

**When Desires Collide with Reality: Communication Illuminates
the Complexity of Expectation in Legal Contexts**

*A Conceptual Framework Presented at the 111th Annual Convention of the National
Communication Association*

Allyson L. Wilson

George Mason University

Department of Communication

November 2025

*Author Note: The framework was informed by both academic study and professional experience
in legal operations, where communication practices and institutional power often intersect.*

Abstract

This paper presents the *Holistic EVT-PIT Conceptual Framework*, which integrates Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT) and Problematic Integration Theory (PIT) to examine unmet expectations. “Holistic” does not imply resolution but reflects the framework’s effort to capture the full complexity of tension between what is expected and what is desired. Through an illustrative vignette grounded in real-world dynamics, the paper explores how legal client expectations (shaped by heuristics, online reviews, and personal investment) often conflict with legal realities, producing emotional dissonance, dissatisfaction, and reputational risk for the legal organization.

EVT provides a lens to understand how violated expectations in legal advice draw attention, elicit emotional responses, and shape evaluations of communicators. PIT complements this framework by addressing the tension that arises when clients' evaluative desires (for example, dismissal of charges) clash with probabilistic realities (for example, likely conviction). Together, these theories illuminate how attorney-client communication becomes a site where desire, legal reasoning, and self-perception interact, particularly when clients place more weight on heuristic cues than legal expertise.

The Holistic EVT-PIT framework offers a lens for understanding how expectation violations and problematic integration are shaped by self-perception, normative assumptions, and personal desire. By situating interpersonal theory within an organizational context, this project examines why expectations in professional-client relationships resist alignment, even when communication is clear, strategic, and empathetic.

Introduction

Over the past eight years, a small Mid-Atlantic law firm has handled nearly eight hundred *Driving Under the Influence/Driving While Intoxicated* (DUI/DWI) cases. The firm frequently represents first-time offenders who are male, employed professionals, many of whom hold security clearances and lack prior criminal records. While case facts and outcomes vary by jurisdiction, the following hypothetical scenario illustrates a pattern observed across many cases.

A young professional is charged with DUI/DWI after being found asleep at a traffic light. Though cooperative with authorities, the client performs poorly on field sobriety tests and registers a blood alcohol level above the legal limit. After analyzing the case facts and applicable law, along with typical outcomes in that jurisdiction, the attorney ethically advises that a conviction is likely. In response, the client follows the attorney's advice and recommendations by completing mitigation such as community service, alcohol education, and driving courses.

Despite receiving legal advice that a conviction is likely and engaging in preparation consistent with that guidance, the client begins to develop elevated expectations of a dismissal. At one point, the client expresses that he would be content with a reduction to a traffic infraction, an outcome that, like a dismissal, is highly unlikely given the seriousness of the charge and the available evidence. These expectations are shaped by peer conversations in court-mandated programs and by online reviews highlighting cases, some seemingly more severe than his, with charges amended or dismissed. Anchored in personal investment, professional risk, and a belief in his exceptionality, the client's expectations shift and begin to diverge from the outcome that his attorney had initially presented as most probable.

When the case is resolved with a reduced charge of Reckless Driving, the client expresses disappointment in a negative online review, questioning the firm's value. Although Reckless

Driving is a misdemeanor charge of the most serious classification in that state, it typically carries less social stigma and fewer consequences than a DUI/DWI. In this jurisdiction, Reckless Driving is not a routine outcome for cases with comparable facts, making the result unusually favorable. The outcome avoids probation and extended legal consequences and helps preserve the client's professional standing. Still, the client's dissatisfaction becomes a reputational liability for the firm. This scenario illustrates how unmet expectations (shaped by heuristics) can escalate into public-facing conflict, even when communication has been strategic and ethically sound.

This paper uses an integrated theoretical framework combining Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT) and Problematic Integration Theory (PIT) to examine how such tensions described in the vignette arise and persist. By focusing on the interplay between evaluative desires and probabilistic orientations, the integrated framework illuminates the complexity of expectations in professional-client interactions. Rather than offering strategies for resolution, it provides a conceptual lens for understanding why misalignment often endures, despite clear and competent communication.

Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT)

Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT), introduced by Burgoon (1978, 1993), explores how individuals respond to unexpected behaviors in interpersonal interactions, emphasizing the formation and violation of expectations (Burgoon, 1993, 2016; Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005; Burgoon & Walther, 1990; White, 2022). Focused initially on nonverbal behavior, EVT has evolved to include verbal and relational dynamics, illustrating how expectancy violations influence perceptions, relational outcomes, and broader communicative contexts (Afifi & Metts, 1998; Burgoon, 2016).

EVT Core Concepts

Expectancies

Central to EVT is the concept of *expectancies*, defined as "enduring patterns of anticipated behavior" that may be either generalized or person-specific (Burgoon, 1993, p. 31; Burgoon & Walther, 1990, p. 235; White, 2022, p. 159). EVT describes two types of expectancies. First, *predictive expectancies* refer to what individuals believe is likely to happen based on prior experiences, cultural norms, or stereotypes (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005). The word "belief" is operative since it suggests a subjective component of predictive expectancies. Second, *prescriptive expectancies* refer to what individuals think should happen based on cultural values (Burgoon, 2016; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2006). Taken together, these definitions frame expectancies as cognitive anticipations of others' behavior.

