

Cognition and Intrapersonal Communication

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you will be able to...

1. Explain the cognitive process and the importance of cognition in communicating and creating meaning with others.
2. Articulate how theories are developed and refined as shown in the development of attribution theory.
3. Explain and identify attribution biases that affect accurately determining intentionality of behavior.
4. Make predictions about the intentionality of behavior using Kelley's covariation model (consensus, consistency, distinctiveness, and locus of control).
5. Identify types of uncertainty and antecedent conditions for reducing uncertainty.
6. Explain, apply, and evaluate the axioms associated with uncertainty reduction theory.
7. Explain and apply strategies for reducing uncertainty in specific situations.
8. Predict the effectiveness of uncertainty reduction strategies in different contexts.
9. Describe how context, relationship, and a communicator's characteristics influence expectations in a given situation.
10. Explain and apply the concepts of expectancy, violation valence, and communicator reward valence so as to predict whether someone will reciprocate or compensate a violation.
11. Combine elements of uncertainty reduction theory with expectancy violation theory to explain how a violation can increase or decrease relational uncertainty.
12. Explain and identify the three possible relationships associated between beliefs and behaviors: irrelevance, consonance, and dissonance.

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13. Articulate the four perceptual processes associated with minimizing dissonance: selective exposure, attention, interpretation, and retention.
14. Explain how, by increasing or decreasing the magnitude of dissonance between beliefs and behaviors, one can influence or prevent change.
15. Illustrate how cognitive dissonance theory is a postdecision theory.
16. Compare and contrast major theoretical approaches to intrapersonal communication.

Regardless of whether you take a source or receiver orientation to communication, messages have no meaning without an individual's interpretation. Everyone has to process every message internally while considering how best to make sense of these messages. In other words, meaning is derived only after an individual perceives a message and gives it meaning; meaning resides in our *interpretations* of words or actions, not in the words or behaviors themselves. Consequently, communication is also an intrapersonal process.

COGNITIVE PROCESS

The roots of communication as an intrapersonal process can be traced to one of the major debates in psychology in the 20th century. At the beginning of the 1900s, American psychology was dominated by a focus on **behaviorism** (Runes, 1984). Most of us are familiar with Pavlov and his studies of salivary production in dogs. By associating the ringing of a bell with food, Pavlov was able to experimentally cause dogs to salivate when hearing a bell, even if the food was not present. Such is a description of a behavioral approach—a focus on external cause and behavioral effect. Major psychological figures such as J. B. Watson and B. F. Skinner argued that because we cannot observe mental processes, we should focus only on these causes and effects (Runes, 1984).

However, in the middle part of the 1900s, psychologists began arguing for a **cognitive** approach to understanding human behavior. Rather than focusing solely on external causes (or stimuli) and behavioral effects, these scholars argued we should be concerned with the mental processes used to process stimuli and generate particular effects (Runes, 1984). A major proponent of this approach was Noam Chomsky, who spearheaded a significant critique of behaviorism. **Cognition**, then, includes the processes of reducing, elaborating, transforming, and storing stimuli (Neisser, 1967). It refers to what happens in the mind that causes us to behave in particular ways.

In this chapter, we explain four theories that examine the cognitive and intrapersonal aspects of communication. First, attribution theory explains the process by which

individuals assign causation or motivation to their own and others' behavior. The second theory presented in this chapter, uncertainty reduction theory, strives to explain and predict initial encounters with people. In other words, what drives you to initiate communication, and how do you go about reducing your uncertainty in a new situation? Third, expectancy violations theory seeks to predict and explain people's behavior when their expectations about what will happen are breached. The fourth theory presented, cognitive dissonance theory, explains and predicts how persuasion may be understood as a self-induced, intrapersonal event.

Altogether these theories emphasize the internal processes that serve as antecedents to the highly personalized creation of meaning, and each perspective applies to numerous communication contexts. From making judgments about a co-worker based on her behavior as compared to others (i.e., attribution theory) to determining how best to reduce one's uncertainty during a job transfer (i.e., uncertainty reduction theory), each of the theories presented illustrates the internally driven process necessary to bring individual meaning to various messages.

ATTRIBUTION THEORY

According to attribution theorists, human beings often work like naïve detectives, continually trying to understand and make sense of what inspired various events, personal mannerisms, and individuals' conduct. Just as a crime scene investigator pieces together clues in an effort to determine a suspect's motive, you, too, go through life picking up clues and making judgments about what you believe influenced your own and others' behavior. These judgments and conclusions that provide reasons for behavior are called **attributions**. Attribution theory, then, explains the cognitive process one uses when trying to make causal explanations for behavior.

Attributions as Naïve Psychology

Attribution theory is not a new concept; researchers have long studied the ways in which people process events and then derive explanations for them. In the mid-1950s, however, Heider (1958) focused his attention on the process of drawing inferences—the assumptions individuals make regarding the causes of behavior as well as the judgments made about who is responsible for that behavior. According to Heider, individuals act as “naïve psychologists.” When you see a person act, you immediately make judgments about the causal nature of the conduct. Specifically, Heider found that individuals try to determine whether a behavior in question was caused by dispositional or situational factors. Dispositional factors refer to internal or personal features, such as one's personality, character, or biological traits. These factors are relatively stable and unique to each individual. Conversely, situational factors refer to external dynamics that are relatively uncontrollable and determined by the environment or circumstance at hand. External factors obviously vary to a much greater extent than do internal factors because they are inherently based on the context of a given situation, not on more stable personality traits.

For example, if, at your monthly staff meeting, Ron's presentation of current sales figures appears disjointed and jumbled, you might attribute his awkwardness to the fact that his PowerPoint slides failed to upload properly onto the laptop. Here, the inference made suggests that because of the situation (i.e., defective software), Ron was forced to give the presentation from memory and without visual aids. Thus, you might attribute Ron's bumbled speech to a technological glitch, thereby making a situational attribution for his behavior. On the other hand, you might attribute Ron's poor presentation to his lack of preparation (i.e., a character flaw). Surely by now everyone knows not to rely solely on PowerPoint; Ron should have come prepared with a backup plan ready in case of technical difficulties. Looking at the situation this way, you might blame Ron's failed presentation on his lazy preparation—something within his personal control, thereby making an internal attribution.

