when he picks me up for dates he does not bring any. Therefore, I have experienced a positive violation because I find his actions to benefit me and make me happy. If I were asked on a date and the guy never showed up, that would be a negative violation because my expectation was not met in the way I had predicted.

The third component to the expectancy violation theory is the *communicator reward valence*. The communicator reward valence is a “mental audit” we place on others’ behaviors. We ask ourselves questions such as, “How do I feel about this person?” or “How will this affect the future?” The relationship factors include features such as language style, appearance, social skills, and personality (Gudykunst 151). Griffin includes, “age, sex, place-of-birth demographic facts asked for on application forms, but they also include personal features that may affect expectation even – physical appearance, personality, and communication style” (Griffin 89). An example we talked about in class was about if a student places a negative violation on their teacher’s behavior, they are more likely to respond in a way that would not harm their future since their teacher is ultimately in control of their grade.

Additionally, Burgoon explains how humans adapt to each other. The Interaction Adaption Theory falls under the expectancy violation theory as people try to adjust their approach to another’s conduct when it does not match what is needed, projected, and preferred. She says there are three factors that make up a person’s initial interaction position. An interaction position is a person’s predisposition towards an interaction. The first element is requirements. *Requirements* are the results that satisfy our basic needs of survival, belonging, safety, and self-worth (Griffin 93). These are the things we as humans need to happen, as displayed in Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. The second element is *expectations*. Expectations, as stated earlier, are the things we need to happen. Third, there are *desires* which are what we wish to see happen. Burgoon uses an example of her interactions with her friend Bob. First off she describes herself as a “people person” and places high importance on intimate or otherwise known as close relationships (requirement). When she and Bob greet one another they either clasp each other’s elbows or stand side-to-side and give a shoulder hug (expectation). She expresses that she likes how their nonverbals show how much they enjoy each other’s company (personal desire). Burgoon goes on to explain that if Bob her to greet her with a bear hug instead of their usual interaction, she would adapt to his new way of expression because it was a positive violation. In the same way, if it was a negative violation, she would adapt because of the idea of reciprocity. Basically, she would respond to his actions with a similar behavior (Griffin 93).

Artifact Summary

Just Friends was produced by Roger Kumble in 2005 (*Just Friends*). It is a romantic comedy Christmas film. The two main characters, Chris Brander and Jamie Palamino, are played by Ryan Reynolds and Amy Smart. Chris was obese during high school and felt like an outsider despite being best friends with Jamie one of the most popular cheerleaders in the school. Chris had a secret crush on Jamie for as long as they were friends. While at Jamie's graduation party, he finally works up the courage to express his feelings by writing a note in her yearbook. Chris becomes publicly humiliated when Jamie's ex-boyfriend reads Chris' note aloud at the party. After hearing the note read, Jamie kissed Chris on his cheek and said how she loves him like a brother. Chris left in a ruckus due to all the humiliation and his crushed dreams. Ten years later Chris becomes a "stud" in the Los Angeles music industry as a record producer. He is now a handsome and fit man with the reputation of a womanizer. Right before Christmas his boss sends him to take a rising pop singer, Samantha James, to Paris to sign a deal. Against his will Chris sets off on a private jet with her that makes an emergency landing in New Jersey, ironically close to his hometown. As a result Chris takes Samantha with him to his mother's house for the night. Being back in his hometown brought back daunting memories of his humiliating past. That same evening he goes to a local bar where he runs into some friends and Jamie, who happens to be a bartender there while she is finishing up her teaching certificate. Feeling like a new and improved man Chris makes it his goal to seduce Jamie just like all her ex-boyfriends did. As they reconnect, Chris realizes that her friendship is more important than a one-night stand. He really cares about her. But when Dusty Dinkleman, a nerd from high school that used to be in love with her too, shows up on the scene, Chris is determined to win over Jamie once and for all. Several complications come with his plan as Chris tries to get out of the "friend zone" and set his newly developed ego aside to find his old self, the one Jamie wants back. In the end, Chris finds himself, makes it out of the "friend zone", and woos Jamie.