Communicator Characteristics, Relational Characteristics, & Context Characteristics

EVT identifies three primary factors that influence expectancies in a given encounter: *communicator characteristics*, the *relationship*, and the interaction *context*. Communicator characteristics refer to demographics (e.g., age, gender), physical appearance, social skills, personality, and communication style (Burgoon, 1993; Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005). These characteristics help individuals anticipate how others will communicate. Cultural stereotypes or past experiences with similar others often shape our anticipations of others' behavior (Burgoon, 1993; Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005). Interestingly, a person's characteristics can influence their expectations for themselves, highlighting identity's role in shaping behavioral expectations (Burgoon & Walther, 1990). However, self-perceptions or self-characteristics are not an explicit part of the EVT model. The second factor, the relationship, includes any defining characteristics between communicators, such as familiarity, attraction, liking, and perceived similarity or dissimilarity (Burgoon, 1993; Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005; White, 2022). Additionally, the

equality or inequality in status between communicators plays a significant role in shaping behavioral expectations, reflecting the dynamic of power and access to resources or influence within the relationship (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005; White, 2022).

Lastly, the context of the interaction involves environmental factors that influence communication norms, such as the formality of the setting, the nature of the task, or the privacy of the situation. Context also encompasses behavioral scripts that prescribe or proscribe communication behaviors, with situational and temporal elements shaping these expectations (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005; Burgoon & Walther, 1990; White, 2022). These factors demonstrate how identity, relationship dynamics, and environmental context influence communication expectations in any given encounter.

Arousal

When behaviors deviate from a person's expectations, individuals experience arousal (Burgoon, 1993). According to Burgoon (1993), arousal is a neutral response that shifts focus to the unexpected behavior and the communicator who enacted the unexpected behavior. However, as White (2022) pointed out, arousal may also involve emotional reactions. This distinction becomes important in high-stakes legal interactions, where emotional arousal may be misread or dismissed, even when it plays a key role in how advice is interpreted.

Violation Valence: Interpretation And Evaluation

Violation valence refers to the evaluation of a behavior that deviates from expectations. This evaluation reflects the positivity or negativity of the meaning given to the violation and is determined through a two-step process. The first step involves interpreting the behavior, primarily influenced by social norms and contextual expectations (Burgoon & Walther, 1990). The second step evaluates the desirability of the behavior, which considers not only societal

standards but also personal preferences and the perceived reward value of the person enacting the behavior (Burgoon & Walther, 1990; White, 2022). This concept is central to EVT as it explains how individuals react to unexpected behaviors based on the meaning they assign during this evaluative process. Although EVT acknowledges personal preference through the construct of violation valence, the theory does not fully explain how wants, desires, and identity-based influences contribute to the formation or interpretation of expectancies.

Interaction Outcomes

The interaction outcome portion of the model explains how the evaluation of a behavioral violation, whether positive or negative, shapes the quality of the interaction. Positively valenced violations, such as unexpected compliments or acts of kindness, often enhance relational satisfaction and strengthen social bonds (Burgoon, 1993; White, 2022). In contrast, negatively valenced violations, such as criticism or hostility, typically result in dissatisfaction, conflict, or relational strain (Burgoon, 1993; White, 2022).

Research on nonverbal behavior shows that certain behaviors, such as obscene gestures, may carry clear, culturally shared meanings that evoke consistent negative evaluations regardless of context (Burgoon, 1993; Burgoon et al., 1989). In addition, ambiguous behaviors such as conversational tone or physical proximity are more open to interpretation, with their impact often determined by the perceived reward value of the communicator. These nuanced interactions demonstrate how the evaluation of expectancy violations is deeply tied to the social meaning and context of the behavior (Burgoon, 1993; White, 2022). Criminal legal situations, with their inherent ambiguity stemming from uncertain outcomes, subjective interpretations of evidence, and unpredictable and complex legal processes, provide a unique context for examining how expectancy violations shape interactions. In such high-stakes scenarios, interpreting explicit and

ambiguous behaviors becomes critical, as these behaviors influence perceptions, decisions, and relational dynamics.

Assumptions of EVT

To summarize, EVT operates on several key assumptions. First, expectancies shape interactions. Expectancies are cognitive frameworks that influence how individuals interpret and respond to behaviors (Burgoon, 1993). Second, violations draw attention. When behaviors deviate from expectancies, they attract attention and are subject to interpretation and evaluation (Burgoon, 1993; White, 2022). Third, contextual factors influence evaluation. The meaning of a violation is shaped by contextual factors, including social norms, the nature of the relationship, and the communicator's reward value (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005).

Gaps in EVT

Despite its strengths, EVT has limitations, which are evident in the legal scenario described earlier. First, as previously suggested, it does not account for a person's wants and desires and how these desires might contribute to expectancies. For example, in the illustrative scenario, the client wanted a dismissal. When the attorney refocused the conversation on preparing for conviction, this shift represented an expectancy violation for the client, whose desire and hope for a different outcome conflicted with the attorney's pragmatic assessment. To justify this desire as a realistic expectation, he combed through the attorney's online reviews, plucking scenarios he perceived as similar to his and possibly ignoring other evidence that would suggest a conviction was likely. Babrow (2001) pointed out that "expectations, desires, and evaluations are interdependent in complex ways" (p. 554); given this, the absence of desires in EVT is problematic in this context. Second (and related to the first point), EVT does not sufficiently explore the tensions between expectations and desires. The client's experience in the

illustrative scenario reflects an apparent tension in which he acknowledged the possibility of a conviction but strongly desired a dismissal. In this sense, and within this proposed framework, an expectancy or expectancy violation can serve as a cue to an expectation, signaling how individuals interpret what they believe is likely or appropriate in light of what they want or hope to occur. Finally, EVT does not fully account for the broader cognitive and emotional processes involved in meaning-making, interpreting, and evaluating behavioral or situational violations. For instance, the client's reliance on online reviews, emphasis on financial investment, and belief in the exceptional nature of his case and of himself demonstrate how complex psychological factors can influence expectations, expectancies, and responses to expectancy violations.