Correspondent Inference Theory

Expanding Heider's work, Jones and Davis (1965) were concerned with the intentionality of dispositional (internally driven) behavior. They argued that when a perceiver attributes the cause of a behavior to dispositional factors, the perceiver also makes judgments about the actor's intentions. Jones and Davis referred to these judgments of intention as correspondent inferences.

As Texter (1995) noted, "Before we can draw correspondent inferences from observing a person's behavior, we must make a determination about the person's intention: Did the person intentionally act in a certain way, knowing the effects the behavior would have?" (p. 55). When a dispositional inference mirrors an action and the perceiver labels the disposition and the action similarly (e.g., lazy), these inferences are said to "correspond." For instance, you might infer the disposition of laziness or apathy from Ron's seemingly lazy preparation for the meeting.

Determining the intentionality of an act is not easy; however, there are several factors one can consider when determining the purpose of another's behavior: choice, assumed desirability, social role, prior expectations, hedonic relevance, and personalism (Jones & Davis, 1965). Beginning with choice, individuals can assess an actor's intention by examining whether the actor in question had any alternatives. If you perceive alternative courses of action, you are also likely to assume the "selected" behavior was deliberate. Second, you can assess intentions by focusing on the assumed **social desirability** of the actor's actions. That is, if a person behaves in a manner contrary to social conventions, you are more likely to infer that the behavior reflects the person's true character and not merely an attempt at social correctness. Similarly, an actor's social role, or public position, can help determine the intentionality of a behavior, particularly when this person behaves in a manner contrary to the prescribed role.

Just as one's position affects expectations and assumptions of intentionality, so do prior expectations of that individual. Thus, your previous encounters with an actor, or knowledge about the person's background, may influence your assessments about

the actor's intentions. **Hedonic relevance**, or the degree to which you believe an actor's behavior directly affects you (either positively through rewards or negatively through punishment), also shapes your assessment of the actor's intentions. The greater you perceive the hedonic relevance, the more likely you are to view the actor's behavior as deliberate. Last, **personalism** refers to the belief that an actor specifically and intentionally behaves in ways to hurt or help you. Thus, if you assume a person's behavior changes when you are not present, you may imagine the actions are intentional. Notably, although each of these six factors can aid in assessing an actor's intentions, relying on any of these reasons may lead to biased judgments of an actor's disposition.

Kelley's Covariation Model

Perhaps a more holistic approach to attribution theory, Kelley's (1967, 1973) covariation model explains the causal nature of the complete attribution process. Specifically, this model has a greater scope than does Jones and Davis's correspondent inference theory because Kelley seeks to explain attributions overall, whereas Jones and Davis focused only on the intentionality of dispositional inferences.

According to Kelley (1967, 1973), individuals judge the causality of another's behavior by examining four factors: consensus, consistency, distinctiveness, and controllability. When the first three of these features are combined (i.e., consensus, consistency, distinctiveness), a perceiver can judge whether the actions were internally controlled (i.e., disposition) or externally controlled (i.e., situational). That is, you assign meaning based on perceived controllability—how much command an individual had over the behavior in question.

First, the perceiver determines if an actor's behavior demonstrates **consensus**, that is, would other people react similarly if placed in the same situation? The more you observe people behaving similarly, the greater the perception of consensus. If Rebecca storms out of the quarterly sales meeting in a huff and snarls at everyone in her path while the other members of the sales team leave the meeting with smiles and small talk, low consensus has occurred. If, however, everyone on the sales team heads out of the meeting sporting a grimace and a foul mood, then you have observed high consensus.

Second, the perceiver must determine whether the actor's behavior demonstrates consistency. **Consistency** refers to whether the person in question engages in similar behaviors over time. Comparable to consensus, the more you observe an actor engaging in the same behavior, the greater your perception of consistency. If Rebecca always seems to be angry and rude to colleagues, then you would say that her ill-tempered behavior after the sales meeting is highly consistent with her previous behavior. Conversely, if you typically view Rebecca as pleasant and enthusiastic, you would conclude that her sudden change of behavior has low consistency.

Third, a perceiver judges an actor's **distinctiveness**, that is, whether the person acts differently depending on the situation. Unlike consensus and consistency, which increase with others' conformity and number of observances over time, distinctiveness decreases when the actor behaves similarly across many situations. That is, a behavior is only labeled distinctive if it is "markedly different in one situation or task from others" (Texter, 1995, p. 60). Continuing with our example, if Rebecca speaks rudely and demonstrates hostility toward everyone in the company, to her friends, to her children, and to her neighbors, then Rebecca's offensive mannerisms have low distinctiveness because her rudeness is not unique. On the other hand, if Rebecca's anger and disrespectful tone occurred only after this one meeting and in no other meetings or situations, then you would conclude this behavior is highly distinctive because it appears contrary to the other circumstances in her life.

As mentioned earlier, by combining these judgments of consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness, the perceiver can determine the controllability of the actor's behavior. For example, you suppose an **interior locus of control** when you believe the actor could have controlled the behavior. Alternatively, you assume an **exterior locus of control** when the behavior appears to have been unavoidable.

Considered individually, predications made using any single variable (i.e., consensus, consistency, or distinctiveness) may provide an incomplete picture. However, by combining the judgments of consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness, eight possible combinations result. It is the combination of variables that allow the perceiver to predict with greater accuracy the controllability of the actor's behavior as either internally or externally motivated (Kelley, 1973).

Specifically, an external (or situational) attribution is made about the individual when consensus is high, consistency is low, and distinctiveness is high. For example, if Rebecca and her entire team leave the sales meeting angry (high consensus), and Rebecca doesn't usually leave meetings in a huff (low consistency), and Rebecca is usually pleasant around the office, not bad-tempered (high distinctiveness), we will assume that something happened at the meeting (the situation) to cause the unpleasant mood. Conversely, an internal (or dispositional) attribution is made about another person when consensus is low, consistency is high, and distinctiveness is low. Returning to the previous example, if only Rebecca leaves the sales meeting angry while the rest of the team is jovial (low consensus), and Rebecca often leaves the sales meetings in a huff (high consistency), and Rebecca snaps at people at work, at home, and at church (low distinctiveness), we can assume that it's Rebecca's disposition influencing her behavior. A summary of the predictions of Kelley's covariation model are in Table 3.1.

