

When Desires Collide With Reality: Communication Illuminates The Complexity Of Expectation In Legal Contexts



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Introduction

This project presents *the Holistic EVT-PIT Conceptual Framework*, which integrates Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT) and Problematic Integration Theory (PIT) to examine how unmet expectations emerge and persist. "Holistic" reflects an effort to capture the full tension between what is expected and what is desired rather than resolve it. Drawing from legal practice, this framework illustrates how client expectations (shaped by heuristics, online reviews, and personal investment) can conflict with legal realities, producing emotional dissonance, dissatisfaction, and reputation risk for the organization. EVT provides a lens to understand how violated expectancies in legal advice draw attention, elicit emotion, and shape evaluations of communicators. PIT complements this framework by addressing the tension that arises when evaluative desires (such as dismissals) conflict with probabilistic realities (such as likely conviction). Together, these theories illuminate how attorney-client communication becomes a site where desire, reasoning, and self-perceptions intersect, particularly when clients place more weight on heuristic cues than on legal expertise.

Literature Review

Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT)

- Explains how individuals interpret and evaluate violations of expectancies (cognitions about how another should behave).
- Expectancies are shaped by communicator, relational, and contextual characteristics.
- Emphasizes violation valence (positive or negative) and communicator reward value (perceived credibility, competence, or attractiveness).
- Strength: Predictive about how violations influence relational outcomes.
- Limitation: Does not explicitly account for self-perceptions or personal characteristics in shaping expectancies and was not designed to address the role of desire/hope/want.

Problematic Integration Theory (PIT)

- Examines how probabilistic beliefs (what is likely) and evaluative desires (what is hoped for) may conflict.
- Identifies forms of Problematic Integration: uncertainty, ambivalence, divergence and impossibility.
- Emphasizes emotional and cognitive struggle in meaning-making.
- Limitation: Focuses on individual sense-making without fully addressing structural or relational dynamics.

Integrative Gap

- EVT explains how expectancies are violated, while PIT explains how expectations are experienced.
- Theories converge in contexts of uncertainty where communication mediates tension between what is expected and what is desired.

Vignette

A young professional with a security clearance was found asleep at a traffic light one afternoon and charged with DUI. He admitted to drinking, failed field sobriety tests, and blew an elevated BAC, making the evidence for conviction overwhelming. His attorney advised that conviction was likely and encouraged him to complete mitigation steps such as community service, driving courses, and an alcohol education program. The client complied, but through conversations with peers in his alcohol education course and by reading online reviews of the attorney, he began to believe that charges like his were often reduced or dismissed, reframing probability through selective interpretation of heuristic evidence. Anchored in personal investment, job risk, and a belief in his exceptionality, he expected a dismissal despite clear legal realities. When his case concluded with a reduced charge that was objectively favorable but fell short of his hopes, he expressed dissatisfaction in a negative online review. The client's story captures how expectancies (cognitions about another's likely behavior) can collide with expectations (what is desired and imagined) creating a communicative tension and the center of the Holistic EVT-PIT Framework.