Problematic Integration Theory (PIT)

PIT, developed by Babrow (1992, 2001), provides a framework for understanding the tensions individuals experience when their beliefs about what is likely to occur conflict with their desires for what they hope will happen (Babrow, 2001; Babrow, 2016; Babrow & Kuang, 2022). This tension, referred to as *problematic integration* (PI), is particularly relevant in high-value/high-stakes and uncertain situations (Kuang & Babrow, 2021), such as the attorney-client relationship described in the DUI/DWI case.

PIT's Core Concepts

Probabilistic And Evaluative Orientations

At the heart of PIT are the *probabilistic* and *evaluative orientations*, which are interdependent with one another and central to meaning-making. Probabilistic orientation refers to the cognitive processes individuals use to assess the likelihood of events, which may sometimes require relying on heuristics and prior experiences to interpret their environment (Babrow, 2001; Babrow, 2016; Babrow & Matthias, 2009). In contrast, evaluative orientation

pertains to judgments about what individuals hope or desire to occur, shaped by their personal values, priorities, and aspirations (Babrow, 2016; Babrow & Matthias, 2009).

Four Forms of Problematic Integration (PI)

PI arises when probabilistic and evaluative orientations fail to align, leading to experiences of *uncertainty*, *divergence*, *ambivalence*, or *impossibility* (Babrow, 2016; Babrow & Kuang, 2022). Uncertainty occurs when individuals struggle to assess the likelihood of an outcome due to incomplete or ambiguous information (Babrow, 2016; Babrow & Kuang, 2022). This uncertainty can result from ontological uncertainty, reflecting the inherent unpredictability of the world, or epistemological uncertainty, which stems from inadequate or unclear knowledge (Kuang & Babrow, 2021).

Divergence occurs when individuals face an incompatibility between their probabilistic beliefs and evaluative desires. This conflict emerges when what is believed to be likely contradicts what is hoped for, creating tension as people confront the gap between their perceptions of reality and their aspirations (Babrow & Kuang, 2022; Kuang & Babrow, 2021).

Ambivalence reflects the experience of equally valued but contradictory feelings or options. It involves a conflict between mutually exclusive alternatives, both of which are meaningful and desirable (Babrow & Kuang, 2022; Kuang & Babrow, 2021).

Impossibility occurs when achieving a valued outcome is deemed impossible or when an unwanted outcome is perceived as inevitable. (Babrow, 2016; Babrow & Kuang, 2022; Kuang & Babrow, 2021). These four forms of PI disrupt the alignment between beliefs and desires, complicating the integration of understanding with evaluative processes (Kuang & Babrow, 2021). This dynamic becomes even more complex when forms of PI evolve over time or intersect with one another, a process further explored through PIT's concept of chaining.

Chaining Problematic Integration (PI)

A unique aspect of PIT is its emphasis on the *chaining* and transformation of PI, where one form of PI evolves into another over time, illustrating its fluid nature (Babrow, 2001). PI often "morphs or chains" across meanings, contexts, and levels, reflecting how individuals adapt to changing circumstances or reframe their understanding of a situation (Kuang & Babrow, 2021, p. 236). For example, uncertainty may shift into divergence or ambivalence as individuals' beliefs and values evolve in response to emotional states or environmental changes. This process showcases how PI is part of the dynamic internal efforts to reconcile beliefs and desires.

Beyond form transitions, PI shifts across *levels* and *issues*, broadening its scope. For instance, uncertainty about a legal outcome may initially be a personal concern but could expand to influence interpersonal relationships or societal interactions (Babrow, 2001; Babrow & Kuang, 2022). Similarly, PI often crosses issues, such as uncertainty about accepting a plea deal, which may evolve into ambivalence about disclosing the situation to family, friends, or an employer. Finally, the person may be concerned with future employment opportunities or their reputation. All of which connect individual struggles to broader social contexts (Kuang & Babrow, 2021).

Refinements to the theory highlight the complexity of chaining. For example, *piling* involves experiencing multiple forms of PI simultaneously, while *layering* refers to the coexistence of forms like "divergent ambivalence," where distinct forms of PI influence each other (Kuang & Babrow, 2021, p. 243). Moreover, dynamic interactions between PI forms demonstrate that chaining is not linear but may involve *overlapping* or *compounded* experiences (Kuang & Babrow, 2021). These developments reinforce the original theory's idea of the

interconnectedness of individual problematic integrations with broader social and relational frameworks.

Communication is Integral to Problematic Integration (PI)

Communication is central to PI, shaping how individuals construct and interpret their world, including its meaning and values (Babrow, 2001). It operates dynamically, creating, clarifying, obscuring, and transforming the probabilistic and evaluative orientations underlying PI (Kuang & Babrow, 2021). Through symbolic processes, both complementary and contradictory, communication constructs, maintains, and transforms layers of meaning, emphasizing the collaborative and iterative nature of meaning-making (Kuang & Babrow, 2021).

As a *medium*, communication allows individuals to recognize problematic situations through specific word choices and interaction patterns, which shape how troubles and challenges are framed and understood. Communication mediates responses to uncertainties, incompatibilities, and tensions (Babrow, 2001; Kuang & Babrow, 2021). Communication also serves as a *source* of PI, as it introduces dilemmas by delivering bad news or making threats. Misunderstandings and unresolved tensions often arise from discrepancies between communicators' intentions and interpretations, emphasizing communication as a direct source of PI (Babrow, 2001). A useful parallel can be drawn between communication as a medium in PIT and the recognition of expectancy violations in EVT. Behavior communicates, and both theories recognize that a disruption to expectations or orientations happens through communication. In other words, communication carries both expectancy violations and problematic integrations.

