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EXPRESSED PRIORITIES OF ASSERTIVENESS TRAINEES*

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Abstract

The assertion-related priorities of 84 English-speaking, Montréal trainees were assessed by having them rate their degree of interest in becoming more assertive in each of 26 major skill-areas. Consistent with previous American-based work (Cooley, 1979), trainees showed the most interest in learning how to deal with negative feelings in close, interpersonal relationships. In contrast, items which involved "saying no" to other people's requests were given low priority. A discrepancy between assertive skills usually emphasized in the professional, training literature and skills deemed most relevant by actual trainees was noted. Findings substantiate the importance of evaluating candidates' preferences for increased assertive skill before implementing assertiveness-training groups so as to better match program goals to participants' own self-expressed needs.

Résumé

Les priorités d'affirmation de soi de 84 stagiaires anglophones de Montréal ont été évaluées en leur faisant indiquer le degré de capacité à devenir plus sûrs d'eux-mêmes dans chacun des 26 principaux secteurs d'habiletés. En compatibilité avec un travail de recherche américain (Cooley, 1979), les stagiaires ont montré un très grand intérêt en apprenant à traiter les sentiments négatifs dans une relation étroite avec autrui. Par contraste, les items impliquant "dire non" aux autres furent considérés comme de moindre importance. Une contradiction entre les habiletés d'affirmation de soi habituellement soulignées dans la littérature professionnelle relative à l'entraînement des stagiaires a été notée. La recherche démontre l'importance de déterminer au préalable les domaines où le candidat souhaite développer ses habiletés d'affirmation de soi afin d'implanter un programme qui présente des buts spécifiques compatibles avec les besoins du candidat.

Cooley (1979) has emphasized the need for modifying current assertiveness-training

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programs to include those skills most relevant to the interests of assertiveness trainees. In a study of 149 West Palm Beach trainees, he found that "being assertive in the face of another's aggression or personal attack" and "expressing feelings of hurt, anger, and disappointment to people who are close to you" ranked as the two foremost concerns. In

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contrast, "saying no" to other people's requests — a skill repeatedly emphasized in the assertiveness literature (e.g. Fensterheim & Baer, 1975; McFall & Twentyman, 1973; Schwartz & Gottman, 1976; Smith, 1975) — was given low priority suggesting that, in some cases, training programs designed to increase assertive skill may not be meeting trainees' own self-perceived needs.

The purpose of the present study was to extend Cooley's (1979) previous work on assertion to an English-speaking sample of Montréal trainees. Specifically, the goal was to determine to what extent the assertion-related interest of this group paralleled those of Cooley's (1979) American-based sample.

All participants in the present study were drawn from assertiveness-training courses conducted by the first author and offered through the Continuing Education Department of a large, Montréal community college. Enrollment for the six courses was solicited through advertisements placed by the college in local newspapers. In comparison, Cooley's (1979) sample was drawn from 10 assertiveness-training courses offered by three instructors in three settings (i.e., a community mental health centre, a junior college continuing education program, and a university counselling centre).

Trainees met with the instructor once a week for 8 weeks in 2-hour sessions, for a total of 16 hours training. Sixty-four females and twenty males participated in the study, making a total sample of 84 participants in comparison to Cooley's 149 trainees. The ratio of female (76%) to male (24%) trainees was similar to that reported by Cooley (females, 80%; males, 20%). This predominance of female over male trainees is typical of group assertiveness-training programs, although the first author's more recent experience with these groups suggests that male participation is increasing.

Trainees ranged in age from 23 to 76 years with a mean age of 38, 4 years older than the sample studied by Cooley (1979).

Method

An assertion interests survey, suggested for use in assertion-training groups (Lange & Jakubowski, 1976), was used to assess degree of interest in each of 26 assertive skill-areas. Surveys were distributed during the first session, completed at home, and returned,

in most cases, the following week. The importance of completing the questionnaires on their own and as honestly as possible was emphasized. Degree of interest was rated on a scale of 1 (uninterested) to 5 (extremely interested). Trainees' preferences for increasing assertive behaviour were also measured by having them nominate and rank order, from lowest (1) to highest (4), the four items representing their skill-areas of greatest interest.

Trainees self-reported levels of assertiveness were assessed as well by having them complete the Rathus (1973) Assertiveness Scale (RAS), one of the more commonly used and psychometrically researched self-report measures of assertion. Test-retest and split-half reliabilities have been reported as .78 and .77, respectively; construct validity, assessed by comparing RAS scores to external ratings of assertion, has been estimated as .71 (Rathus, 1973). Similar reliability and validity correlation coefficients have been obtained by other researchers (Mann & Flowers, 1978; Quillan, Besing, & Dinning, 1977).

