Assertiveness

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Synonyms

Candid; Expressive; Forthright; Straightforward

Definition

Assertiveness involves appropriately expressing ideas, feelings, and boundaries while respecting other's rights, maintaining positive affect in the receiver, and considering potential consequences of the expression. It includes both positive and negative expressions and seeks to achieve personal and/or instrumental goals.

Foundations of Assertiveness

Popular perceptions and actual assertiveness differ in kind and in degree (Ames 2009). Even though psychology has consistently maintained that assertiveness respects *mutual* rights and fosters positive affect, everyday perceptions of assertiveness tend to include even aggressive and relationship damaging expressions. Where assertiveness creates positive affect in the receiver,

aggression is hostile, shows little respect for the other, and fails to consider potential consequences of the action. Where assertive personalities have high affection, inclusion, and pleasure motives, aggressives have high control motives and tend to use force to dominate, control, defeat, or damage another's self-concept (Anderson and Martin 1995). Because everyday perceptions and even popular writing routinely confuse aggression with assertion, laypeople often identify assertiveness differently than experts. Everyday perceptions rarely, if ever, recognize statements such as "I like you" as an assertive expression.

Similarly, a consistent and precise definition of assertiveness remains one of the challenges in assertiveness research. In fact, St. Lawrence (1987) identified at least 20 distinctly different definitions regularly used in research and assertiveness training. Even minor differences in how researchers operationalize the concept have meaningful impacts on how assertiveness is identified, evaluated, and judged and consequently produces inconsistent or even contradictory study results.

There is general consensus regarding two general categories of assertiveness. Positive assertiveness includes admitting personal shortcomings, giving and receiving compliments, initiating and maintaining interactions, and expressing positive feelings. Negative assertiveness includes expressing unpopular or different opinions, requesting behavior changes, and refusing unreasonable requests. Negative assertions have

become known as the conflict classes and are the most frequently studied (Rakos 1991).

Historically, assertiveness was framed as vital to personal and relational well-being. Systematic study of assertiveness began in the late1940s and 1950s when psychologists theorized some mental illness might be caused by uncertainty (nonassertiveness) and resistance or inability to express ideas and feelings openly. Consequently, nonassertiveness was associated with anxiety and shyness. Individuals scoring low on assertiveness scales were generally more anxious and quiet; individuals scoring high on assertiveness were more talkative, precise, and remembered by others (Norton and Warnick 1976), so early assertiveness training simply encouraged patients to talk more in an effort to increase confidence and self-acceptance.

However, assertiveness is also about social competence. Wolpe (1954) warned that assertiveness training for nonassertive patience was only appropriate when nonassertiveness was maladaptive. Later, Lazarus (1971) pointed out that open expression of any idea or feeling in any situation is also maladaptive and potentially aggressive. His research and practice included training aggressive patients to use assertiveness.

In the 1960s and 1970s, individual rights movements in the United States began to link assertive expression to defense of individual rights. Assertiveness training moved out of the psychotherapist's office and into the mainstream. Around the same time, Norton and Warnick (1976) successfully defined assertiveness as a communication construct so that assertiveness research moved beyond psychology's disciplinary domain as communication scholars began exploring nonassertiveness in association with communication apprehension. This shift in focus also altered the intention of assertiveness training. Where previously the goal of training was confidence and self-acceptance, training and research now pursued assertiveness as a means to achieving instrumental goals.

Nature of Assertiveness

One approach to understanding the nature of assertiveness is as a personality trait and communication style. From this perspective, personality and cognitive processing combine to produce a communication style, defined as a learned predisposition to respond to certain cues in patterned ways. Much assertiveness research characterizes it as a style, which enables scholars to succinctly classify assertiveness behaviors.

After a thorough review of literature, Rakos (1991) identified three antecedent obligations distinguishing assertive individuals: (a) determining rights of all participants, (b) developing responses that persuade but do not judge or evaluate the other's self-worth, and (c) considering potential negative consequences of assertion. He also identified assertive attitudes as (a) openness in close personal relationships; (b) willingness to volunteer opinions, question, and confront stressful situations without fear; (c) willingness to be contentious by standing up for self in close personal relationships; and (d) willingness to give neutral but definitive responses in impersonal situations. Lazarus (1971) described assertive personality traits as the ability to talk openly, say no, and establish contact with others through social interaction. In addition, he reasoned nonassertiveness and aggressiveness were the products of faulty cognitive reasoning and erroneous conclusions, so assertiveness training incorporated various perception checking techniques.