Moreover, communication functions as a *resource* for coping with and managing PI. Strategies such as politeness, euphemisms, and strategic ambiguity can help individuals navigate integrative challenges, though these approaches may generate new uncertainties (Kuang &

Babrow, 2021). As Babrow (2001) pointed out, on a broader scale, communication transmits social norms and creates structures like healthcare systems, courts, and educational institutions to address PI individually and collectively. These systems offer frameworks and structured approaches to mitigate the effects of PI, reinforcing social expectations and providing tools for meaning-making. In all its roles, communication dynamically mediates how individuals recognize, experience, and resolve PI, making it essential to the experience and transformation of PI (Babrow, 2001).

PIT's Gap

A gap in PIT is its limited attention to the structural dynamics inherent in relationships, contexts, and communicator characteristics. While PIT focuses on individual meaning-making, it overlooks how relational dynamics, such as the roles, expectations, and patterns of interaction between individuals, shape the experience and resolution of tensions between beliefs and desires. Similarly, context dynamics, such as cultural settings, organizational environments, or situational constraints, are underexplored despite their significant influence on how problematic integrations emerge and evolve, as evidenced by the DUI/DWI example in this essay. Communicator characteristics, including personality traits, communication styles, and past experiences, also introduce a structural dimension that impacts how individuals interpret and respond to uncertainties or conflicting expectations. Without addressing these structured elements, PIT may oversimplify the complexities of human interaction by isolating individual meaning-making from the broader frameworks in which it occurs. Incorporating relational and contextual structures could enhance PIT's utility and deepen its insights into how people manage problematic integrations.

Significance Of Each Theory to This Context

Together, EVT and PIT could offer a robust framework for analyzing not only attorney-client interactions but also the broader high-stakes context of the relationship. EVT can provide insight into how clients interpret and respond to violations of their expectations, while PIT could address the deeper cognitive and emotional conflicts that drive these responses. By examining both the surface-level dynamics of expectancy violations and the deeper tensions described by problematic integration, this framework offers language for understanding the complexity of unmet expectations in legal communication. Rather than prescribing solutions, this integration offers a way to conceptualize expectation as a layered process involving prediction, desire, and meaning-making. It highlights how even well-delivered communication can encounter resistance when expectations are shaped by personal investment, perceived norms, or conflicting values.

Identifying Connections

EVT and PIT share several foundational themes that provide insight into communication dynamics. Both theories place expectations at the core of their frameworks. They examine how expectations shape and are shaped by communication processes. EVT focuses on the consequences of violations of interpersonal or social behavioral expectations, while PIT explores the interaction between expectations and desires, particularly when they create tension or uncertainty (Babrow & Kuang, 2022; Ford et al., 1996).

Both theories view communication as a central process for constructing and interpreting meaning. EVT analyzes how individuals assess the valence of expectancy violations (positive or negative) (Burgoon, 1993; 2016), whereas PIT considers the mismatches between probabilistic and evaluative judgments, creating what the theory terms problematic integrations (Babrow, 2001; Ford et al., 1996; Kuang & Babrow, 2021). Additionally, both theories emphasize, on

some level, the influence of context, individual characteristics, and social norms in shaping expectations and their evaluation.

The integration of EVT and PIT offers opportunities to expand the insights each provides. EVT's focus on specific interpersonal violations complements PIT's broader examination of uncertainty and value conflicts, providing a more nuanced understanding of how individuals respond to unexpected or undesired outcomes. For instance, PIT's emphasis on navigating competing desires and uncertainties enriches EVT's exploration of how individuals interpret expectancy violations. EVT's focus on micro-level interpersonal interactions, particularly nonverbal communication, provides a valuable framework for applying PIT's broader value concepts to specific relational contexts.

EVT and PIT also address distinct aspects of communication in complementary ways. EVT is particularly suited to analyzing the immediate consequences of expectancy violations, such as shifts in credibility, attraction, or relational cohesion (Burgoon & Hale, 1988; Burgoon & Walther, 1990). In contrast, PIT excels at exploring communication's cognitive and emotional dimensions, such as how individuals cope with uncertainty or conflicting desires in complex or high-stakes situations (Babrow & Kuang, 2022; Kuang & Babrow, 2021).

Despite these synergies, potential contradictions arise. For example, EVT suggests positive expectancy violations often enhance relationships, whereas PIT focuses on the discomfort or ambivalence that can occur when expectations and desires diverge. Additionally, EVT simplifies outcomes into binary valence categories (positive or negative), while PIT grapples with the complexities of uncertainty and multilayered tensions. These differences highlight the unique strengths of each theory and suggest areas for further exploration to reconcile their contradictions.

Combining EVT and PIT generates unique questions. For example, how do individuals reconcile conflicting values when an expectancy violation elicits positive and negative implications? Can these theories predict long-term relational dynamics when violations lead to sustained uncertainty, divergence, ambivalence, or impossibilities? How do cultural norms influence the integration of probabilistic and evaluative orientations in response to expectancy violations? How do individuals use their cultural frameworks to understand their expectations and orientations, as well as to interpret violations of these expectations and disruptions to the integration of their orientations? Lastly, what strategies can communicators use to align violated expectations with desired outcomes, particularly in uncertain or ambiguous contexts? These questions draw attention to the potential that integrating EVT and PIT could help develop comprehensive strategies that account for both immediate interactional outcomes and long-term communication challenges.

Integration: The Holistic EVT-PIT Conceptual Framework

(See Appendix for Illustration)

This paper proposes the Holistic EVT-PIT Conceptual Framework, which respecifies EVT by incorporating PIT as the interpretive mechanism for evaluation. The framework is described as holistic, not to suggest simplicity or resolution, but to emphasize the integration of theoretical insights on violated expectations, cognitive and emotional conflict, and interpretive struggle in attorney-client communication. It aims to expose the complex communicative tensions that arise when evaluative desires and probabilistic judgments diverge, often beneath the surface of legally sound communication and outcomes that nevertheless leave clients in a state of unresolved problematic integration. This model replaces EVT's binary violation-valence with PIT's interpretive process of Integration and Problematic Integration, which together shape

communicative evaluation. Within Problematic Integration, uncertainty, ambivalence, divergence, and impossibility represent the forms of tension that influence how meaning is (re)produced and sustained in interaction.

