



A FIRST LOOK AT COMMUNICATION THEORY

**Transcript of Em Griffin's interview with Judee Burgoon,
creator of Expectancy Violations Theory**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-kmnZlxiYHk>

Griffin: I'm talking with Judee Burgoon from the University of Arizona. Judee is the author of Expectancy Violations Theory. We often hear, "when in Rome, do as the Romans do;" conform to other people's expectations; don't rock the boat; and go along to get along. Expectancy Violations Theory suggests there may be times when we don't have to conform or do as others do so and, in fact, it may be better if we don't. Judee, could you give us a thumbnail sketch of Expectancy Violations Theory.

Burgoon: Sure. One of the things that's always intrigued me in communication is looking at things that are counterintuitive, things that challenge the basic truisms, things that everybody holds we should all buy into. And Expectancy Violations Theory is one of those cases where really what we're proposing is that there are occasions where violation is not a negative. There's a lot of literature that would suggest doing a violation is always going to have negative consequences. And the idea of the theory is that there are occasions when it may actually be beneficial to violate in what is called a "positive violation." These can include situations where the behavior itself has a lot of positive meaning; or it may be a case where the behavior itself has some ambiguities to it, and by doing the violation, you make the source of the violation more relevant. There's more focus on the source; and if that source has positive characteristics, that makes the violation a more positive kind of violation. So, for example, if I think really positively of you, and you become...

Griffin: Oh you do, you do!

Burgoon: And I do... and I am engaged in an interaction with you and you become even friendlier than I had expected, I might in this case become even more aware of what you're doing, be even more aware of all your wonderful sterling qualities; and as a result of your doing the violation, I'm actually even more favorably disposed toward you. I might be more persuaded by you; I might better remember what you had to say; I might even think of you as more credible than if you had gone along and done what was expected.

Griffin: How could I know?

Burgoon: How could you know when to do it and when not?

Griffin: Mmm hmm.

Burgoon: There are a lot of circumstances where you don't know. And under those circumstances maybe you'd be better off not to risk a violation.

Griffin: How did you get started in this? I mean, was there some violation that you did with good effect or did someone violate your expectations and this ticked you off, or what?

Burgoon: Serendipity. A lot of these things come by accident. I was given an assignment as a student to make sense out of the proxemic literature. That's how we started out in the area of space. At the time there was almost nothing in the way of communication theory, and we were told to make sense of this literature. And so, from a communication standpoint, what do we know here about spacing behavior? Is there any kind of communication potential here?

Griffin: This sounds like it could be Machiavellian, that I'm moving around during the day saying "should I violate this person's space, or should I talk louder?" I mean, do you do this? [laughter] Do you think this stuff as you go through the day?

Burgoon: No, I don't, and I think anybody who knows anything about effective communication that you can't have an authentic interchange if you're busy standing back and watching yourself go through the motions and...

Griffin: That's a very self-conscious thing.

Burgoon: Yes ...and behaving very deliberately. But I think there are times when I think we plan our communication where you could make choices.

Griffin: Judee, I'm intrigued because it seems to me that you almost ooze theory. You're constantly referring to a number of theories, and these are theories that you've put forth. This is unusual. You're the only person that I'm interviewing that has two theories that we're talking about. What is it that gets a person theorizing? Is there a certain mindset or personality, or...

Burgoon: I think part of it is my graduate training, that one of the reasons people come into communication is trying to understand this endlessly fascinating area of human communication; and there's nothing so practical as a good theory. Theories are helping us explain why people do what they do, and try to predict what they do. So my whole education was geared toward trying to make sense out of communication. And because studying it is so fascinating – we've done so many studies, and each study raises new questions and sends you off in new directions. And that's why one theory sort of spawns another theory. So, the more you get immersed in the actual empirical study of communication, of necessity you're trying to make sense of things... you have to ask, "what's your theory of why things happen the way they do?"

Griffin: So, if I'm going to be a person who cares about communication, trying to make sense out of things, I'm almost of necessity going to do theory?

Burgoon: You have to. A theory is nothing more than your set of systematic hunches about the way things operate, and the point of trying to test theories is to see if your hunches work out. Now, those should be informed hunches. They should be built on a foundation of what other people already know, what they theorized about, what literature people have already developed. That's all it is... a set of systematic predictions about how human behavior functions.

Griffin: So, it'd be okay if I wrote a book called *Communication Hunches*, but they better be informed hunches?

Burgoon: That's it; that's what theory is.

Griffin: Judee, it strikes me that empiricists are often criticized because they say, or people think they say, that human beings have no choice. I hear you saying all the time that we have choice.

Burgoon: Absolutely. I think you have to understand that there are certain aspects of communication in which we are operating in a fairly automated fashion. Even some of those things began as choice behavior, voluntary behavior. There are other things... I am a firm believer in part of what happens in our communication being biologically driven and somewhat involuntary, following genetically programmed routines. But as communication scholars, we have to believe, or we might be out of business, that we can craft our messages and we can do a lot of strategic things to be more effective as communicators. And that's what we're trying to train people to do – how to make the wise strategic choices to minimize those things that are inadvertent byproducts of our communication, to bring more and more under our strategic control. So, that by its very nature means communication is a choice-driven, goal-driven, strategic activity.

Griffin: I'm glad you made the choice to be here.

Burgoon: Thank you.