Results

A mean RAS score of -3.64 showed these assertiveness trainees to be below the median level of assertiveness, at least insofar as university students are concerned (Nevid & Rathus, 1978; Quillan *et al.*, 1977). This confirmed the expectation that participants were, on the average, within the nonassertive range. Unfortunately, normative data for older, non-university samples is lacking.

RAS scores for male ($M = -5.80$, $SD = 32.87$) and female ($M = -2.97$, $SD = 28.89$) trainees did not differ significantly, $F(82) = 0.26, p < .05$.

Table 1 shows the rank order of mean interest ratings for each of the 26 assertive skill-areas. The rank ordering obtained by Cooley (1979) for his American sample is provided in brackets for comparison purposes. "Being assertive in the face of another's aggression or personal attack" was again given highest priority while "expressing feelings of hurt, anger, and disappointment. . ." ranked third. Nine of the 13 items ranked above the median for interest were identical to those previously reported by Cooley (1979). Discrepancies involved a greater preference by Montréal trainees for increasing their assertive skills in job-related areas (e.g. "being assertive in job interviews"; "giving supervisory criticism to people at work"). In comparison,

West Palm Beach trainees showed a greater preference for items entailing positive assertion (e.g. "expressing feelings of love, affection,

and tenderness"; "talking positively about your accomplishments").

Table 1
Mean Interest Ratings for Assertive-Skill Areas

| Item | Rank | Skill Area | Mean Rating |
|------|---------|--|-------------|
| 13 | 1 (1) | Being assertive in the face of another's aggression or personal attack | 3.90 |
| 11 | 2 (5) | Being assertive with high status professionals who are very busy and/or condescending | 3.69 |
| 19 | 3 (2) | Expressing feelings of hurt, anger, and disappointment to people who are close to you | 3.50 |
| 12 | 4 (11) | Being assertive with supervisors/superiors at work | 3.43 |
| 24 | 5 (9) | Starting or participating in social conversations | 3.38 |
| 7 | 6 (3) | Asserting your opinion in a group | 3.36 |
| 5 | 7 (8) | Being assertive with people who attempt to force their views and values on you | 3.31 |
| 26 | 8 (14) | Being assertive in job interviews | 3.27 |
| 25 | 9 (13) | Giving supervisory criticism to people at work | 3.26 |
| 14 | 10 (6) | Being assertive with repair people who overcharge, do not repair properly, or fail to show up on time | 3.21 |
| 16 | 11 (15) | Negotiating salary increases, changes in job title, or function | 3.17 |
| 9 | 12 (4) | Asking for help or making requests of others | 3.10 |
| 17 | 13 (16) | Being assertive with friends or family who shift all the responsibility to you | 3.02 |
| 8 | 14 (12) | Being assertive with friends or colleagues who make sexist, racist, or condescending remarks | 3.01 |
| 15 | 15 (19) | Being assertive and getting the service you deserve in stores and restaurants | 3.00 |
| 1 | 16 (13) | Being assertive with people who demand personal favors | 2.98 |
| 20 | 17 (10) | Expressing feelings of love, affection, and tenderness | 2.86 |
| 21 | 18 (7) | Talking positively about your accomplishments | 2.83 |
| 2 | 19 (20) | Being assertive with people who request that you spend more time with them or whose requests are excessive | 2.79 |
| 22 | 20 (17) | Accepting compliments | 2.67 |
| 6 | 21 (21) | Being assertive with high pressure sales personnel | 2.66 |
| 4 | 22 (23) | Being assertive with people who ask for your help or assistance | 2.48 |
| 23 | 23 (25) | Giving compliments | 2.41 |
| 18 | 24 (22) | Being assertive and asking for greater sexual intimacy | 2.38 |
| 10 | 25 (24) | Being assertive with people who ask for greater sexual intimacy than you'd like | 2.14 |
| 3 | 26 (26) | Being assertive with people who request that you donate time or money to a worthy cause | 2.00 |

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Agreement between the two samples was almost perfect for those six items ranked lowest in terms of interest – that is, items dealing primarily with “saying no” to other people’s requests. Overall, Spearman’s coefficient of rank correlation confirmed a strong positive relationship between interests expressed by the present English-speaking, Montréal sample and those previously expressed by Cooley’s (1979) West Palm Beach sample ($\rho = +.81, p < .001$). A significant positive correlation between mean preference rankings assigned in nominating four skill-areas of greatest interest and mean interest ratings obtained for individual items provides evidence that trainees were being consistent in expressing their assertiveness priorities ($r = +.68, p < .001$).