Adding Self-Perceptions and Characteristics

The illustrative example highlights how self-perceptions, including identity, social roles, and individual characteristics, may serve as a foundation for both EVT and PIT. Although not explicitly part of the EVT model, Burgoon and Walther (1990) pointed out that a person's characteristics can influence expectations for themselves. Similarly, Kuang and Babrow (2021) emphasized that uncertainty in high-stakes situations can affect perceptions of identity. In EVT, communicator characteristics like demographics, social skills, and relational status shape how individuals form predictive and prescriptive expectancies, based in part on how the communicator is positioned in relation to the receiver. In PIT, self-perceptions influence probabilistic and evaluative orientations, as individuals' beliefs and desires are deeply connected to their self-concept and perceived role within social and relational contexts. Together, these perspectives highlight that self-perceptions could play a significant role in forming expectancies and orientations. As such, self-perceptions and characteristics are proposed as additional contributors to expectancies and orientations alongside communicator, relational, and context characteristics.

Juxtaposing Expectancies and Orientations

Having identified the role of self-perceptions and characteristics, this section further examines how EVT's and PIT's core constructs correspond. EVT and PIT come from different theoretical traditions, but each explains how people anticipate, interpret, and respond under uncertainty. EVT's central construct is the expectancy, a cognitive representation of how another

is likely or ought to behave. In PIT, a similar concept is captured through orientations, which describe the expectations people hold as assessments of likelihood (probabilistic orientations) and judgments of desirability (evaluative orientations). Considered jointly, their constructs reveal how tensions emerge between what individuals believe is likely and what they hope will happen or want to happen. In this framework, expectancies operate as cues to underlying expectations (or orientations in PIT's terms), allowing those expectations to become visible through interpretation and response.

In the Holistic EVT-PIT Conceptual Framework, predictive expectancies and probabilistic orientations correspond with one another. Predictive expectancies in EVT and probabilistic orientations in PIT both address anticipated likelihoods. Although EVT discusses the influence of expectancies in terms of social norms and prior experience, and PIT emphasizes subjective interpretations of probability, both constructs attend to how people manage uncertainty about what is likely to occur. This pairing raises the question: *How do people interpret and respond to uncertainty when forming beliefs about what is probable?*

Similarly, prescriptive expectancies and evaluative orientations correspond with one another. Prescriptive expectancies in EVT and evaluative orientations in PIT both deal with judgments about what should and ideally could happen. Prescriptive expectancies are shaped by cultural norms or relational roles, while evaluative orientations are shaped by personal desire and investment. This pairing raises the question: *How do people assess outcomes that violate what they hoped for or believe should have occurred?*

Both expectancies and orientations are deeply interconnected. For instance, beliefs about what is likely to happen (probabilistic orientation) can influence desires (evaluative orientation) (Kuang & Babrow, 2021), just as predictive expectancies shape prescriptive ones (Burgoon &

Walther, 1990). This mutual influence reflects the dynamic interplay of cognitive and emotional processes in shaping expectancies and orientations. This raises the central question: *What happens when expectation and desire conflict, and communication is unable to bring them into alignment?*

Behavioral Violations and Communication as a Source of PI

As noted earlier in the discussion of PIT, communication (behavior, etc.) serves as a medium for recognizing violations and problematic integrations in both EVT and PIT, respectively. Both theories highlight how expectations are challenged through interaction and behavior. In the new framework, communication is explicitly identified as a medium through which expectancy violations and problematic integrations are identified.

Problematic Integration in the Evaluation Process

PIT enriches EVT's evaluation process by explaining the complexity of interpreting violations. While EVT considers violation valence and communicator reward valence, PIT dives deeper into the tensions that emerge when beliefs and desires conflict. For example:

- Uncertainty in PIT could explain the ambiguity individuals feel when an expectancy violation does not align with positive or negative outcomes.
- Divergence might clarify why some violations result in prolonged emotional or cognitive processing.
- Ambivalence and Impossibility may provide frameworks for understanding mixed reactions or evaluations that EVT alone might struggle to predict.

By integrating PIT, the framework emphasizes that the evaluation process involves immediate interpretations and more profound struggles to reconcile beliefs, desires, and contextual factors.

Interaction Patterns and Outcomes

The synthesis of EVT and PIT introduces greater complexity to predicting interaction patterns and outcomes. In EVT, interaction patterns and outcomes are dichotomously categorized as positive or negative. In contrast, PIT allows for a broader spectrum, suggesting that an interaction pattern can range from positive to negative or fall somewhere between. Importantly, interaction patterns and outcomes are communicated, and PIT posits that communication serves as a medium, source, and resource for problematic integration. This perspective has been incorporated into the new model.

Extending this logic, communication functions not only as the medium that enables and constrains interaction but also as the outcome that reproduces expectancies and orientations, operationalizing structuration at the interpersonal level. In this recursive environment, an interaction pattern or communicative outcome for one party can initiate problematic integration or an expectancy violation for another party, much like the spiral of action and structure described by McPhee et al. (2014) and Nicotera (2020). At the same time, outcomes can also reinforce or recalibrate the expectancies and orientations of the person who produced them.

For example, when the client in the illustrative scenario left a negative review, that action represented an interaction pattern and an outcome of the relationship with the firm. The review simultaneously functioned as a communicative act that may trigger an expectancy violation for the organization and reinforce the client's unresolved problematic integration.

