# When Norms are Violated: Imagined Interactions as Processing and Coping Mechanisms

Kristen M. Berkos, Terre H. Allen, Patricia Kearney, and Timothy G. Plax

*Relying on the fundamental assumption of violation theories that norm violations stimulate receiver thought processes, we explored receivers' symbolic cognitive processes in response to particular types of norm violations. Specifically, we reasoned that imagined interactions serve as a processing mechanism whereby individuals review the behavior of another, identify the type of norm violation, and make decisions about how to respond–all within their efforts to cope with deviations from norms. Utilizing the classroom context, we examined how teacher norm violations, operationalized as teacher misbehaviors, provoke students' imagined interaction activity. Results revealed that imagined interactions were used in respect to all three types of violations profiled and that participants were significantly more likely to engage in imagined interactions than to interact with or confront norm violators. The results are discussed in terms of implications for extending violation theories to include context-based goal attainment and power differentials between interactants.* **Key words:** Norm Violation, Imagined Interactions, Coping Mechanisms

Although Berger (1997) argued that discrepant social activity leads to greater attentiveness and more detailed acquisition of information by receivers, little attention has focused on how receivers process communication relevant information when confronted with norm violations. Violation theories assume that heightened arousal causes recipients of violations to pay more attention to messages that have direct bearing on the nature of the relationship (Burgoon, 1993, 1995; Burgoon & Hale, 1988; Burgoon, Newton, Walther, & Baesler, 1991; Cappella & Greene, 1982, 1984; LePoire & Burgoon, 1994, 1996; Levine, Anders, Banas, Baum, Endo, Hu, & Wong, 2000). However, research, to date, has not focused on the symbolic message processing mechanisms that are associated with how receivers define reward value, make decisions about responses to violations, and cope with negative emotions that may result from such violations. Violation theories should be expanded to reflect the employment of symbolic interpretation and/or defining activity common to human communicators.

The purpose of this study was to extend the research pertinent to violation theories by examining receivers' symbolic message processing associated with norm violations. As such, this investigation explores how receivers rely on cognitive processes, operationalized as imagined interactions, when confronted with a communicator who violates norms. In particular, we reason that imagined interactions serve as a central processing mechanism whereby individuals review the behavior of

*Kristen Berkos (M.A., California State University, Long Beach, 1999) is a doctoral student in the Department of Speech Communication, Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge. Terre Allen (Ph.D., Louisiana State University, 1990) is Associate Professor, Patricia Kearney (Ed.D., West Virginia University, 1979), and Timothy G. Plax (Ph.D., University of Southern California, 1974) are Professors of Communication Studies at California State University at Long Beach. Correspondence regarding this paper should be directed to Terre Allen, 5971 Donlyn Drive, Huntington Beach, CA 92649 (phone: 714/840-2237, e-mail: thallen@aol.com).*
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another, identify the type of norm violation, and make decisions about how to respond–all within their efforts to cope with deviations from norms.

## Violation Theories

Discrepancy arousal theory (DAT; Cappella & Greene, 1982, 1984) posits an approach-avoidance framework for theorizing that reactions to nonverbal involvement changes by one communicator lead to increases or decreases in involvement displayed by another. Cappella and Greene assume that discrepancies from expectancies induce various changes in arousal that, in turn, mediate communicators' physiological responses to one another. According to the DA model, discrepancies produce changes in arousal, such that moderate changes produce positive affect, and large changes produce negative affect. In essence, the theory proposes that size or magnitude of the changes in arousal produces response valence. One of the many limitations of DAT concerning communication researchers, is that the resulting reactions to violations occur without any conscious thought. Therefore, the theory tends to be limited to responses to nonverbal stimuli.

Expectancy violation theory (EVT; Burgoon & Hale, 1988) posits a similar arousal process. However, Burgoon and Hale asserted that the valence (evaluation) of the communicator must be factored in as well. Central to EVT are *expectancies*, defined as enduring patterns of anticipated verbal and nonverbal behavior that are appropriate, desired, or preferred. Expectancies involve judgments of what behaviors are possible, feasible, and typical for a particular context, purpose, or individual. An extensive body of research has established that interactants hold a number of expectations regarding nonverbal behaviors such as eye gaze (Burgoon, Coker, & Coker, 1986; Manusov, 1984), conversational distancing (Burgoon, 1978; Burgoon & Aho, 1982), and those associated with immediacy (Burgoon & Hale, 1988). EVT predicts that when a violation of normative expectancies occurs, individuals should experience heightened arousal which stimulates the participants to assign meaning and valence to the violation.