To review, attribution theorists have emphasized various explanations for the attributions you make in assigning the causes and motivations of your own and others' behavior. Whereas Heider examined the causal location of dispositional and situational sources of behavior, Jones and Davis focused more narrowly on determining the perceived intent that drives dispositional behavior. Kelley broadened the scope of attribution theory by examining the interplay of consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness.

Table 3.1 Types of Attributions Based on Kelley's Predictions

<i>Consensus</i>	<p>"Do other people act this way?"</p> <p>If yes, an external attribution is likely. If no, an internal attribution is likely.</p>
<i>Consistency</i>	<p>"Has this person behaved similarly many times before?"</p> <p>If yes, an internal attribution is likely. If no, an external attribution is likely.</p>
<i>Distinctiveness</i>	<p>"Has this person behaved similarly in other types of situations?"</p> <p>If yes, an internal attribution is likely. If no, an external attribution is likely.</p>

UNCERTAINTY REDUCTION THEORY

The second intrapersonal theory discussed here is uncertainty reduction theory (URT). Berger and Calabrese's (1975) URT holds that social life is filled with ambiguities. Not knowing what to wear on the first day at a new job (Should I wear a suit or go with business casual?), uncertainty as to how to greet a new boss (Should I call her Megan? Ms. Smith? Mrs. Smith? Dr. Smith?), and wondering whether you will get along with the new office mate who just transferred from another location (Will she bother me with questions? Will he gossip about team members?) are just a few typical concerns during an average workday. Guided by several assumptions and **axioms** of human behavior, URT seeks to explain and predict when, why, and how individuals use communication to minimize their doubts when interacting with others.

Three assumptions guide the uncertainty reduction framework. First, Berger and Calabrese (1975) maintained that the primary goal of communication is to minimize uncertainties humans have about the world and the people therein. Second, they proposed that individuals experience uncertainty on a regular basis and that the experience of uncertainty is an unpleasant one. Third, Berger and Calabrese assumed that communication is the primary vehicle for reducing uncertainty. Importantly, with so many uncertainties presented to you within a given 24-hour period, Berger (1979) admitted individuals couldn't possibly reduce uncertainty about all of these new people or situations. Instead, he argued there are three possible preceding conditions that influence whether people have the motivation necessary to reduce their uncertainty.

Reducing Uncertainty

Antecedent Conditions

Berger (1979) argued that individuals are motivated to reduce uncertainty only under one of three specific antecedent conditions. First, anticipation of future interaction

suggests you are more motivated to reduce uncertainty about someone you are likely to see again. Thus, you are more inclined to use uncertainty reduction behaviors when a new office mate joins the team because you know you will be working with this person on a daily basis. The second condition, **incentive value**, includes the notion that you are prompted to learn more about someone when the individual in question has the potential to provide you with rewards or even punishments. In other words, what can this person do for you or to you? The third antecedent condition is **deviance**. If a person is odd, eccentric, bizarre, or unusual in some way that counters your expectations, URT suggests individuals will be more likely to reduce their uncertainty about the individual.

Types of Uncertainty

Beyond the antecedent conditions that prompt people to want to reduce uncertainty, Berger and Bradac (1982) argued there are two distinct variations, or types, of uncertainty. The first type, **behavioral uncertainty**, takes into account your insecurity about which actions are appropriate in a given situation. For example, when starting a job at a new company, there is often some ambiguity about the hours “required.” Do employees of my position begin promptly at 9:00 a.m. and leave right at 5:00 p.m.? Or am I expected to arrive early and stay late? Should I work through lunch, eating at my desk, or do colleagues expect me to go out to lunch with them and socialize? These are all examples of typical behavioral uncertainty for a new employee not yet sure as to how to act within the new corporation.

The second type of uncertainty is **cognitive uncertainty**. Whereas individuals experiencing behavioral uncertainty question how they should act in a given situation, those who experience cognitive uncertainty are unsure as to what to think about someone or something. In other words, cognitive uncertainty emphasizes the doubts in your ability to pinpoint the attitudes and beliefs of others. When a colleague makes a comment about how “comfortable” you look on a casual Friday, you may wonder, was this a compliment? Or was the remark a subtle hint that you may be dressed in a manner that is too casual for the office? Should you even care what the person thinks of your attire? All of these questions emphasize cognitive uncertainty.

Axioms Explaining the Uncertainty Reduction Process

URT seeks to explain and predict the ways in which individuals use communication to reduce ambiguity. Specifically, the process of reducing uncertainty is predicated on eight axioms, or self-evident truths, established and supported in previous research (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). These axioms are summarized in Table 3.2.

As you can see, these axioms make sense; they are, after all, “self-evident truths.” Unlike a commonsense theory, however, URT’s axioms have been classified, paired together to create theorems, and tested systematically over time, thereby providing URT with scholarly credence. Moreover, the axioms presented in Table 3.2 supply only the backbone of the theory. In other words, to say that using friendly nonverbal behaviors reduces uncertainty

Table 3.2 Axioms of Uncertainty Reduction Theory

Axiom 1	As your verbal communication with a communication partner increases, your level of uncertainty about that person decreases; as a result, verbal communication continues to increase.
Axiom 2	As welcoming nonverbal expressions increase, uncertainty decreases and vice versa.
Axiom 3	The greater your uncertainty, the more information-seeking behaviors you use. Conversely, as your uncertainty lessens, you seek less information.
Axiom 4	When uncertainty in a relationship is high, the intimacy level of communication content will be low. On the other hand, the reduction of uncertainty leads to greater intimacy.
Axiom 5	The more uncertain you are, the more you will use reciprocal communication strategies and vice versa.
Axiom 6	The more similarities you perceive to share with the target person(s), the more your uncertainty is reduced. Alternatively, perceiving dissimilarities leads to increased uncertainty.
Axiom 7	As uncertainty decreases, liking increases. Conversely, if your uncertainty rises, your liking of the person will decrease.
Axiom 8	Shared communication networks, or shared ties, lessen your uncertainty. On the other hand, if you share no common relations, your uncertainty intensifies.

Source: Axioms 1 through 7 are adapted from Berger and Calabrese, 1975. Axiom 8 is adapted from Parks and Adelman, 1983.

is not enough to warrant a scholarly theory. Discussed next, communication strategies to reduce uncertainty provide additional substance to URT's axioms.

Uncertainty Reduction Strategies

When examining communication strategies for reducing uncertainty, it is important to remember Berger and Calabrese's (1975) original premise: Uncertainty reduction is central to all social relations. Likewise, Berger (1995, 1997) noted that much of social interaction is goal driven. In other words, you communicate for a reason, and you create cognitive plans that guide individuals' social interaction.