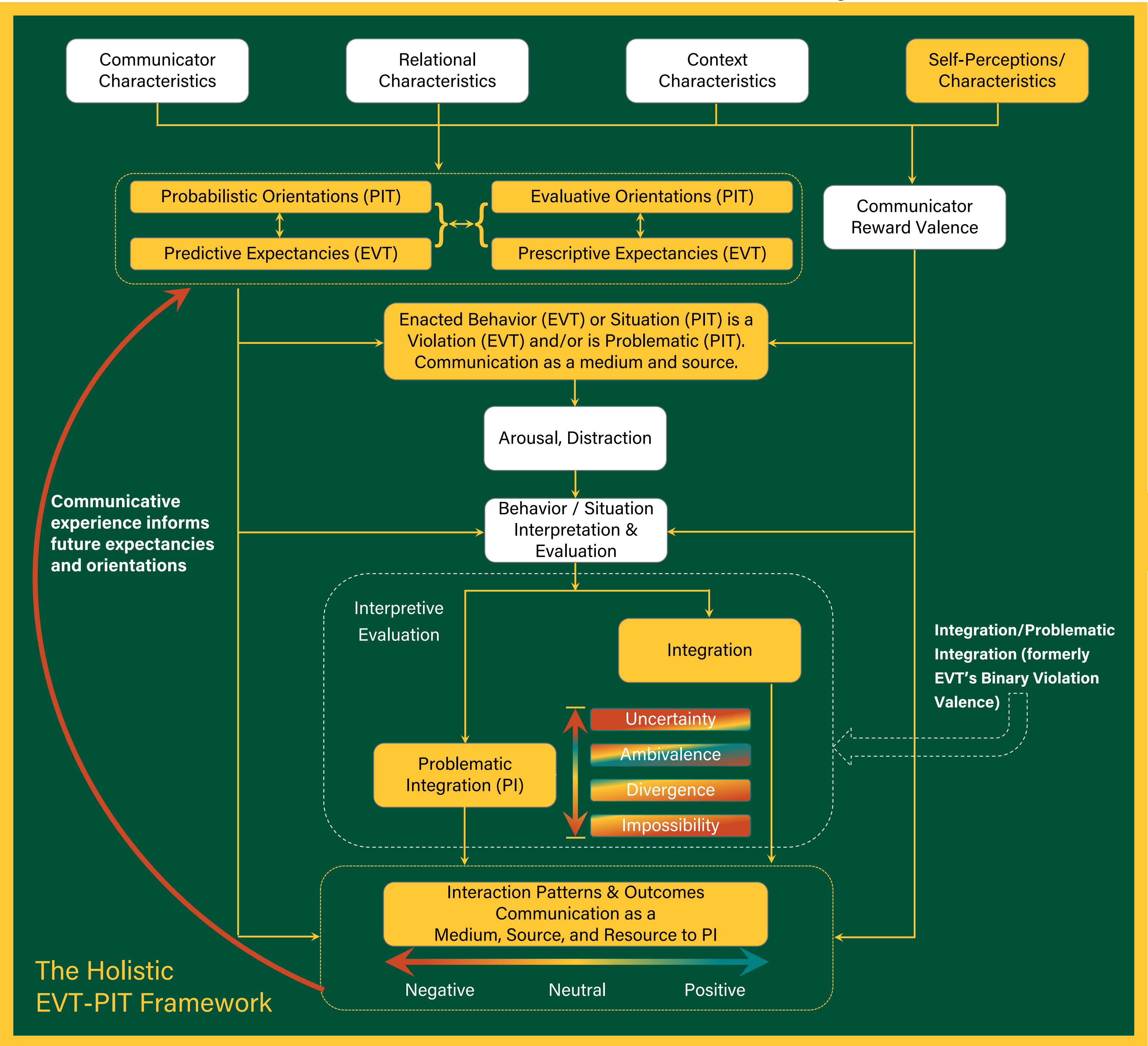
Framework Development

Integrating EVT and PIT

- Pairs EVT's expectancies with PIT's orientations, adding self-perceptions and personal characteristics as influences.
- EVT's binary violation valence has been replaced with an interpretive meaning-making process.

Core Correspondences

- Predictive Expectancies $\approx$ Probabilistic Orientations: Both concern perceived likelihoods.
- Prescriptive Expectancies $\approx$ Evaluative Orientations: both address values, norms, and desires.



- Communication as Medium and Outcome: Expectancies and expectations are recognized, expressed, and violated through interaction, making communication both the medium that enables/constrains and the outcome that (re)produces these processes.

Recursive Process

- When problematic integrations remain unresolved, people engage in renewed information seeking and further 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.
- Chaining across levels: Unresolved PI can move from intrapersonal tension to interpersonal strain and into public arenas (e.g., online reviews), propelling the spiral into new contexts and consequences.

Outcome

- Highlights the structural nature of communication: a client's negative review became an EV for the firm. More broadly, interaction patterns/outcomes can reproduce, resolve, or generate new expectancies and orientations. EVs and PIs can persist even when communication is clear/ethical.

Discussion & Conclusion

Cultural and interpretive divides between attorneys and clients complicate how expectations are formed, communicated, and evaluated. The law firm operates within institutional norms and ethical constraints, while clients approach interaction through emotional, financial, and identity concerns that shape how they interpret advice and outcomes. When these frameworks collide, even clear communication can yield dissatisfaction. The Holistic EVT-PIT Framework accounts for this misalignment by replacing EVT's violation valence variable with Integration and Problematic Integration (uncertainty, ambivalence, divergence, and impossibility). This modification shifts analysis from binary evaluations toward an interpretive process that accounts for emotion, identity, and meaning-making. Clients often rely on heuristic cues (such as online

reviews or peer discussions) to validate desires rather than expertise, reinforcing problematic integration and sustaining divergent spirals of meaning. This framework reveals that client expectation management in legal contexts is less about persuasion and more about navigating tension. By uniting predictive, affective, and structural dimensions, this framework could provide a tool for understanding why clear, ethical communication can still fail to align expectations and outcomes. The author thanks **Dr. Anne Nicotera** and **Dr. Sergei Samoilenko** for their review and guidance of this project. Key Ref.: Babrow, 1992, 2001, 2016; Babrow & Kuang, 2022; Babrow & Matthias, 2009; Burgoon, 1978, 1993, 2016; Burgoon & Hale, 1998; Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005; Burgoon & Walther, 1990; Giddens, 1984; Kuang & Babrow, 2021; McPhee et al., 2014; Nicotera, 2020.