In general, violators evaluated to hold high reward value are likely to elicit positive responses to violations whereas violators evaluated to hold low reward value are likely to elicit negative or avoidant responses. In addition, the EV model stipulates that an extreme violation, if committed by a high reward communicator, can be viewed as positively valenced and produce positive outcomes such as increased attraction (Burgoon & Hale, 1988). For example, unexpected increases in proximity from a high reward communicator during conversation might be viewed as an attempt to affiliate, but the same behavior from a low reward communicator might be viewed as an aggressive act.

EVT appears to extend discrepancy arousal beyond the boundaries of nonconscious processing. In addition to evaluating the reward value of a communicator, EVT further predicts that interpretations of normative violations are influenced by three primary sources of information: communicator characteristics, relational characteristics, and context. Communicator characteristics include gender, personality, age, appearance, and style. Relational characteristics include prior history, degree of acquaintance, status, dominance, liking, and attraction. And, context includes situational definitions, communication functions, formality, task, and environmental constraints. Taken together, these sources of information are central to how receivers define both norm expectations and violators' reward value. Process-

ing information relevant to communicator characteristics, relational characteristics and contextual information, all for the purpose of defining reward value, should require some level of symbolic, conscious processing. This, however, remains an empirical question.

Although expectancy violation theory is both comprehensive and compelling, investigations of the model have yielded mixed results. Kam, Bondman, and Levine (1998) and Levine et al. (2000) claimed that studies testing EVT fail to distinguish norms from expectations. Levine and his colleagues asserted that norms and expectations are conceptually and empirically distinct. They specified that norms are situationally based standards for behavior that prescribe certain actions. In addition, they stipulated that norm violations occur when a person's behavior falls outside of the range of acceptable behavior and is inappropriate or deviant relative to the context. In other words, while persons often expect normative behavior from others, it is possible to expect (based on information from a third party or prior interaction) inappropriate, deviant, or non-normative behavior from others.

The norm/expectation distinction is important. In fact, Levine et al. (2000), while investigating deception, found that independent of receiver expectations, confederates enacting inappropriate or "weird" behaviors were rated as less honest than the same confederates acting normally. They surmised that since norms specify the range of socially acceptable behavior in particular contexts, behaviors that violate norms should be evaluated negatively by others whether the inappropriate behavior is expected or unexpected. Hence, they proposed a norm violation model as opposed to an expectancy violation model.

Levine et al. (2000) cautioned researchers to avoid confounding norms with expectations. They suggested that norms give rise to expectations and that norms and expectations often coincide; however, the negative evaluations stemming from norm violations do not require corresponding expectancy violations. Instead, they suggested that norm violations rest on the normative valuation of the behavior observed inasmuch as norm-violating behaviors are inappropriate whether they are expected or unexpected.

Although Levine and his colleagues make an important distinction, they, too, confined their investigation to responses to nonverbal behaviors. While by definition, norm and/or expectation violations can be either verbal or nonverbal in nature, in general, studies of norm and expectancy violations place the central emphasis on responses to nonverbal behaviors. Clearly, what constitutes "socially acceptable behavior" or "expected behavior" is not exclusively determined by receivers' responses to nonverbal stimuli. In most communication transactions, receivers process both verbal and nonverbal portions of the message in order to assess whether a sender is violating norms and/or expectations. The current study departs from the traditional treatment of norm violations as being vested mainly in nonverbal behaviors. In addition, we sought to determine if norm violations elicit increased cognitive attention to symbolic aspects of the message on the part of receivers.

Clearly, receivers take into account several types of information when confronted by a communicator who deviates from anticipated norms. However, with respect to norms and expectancies, the mechanisms that receivers utilize when processing information about communicator characteristics, relational characteristics, and contextual information remain untested. Emphasizing receiver information processing in strategic communication, Berger (1997) theorized that individuals gain understand-

ing of others' communication activity by making inferences about others' strategies and goals. Berger pointed to imagined interaction activity as a useful mechanism for investigating how individuals process communication relevant information when making inferences and gaining understanding about others.

