An Expansion of Expectancy Violation Theory:

Self-Expectancy Violation

Brittany Pailthorpe

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Introduction

Since its development in 1976, based primarily upon non-verbal behavior, expectancy violation theory has grown to include a multitude of triggers that directly contradict an individual's preconception of "what interaction should and will be like" (Miller, 2005, p. 159). Based in both individual expectancies and social norms, when an expectancy is violated it begins a process of both alertness and arousal that makes the individual more attune to the action that has passed the threshold of normalcy. Whether that breech is welcomed or unwelcomed depends on the violation itself and the person who committed it (Miller, 2005). The research testing this theory has not veered from its origins in intrapersonal communication, ignoring the interpersonal communication, or expectancies of self, that individuals are constantly managing. I argue for an extension to expectancy violation theory that includes the expectancies of the self. These various violations are represented by the examples of intellectual disappointment, guilt by lack of effort and failure to make an alternative choice. The events of failing a test, throwing a match, or having to make a quick decision, are predicated on a sense of responsibility, sometimes resulting in lower self-esteem, a communicative process that could possibly illuminate some aspects of personal blame in situations when the violation is caused by an outsider.

Self-Expectancy Violation as Disappointment

Violations of self-expectancies have the potential to take many forms. Disappointment, one form of a possible self-expectancy violation, is perhaps one of the strongest example of this theoretical extension, as young adults, particularly students, face this continually throughout their academic and budding professional careers. Anticipating a better score on the GREs or grade on a paper or exam, a student's self-expectancy would cross the threshold of normalcy only when the result turns to disappointment. Thinking of violations as emotionally specific makes room for understanding the trigger of such violations that, like in those caused by an outsider, are both

idiosyncratic and socially constructed. That disappointment that derives from intellectual self-expectancy violation, usually only has merit when the individual takes responsibility for the violation—blaming the teacher for an unfair grade is no longer a failure of self but a failure of the outsider. Without that notion of responsibility, self-expectancy violations rarely occur.

Self-Expectancy Violation as Guilt

Just in the case of intellectual disappointment, a self-expectancy violation that causes the individual to feel guilt is dependent upon a notion of responsibility. An example of guilt within this framework can be triggered by a lack of effort—a boxer throwing a match for money when morally they know it contradicts their character—or a failure to make an alternative choice. Understanding difficult choices individuals make and how much it violates their expectancies of self, is in itself difficult, but media representations serve as possible illuminations to those repercussions of guilt. The decision that drives the plot of *Sophie's Choice,* represents the guilt that can result from a self-expectancy violation. During World War II, Sophie Zawistowski, a Polish Catholic, was forced to make an unbearable choice: whether her son or her daughter would be sent to the gas chambers. After choosing to save her son, who she never saw again, the guilt of having made that decision slowly destroyed her mental stability (Pakula, Barish, Gerrity, & Starger, 1982). Yet, even in this representation of the most extreme circumstance, Sophie's guilt was still predicated on a sense of responsibility, resulting in lower self-esteem that may connect these self-expectancy violations to the phenomenon of victim responsibility.

Self-Expectancy Violation as Self-Blaming

Even though Sophie's guilt derived from a decision that she had to make, the cause of that decision was an outsider. The Nazi soldier that made her choose between her son or her daughter received very little culpability. Her guilt and disappointment was a product of taking responsibility for that violation, thus resulting in self-blame. By identifying the situations were

self-expectancies are violated it could possibly help both scholars, health professionals and victims, identify the best strategies to curb that unwarranted self-blame. Although all self-expectancy violations would require a sense of individual responsibility, outsiders may be more accountable than the victim acknowledges. Some scholars may disagree that this extension is always the result of socially constructed or idiosyncratic self-expectancies, but recognizing the origin of those violations may help to stop the possible stigmatization of the person experiencing the breech.

Conclusion

Though this extension to expectancy violation theory may still fit into the category of intrapersonal communication, negotiating the self in terms of schemas, but still adhering to the arousal portion of the theory, makes awareness of a self-expectancy violation the strongest when there is a solid sense of individual responsibility or a false blame. Intellectual disappointment from failing academically, guilt via intentional lack of effort or failure to make an alternative choice, are all examples of how self-expectancy violations may lead to self-blame. It is worth recognizing that all of the preceding examples pertain to negative violations, and to fully examine the potential of this extension future research is needed to examine both the proposed expansion and the differences in responsibility and blame that may occur with positive self-expectancy violations.

References

Miller, K. (2005). *Communication Theories: Perspectives, processes and contexts.* Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.

Pakula, A.J., Barish, K., Gerrity, W.C., & Starger, M. (Producers), & Pakula, A.J. (Director). (1982). *Sophie's choice.* [Motion picture]. United States: Universal Pictures.