URT is related to Berger's (1995, 1997) notion of plan-based messages. Specifically, when seeking information about social realities, individuals create and use plans that vary in complexity. Individuals may vary widely in their relational goals and have a range of specific tactics available to cope with uncertainty. Despite these differences in goals, however, three overarching strategies typify most uncertainty-reduction communication: passive, active, and interactive.

Indicative of the passive strategy, individuals observe their surroundings and surreptitiously gather clues about which behaviors are appropriate as well as which attitudes and beliefs others hold. The passive approach is much like playing detective. The active strategy to uncertainty reduction involves seeking information from a third party. Rather than playing detective yourself, you go to someone else who may know more about the person or situation in question. Last, the **interactive strategy** is when you go straight to the source in question and ask for as much information as possible.

For example, imagine yourself in a new position at a new company. As the December holiday season approaches, you begin to wonder whether you should give a gift to your boss. You could wait to see if others give gifts (passive strategy), you could ask several peers what they do for their supervisors (active strategy), or you could directly ask your boss what the company culture is like and what he or she expects (interactive strategy). Clearly, there are many possible goals that would influence which plan to enact. If the overarching goal is to appear appropriate, effective, and appreciative, the active strategy is probably the best choice. By asking others in your position what they do, you can get a good sense of what your supervisor expects without offending or embarrassing him or her.

Beyond Initial Interactions

Uncertainty reduction theory was originally concerned with explaining and predicting the ambiguity associated with initial interactions (Berger, 1979; Berger & Calabrese, 1975). That is, research using URT emphasized when, why, and how individuals minimize doubt when in new situations or when meeting new people. Berger (1997) has since expanded his position on URT, however, noting that uncertainty exists in new and developing relationships as well as in long-term, ongoing relationships. For example, when Allen is suddenly laid off, Dan and Davida become (understandably) uncertain about their own job security. Even in the face of positive change, uncertainty is inevitable. Imagine you are promoted and will now manage some of your closest friends at work. This change in power—from peer to superior—will likely increase your uncertainty. All relationships are characterized by change and growth—both of which promote the rise of uncertainty. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 5, some researchers believe a little bit of uncertainty is actually necessary for maintaining a healthy relationship.

To review, URT focuses on when and why individuals use communication to reduce uncertainty about others. Uncertainty predictably decreases when nonverbal immediacy, verbal messages, self-disclosure, shared similarities, and shared social networks increase. People routinely use passive, active, and interactive information-seeking strategies to reduce their uncertainty when encountering others.

EXPECTANCY VIOLATIONS THEORY

Developed by Judee Burgoon (1978, 1994), expectancy violations theory (EVT) explains the meanings people attribute to the violation, or infringement, of their personal space. Importantly, whereas much of Burgoon's work emphasizes nonverbal violations of physical

space (known as the study of proxemics), personal space can also refer to psychological or emotional space. Similar to URT, EVT is derived from a series of assumptions and axioms.

Assumptions

EVT builds on a number of communication axioms; most central to the understanding of EVT, however, is the assumption that humans have competing needs for personal space and for affiliation (Burgoon, 1978). Specifically, humans all need a certain amount of personal space, also thought of as distance or privacy; people also desire a certain amount of closeness with others, or affiliation. When you perceive that one of your needs has been compromised, EVT predicts you will try to do something about it. Thus, Burgoon's initial work focused on the realm of physical space—what happens when someone violates your expectations for appropriate physical distance or closeness.

Beyond explaining individuals' physical space and privacy needs, EVT also makes specific predictions as to how individuals will react to a given violation. Will you **reciprocate**, or match, someone's unexpected behavior, perhaps moving closer or turning toward the individual? Or will you **compensate**, or counteract, by doing the opposite of your partner's behavior? Before making a prediction about reciprocation or compensation, however, you must evaluate EVT's three core concepts: expectancy, violation valence, and communicator reward valence.

Core Concepts of Expectancy Violations Theory

First, **expectancy** refers to what an individual anticipates will happen in a given situation. Expectancy is similar to the idea of social norms and is based on three primary factors. The first factor associated with expectancy emphasizes the context of the behavior. In a formal business meeting, for example, hugging a colleague to show support may be inappropriate and may raise some eyebrows. If, however, you hug the same colleague while attending his mother's funeral, the gesture may be perfectly acceptable. A second factor, the relationship one has with the person in question, must be examined. If attending the funeral of your boss's mother, a hug may still be perceived as inappropriate, whereas if the funeral is for the mother of a colleague who is also a personal friend, a hug would likely be more suitable. The third factor, the communicator's characteristics, also fuels your expectations; you have expectations for the way people of both sexes and of certain ages, ethnicities, socioeconomic status, and the like will communicate.

By examining the context, relationship, and communicator's characteristics, individuals arrive at a certain expectation for how a given person should and will likely behave. Changing even one of these expectancy variables might lead to a different expectation. Once you have determined, however, that someone's behavior was, in fact, a breach of expectation, you then judge the behavior in question. This breach is known as the **violation valence**—the positive or negative evaluation you make about a behavior you did not anticipate. Importantly, not all violations are evaluated negatively. Very often a person behaves in a way you might not have expected, but this surprising behavior is viewed positively. For example, a normally bad-tempered colleague brings coffee and bagels to the

Monday morning staff meeting or the habitually shy intern actually makes eye contact with you and asks for your opinion on a new project.

Notably, others' behavior can be confusing and hard to interpret. Therefore, the third element that must be addressed before predicting reciprocation or compensation involves assessing the person whose behavior is in question. Similar to the violation valence, the **communicator reward valence** (also called the rewardingness of partner) is an evaluation you make about the person who committed the violation. Specifically, how rewarding or interpersonally attractive do you perceive this person to be? If you view the person engaging in the violation to be likeable, charismatic, nice looking, and smart, then you will likely believe the person has a positive reward valence. Conversely, if you perceive the violator to be rude, stingy, unattractive, or conceited, you will likely judge this person as having a negative reward valence. Importantly, the same behavior can be interpreted positively if committed by someone with a positive communicator reward valence and negatively by someone with a negative reward valence. For example, let's say you make a flawless presentation to a difficult client. Afterward, a respected colleague congratulates you and gives an unexpected pat on the shoulder. You will likely judge this act positively and as a gesture of support. On the other hand, let's say it's a different colleague who gives the unexpected pat on the shoulder, one who is always grandstanding and trying to make the focus of attention all about him. In this second case, you will probably view the pat on the back as negative and patronizing. Thus, assessing the behavior itself is insufficient to make a reasonable prediction of how one will react to the violation. You need to take into account your relationship and view of the person performing the violation.