Without a doubt, *Just Friends* is a well designed example of the expectancy violation theory. Chris and Jamie are in this perpetual cycle of expectancy violations both positive and negative which create a confusing situation for the two as they seek to understand "boundaries" to their relationship with each other. To start, back in their high school years Chris and Jamie were inseparable. Jamie's attention to Chris made Chris feel that there was a potential romance. He found himself extremely jealous when Jamie found a new boyfriend and then overjoyed when she dumped him. As previously mentioned, the situation at Jamie's graduation party turned into a complete mess. Jamie felt no violation as her reaction was a kiss on Chris' cheek and a hug with an explanation of how she felt this close relationship to him as a brother. However, Chris experienced a huge negative expectancy violation as his dream of a romantic relationship with her was crushed. He expected her to reciprocate the romantic feelings and embrace his initiation at a relationship. Despite his hopes and expectations, Jamie did not reciprocate, leaving Chris embarrassed. Because he placed a negative valence on the occurrence he felt that he could never face Jamie or the rest of his peers from high school ever again. As a result he pursued a career in California where he received a new chance at who and what he wanted to be (*Just Friends*).

When Chris and Samantha's plane had to make an emergency landing (because the microwave on the plane caught on fire) Chris experience another negative expectancy violation especially when he found out they were close to his hometown. He predicted he would take Samantha to Paris to make his boss happy with no interruptions. Additionally, Samantha was another expectancy violation. She is perceived as this sweet, hot pop singer that is eco-friendly,

but when he meets her she ends up to be this controlling psycho woman desperate for love (*Just Friends*).

When Chris takes Samantha home, she physically violates him as she is very touchy in front of Chris' mother, who is obviously uncomfortable with the situation. Despite the negative valence Chris places on the violation, he has act as though it does not bother him because if he does not get her to sign the record deal, his job is on the line. Therefore, his future dictates his reactions to the violation (*Just Friends*).

Furthermore, the evening Chris arrives in his hometown, he goes out to the local bar where he finds Jamie to be the bar tender (a pleasant surprise). When he asks to meet up with her the next day, she offers lunch, which greatly disappoints Chris because a "lunch date" puts you in the "friend zone". Chris feels like he picked up where they left off, but he is determined to change that. The next day he picks Jamie up and they eat at the local diner that was one of "their spots" in high school. While there both Chris and Jamie experience expectancy violations. First, Jamie expects Chris (despite his weight change) to be the same guy she knew in high school, however Chris negatively violates her expectations as he though she wanted him to be like the other guys she dated in high school. Much of the violation came from not understanding what the other person wanted. Although both placed a negative valence on their encounter they were still cordial to each other because of their past friendship. As a result of their past, they agreed to see each other again (*Just Friends*).

On the flip side, Samantha was being shunned by Chris because he would do anything to delay continuing their trip to Paris in order to send more with Jamie. One example of this is when Chris talked her into playing a gig at a local restaurant to widen her fan base. She fell for his idea and experienced a huge negative expectancy violation, because when she arrived at the "restaurant" it was actually a biker bar with an extremely rough crowd that booed her performance. As a result of her negative valence she no longer trusted Chris and became bitter towards him (*Just Friends*).

In addition, Chris is surprised to see Dusty Dinkleman while in town. In high school, Dusty was a pimple faced nerd who wrote a horrendous song for Jamie in hopes to woo her. His attempt in high school failed, but his chances now were greater as Dusty is now this handsome EMT who loves children. Where people like Jamie find this to be a positive expectancy violation, Chris finds it to be negative because of his jealousy and nerves that Dusty might win over Jamie before him. As a result, he is very rude and sarcastic to Dusty and tries to manipulate situations so that Dusty would not be able to tag along. For example, Chris called Jamie and they decided to go see *The Notebook*. When Jamie shows up at Chris' house Dusty is with her. Jamie perceived going to the movies as a friend event where Chris hoped for it to be a date. Chris' expectations were greatly violated and put him in a grouchy mood for the rest of the evening. The more negative violations Chris experiences the more his aggression builds to win the game of "who gets Jamie". This causes him to act out and not be himself which as a result pushes Jamie further and further away (*Just Friends*).