A conflict style approach views assertiveness as one's relatively stable orientation toward conflict. Early conflict style research identified five conflict behaviors determined by two independent dimensions. The assertiveness dimension rate behaviors intended to satisfy self-interests, and the cooperation dimension rate behaviors intended to satisfy interests of the other. A competing conflict style is a highly controlling or domineering orientation. These behaviors are high in assertiveness and low in cooperation. An accommodating conflict style is the least likely to satisfy the speaker's interests. It is low in assertiveness and high in cooperation. The avoiding

style often signals disengagement. It is low in both assertiveness and cooperation. Collaborating produces the most satisfying outcomes for both parties. It is high both in assertiveness and cooperation. Compromising has moderate amounts of both collaboration and assertiveness. It tends to produce outcomes that are only partially satisfying to both parties. However, no single style is considered always appropriate.

Similarly, Infante and Wigley (1986) argued aggressiveness is the learned predisposition to use personal attacks in conflict situations. They make a clear distinction between aggression and argument where argument is the defense of a position toward an issue including attacks against opposing positions toward the issue. Aggression, on the other hand, is a personal attack against the other's self-concept. Individuals are either motivated to engage in argument situations or avoid argument situations. People who are motivated to engage are considered high in argumentativeness, find argument intellectually challenging and thus exciting, and derive excitement and satisfaction from the argument experience. Individuals motivated to avoid argument situations are low in argumentativeness, find argument uncomfortable and unsettling, and tend to lack the skills necessary to be successful in argument situations. Studies find that individuals low in argumentativeness are more likely to use personal attacks against self-concept (aggressiveness) where individuals high in argumentativeness more likely to use assertiveness.

An alternative approach to assertiveness highlights situational factors as opposed to personality traits. Since assertiveness must be perceived by the receiver as appropriate, any expression violating cultural, contextual, or relational norms would be considered aggressive. Furnham (1979) explored the social and cultural influences on assertiveness arguing assertiveness is a specifically Western concept since expressions encouraged and valued in the West would not be encouraged or even tolerated in other cultures. He documented cultural differences in self-reports of assertiveness across three different cultural groups in South Africa and explained these differences as variance along collectivist/individualist orientations with collectivist cultures being lower in assertiveness than individualist cultures.

Likewise, Florian and Zernitsky-Shurka (1987) looked at cultural affiliations and level of discomfort with assertive acts. Comparing Arab Israeli and Jewish Israeli students revealed Jewish women were highest in self-reports of assertiveness and more assertive than Jewish or Arab men. Arab women were lowest in self-reports of assertiveness. Arab men and Jewish men were in the middle with Arab men reporting higher assertiveness than Jewish men. The authors concluded cultural affiliation was more meaningful than gender is influencing reports of assertiveness.

Regional differences also impact assertiveness. Sigler et al. (2008) compared students raised and attending school in the upper Midwestern United States to students raised and attending school in New York Metropolitan areas. They found significant difference in assertiveness across the two regions but no significant differences within regions and no interaction between sex and region. Their findings suggest assertiveness is learned and shaped by environment.

Other research indicates situation and expectations are also relevant to determining socially appropriate expression. Pfafman and McEwan (2014) found women strategically modified how they asserted at work according to their goals, the situation, and the relationship between interactants. Because assertiveness is context and culture bound, scholars and practitioners should use caution in assuming nonassertiveness is deficient. Instead, nonassertiveness can be socially competent.

Performing Assertiveness

Assertive behaviors include making requests; refusing unwanted or unreasonable requests; expressing one's personal rights, positive and negative feelings, or positive and negative ideas; and initiating, maintaining, or disengaging from conversation. Each of these expressions can be performed using standard assertion, assertion plus elaboration, or empathic assertion. Standard

assertion is an expression of rights without elaboration or explanation. It is judged as (a) equally potent and more desirable than aggression, (b) less likable than nonassertiveness, (c) more socially competent than nonassertiveness, (d) less likable and more unpleasant than everyday non-conflict conversation, and (e) more unpleasant than expression of positive feeling (Rakos 1991).