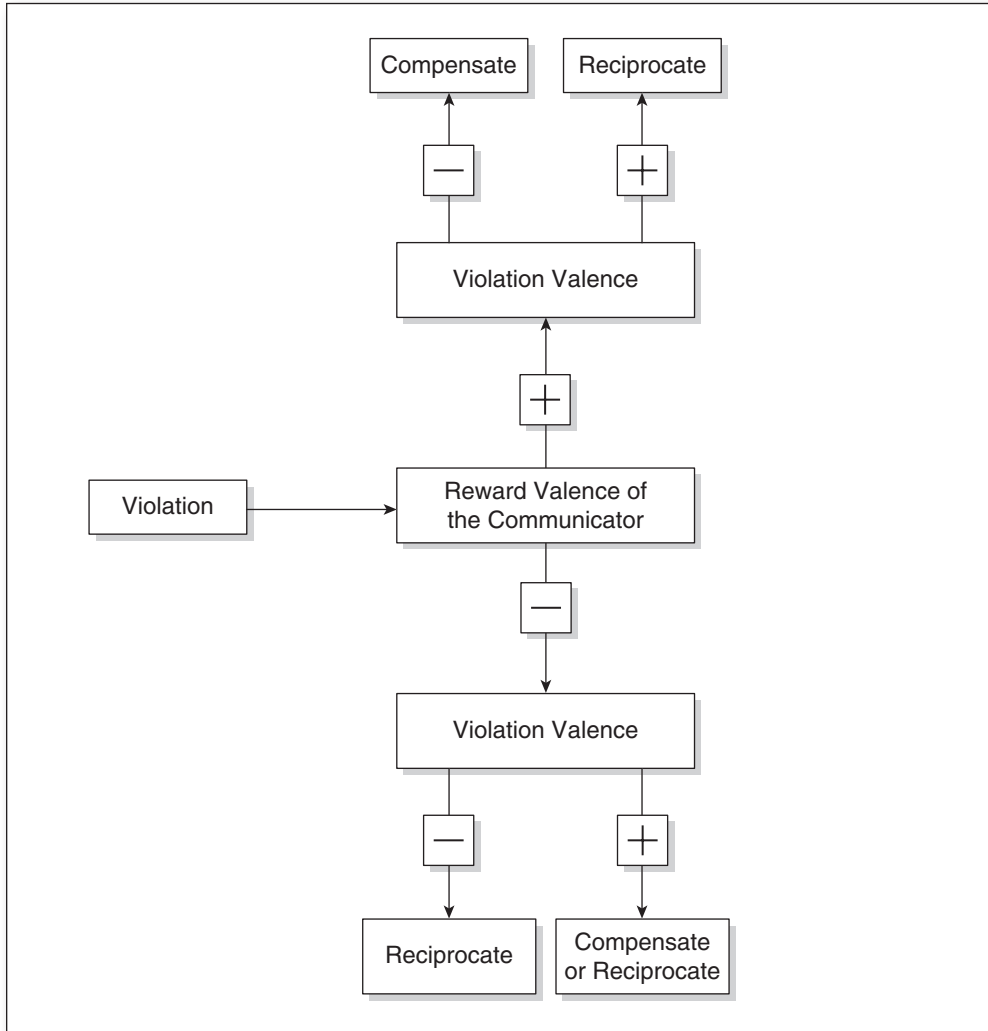
Predicting Reactions When Expectations Are Violated

After assessing expectancy, violation valence, and communicator reward valence of a given situation, it becomes possible to make rather specific predictions about whether the individual who perceived the violation will reciprocate or compensate for the behavior in question. These predictions are described in Figure 3.1.

Guerrero and Burgoon (1996; Guerrero, Jones, & Burgoon, 2000) noticed that predictable patterns develop when considering reward valence and violation valence together. Specifically, if the violation valence is perceived as positive and the communicator reward valence is also perceived as positive, the theory predicts you will reciprocate the positive behavior. For example, your boss gives you a big smile after you've given a presentation. Guerrero and Burgoon would predict that you smile in return. Similarly, if you perceive the violation valence as negative and perceive the communicator reward valence as negative, the theory again predicts you reciprocate the negative behavior. Thus, if a disliked co-worker is grouchy and unpleasant to you, you will likely reciprocate and be unpleasant in return.

Conversely, if you perceive a negative violation valence but view the communicator reward valence as positive, it is likely you will compensate for your partner's negative behavior. For example, one day your boss appears sullen and throws a stack of papers in front of you. Rather than grunt back, EVT predicts you will compensate for your boss's negativity, perhaps by asking if everything is okay (Guerrero & Burgoon, 1996). More difficult to predict, however, is the situation in which someone you view as having a negative reward valence violates you with a positive behavior. In this situation, you may reciprocate, giving the person the "benefit of the doubt." Alternatively, you may view the communicator

Figure 3.1 Predictions of Expectancy Violations Theory



as having suspicious motives, thereby compensating. For example, if the disliked co-worker comes in one day and is very pleasant, you might be pleasant in return, but you also might treat the person with suspicion.

As evidenced, EVT focuses broadly on the infringement of one's expectations for "normal" behavior. Burgoon's research has chiefly emphasized the violation of nonverbal space; however, other expectations, such as behavioral norms, can also be violated. Notably, violations are not necessarily negative. One must evaluate the anticipated behavior, the communicator's characteristics, and the violation itself.

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE THEORY

The final intrapersonal theory featured in this chapter is cognitive dissonance theory—a way of understanding how persuasion may be understood as a cognitive event whereby an individual is motivated to create balance between one’s own beliefs and behavior. Discussed in Chapter 7 along with other theories of persuasion, it is often assumed an outside source simply has to provide enough ammunition to change another’s attitudes or beliefs. For example, public health campaigns often presume the best way to get a smoker to quit is to infuse the smoker with information about mortality rates, health problems, and the social stigma associated with smoking in order to change the person’s attitude about cigarettes. If the smoker’s attitude changes, surely he or she will stop smoking, right? After all, it doesn’t make sense to engage in a habit known to cause premature aging and cancer and banned in many public places.