When problematic integrations remain unresolved, communicators may engage in renewed information seeking and subsequent interactions that transform a single expectancy–evaluation event into a continuing communicative sequence. These exchanges can trigger additional expectancy violations, producing a divergent spiral of dissatisfaction and meaning-

making. This process can also chain across levels: unresolved tension may move from intrapersonal uncertainty to interpersonal strain and into public arenas (e.g., online reviews), propelling the spiral into new contexts and consequences. This recursive process is consistent with Structuration Theory, which emphasizes how communicative acts reproduce and reshape social structure over time (Giddens, 1984). Over time, communicative experience feeds back into expectancies and orientations, reproducing, resolving, or generating new structures that shape future interaction. Expectancy violations and problematic integrations may persist even when communication is clear and ethical, which may suggest that meaning-making can amplify, complicate, or counter the persuasive effects of message design and source credibility in shaping interaction over time.

Violated Expectations and Uncertainty in the Field

Legal scholars and criminologists are increasingly concerned with how defendants navigate the complexities of violated expectations and uncertainties of the criminal justice system. Research has highlighted the interplay between systemic (cultural) constraints, emotional dynamics, and communication gaps in legal contexts (Albonetti, 1991; Dervan & Edkins, 2013; Dinerstein et al., 2004; Luna & Redlich, 2020; Redlich et al., 2017; Silver, 1999; Uphoff & Wood, 1999). Defendants may often enter attorney-client relationships with expectations of fairness, advocacy, and collaboration. Uphoff and Wood (1999) reveal that lawyer-centered practices frequently sideline defendants, creating negative expectancy violations that undermine trust and satisfaction. In contrast, client-centered approaches foster positive expectancy violations by exceeding expectations for inclusion and respect, aligning decisions with defendants' personal values (Uphoff & Wood, 1999). Similarly, Silver (1999) emphasized the critical role of empathy, as lawyers who demonstrate empathy and maintain boundaries mitigate

the adverse effects of transference and countertransference, thereby enhancing trust and relational dynamics.

Plea bargaining practices intensify these challenges, as shown in Redlich et al. (2017) and Dervan and Edkins (2013). The "coercive" nature of plea negotiations, particularly for innocent defendants, creates expectancy violations when the justice system fails to meet procedural fairness standards (Redlich et al., 2017, p. 348). Closed-file discovery policies exacerbate these tensions by limiting evidence access, forcing defendants to make uninformed decisions about whether to go to trial or accept a plea offer from the government (Luna & Redlich, 2020). This lack of structural transparency strains attorney-client trust and amplifies defendants' uncertainty. From a PIT perspective, these systemic constraints could create profound cognitive dissonance as defendants navigate conflicting goals: securing immediate leniency through a plea or upholding their innocence despite trial risks.

Judicial discretion further complicates these dynamics, as explored by Albonetti (1991), who highlighted how stereotypes and heuristics shape sentencing decisions. Defendants face expectancy violations when judges disproportionately apply harsher penalties based on racial or socioeconomic biases (Albonetti, 1991). Defense attorneys must actively counter these stereotypes, offering mitigating evidence to humanize their clients and restore perceptions of fairness. Effective attorney communication also addresses PIT-related tensions by helping defendants reconcile probabilistic judgments, such as recidivism risk, with evaluative concerns like justice and morality (Dinerstein et al., 2004). Lawyers who prioritize transparency, empathy, and client involvement may bridge gaps between defendants' expectations and the systemic realities of the legal process. These insights provide a useful backdrop for the expectations and communicative tensions illustrated throughout the hypothetical scenario in this paper.

Theoretical Analysis of the DUI Scenario

The paradox of the illustrative DUI/DWI scenario lies in the client's expectation that the outcome of his case would exceed his expectations despite the objective realities of his situation. This reflects the influence of both communicator characteristics (e.g., the attorney's reputation and perceived competence) and context characteristics (e.g., peer discussions and online reviews). The client *expected positively valenced unexpectedness*, a favorable outcome beyond the perceived norm, such as a dismissal. His strong desire for a dismissal likely shaped his interpretation of the information he encountered, leading him to confirm the probability of his desired outcome. This highlights the complexity of how expectations and desires interact, creating a scenario where unmet expectations generate significant dissatisfaction despite an objectively favorable outcome.

Cultures and their norms, as well as contexts, are essential to both EVT and PIT. Adding to this complexity is a divide between the institutional culture of the law firm and the personal worldview of the client. The firm operates within a professional legal framework that constrains its communicative and procedural options through ethical codes of conduct, formal obligations, and institutional norms. In contrast, the client approaches the interaction through a more personal, emotional, and financial lens, focusing on identity, investment, and perceived fairness. This clash of cultural frameworks may shape how expectations are formed and communicated, ultimately contributing to a misalignment of client expectations. The tension between these two cultures and the client's desires illustrate how culturally normative communication can exacerbate frustration for parties operating in different frameworks, even when the outcome is objectively positive.

The irony of the hypothetical is also striking and could present ideas for further research. The client, lacking legal expertise, sought out the lawyer for his positive characteristics (his perceived professional knowledge and skill). Yet rather than fully relying on the attorney's expertise, the client turned to heuristic cues such as online reviews and peer discussions to reinforce his desires. He appeared to place more weight on generalized indicators of the attorney's reputation than on the attorney's case-specific guidance when forming his expectations. This reliance on heuristic cues led the client to reinforce his expectations (and desire) of a dismissal, even when these expectations were objectively unrealistic. By prioritizing anecdotal evidence and heuristics over the attorney's expert analysis, the client created a cognitive framework that made the outcome, a Reckless Driving conviction, seem inadequate. This dynamic emphasizes the complexity of client expectation formation, where trust in expertise coexists with an inclination to rely on external, emotionally resonant, and possibly unreliable information.

Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Directions

The illustrative DUI scenario reflects a recurring pattern in legal defense work: clients form expectations that diverge from legal advice and outcomes, even when communication is clear and case-specific. The Holistic EVT–PIT framework makes visible the tensions between probability, desire, and interpretation, offering conceptual tools for understanding why misalignment often endures.

While this synthesis offers new insight, it is not without limitations. EVT and PIT emerge from different paradigms, with EVT grounded in measurable constructs and PIT rooted in interpretive meaning-making. Bridging these traditions raises questions of methodological compatibility and conceptual clarity. EVT's predictive structure may struggle to accommodate

the nuance and subjectivity emphasized by PIT, and PIT's depth may be diluted by attempts to quantify or operationalize its constructs.

Yet these limitations reflect the very tensions the framework is meant to illuminate. Professional-client interactions, particularly in high-stakes legal contexts, rarely fit neatly into either paradigm. The unpredictability of client response, shaped by emotion, identity, and narrative, resists tidy mapping. It is precisely this resistance that makes the integration useful. The framework serves as a conceptual tool for seeing where communication does not close the gap between what is expected and what is hoped for but instead brings into focus the tension that defines it.

This framework is anchored in interpersonal communication, where expectancies and orientations are enacted, interpreted, and negotiated. At the same time, because communicative action is itself the site of structural production and reproduction, the recursive processes at work here have implications beyond the dyad. Interaction patterns and outcomes can reshape or reinforce expectations within the relationship and the professional context that surrounds it, contributing to organizational dynamics such as client dissatisfaction and reputation. In this sense, the framework remains interpersonal in mechanism while reflecting the structural reality that individuals, through interpersonal communication, (re)produce structural consequences.

In doing so, this framework invites further inquiry into how professional-client expectations are formed, managed, and resisted. For instance, future research might examine how clients weigh heuristic cues (such as online reviews or peer experiences) against case-specific legal advice. It could also explore how unmet expectations influence emotional responses, perceptions of fairness, and public expressions of dissatisfaction. Lastly, this

integration raises questions about how professionals navigate communicative tension when well-delivered advice does not produce alignment, agreement, or satisfaction.

References

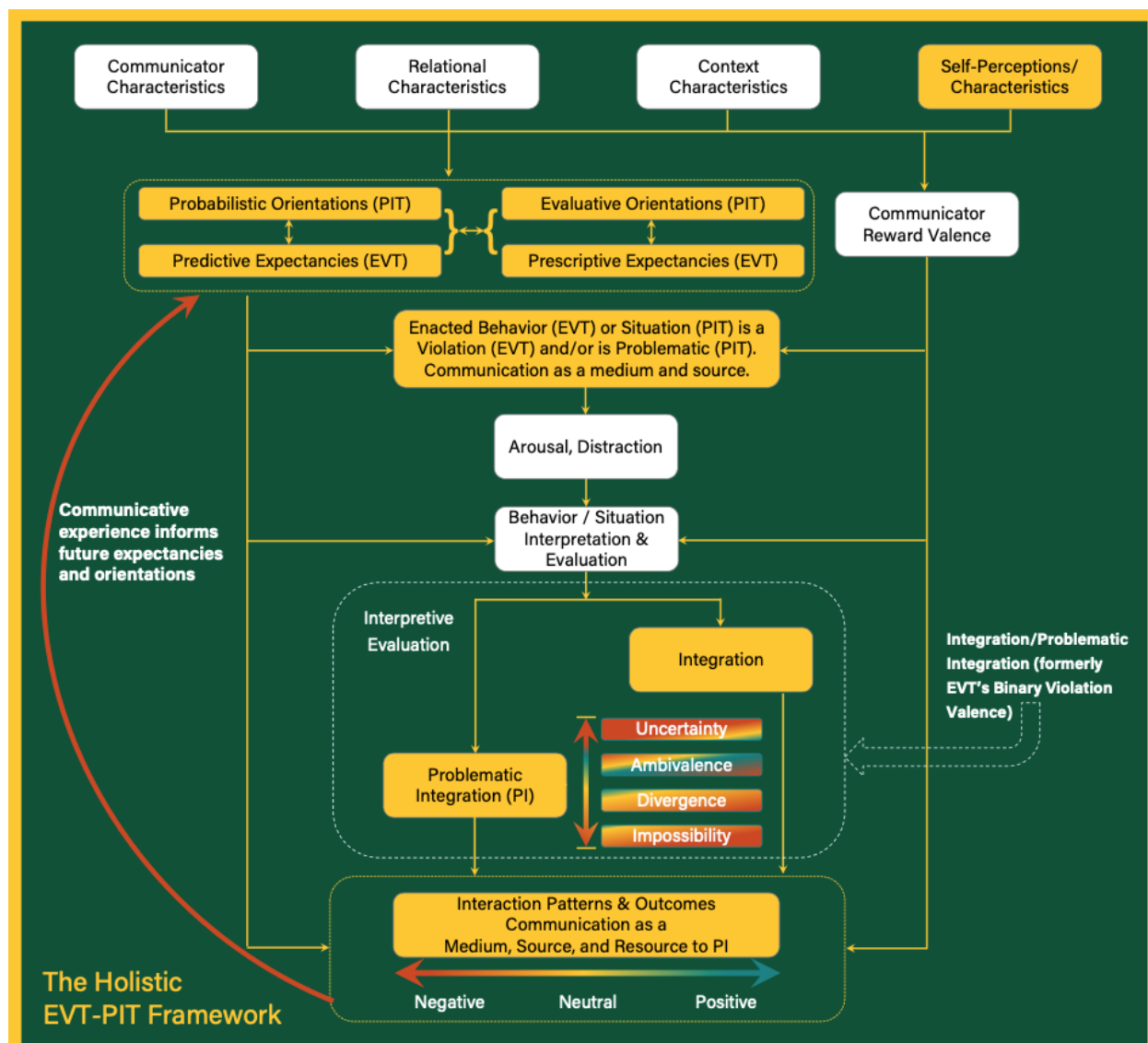
- Afifi, W. A., & Metts, S. (1998). Characteristics and consequences of expectation violations in close relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 15(3), 365-395.
- Albonetti, C. (1991). An integration of theories to explain judicial discretion. *Social Problems*, 38(2), 247–266. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/800532>
- Babrow, A. S. (1992). Communication and problematic integration: Understanding diverging probability and value, ambiguity, ambivalence, and impossibility. *Communication Theory*, 2(2), 95–130.
- Babrow, A. S. (2001). Uncertainty, value, communication, and problematic integration. *Journal of Communication*, 51(3), 555–573. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2001.tb02896.x>
- Babrow, A. S. (2016). Problematic integration theory. In *The International Encyclopedia of Interpersonal Communication* (pp. 1387–1395). John Wiley & Sons.
- Babrow, A. S., & Kuang, K. (2022). Problematic integration theory: Uncertainty and related communication challenges [3rd Ed.]. In D. Braithwaite & P. Schrodt (Eds.), *Engaging Theories in Interpersonal Communication* (pp. 64–74). Routledge.
- Babrow, A. S., Matthias, M.S. (2009). Generally Unseen Challenges in Uncertainty Management: An Application of Problematic Integration Theory. *Uncertainty, Information Management, and Disclosure Decisions*. 1st Ed. Routledge. 9–25.
- Burgoon, J. K. (1978). A communication model of personal space violations: Explication and an initial test. *Human Communication Research*, 4, 129–142
- Burgoon, Judee K. (1993). *Interpersonal Expectations, Expectancy Violations, and Emotional Communication*. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 12(1-2), 30-48. DOI: 10.1177/0261927X93121003