## Imagined Interactions

Imagined interactions (IIs) are defined as a social cognitive process in which individuals imagine themselves communicating with others (Edwards, Honeycutt, & Zagacki, 1988). Similar to conversational daydreams, individuals imagine what they would like to say (proactive II) during a conversation, or reflect on what they should have said (retroactive II), as well as imagine the messages from conversational partners (Edwards et al.). As a mechanism for processing conversation relevant information, IIs serve a multiplicity of functions, including rehearsal for anticipated encounters, catharsis to release built-up emotional tensions, and self-awareness to engage in thought clarification and emotion analysis (Allen & Edwards, 1991; Edwards et al.; Honeycutt, Edwards, & Zagacki, 1989–90).

Research reveals that the rehearsal, catharsis, and self-awareness functions of IIs allow individuals to focus on emotional concerns and situational exigencies (Allen & David, 1994; Allen & Honeycutt, 1997; Edwards et al., 1988; Honeycutt, 1991; Honeycutt et al., 1989-90; Zagacki, Edwards, & Honeycutt, 1992). Furthermore, IIs are linked to the emotions and messages used in actual conversations (Allen & Edwards, 1991; Allen & Honeycutt, 1997). Specifically, research indicates that when individuals repeatedly experience IIs discrepant from their actual conversations, they report increased anxiety in both their IIs and actual interactions. Additionally, unpleasant IIs are associated with decreased communication satisfaction and with negative emotions (Zagacki et al., 1992). Other research reveals that imagined interactions become emotionally charged when one receives cues related to the pursuit of a goal (Allen & Honeycutt).

Even though imagined interactions are often used to cope with emotionally charged issues, IIs sometimes function as a substitute for actual interactions (Allen & Berkos, 1998; Allen & David, 1994). When individuals are unable to confront the partner because of physical separation (Allen & David) or when individuals believe that confrontation will thwart subsequent interaction goals (Allen & Berkos), IIs are likely used to replace interaction. In particular, IIs function as a substitute for interaction when individuals recognize that actual confrontation may yield negative consequences or diminish the potential for future rewards within the relationship.

Taken together, the imagined interactions studies demonstrate that IIs serve as a type of visual and verbal imagery that individuals utilize to focus on expectations and emotions, to prepare and plan for conversations, and to review conversations that have already taken place. Furthermore, individuals use IIs to review previous interactions, refine interpretations, and reflect on what they could have or should have said. Finally, individuals use IIs as a mechanism for decision-making regarding the consequences of confronting emotionally charged issues. As such, IIs may function as a substitute for actual interaction when the anticipated consequences of interaction diminish future rewards or result in punishment (e.g., loss of the relationship or loss of a job).

The current study links imagined interactions to norm violations by exploring how deviant behaviors stimulate receivers' conscious, symbolic information process-

ing. We framed the present study in a classroom context. Specifically, we examined whether teacher norm violations provoke students' imagined interaction activity. If norm violation theory is correct, students should have a variety of experiences within the classroom context, and thus, have a variety of expectations of teacher behaviors that are appropriate and/or desirable. Furthermore, students are likely to judge the teacher's behavior and make choices concerning their own behavior on the basis of what they believe is possible, feasible, and typical in the classroom context. When teachers engage in behaviors that violate students' perceptions of appropriate teacher behavior, students are likely to define teachers as engaging in misbehaviors (Kearney, Plax, Hays, & Ivey, 1991). We reasoned that imagined interactions serve as a conscious processing mechanism whereby students are able to "replay" conversations, identify teacher norm violations or misbehaviors, make decisions about their responses to those violations, and process or cope with deviations from norms. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H1: Participants will report using IIs to process norm violations.

Critical to understanding the role that IIs play in students' thoughts about teacher norm violations is discerning how IIs function. Previous research suggests that IIs serve at least three important functions for communicators: rehearsal for anticipated encounters, catharsis, and increased self-awareness/understanding. However, these functions are not mutually exclusive. Although some IIs serve strictly a planning or rehearsal function, others serve multiple functions by allowing individuals to understand the basis for their emotions and to engage in catharsis. Because little is known about how individuals process symbolic information relevant to norm violations, the following research question was posed:

RQ1: Do participants differentiate among the three functions of imagined interactions to process norm violations?

We further reasoned that different types of norm violations elicit different II functions. Specifically, norm violations should elicit attention to and information processing of the violation and violator. Within the classroom context, we expect that when students encounter different teacher misbehavior types (Kearney et al., 1991), they will select different processing functions. For example, when embarrassed by an offensive teacher, students will rely on IIs to rehearse confrontation strategies. Likewise, when students encounter an incompetent teacher, they may use IIs as a type of catharsis and imagine complaining to an administrator even though they may not actually intend to take action. Because we reasoned that different types of norm violations operationalized as teacher misbehaviors should stimulate different types of imagined interaction activity, the following hypothesis was posted:

H2: Participants' differential use of IIs will be determined by the type of norm violation.