Expression plus elaboration is more responsive to cultural, social, and relational norms than standard assertion. Elaborations can include a short explanation, acknowledgment of the other's situation, compromises or alternatives, praise, or apologies. This type of assertion is generally judged as effective and more socially competent than standard assertion.

Empathic assertion pays particular attention to relationship health. Empathic assertions include a brief and honest explanation, acknowledgment and expression of the other's rights, praise or positive comment, apology for inconvenience or disappointment, and an attempt to achieve a mutually acceptable compromise. Empathic assertion is always necessary in enduring relationships but might be less important in temporary relationships (such as interacting with a sales clerk). This approach is always preferred and recommended by practitioners.

From a communication perspective, assertiveness should be performed with politeness. Politeness is a socially and contextually negotiated subset of appropriateness determined by the interplay between identity, context, and relationship (Jenkins and Dragojevic 2011). It enables people to make requests that are less infringing on the other or express negative ideas while maintaining a positive relationship (Brown and Levinson 1987). Because assertiveness can intrude on others' rights to pursue their own goals, it can also pose a face threat, defined as a challenge to one's chosen image (Goffman 1967). Even minor face threats (such as asking for a file) can threaten the other's chosen image or damage the relationship. Politeness speech strategies mitigate these face threats. Negative face threats are behaviors that impede the receiver's actions or cause the receiver to feel imposed upon. Negative politeness strategies mitigate the threat by using indirect statements, tag questions (shortened questions at the end of declarative statements), or hedges (qualifications of utterances) (Lakoff 1975). Positive face threats are challenges to one's self-esteem, or ability to be liked, admired, or viewed positively. Positive politeness strategies include paying attention to the relationship and expressing interest and concern for the other. Skillful assertion includes politeness (Smith 1985).

Assertiveness Research

Most research on assertiveness analyzes self-reported data collected with one of many different assertiveness measures. There are at least 30 distinctly different self-report scales widely used to measure and assess assertiveness. The Wolpe-Lazarus Assertiveness Schedule (WLAS) (Wolpe and Lazarus 1966) is one of the earliest assessment instruments developed for therapists to assess clients and determine the potential usefulness of assertiveness training. However, Rakos (1991) and others report the WLAS, like most popular assertiveness instruments, lacks sufficient validity and reliability support. The few instruments that do have a degree of psychometric support are the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (RAS) (Rathus 1973), the College Self-Expression Scale (CSES; Galassi et al. 1974), and the Conflict Resolution Inventory (CRI; McFall and Lillesand 1971). Many scholars caution that even these instruments with enough data to support their use do not sample the same behaviors or situations, so there are low correlations across instruments. The problem with assertiveness assessment measures makes drawing consistent conclusion across studies difficult at best.

There are fewer behavioral measures for coding assertiveness. A couple of the more popular measures include the Behavioral Assertiveness Test – Revised (BAT-R) developed by Eisler et al. (1975) and the Assertive Interaction Coding System developed by Weeks and Lefebvre (1982). Differences in instruments and precisely what they measure might explain some of the contradictory findings in assertiveness research.

Interpersonal Research

Interpersonal, organizational, and identity differences research are a few areas where scholars are especially interested in assertiveness. Assertiveness is an important component of personal and professional interpersonal interactions. It is considered the most constructive communication in interpersonal relationships and is a vital component of interpersonal communication competence. Interpersonal scholars link assertiveness to relationship development and maintenance, sexual communication, expression of desire, dating behavior, abusive relationships, relational intimacy, marriage, friendship, parenting, and doctor/patient communication.

Conflict is one of the most studied areas of assertiveness in interpersonal interactions. If, when, and how one asserts ideas and feelings has a meaningful impact on trajectory and impact of the conflict. There are numerous instruments designed to measure conflict styles. Research in this area has explored strategies and tactics in relation to conflict orientation. In conflict, assertiveness is not hostile and enhances relational satisfaction. Some conflict research considers conflict engagement according to power and control tactics. Aggressive tactics are those perceived negatively by the receiver. Assertive strategies also attempt to exert control, but the receiver perceives the tactics as more socially appropriate. Submissive tactics are nonassertive. Conflict research explores assertiveness in both personal and professional relationships.