According to cognitive dissonance theory, however, this line of thinking may seem logical but is potentially incorrect, possibly explaining why there are so many smokers who acknowledge the health and social risks yet continue to indulge in the behavior. Cognitive dissonance theory (CDT) explains that persuasion is not simply the result of injecting new or refined beliefs into others. Instead, CDT predicts that influence is often an intrapersonal event, occurring when incongruence between our attitudes and behavior creates a tension resolved by altering either our beliefs or our behaviors, thereby effecting a change.

Schemata: Creating Familiarity or Discomfort

According to Festinger (1957, 1962), when presented with a new or unfamiliar stimulus, individuals use **schemata**—that is, cognitive structures for organizing new information. Essentially, for new information to be understood or useful, we must find schemata with which to link the new stimulus to previously understood experiences. For example, when trying frog legs for the first time, many people claim the dish tastes “just like chicken”; in this case, the previous experience of being familiar with the taste of chicken serves as schemata for relating the taste of frog legs.

Importantly, however, when newly presented information is inconsistent with our previously established beliefs (i.e., schemata), we experience an imbalance or dissonance (Festinger, 1957). It is this dissonance that becomes a highly persuasive tool because, according to Festinger, humans feel so uneasy with holding contradictory beliefs and actions that they will make every attempt to minimize the discomfort. In other words, when individuals behave in a manner incongruent with their beliefs, dissonance is created; dissonance creates discomfort. Because humans do not like to feel unnerved, individuals actively seek to change the situation to restore a balance between thought and action.

Relationship Between Beliefs and Behaviors

Three possible relationships between beliefs and behaviors exist: irrelevance, consonance, and dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Briefly stated, **irrelevance** simply refers to beliefs and behaviors that have nothing to do with each other. For example, Cory’s beliefs about

preserving the environment and his position on gun control are completely unrelated. Thus, irrelevance is the absence of both consonance and dissonance. Second, **consonance** occurs when two stimuli or pieces of information are in balance or achieve congruence. For example, if Cory believes recycling is an important way to maintain the environment, and he recycles everything from plastic bottles, to Styrofoam peanuts, to junk mail, it could be said Cory has consonance between his beliefs (recycling benefits the environment) and his actions (he avidly recycles household waste). According to Festinger (1957), individuals prefer consonant relationships; that is, we strive to feel consistency between actions and beliefs.

Conversely, **dissonance** occurs when two stimuli or pieces of information contradict each other (Festinger, 1957). Continuing the previous example, if Cory believes the environment is a precious commodity that deserves protection yet he drives an SUV for his 40-mile commute each day, he has created dissonance. Cory's beliefs (preserving the environment) and his actions (driving a gas-guzzling SUV) are incongruent. CDT predicts this dissonance will give Cory discomfort, at least until he can rationalize or augment the dissonance—either by shifting his belief (sure, the environment is important, but driving a car won't harm anyone) or by changing his behavior (trading in the SUV for an electric hybrid car).

Importantly, not all dissonance is created equally. That is, a magnitude of dissonance exists whereby some forms of incongruence produce greater discomfort than others (Zimbardo, Ebbesen, & Maslach, 1977). This magnitude of dissonance can be measured by three variables. First, the amount of dissonance one experiences is affected by the perceived importance of an issue. Recycling soda cans may not be as important an issue when compared with driving while intoxicated. Similarly, spending \$5,000 on a beach rental that turns out to be a dilapidated shack is far more devastating than spending \$100 to watch your favorite football team lose. Second, the **dissonance ratio** affects the amount of discomfort one feels. The dissonance ratio is simply the proportion of incongruent beliefs held in relation to the number of consonant beliefs. If you hold a greater number of incongruent beliefs and behaviors compared with consistent thoughts and actions, you will experience more discomfort. Third, one's ability to **rationalize**, or justify, the dissonance also affects the amount of discomfort experienced when faced with conflicting beliefs and behaviors. The more you can justify these contrasting attitudes and actions, the less discomfort you endure.

A related issue is perception. Specifically, the perceptual processes of selective exposure, attention, interpretation, and retention can help minimize dissonance. CDT argues that an individual selectively perceives various stimuli so as to minimize dissonance. For example, with **selective exposure**, a person actively avoids information inconsistent with previously established beliefs or behaviors. Thus, a pro-choice supporter will likely avoid pro-life demonstrations and vice versa. Similarly, **selective attention** suggests that if you have to expose yourself to a situation incongruent with your beliefs, you will only attend to information that reaffirms your beliefs, disregarding any information that fails to support your views. Thus, if pro-choice supporters happen to come face-to-face with a pro-life demonstration, they will likely only attend to those details that support their previously held beliefs, for example, that pro-life supporters are religious "fanatics."

With regard to **selective interpretation**, CDT predicts individuals will carefully decipher ambiguous information so it is perceived to be consistent with their established beliefs. To

illustrate, consider *Zero Dark Thirty*, a film that includes the explicit depiction of “enhanced interrogation techniques” used in the pursuit and killing of Osama Bin Laden. Individuals who support the use of torture in warfare are likely to have interpreted the film as providing evidence of the efficacy of the technique; those who do not support the use of torture may very well have interpreted the film as a condemnation of these techniques (Bruni, 2012).

Finally, CDT maintains individuals use selective retention to uphold their viewpoints while more easily dismissing or forgetting information that creates dissonance. Accordingly, we might remember all the good times we had in college and conveniently forget how stressful we found trying to balance the demands of schoolwork with the need to work to pay for college.

Persuasion Through Dissonance

By now it should be understood that CDT assumes humans prefer congruency between beliefs and behaviors. When we engage in an action that opposes our attitudes, we experience distress known as dissonance. Depending on the importance of the issue and the degree of our discomfort, we are motivated to change our beliefs or behaviors (i.e., be persuaded). CDT is often considered a **postdecision theory**, meaning individuals attempt to persuade themselves after a decision has been made or course of action has been enacted that the decision or behavior was okay (Gass & Seiter, 2003). The notion of buyer’s remorse is an obvious example. After spending more than you feel comfortable with on a new home, car, vacation, or some other luxury item, you probably had to rationalize, or convince yourself, that the purchase was “worth” it. Thus, you try to reduce the dissonance created after making a decision to buy. Yet the question remains: How can communicators use CDT as a tool to persuade others?