Recall that in response to teacher misbehaviors, the norm violation and/or deviant behavior should increase student awareness and information processing. Consistent with the research on imagined interactions, information processing serves as a substitute for actual interaction with the violator when the costs outweigh the rewards. Recognizing that actual confrontation might thwart their pragmatic goals, such as receiving the desired grade, students might use IIs as a substitute. Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis:

H3: Participants will report using IIs as a substitute for interacting with or confronting norm violators who have the power to diminish rewards or deliver punishments.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants ($N$ = 237) were students recruited from a large undergraduate general education communication course ($M$ age = 20.3 years, range = 18–50), and represented a wide variety of majors. Of the 76 males and 161 females, 80 were Euroamerican/white, 63 Asian American, 47 Latino/a, 20 African American, and 27 other. Single students comprised 96.6% of the sample. Additionally, 91 were freshmen, 72 sophomores, 48 juniors, 24 seniors, and 2 did not indicate. Students' self-reported estimates of their grade point averaged 2.99 on a 4.0 scale.

### *Procedure*

Participants completed one of three forms of a questionnaire. All forms included questions regarding participant demographics and provided a paragraph describing one of three profiles of teacher norm violations identified by Kearney et al. (1991). Participants were randomly assigned to one of three treatments: offensive teacher ($n$ = 76), indolent teacher ($n$ = 72), or incompetent teacher ($n$ = 85). Next, participants were asked to provide an example of an actual teacher who fits the profile of the norm violating teacher targeted. This procedure anchored students' perceptions and permitted us to assess whether the descriptions of the target norm violating teacher were realistic and believable. Participants then reported their imagined interactions with the target teacher. Immediately after reporting their IIs, the participants responded to three items regarding the likelihood of actually engaging in imagined interactions with or confronting the teacher. After completing the questionnaire, participants were debriefed.

### *Instrumentation*

*Teacher norm violation profiles.* Within the conceptualization of norm violations, teacher misbehaviors are defined as in-class norm violations (Kearney et al., 1991). Teacher norm violation profiles developed specifically for this study relied on items representing each of the three dimensions of teacher misbehaviors identified by Kearney et al.: offensive, indolent, and incompetent. Each profile was developed to anchor students' perceptions to a particular norm violating teacher type. Accordingly, each participant was stimulated by one of the teacher norm violations profiled. Based on pilot testing, all questionnaires began with a brief description of all three types of teacher norm violations in order to help students distinguish between any teacher norm violation and their target teacher violation type. The directions read as follows:

> In earlier research, college students identified three major types of teachers who engage in particular kinds of misbehaviors: (1) incompetent (boring and difficult), (2) offensive (rude and inappropriate), and (3) indolent (lazy and unprepared). For purposes of this study, we want you to focus only on one particular teacher type–in this case, an *incompetent* (or offensive or indolent) teacher.

These directions were followed by the profile for the particular type of teacher norm violation targeted. For the incompetent teacher, the profile read:

> Incompetent teachers are those who assign excessive homework or try to rush through too much information. They tend to make their exams too difficult, discourage student input, and generally don't care about their students or the course. These teachers are likely to be unenthused about the

material and they deliver boring lectures, relying on a monotone voice or talking too soft or too loud.

For the offensive teacher, the profile read:

Offensive teachers are those who tend to embarrass or demean their students. They might use profanity or insult students in class. They can be rude or egotistical. Sometimes they're considered chauvinistic or prejudiced playing favorites with some, offending others. Offensive teachers might be sarcastic, use putdowns, or enforce unreasonable rules.

For the indolent teacher, the profile read:

Indolent or lazy teachers are those who tend to be tardy themselves or absent a lot. They tend to be unprepared and disorganized for class. Indolent or lazy teachers may change the syllabus in mid-semester and they may take too long in returning homework. These same teachers might also fail to give students enough information to do their assignments or to learn all that they should to meet their expectations for the course.

