Asserting and confronting

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If not I for myself, who then?
And being for myself, what am I?
And if not now, when?

Hillel

INTRODUCTION

The words of the ancient Sage, though discussing knowledge and meritorious behaviour in general (Goldin, 1957), also apply to the effective use of assertive skills: accepting the right to express one's desires, understanding the social responsibilities that accompany the expression of rights, and making a sound decision to engage in such expression. Hundreds of studies over the past 45 years have confirmed that Hillel's wisdom remains highly relevant even today.

Assertiveness rose to prominence in the mid-1970s as both a pop psychology fad that promised to be a panacea for human unhappiness and as a clinical focus of behaviour therapy. The contemporary notion of assertiveness emerged from the cultural philosophies and social changes that the US and other Western nations experienced in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Rakos, 1991). These include rationality that helped to meet the demands of an accelerating scientific and technological society, social and political activism that promoted personal empowerment, ethical relativism that expanded the range of socially acceptable behaviours, and pragmatism (cf. Dewey, 1957) that prioritised outcome over ideology. Though scientific and popular interest in assertion waned in the 1990s, assertiveness today is widely accepted as an appropriate way to empower oneself, influence others, and resolve conflicts; assertiveness training remains a standard cognitive behaviour therapy intervention (e.g., Spiegler, 2016); and rationality, activism, relativism,
and pragmatism still embody the heart of assertion as a response option in a rapidly changing, globalised, and technological environment.

The assertion concept has been utilised in contexts far from the clinical settings in which it originated. For instance, its value in the work environment is recognised widely (Back & Back, 1999; Hayes, 2002; Hargie, Dickson, & Tourish, 2004), particularly within predominantly female professions, such as nursing (Okuyama, Wagner, & Bijnen, 2014) and social work (McBride, 1998), where deference by females can undermine job satisfaction. Assertion also can have longer term benefits for employees as assertive persons, compared to nonassertive individuals, receive fairer performance appraisals and feel more positively toward the appraisal and supervisor (Korsgaard, Roberson, & Rymph, 1998).

Assertiveness also contributes to physical and behavioural wellness. The skill helps low income cancer patients access the most appropriate medical care (Adler, McGraw, & McKinlay, 1998; Krupat et al., 1999), and permits women to respond to stress as a challenge rather than as a threat (Tomaka et al., 1999). Assertive skills are associated with superior coping with issues as varied as alexithymia (McIntosh, Ironson, Antoni, Fletcher, & Schneiderman, 2016), autonomy connectedness (Bekker, Croon, van Balkrom, & Vermee, 2008), household labour allocation (Mannino & Deutsch, 2007), and racial and ethnic prejudice (Hyers, 2007; Upton, Panter, Daye, Allen, & Wightman, 2012). Assertiveness is correlated with academic self-efficacy in Asian students studying in US universities (Leea & Ciftcib, 2014) and with school achievement in non-gifted students (Ghbary & Hejazi, 2007; Jurkowski & Hanzel, 2017). On the other hand, deficits are associated with anorexia (Raykos, McEvoy, Carter, Fursland, & Nathan, 2014), depression (Pearson, Watkins, & Mullan, 2010), psychological distress in African Americans (Lightsey & Barnes, 2007), peer victimisation of children (Toma, Schwartz, Chang, Farver, & Xu, 2010), and depressive symptoms in girls (Keenan et al., 2010). Finally, sexual assertiveness, which will be discussed in detail later, is correlated positively with sexual satisfaction and performance (Leclerc et al., 2015; Menard & Offman, 2009) and negatively with victimisation.

Assertiveness training is included in interventions for a wide range of problems that compromise the quality of life, such as chronic pain (Winterowd, Beck, & Gruener, 2003) and depression (Klosko & Sanderson, 1999). It can empower vulnerable individuals, such as the chronic mentally ill who are at risk of contracting HIV infection (Weinhardt, Carey, Carey, & Verdecia, 1998), women with intellectual disabilities who need to be partners in their health care (Lunsky, Straiko, & Armstrong, 2003), gay men struggling with rejection sensitivity (Pachankis, Goldfried, & Ramrattan, 2008) or who are HIV-positive and need to refuse drugs (Semple, Strathdee, Zians, McQuaid, & Patterson, 2011), children at risk of being abused or bullied (MacIntyre, Carr, Lawlor, & Flattery, 2000), and adolescents facing decisions about substance use (Trudeau, Lillehoj, Spoth, & Redmond, 2003) or condom use (Schmid, Leonard, Ritchie, & Gwadz, 2015). Among international students studying in the US, assertiveness training decreases negative emotional reactions (Tavakoli, Lumley, Hijazi, Slavin-Spenny, & Parris, 2009) and, in women, depression (Hijazi, Tavakoli, Slavin-Spenny, & Lumley, 2011). In recent years, assertiveness programmes have been seen as a way to teach adolescents and women how to set boundaries in sexual situations (see later discussion). Assertiveness also retains its popular appeal as a self-improvement strategy, and new self-help books continue to be published regularly, including the 10th edition...
of the classic *Your Perfect Right* (Alberti & Emmons, 2017) A powerful reflection of the extent to which the assertiveness concept is embraced in the developed world is the Spanish Education Act of 2006, one goal of which is to develop in students a range of social skills based on assertiveness and empathy (García-Lopez & Gutierrez, 2015).