- Burgoon, J. K. (2016). Expectancy violations theory. *The international encyclopedia of interpersonal communication*, 1-9.
- Burgoon, J. K., & Hale, J. L. (1988). Nonverbal expectancy violations: Model elaboration and application to immediacy behaviors. *Communication Monographs*, 55, 58–79.
- Burgoon, J. K., & Hubbard, A. E. (2005). Cross-cultural and intercultural applications of expectancy violations theory and interaction adaptation theory. *Theorizing about intercultural communication*, 149-171.
- Burgoon, J. K., & Walther, J. B. (1990). Nonverbal expectancies and the evaluative consequences of violations. *Human Communication Research*, 17(2), 232–265.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.1990.tb00232.x>
- Dervan, L., & Edkins, V. A. (2013). The innocent defendant's dilemma: an innovative empirical study of plea bargaining's innocence problem. *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 103(1), 1–48. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24615609>
- Dinerstein, R., Ellmann, S., Gunning, I., & Shalleck, A. (2004). Connection, capacity, and morality in lawyer-client relationship: Dialogues and commentary. *Clinical Law Review*, 10, 755–804.
- Ford, L. A., & Babrow, A. S. (1996). Social support messages and the management of uncertainty in the experience of breast cancer: An application of problematic integration theory. *Communication Monographs*, 63(3), 189. <https://doi-org.mutex.gmu.edu/10.1080/03637759609376389>
- Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society*. University of California Press.

- Kuang, K., & Babrow, A. S. (2021). Problematic integration theory: a systematic review. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 45(4), 234–257.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2022.2033633>
- Luna, S., & Redlich, A. D. (2020). Unintelligent decision-making? *Wrongful Conviction Law Review*, 1(3), 314–335.
- Neuman, L. (1997). Meaning of methodology. In *Social research methods: qualitative and quantitative approaches* (pp. 60–87). Allyn and Bacon.
- Nicotera, A. (2020). Developments in the 21st century. In *Origins and Traditions of Organizational Communication* (pp. 45–70). Routledge.
- McPhee, R. D., Poole, M. S., & Iverson, J. (2014). Structuration theory. In *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Communication: Advances in Theory, Research, and Methods* (pp. 75–99). SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Oetzel, J. G., Ting-Toomey, S. (2006). *The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Communication: Integrating Theory, Research, and Practice*. SAGE Publications.
- Redlich, A. D., Bibas, S., Edkins, V. A., & Madon, S. (2017). The psychology of defendant plea decision making. *American Psychologist*, 72(4), 339–352.
- Robertson, C. B. (2016). Online reputation management in attorney regulation. *Georgetown Journal of Legal Ethics*, 29(1), 97-152.
- Silver, M. A. (1999). Love, hate, and other emotional interference in the lawyer/client relationship. *Clinical Law Review*, 6, 259–313.
- Uphoff, R. J., & Wood, P. B. (1999). The allocation of decision making between defense counsel and criminal defendant: An empirical study of attorney-client decision making. *The University of Kansas Law Review*, 47(1), 1–60.

White, C. H. (2022). Expectancy violations theory and interaction adaptation theory: From expectations to interactions. In D. Braithwaite & P. Schrodt (Eds.), *Engaging Theories in Interpersonal Communication [3rd Ed.]* (pp. 158–170). Routledge.

Appendix



Problematic Integration can occur through:

- **Uncertainty**
 - Rooted in ignorance or information overload
 - Epistemological (knowledge-based) vs. ontological based (existence-based)
- **Ambivalence**
 - Mixed feelings about choices or single objects
 - Emotional and evaluative conflicts
- **Divergence**
 - Conflicts between expectations and desires
 - Can result in internal struggle or relational tension
- **Impossibility**
 - Perception of unattainable goals or outcomes
 - Includes theoretical vs. practical impossibilities