Recall that, according to CDT, motivation results from an individual’s internal struggle to change beliefs or behaviors to restore consonance (Festinger, 1957). Consequently, if a persuader can create or exploit dissonance while also offering a solution to minimize the disparity, it is likely the receiver will adopt these suggested new behaviors (or change beliefs).

In the case of buyer’s remorse, sellers and real estate agents can capitalize on principles of CDT by reinforcing the wisdom of making certain choices. Realtors often encourage buyers to make a list of pros and cons before even looking for that new home with breathtaking views, a gourmet kitchen, or a sunken Jacuzzi tub (Light, 2002). This way, buyers can reduce dissonance that typically occurs after their bid is accepted by reinforcing their decision to purchase with the list of advantages. Home inspections and contingency clauses in the agreement of sale also help prospective buyers feel better about their decision to purchase.

Advertisers have also been using principles of CDT for decades, convincing consumers to buy their clients’ products. For instance, the diet industry has made billions of dollars by preying on the average person’s insecurities about his or her appearance and body image. Most adults know they should engage in exercise or physical activity on a daily basis, yet the majority of them don’t. And although we may not be motivated enough to get off the couch and onto the treadmill, we are motivated to relieve the dissonance by purchasing so-called miracle products such as fat blockers, diet supplements, cellulite creams, and even cocktails formulated for skinny women. Thus, by presenting an easy alternative, these manufacturers help consumers to minimize their discomfort by realigning their beliefs and behaviors, if only on a temporary basis.

Within an organizational context, CDT predicts that by increasing employee commitments and loyalties, employee turnover could be reduced and satisfaction improved. That is, “once we’ve invested our time and energy or poured our hearts and souls into a cause, a person, an idea, a project, or a group we find it too difficult to let go” (Gass & Seiter, 2003, p. 69). If you have already invested years, overcome financial burdens, or forged meaningful relationships with co-workers, you are much less likely to leave an organization—regardless of pay or other adverse circumstances. Instead, you suppress second thoughts about other career opportunities, rationalize our corporate loyalty, and may even intensify your efforts to prove to yourself and others that the job is worth it.

We would like to offer a few words of caution, however. Take care when trying to capitalize on others’ inconsistencies as a persuasive strategy for changing receivers’ beliefs or behaviors. As Gass and Seiter (2003) noted, if you create too much dissonance, the receivers may simply create balance by changing their attitudes so as not to like you. Likewise, ethical issues abound when individuals plot to exploit consumers’ or employees’ dissonance for material gain. We believe competent persuaders must think of each consumer or employee as an individual worthy of respect. If creating or magnifying another’s dissonance strips that individual of self-worth, then such techniques should be avoided.

CDT focuses primarily on an individual’s psychological response to inconsistencies in beliefs and actions. Because dissonance produces distress, human beings seek to maintain consonance or the appearance of consonance whenever possible. This adverse effect may mean changing one’s behaviors or realigning one’s beliefs through some type of rationalization or selective perception. Although often a postreactive approach, communicators can use this knowledge of CDT to better target their persuasive messages. By offering a solution, product, or course of action that bridges the gap between receivers’ incongruent beliefs and behaviors, communicators may influence receivers to use these methods to create cognitive harmony.

Summary and Research Applications

This chapter focused on cognition and communication, which refers to the way individuals assess others’ behavior, attitudes, and messages to assign meaning. First, attribution theory focuses on how and why individuals assign causes to other peoples’ behavior. Related to workplace communication, attribution theory has been applied to understanding how recipients of e-mail messages are interpreted by the sender when a response is not returned, as well as how recipients interpret their own behavior when a reply is not provided (Easton & Bommelje, 2011). Related to public relations and crisis communication, attribution theory has also been applied to understanding public reactions to a petroleum corporation that caused an oil spill (Jeong, 2009). Second, URT states that when individuals encounter someone or something new, they experience uncertainty; uncertainty is uncomfortable, so people use communication strategies to reduce it. One application of URT is its usefulness in explaining how employees experience uncertainty and use uncertainty reduction strategies to manage both temporary (Rhodes, 2008) and long-term organizational change, such as job transfers (Kramer, 1993, 1994) and reactions to management decisions such as promotions (Kramer, 1999). Next, EVT predicts whether people will reciprocate or compensate

when their conversational partner violates their expectations. Within organizational contexts, EVT has been used to explain negative perceptions of organizations' responses to consumer complaints (Bolkan & Daly, 2009) as well as how unexpected touch between opposite-sex workers, either managers or subordinates, can lead to perceptions of inappropriateness and harassment for both men and women (Guerrero & Smith, 2009). Finally, cognitive dissonance theory explains persuasion as a cognitive response to inconsistencies in beliefs and actions, whereby individuals prefer to maintain consistency between their beliefs and behaviors. Again related to crisis communication, Waters's (2009) research on individuals' motivations to donate to the American Red Cross after a disaster found that donors were more likely "to experience feelings of cognitive dissonance than non-donors, and their donations resulted in a consonance restoration" (p. 139). Nonprofit organizations, particularly those dealing with disaster relief, might be able to improve fund-raising efforts by highlighting dissonance among nonresidents and then publicizing how nonresident donations to the victims can restore consonance.

Key Terms

Attribution	35	Exterior locus of control	38
Axiom	39	Hedonic relevance	36
Behavioral uncertainty	40	Incentive	40
Behaviorism	34	Interactive strategy	42
Cognition	34	Interior locus of control	38
Cognitive	34	Irrelevance	46
Cognitive uncertainty	40	Personalism	37
Communicator reward valence	44	Postdecision theory	48
Compensate	43	Rationalize	47
Consensus	37	Reciprocate	43
Consistency	37	Schemata	46
Consonance	47	Selective attention	47
Deviance	40	Selective exposure	47
Dissonance	47	Selective interpretation	47
Dissonance ratio	47	Selective retention	53
Distinctiveness	38	Social desirability	36
Expectancy	43	Violation valence	43

Case Study 3: Caught in Between

Julie Miller had recently joined the internal audit department of a large pharmaceutical company as an analyst. As a team, these analysts conducted thousands of inspections to ensure the sales representatives complied with federal regulatory guidelines. It was a Monday afternoon, and Julie grabbed a seat at the weekly staff meeting. Her boss, Pat, sat at the head of the large conference room table, notebook open, looking ready to begin. Over the next hour, Pat previewed a new plan that he and a senior analyst, Erin, would create to standardize the team's daily logging process.