*Validity check.* In order to substantiate the familiarity with and the realism of each norm violation profile, students were asked to provide an example of a teacher who fit the particular targeted norm violation described. Of the 237 students sampled, 208 provided detailed descriptions of teachers similar to those profiled in the stimulus ($\chi^2 = 134.19$, $df = 1$, $p < .0001$). An examination of the sample descriptions from students for each of the incompetent, offensive, and indolent teachers profiled corroborated the familiarity with and realism of each norm violation scenario depicted.[1]

*Students' imagined interactions with teachers.* In order to determine how students use imagined interactions to cope with teacher norm violations, students were provided a brief definition of the construct, followed by 30 Likert-type items generated specifically for this study. Relying on the original work of Edwards et al. (1988), imagined interactions were described as follows:

Very often people talk to themselves. Sometimes that talk includes what researchers call "imagined interactions." This kind of self-talk involves mental conversations with a partner who may not even be physically present. Such mental conversations might occur before an actual conversation or afterwards. They might even occur in place of having an actual conversation. Imagined interactions can be one-sided where one person does most of the talking or they can be more two-sided. These mental conversations can be very brief or very long. They can be fairly ambiguous or highly detailed. They might also address a number of different topics or focus exclusively on one thing.

Based on the three functions of imagined interactions (IIs) identified by Edwards et al. (1988), 10 items were written to represent the rehearsal function, 10 the self-awareness function, and 10 the catharsis function. Anchoring students' use of IIs with their target teacher, students were instructed to respond to each of the items on a 7-point scale with 7 indicating greater agreement. Items written for the rehearsal function were designed to assess the degree to which students use IIs to prepare for a conversation with their targeted instructor (i.e., incompetent, indolent, or offensive). The self-awareness function included items regarding students' use of IIs to better understand or analyze their own emotions and thoughts regarding actual or potential encounters with target instructors. Catharsis items assessed students' use of IIs to release or vent emotions or anxieties associated with their teacher.

In order to determine whether the scale differentiated the three underlying functions of IIs, students' responses to the 30 items were submitted to principal

TABLE 1

STUDENTS' IMAGINED INTERACTIONS WITH TEACHERS SCALE

1. In order to prepare for an important conversation with this particular teacher, I would use imagined interactions to plan what I would say.
2. I think I would probably have a number of imagined interactions before I would interact with this particular teacher.
3. I would *not* rehearse what I was going to say to this teacher; instead I would just say what I had to say.
4. I would use imagined interactions to practice what I might say in upcoming interactions with a teacher of this type.
5. I would *not* use imagined interactions ahead of time to plan conversations with this particular teacher.
6. I would rarely use imagined interactions to prepare for upcoming encounters with this teacher.
7. Before actually talking to this teacher, I would imagine my interaction first.
8. Before going to class with this teacher, I would mentally rehearse what I would say in class.
9. Before I would visit this teacher in her/his office, I would imagine how the conversation would go.
10. Having imagined interactions with this teacher would help me to better understand myself.
11. Having imagined interactions with this teacher would help to clarify my thoughts and feelings about this teacher.
12. I don't think that having imagined interactions with this teacher would help me figure out this teacher any better.
13. Having imagined interactions with this teacher would go a long way toward understanding how I should (or should not) communicate with him/her.
14. I don't see how imagined interactions would help me understand where this teacher is coming from.
15. I do *not* believe that imagined interactions would help me get a better grasp of how I feel about this teacher.
16. Imagined interactions with this particular teacher would help to reduce my uncertainty.
17. Imagined interactions with this teacher would help me to better comprehend what I think and how I feel about him/her.
18. Imagined interactions would enable me to understand my reactions to actual encounters with this teacher.
19. Imagining an interaction with this teacher would help me get things off my chest.
20. I would use imagined interactions to deal with stressful situations surrounding this teacher.
21. In an effort to relieve tension or anxiety about this teacher, I would rely on imagined interactions.
22. Imagined interactions would *not* help me to relieve tension or discomfort about this teacher.
23. Imagined interactions do *not* help me get rid of unwanted emotions about this teacher.
24. I would feel better if I could imagine an interaction where I told the teacher what I really thought about him/her.
25. Imagined interactions with this teacher would help me to get over my frustrations about her/him.
26. Having imagined interactions with this teacher would *not* help me feel any better.
27. Imagined interactions with this teacher would only make me feel worse, *not* better.

components factor analysis. With eigenvalues greater than 1.00, five factors were initially obtained with 27 of the 30 items having their highest loading on the first unrotated factor. Examination of the scree plot further supported a single factor interpretation. Subsequent principal components analysis was conducted after eliminating the three items with split loadings. The result was a single factor that explained 44.02% of the total variance (eigenvalue = 11.88). Chronbach's alpha reliability estimate for this 27-item scale was .95 ($M$ = 123.27, range = 43–189). The items retained for this scale (II) are presented in Table 1.