Organizational Research

In the 1980s, assertiveness was linked to self-improvement at work, and work-related assertiveness training became especially popular. Unlike psychology, which associates assertiveness training with self-confidence and self-actualization, organizational assertiveness is more instrumental goal achievement. The nature and quality of interactions at work have a meaningful impact on satisfaction, motivation, and productivity. Managers were found to be more willing to assert than subordinates (Sullivan et al. 1990). Managers perceived as having too little or too much assertiveness can be viewed as less effective leaders (Ames and Flynn 2007), and their assertiveness training tends to focus on improving listening and feedback skills. A subordinate's message delivery style affects the supervisor's willingness to grant requests and influences perceptions of the speaker's reputation (Foste and Botero 2012). Standard assertions at work have been linked to perception of manipulation, coercion, and aggression and demonstrating lack of respect for the other in upward communication. Assertiveness is also explored in relation to perceptions of competence, leadership, decision making, employment interviews, superior-subordinate relationships, upward communication, information flow, negotiation, feedback, and responses to criticism.

Dissent is a subset of assertiveness that is critically upward expression of feedback characterized by contradictory opinion or disagreement (Kassing 1997). Research shows dissent enhances organizational decision making and members' sense of accomplishment, satisfaction, commitment, and engagement. However, individuals only have an ability to act within organizationally controlled constraints, which is exerted by limiting and shaping the channels of dissent. Organizational power and politics can make dissent risky for members. Research on organizational dissent explores responses to dissent, leadership ability, how dissent impacts public image and promotion, and the role of power and status on willingness to dissent.

Identity Differences

Research indicates assertiveness varies according to sociopolitical factors such as social status, age, and gender. Social identity determines perceptions of social appropriateness. In fact, numerous studies explore the relationship between gender and assertiveness, often with contradictory findings. Some studies argue men are more assertive or more frequently assertive than women. Other studies argue women are differently assertive than men (Pfafman and McEwan 2014). Some studies conclude women are evaluated more negatively than men when using assertive messages. Other studies find no significant difference in evaluations of men and women using assertive messages. However, other studies find gender

influences overall valuation of assertiveness (Crawford 1988). Self-advocating women tend to suffer more backlash and negative evaluation (Amanatullah and Tinsley 2013). Assertive women at work experience greater resistance and harsher performance evaluations and are more likely to be sabotaged (Rudman and Fairchild 2004). Women initiating salary negotiations also receive more negative evaluations than men initiating salary negotiations regardless of whether they used empathic or standard assertion (Bowles et al. 2005).

Consistency in defining and operationalizing assertiveness remains a problem in assertiveness research and might explain some of the contradictory gender findings. Specifically, the majority of research defines assertive expressions generally as direct, specific, and respectful with directness operationalized as avoiding blatant lies, subtle dishonesty, and exaggerated excuses (Rakos 1991). However, some studies have conceptualized directness as blunt or without softeners associated with politeness. In these instances, positive politeness strategies are perceived as the speaker's lack of independence or confidence and negative politeness strategies perceived as deferential and powerless. It is possible studies conceptualizing politeness and assertiveness as mutually exclusive also misidentify some aggressive behaviors as assertive and misidentify assertive but polite behaviors as nonassertive.

Conclusion

Assertiveness is a well-established area of research across several disciplines. There are comprehensive bodies of literature on assertiveness in education, conflict, and behavior modification. There is a growing body of assertiveness research in health care, sports, and organizational studies. However, there are many discrepancies across study findings, which makes it difficult to draw meaningful conclusion about assertiveness. The numerous contradictory findings, particularly in the gender research area, are likely a product of inconsistencies in definition and measurement tools. Much work remains to be done toward defining and operationalizing assertiveness consistently. Also, while there is abundant literature on perceptions of assertiveness, there remains a shortage of studies exploring actual assertiveness. Growth in this area would be a valuable addition to the assertiveness literature.

Cross-References

▶ Culture, Collectivist Cultures
▶ Empathy
▶ Expectancy
▶ Identity
▶ Individualistic Cultures
▶ Personality Traits
▶ Positive Affect
▶ Prosocial Behavior
▶ Self Concept

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