Discussion

The results of this study are consistent with those previously reported by Cooley (1979) and suggest again that the assertion skills most often emphasized in the professional, assertiveness-training literature may be at variance with those skills deemed most relevant by actual assertiveness trainees. These Canadian trainees, like their American counterparts, reported themselves as most interested in learning how to negotiate negative feelings such as hurt, anger, and frustration in situations where they were either the recipients or senders. Overall, their preferences reflected greater concern over communicating thoughts and feelings in close, interpersonal relationships, as compared to social situations involving more superficial and temporary contacts. Their self-stated priorities contrast sharply with the heavy emphasis on “saying no” to unreasonable requests, especially in consumer-related situations, that has typically been found in the assertiveness literature. Indeed, this discrepancy strikes us as particularly paradoxical, if not troublesome, in that it is through these assertiveness-training programs – potentially at odds with trainees’ priorities – that non-assertive individuals are purported to learn how to fulfill their own “self-defined” interpersonal goals. A preliminary evaluation of assertion-related concerns in all prospective trainees, coupled with a re-evaluation of assertiveness goals currently highlighted in the professional milieu, would seem to be a necessary first step in designing more group training programs effective in helping clients assert themselves more successfully with others (Lange & Jakubowski, 1976).

That assertiveness trainees should be most concerned with situations in which they are

the recipients and/or purveyors of negative feelings is particularly interesting in that previous studies have indicated that fear of disapproval, or negative reactions from others, may be a prime inhibitor of self-assertion (Deffenbacher & Payne, 1978; Hollandsworth, 1979; Kern & MacDonald, 1980; Lefèvre & West, 1981). If, indeed, fear of disapproval is a predominant deterrent of self-assertion (Salter, 1949; Wolpe, 1958), then it seems logical that candidates who seek assertiveness-training should wish to focus on situations involving the expression of negative feelings since it is these assertions which are most likely to prove troublesome by eliciting and/or reflecting negative reactions from others. Interestingly, role-play studies of assertion have also been consistent in demonstrating that individuals behave less assertively in situations involving predominantly negative, as opposed to positive, assertion (Eisler, Hersen, Miller, & Blanchard, 1975; Hamilton, & Maisto, 1979; Hersen, Bellack, & Turner, 1978; Pitcher & Meikle, 1980; Zielinski, 1978).

The marked similarity of interests expressed by our Montréal-based sample and Cooley’s (1979) West Palm Beach sample is particularly striking in view of noted differences in setting, both with respect to training institutions and geographic locale. One observed discrepancy, that is the greater preference by Montréal trainees for increased assertion in job-related areas, could well be related to differences in locale and may be reflecting a heightened economic concern among Montrealeers living in a less politically certain, less economically secure, and less financially affluent area. An alternate possibility is that higher interest in assertion-related issues of job promotion and so on could reflect greater concern over anticipated economic success in our slightly older Montréal sample.

One limitation of the present study concerns the lack of behavioural role-play data to substantiate that (a) individuals who perceived themselves as least assertive were, in fact, most in need of assertive skill and that (b) skills ranked foremost in preference were actually more deficient than areas of lesser concern. Further work in this direction seems warranted since a tendency to see oneself as less assertive is often related to low self-esteem (Green, Burkhardt, & Harrison, 1979; Lefèvre & West, 1981; Percell, Berwick, & Beigel, 1974; Tolor, Kelly, & Stebbins, 1976). This raises the possibility that individuals who present for assertiveness-training with marked interest in increasing assertive skill may be

acting more on the basis of negative self-perceptions than on clear behavioural differences per se. Inclusion of a behavioural role-play test, in addition to the RAS and assertion interest survey, could help clarify this situation with respect to future trainees.

One final comment concerns the lack of significant sex differences in self-report levels of assertiveness on the RAS. This finding is consistent with data from other sources illustrating that while males and females may differ in particular areas of "assertive expertise", overall sex differences in assertiveness are generally lacking (Chandler, Cook, & Dugovics, 1978; Crassini, Law, & Wilson, 1979; Hollandsworth & Wall, 1977; Nevid & Rathus, 1978). The issue of whether these sex-related differences in "assertive expertise" are paralleled by similar differences in assertion-related interests has not yet been addressed. Since candidates surveyed in the present study were primarily female, it seems reasonable to assume for now that the interests expressed here are probably most applicable to female trainees and to question to what extent this pattern might also be true of a more predominantly male sample. A comparison of expressed differences in assertion priorities for a more evenly-split, male-female sample could prove worthwhile for trainers concerned with maximizing the "level of fit" between the goals of assertion trainees and their assertiveness programs.

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