*Likelihood of relying on imagined or real interactions.* Three Likert-type items were written to determine whether students' would be more or less likely to rely on imagined or real interactions in response to norm violating teachers. This set of items permitted us to explore how IIs might serve students' efforts to cope with norm violating teachers. Response options for each item ranged from 7 (very likely) to 1 (very unlikely). The items were as follows: "How likely would you be to use imagined interactions with an incompetent teacher like the one described in this project?," "How likely would you be to actually interact with an incompetent teacher like the one described in this project?," and "How likely would you be to confront an incompetent teacher like the one described in this project?" The norm violating

teacher type (incompetent, offensive, or indolent) was changed on each of the forms to match the teacher profile given to each student.

## Results

Hypothesis 1 was that participants will report using imagined interactions (IIs) to process teacher norm violations. A series of one-sample *t*-tests of students' responses to the 27-item II scale was conducted. Participants' responses were compared to a theoretical mean of 108. Regardless of condition, the overall result was significant [$M = 123.27$, $SD = 29.67$, $t(232) = 7.86$, $p < .001$]. Similar results were obtained for each of the three norm violation conditions. The likelihood scores for students responding to the incompetent teacher profile [$M = 124.49$, $SD = 27.31$, $t(84) = 5.57$, $p < .001$], offensive teacher profile [$M = 130.11$, $SD = 30.12$, $t(75) = 6.4$, $p < .001$], and indolent teacher profile [$M = 114.63$, $SD = 30.13$, $t(71) = 1.87$, $p < .05$, one-tailed test] were significantly greater than the theoretical mean. Thus, H1 was supported.

In Research Question 1 we asked if participants differentiated among the three functions of IIs when processing teacher norm violations. Although the research focusing on IIs in the interpersonal context (Edwards et al., 1988) suggests that individuals use IIs in three distinct ways, students in the present study were not able to distinguish among rehearsal, self-awareness, and catharsis. As mentioned, results of factor analysis failed to support an interpretable three factor solution; instead, one dimension was obtained. Of the 27 items retained, nine reflected rehearsal, nine self-awareness, and nine catharsis.

Hypothesis 2 was that participants' differential use of IIs will be determined by the type of teacher norm violation targeted. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference among students' responses to IIs as a function of the target teacher profiled ($F = 5.34$, $df = 2/230$, $p < .01$, variance explained = 4%, power = .84). A Scheffe' test indicated a significant difference between students' responses to the offensive teacher ($M = 130.11$) and the indolent teacher ($M = 114.63$, $p < .01$). However, nonsignificant differences were obtained between students' responses to the incompetent teacher ($M = 124.49$) and either the offensive or indolent teacher conditions ($p > .05$). Consequently, H2 received partial support. Students indicated the greatest likelihood of relying on IIs to process norm violations with offensive teachers and least with indolent teachers.

According to Hypothesis 3, students should report using IIs as a substitute for either interacting with or confronting a norm violating teacher. Results of paired *t*-tests indicated that students reported that they were more likely to engage in imagined interactions with their target norm violating teacher ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 1.64$) than to interact [$M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.66$, $t = 5.69$ (236), $p < .0001$, variance explained = 12%] or confront their teachers [$M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.74$, $t = 7.70$ (236), $p < .0001$, variance explained = 20%]. Estimates of variance explained were calculated using the formula presented by Hunter, Schmidt, and Jackson (1982, p. 98).

## Discussion

In an effort to extend norm violation theory, we explored receivers' cognitive processes in response to particular types of norm violations. Whereas the majority of

investigations of violations have been focused on interpersonal contexts, we examined the role of norm violations in an instructional context. We reasoned that imagined interactions serve as a processing mechanism whereby individuals reflect on communicator characteristics, relational characteristics, and contextual demands in order to review the behavior of another and make decisions about how to respond.

Norm violations theorists (e.g., Expectancy Violation Theory and Discrepancy Arousal Theory) contend that heightened arousal results in some cognitive-affective assessment of the situation and/or behavior. And yet, the cognitive processes involved in such assessments have remained untested within this framework. In this study, we conceptualized imagined interactions as an information processing mechanism, and provided a direct test of cognitive processes assumed to underlie norm violations. Importantly, our findings verify a key assumption of norm violation theories, that deviant behaviors influence receiver information processing.