At one point Chris and Jamie decide to have a sleep over like the old days, and what started out as a positive and exciting thing turned into a negative violation for Jamie. After a fun night of eating ice cream and reminiscing, the two climb in bed (Jamie in one of Chris' work shirts). Chris and Jamie both want to "do the deed" but when Jamie puts herself out there Chris does not make a move. Chris finally realizes that it is not about the sex it is about Jamie. He loves her and wants to make her his. However, Jamie feeling stupid feels violated as Chris never

reciprocated the action. As a result, Jamie and Chris become frustrated and seek out their friends for insight and comfort on the situation (*Just Friends*).

Consequently, Chris decides to run from the problem and head back to Las Angeles forgetting Jamie as he feels defeated. He flies home and once there realizes he cannot live without her. He gets back on a plane and heads for New Jersey. Just as the ball is about to drop on New Year's Eve, Jamie hears a knock on her door and opens it to find Chris. First, Jamie experiences an expectancy violation as she thought Chris was gone for good once and for all. To her liking she was glad to see him but played it off as she was afraid to get hurt. Therefore, Jamie placed a positive valence on Chris' unexpected actions. While standing in the doorway, Chris spills his heart to Jamie and explains his out-of-line actions. He shares how he wants to love her, marry her, and make babies with her. He put his heart on the line with no notion of how she would react. To his surprise she laid a huge kiss on him confirming her feelings and acceptance of his "plan". Chris did not know what to expect but her actions were identified as positive (*Just Friends*). All the negative violations were worth that one positive.

Implications

I love this movie. I think it is hilarious and pulls out many emotions allowing almost anyone to relate. In terms of implications, I thought of the movie first and realized the expectancy violation theory would work great with the film. I have always recognized the disappointments and surprises the characters experienced due to other actions, but I was never able to put reasoning to it or a theory. Knowing how to apply the theory has helped me see why Chris and Jamie act the way they do in the film. So many times their action of avoidance to tell each other how they feel really frustrates me. I look at how long it took for Chris to just be honest with Jamie and it amazes me. However, I now understand that when someone places a negative valence on an action or occurrence it makes their next encounter with that person harder because of their previous experience and hurt. Although the negative violations hindered their relationship, in the end the positive violation finally brought them together.

Although there are many great examples of this theory in the film, it is still Hollywood. Hollywood's outlook on life tends to be dramatic and wishful. Life does not always end with a "happily ever after". Unfortunately, *Just Friends* is another film that does. Now, I do believe the storyline is plausible but it is dramatized to entice an audience and be funny. I feel that in reality people, like Jamie and Chris, are avoidant with how they feel, but if someone experiences so many negative expectancy violations I would think they would ignore the other person or say something sooner out of frustration. However, this film leads people to believe that persistence wins when in reality that is not always the case.

Conclusion

Overall, the idea of proxemics motivated the development of Judy Burgoon's expectancy violation theory. Within this theory the three main components are expectancy, violation valence, and communicator reward valence. As *Just Friends* illustrates, the expectancy violation theory is a practical and proven theory. Expectancy violations are an aspect of life that is impossible to avoid. People have expectations of others and situations. If people's expectations are not met there is a negative valence placed on the experience. However, people may experience positive violations when the unexpected behavior benefits them. Depending on someone's future encounter with the other individual, their reaction to the situation will differ despite the valence given to the violation. In the end, we can label this theory as objective because there is one "truth" in that expectancy violations do in fact occur to everyone.

Additionally, the violations can be generalized as positive or negative confirming it to be objective.

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