Interestingly, assertiveness training and use of the assertion construct have spread in the last decade to numerous developing countries, demonstrating that its individualistic philosophy increasingly is accepted in regions of the world where communal values are traditional. This is consistent with recent research demonstrating that individualistic practices and values have increased markedly over the last 50 years across the world, including in collectivistic societies where strong socioeconomic development has introduced a postindustrial, urbanised, and more educated foundation that reduces reliance on others for survival (Santos, Varnum, & Grossman, 2017). Research of varying methodological soundness has found assertiveness training to be a successful intervention in Mexico (abused women, Cruz-Almanza, Gaona-Marquez, & Sanchez-Sosa, 2006), Japan (stress management of nurses, Yamagishi et al., 2007; wrist cutting in borderline personality disorder patients, Hayakawa, 2009), Iran (anxiety and insomnia in high school students, Younes & Nejad, 2012; shyness among adolescents, Shariatnia & D’Souza, 2007), Taiwan (psychiatric patients, Lin et al., 2008), Nigeria (management of negative self-image in university societies, Obiageli Agbu, 2015), Turkey (counsellor trainees, Gundogdu, 2012), and Brazil (elderly, Braz, Del Prette, & Del Prette, 2011). Assertiveness deficits contribute significantly to burnout among both Japanese nurse managers (Suzuki et al., 2009) and novice nurses (Suzuki, Kanoya, Katsuki, & Sato, 2006), to peer victimisation among Hong Kong schoolchildren (Toma et al., 2010), and to high risk for Internet addiction among Turkish university students (Dalbudak et al., 2015).

Even though assertion now embodies a positive social value across many different cultures around the world, the use of these skills will not be the preferred option in every situation. This chapter will review our current understanding of appropriate and effective assertive behaviour in conflict situations, but because virtually no research has been conducted in the last decade on the content of the skill itself – despite widespread acceptance in both developing and developed countries – the next sections will summarise very briefly the literature concerned with the conceptualisation of assertive behaviour, noting that fuller discussions can be found in Rakos (1991, 2006).

### DEFINING ASSERTIVE BEHAVIOUR

Early definitions of assertion emphasised the right to express personal desires while respecting the rights of the other person (e.g., Alberti & Emmons, 1970; Lange & Jakubowski, 1976). They were developed by clinicians from the pioneering formulations introduced by Salter (1949) and Wolpe (1969), and specified components (be direct, use a firm but respectful tone, maintain eye contact) derived from face validity. These conceptualisations were insensitive to situational, individual, and cultural factors and failed to promote systematic theoretical and empirical inquiry, prompting Rich and Schroeder (1976) to propose a functional, contentless operant definition: “(Assertive behaviour is) the skill to seek, maintain, or enhance reinforcement in an interpersonal situation through the expression of feelings or wants when such expression risks loss of reinforcement or even punishment […] the degree of assertiveness may be
measured by the effectiveness of an individual’s response in producing, maintaining, or enhancing reinforcement” (p. 1082). This definition highlights the core features of assertion: it is a learned skill that varies as a function of the situation (Ames, 2008a; Vagos & Pereira, 2009), not a “trait” that a person “has” or “lacks;” it occurs only in an interpersonal context; it is an expressive skill, involving verbal and nonverbal components; it always involves risk that the recipient may react negatively; it is frequently measured by outcome, which some consider to be the “ultimate criterion for evaluating performance” (McFall, 1982, p. 17).

However, assertion can be evaluated by more than an immediate outcome criterion (Rakos, 1991). Because assertion involves risk, proficient behaviour may fail to produce reinforcement in any given instance, indicating the importance of a technical criterion that assesses response quality independent of impact. Additionally, an assertion that achieves its immediate goals may enhance or weaken a continuing relationship with the other person, suggesting the importance of a cost-benefit criterion. Finally, appropriate behaviour has social validity (Kazdin, 1977; Wolf, 1978); because unskilled behaviour can produce reinforcement, a cultural criterion that encompasses social acceptability is usually necessary. In practice, in fact, trainers emphasise technical expertise, net benefit, and cultural appropriateness far more than immediate outcome (Heimberg & Etkin, 1983).