Norm violators stimulated receiver thought processes that involved rehearsal for an anticipated encounter, self-understanding, and catharsis, even though participants reported that they did not plan to confront the violator. This finding demonstrates that IIs serve as a coping mechanism. Apparently, participants in this study used IIs, not for rehearsal to take action, but to replace action. Consistent with previous research indicating avoidance responses to expectancy violations, participants appeared to be avoidant or reluctant to confront norm violators with their concerns. Importantly, the avoidance decision does not appear to be mindless, but rather a reasoned, strategic response reflecting differential levels of symbolic information processing activity related to the violation and the violator. This finding supports previous research (e.g., Allen & Berkos, 1998; Allen & David, 1994) which suggests that the substitution function of IIs occurs when the consequences of confrontation have the potential to thwart or undermine goals or when the perceived costs associated with confronting the violator outweigh the perceived rewards of confrontation.

Apparently, not all norm violations elicit the same level of attention or symbolic processing activity. Even though IIs were used in response to offensive, indolent, and incompetent violators, offensive violations stimulated the most IIs. Offensive violations take the form of sarcasm, putdowns, and types of verbal abuse. Norm violations, such as verbal aggression and put-downs, involve direct threats to receivers' self-esteem. In addition, receivers may find it difficult predicting any positive consequences resulting from future encounters with an aggressive, offensive communicator. Offensive norm violations that attack self-esteem and reduce the potential for subsequent positive interpersonal interaction, should trigger a need for greater use of IIs in order for individuals to cope.

On the other hand, indolent violators do not provide the same threat to receivers' self-esteem nor do they influence others' predictions of positive future interactions in the same way as offensive violators. Participants' responses were consistent with this interpretation. They indicated that they were least likely to use IIs in response to this type of norm violator. Indolent violations take the form of absenteeism, unpreparedness, and forgetfulness. With indolent violators, receivers may easily sustain their self-esteem by reflecting on the violator's inadequacies and lack of preparedness. As a result, individuals might not find it necessary to cope with indolent violations in the same way or to the same extent that they do with offensive violations.

In sum, the current study indicates that norm violations influence receivers' thought processes, but the amount of symbolic processing engaged in by the receiver may be influenced further by the nature of the violation itself. Moreover, certain types of norm violations appear to impact receivers' decisions to communicate or confront violators. Because of participants' desire to accomplish their goal, to encourage continued rewards, and/or to discourage punishments, participants' may be inhibited from communicating grievances in response to norm violations. While we know that individuals spend time imagining or thinking about their non-communicated grievances in their efforts to cope with norm violators, more research is needed to understand the role of symbolic processing in managing, confronting, or reconciling norm violations. Arguing that IIs are used as a substitute for communicating grievances and concerns, future research should determine to what extent IIs result in other, less constructive forms of compliance-resistance over time. We might reason that the cumulative effect of II substitutions for actual interaction will undermine other more positive personal, social, or task-related outcomes.

## Notes

[1]Representative student descriptions of the expectancy violation, *offensive* teacher, included: "She would always talk down or belittle those she did not like, by using sarcastic or rude remarks." "He said things like 'don't bother coming to class because you're doing terrible anyway.' He also used his cheap pick-up lines on pretty females such as asking them their name and then saying 'That's a pretty name for a pretty girl.'" "This teacher said generation x is incompetent." Those for the *incompetent* teacher included: "Actually he didn't lecture, but he read us material from the book. In many cases, lectures were like 'Open the page . . . and so on . . . on the bottom part is a definition you need to know.' He never demonstrated any interest in students. He gave us quizzes during the last 10 minutes of a three hour class. Even though his lectures were boring, his tests were hard and detailed." "Talked and lectured to herself. Did not want to be asked questions." "This teacher had a heavy accent and did not speak up. On top of that, I could not comprehend the lecture at the rate he went. In the end, I really thought of the class as just a filler class because I didn't get anything out of it." And, for the *indolent* teacher, representative descriptions were: "Constantly changing the syllabus." "Totally unprepared for class and also was consistently late. Sometimes he never showed up. The teacher lost our homework." "He missed a lot of class and would play videos." A more complete list of student descriptions of actual teacher expectancy violations are available from the senior author.

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