Pat started the meeting by saying, "I done some checkin', and I can tell that yooz are not doin' the same amount of inspeckin. Uhbeht heahf of yooz are checkin awwl da voided cards to look for blanks. The udder heahf of yooz aren't looking at no more 'an a hanful. We godda get this more together, ya know?"

He continued in his heavy Philly accent, saying that this type of inconsistency could leave the department open to liability issues and might be a problem in the department's yearly internal audit.

"I jus' wanna make sure ever'bod's on da same page uhbeht awl dis," Pat explained. "If any of yooz got any ideas 'bout what should be include' in da process, gimme a kawl on the phowen. Me enn Erin are gawn head up this projeck."

With that, as he did at each meeting, Pat asked each person around the table for any questions or issues they wished to discuss.

As soon as Julie got back to her desk after the meeting, the woman from the next cubicle rushed into her space, visibly angry. "What was *that* all about? Are we trained monkeys? Can you even believe him?" Marissa sputtered.

Julie felt a twinge of discomfort; she had been one of the people who recognized a large discrepancy in the analysts' process. She actually looked forward to having more definite guidelines.

Before Julie could respond, Marissa went on, "Why do we even need a standardized process? Is he really so sure I don't know how to do my own job? I've been in this department for 12 years! I think I know how to do an audit by now. Every day, I speak to senior directors who are so far above his head, he couldn't even see them! Of course, with him being so short and bald, that's not that difficult! I can't believe this!"

Here we go again, Julie thought silently to herself. Although only a few months into the job, Julie had witnessed enough of Marissa's complaints to know that if left unchecked, she would go on and on.

Julie again attempted to speak but was interrupted by Marissa's rant: "And when will the man learn how to speak? Who talks like that in management? I can't believe they hired this man to be *my* manager. He's absolutely stupid! I'm supposed to respect him? I can't. I won't. And why did he pick Erin? I have more seniority than she does—even if my title doesn't reflect it! Please! It's a shame you weren't here before Pat got here, Julie. The old boss knew we were doing a good job and left us alone."

Julie didn't know how to respond. She shared a cubicle wall with Marissa and didn't want to get on the woman's bad side. At the same time, Julie and Pat had gotten along well since he hired her a few months ago. Although she agreed he was rough around the edges, she liked his straightforward

manner. Pat had been a captain in the Philadelphia Police Department, until two years ago when he was injured in the line of duty and relegated to a desk job. He came to this company after being recruited by Mary, the senior director and a former Philadelphia detective herself who had worked for Pat. Julie had spoken privately with Pat a few times about his difficult transition from being a manager at the police department, which used a managerial style that was very confrontational, aggressive, and structured, to this company, which encouraged a managerial style that sometimes seemed to him to be more about *how* the job got done than actually getting it done. Sometimes, even now, Julie could tell that Pat had to stop and think about the “right” way to respond to a situation, instead of responding in his natural style.

Complicating matters, Julie had learned from a co-worker that Marissa had applied for Pat’s job but wasn’t chosen. Knowing Mary’s history with Pat, Julie assumed Mary had an interest in bringing in people with a background in criminal justice to round out the investigative skills on the team. Marissa, on the other hand, had chalked it up to plain old nepotism.

Julie could not imagine Marissa as a manager. An attractive woman in her mid-50s, Marissa was always meticulously put together. Twice divorced, Marissa had a sarcastic, if caustic, sense of humor that had initially turned Julie off. Marissa rarely held back from sharing her opinion as if it were the only correct one.

Over the past few weeks, however, Julie’s initial opinion had softened. From chatting with Marissa, Julie learned she had endured a lot early in life and, as a result, wasn’t able to finish college. Starting as a secretary years before, Marissa had slowly worked her way up the ranks, even without a degree. Although she really was good at her job, Julie noticed Marissa was rarely commended. Still, Julie was learning to take Marissa’s tirades about Pat with a grain of salt. Everyone else did as well.

Julie whispered quietly, so as not to be overheard, “Well, why didn’t you raise any of your objections to the process in the meeting when Pat asked for feedback? He said he wanted to hear people’s concerns.”

“Are you kidding me?” Marissa replied, in her regular speaking voice. “He only *says* he wants feedback because that’s what he learned in some managerial class.”

At that moment, Pat walked by Julie’s cube on his way to Erin’s desk. Marissa stopped and looked a little guilty. Julie sensed the tension, but knowing she had done nothing wrong she just smiled and greeted Pat as she usually did. She assumed Pat would smile and make a friendly joke as he typically did when he saw Julie. Instead, he curtly nodded his head in their direction and barked, “Yo Marissa, why don’ I got those reffer’l ledders back? I gave ‘em to you two-tree days ago. If you can’t hannel your work, lemme know. I’ll get summon else a do it.”

Marissa’s face reddened, but she coolly replied, “I’ll have them to you within the hour.” Pat turned to Julie, smiled, and continued on his way.

Julie was taken aback; Pat had never spoken to her in this way. She had recently turned in some requested referrals a day late herself and had been reassured by Pat that they were “no big deal, just more paperwork.”

Julie plopped down at her desk and sighed. *I’m staying out of this*, she thought. *I’ll just be nice to both of them and do my work.*

Questions for Consideration

1. What attributions has Julie made about Marissa's complaints? Make sure to include information about consensus, consistency, distinctiveness, and controllability.
2. Julie is fairly new to the organization. What strategies has she used to reduce her uncertainty about Pat? Marissa?
3. Using examples for each of EVT's core components (expectancy, violation valence, and communicator reward valence), what does EVT explain about Julie's reaction to Pat? Then, think about it from Pat's perspective. What does EVT explain about Pat's reaction to Julie "gossiping" with Marissa?
4. Do you believe Julie experiences any cognitive dissonance about Marissa's complaints? Why or why not? What about Marissa? Do you see any evidence that either has engaged in selective attention, selective exposure, selective interpretation, or selective retention?
5. Which theory alone seems to provide the "best" explanation for the situation? Why do you believe this to be the case? What situations might surface that would make a different theory or theories better at explaining the situation? How could you combine several theories to make for an even "better" explanation of the encounter?