Criteria such as technical expertise and cultural appropriateness reintroduce some content into the functional definition of assertion. While a consensus has been elusive (St. Lawrence, 1987), content commonalities from diverse investigations can be extracted (Vagos & Pereira, 2009).

**CLARIFICATION OF THE ASSERTION CONCEPT**

**Response classes**

Assertive behaviour encompasses several response classes that have been dichotomised as active/initiative–reactive (Gambrill, 1995; Trower, 1995) or, more frequently, positive–negative (e.g., Vagos & Pereira, 2009). The latter is exemplified by Schroeder, Rakos, and Moe (1983)’s identification of four positive response classes: admitting personal short-comings/self-disclosure, giving and receiving compliments, initiating and maintaining interactions, and expressing positive feelings, and three negative or conflict ones (expressing unpopular or different opinions, requesting behaviour changes, and refusing unreasonable requests). While the conflict response classes have received the bulk of the research and clinical attention, it is important to recognise that assertiveness encompasses interpersonal expressiveness in positive contexts as well (Gambrill, 1995; Rakos, 1991).

**Distinguishing assertion from aggression**

Assertion typically has been conceptualised as the midpoint on the continuum between non-assertion and aggression though recent data suggest it incorporates elements of aggressive and submissive behaviour as well (Dirks, Suor, Rusch, & Frazier, 2014; Dirks, Treat, & Weersing, 2011; Wilson & Gallois, 1993). Further, while a single
continuum highlights the appropriateness of assertiveness training for both aggressive and timid individuals, it fails to differentiate clearly between socially acceptable conflict assertive behaviour and inappropriate aggressive behaviour (Hargie, 2017). This is a critical distinction because laypersons often fail to distinguish the two styles of responding, label conflict assertion as aggression, describe assertion as pushy, rude, and insensitive (Rakos, 1991), and see high levels of assertiveness as a weakness of leaders rather than as a strength (Ames & Flynn, 2007).

Nevertheless, differences between aggressive and assertive response styles are evident as early as preschool (Ostrov, Pilat, & Crick, 2006) and distinguishing between the two concepts relies on one or more of the four criteria discussed earlier (see Rakos 2006). Appropriate conflict assertion, unlike aggression, respects the other person's rights, uses non-hostile verbal content and vocal attributes, and tries to minimise negative emotions and enhance ongoing relationships. Assertion employs only reasonable threats and only when necessary to deal with repeated noncompliance (see below). Additionally, assertion differs from aggression in how intentions, consequences, and context are interpreted. Unfortunately, a functional definition also excludes critical context such as social values, behavioural goals, and cultural expectations; for instance, people commonly endorse “the general goals of avoiding conflict and not straining the relationship” (Wilson & Gallois, 1993, p. 99). However, a functional definition allows us to identify other functionally related, socially appropriate behaviours with specified but still very general content. Assertion, which is typically viewed as a discrete behaviour and a personal right, instead can be analysed as a chain of overt and covert responses encompassing rights (actually, rights behaviours) and their functionally related antecedent and consequent responsibilities (obligation behaviours). Verbalisation of the rights behaviour alone, without the obligation behaviours, is expressive behaviour, and by itself, aggressive, as it violates the social norm of conflict minimisation and employs dominance and power to achieve an outcome (Wilson & Gallois, 1993). Conflict assertion, in contrast, requires the emission of specific categories of socially responsible behaviour (Rakos, 1979):

Antecedent obligations (emitted prior to expressive behaviour):

- Engaging in sufficient overt and covert behaviour to determine the rights of all participants.
- Developing a verbal and nonverbal response repertoire that is intended to influence the other person's offending behaviour but not his or her “self-worth.”
- Considering the potential negative consequences the other person may experience as a result of expressive behaviour.

Subsequent obligations (emitted after expressive behaviour):

- Providing a brief, honest, but non-apologetic explanation for the expressive behaviour.
- Providing empathic communications and short clarifications in an attempt to minimise hurt, anger, or unhappiness experienced by the other person as a consequence of the expressive behaviour.
- Protecting the other person's rights if that person is unable to do so.
- Seeking a mutually acceptable compromise when legitimate rights conflict.
The antecedent obligations are necessary prerequisites to expressive behaviour in all conflict situations, while the subsequent ones preserve ongoing relationships (Rakos, 1991; Wilson, Lizzio, Whicker, Gallois, & Price, 2003) but are not seen as helpful when interacting with a stranger (Heisler and McCormack, 1982). Not surprisingly, subsequent obligations are more commonly used by women, unlike men who tend to focus on rights (Wilson et al., 2003), and by persons who exhibit the Type B behaviour pattern compared to Type As (Bruch, McCann, & Harvey, 1991).

Two recent studies indirectly support the behaviour chain conceptualisation. Vagos and Pereira (2009) analysed 20 investigations spanning four decades to arrive at a formulation of assertion as a skill involving protection of the other’s rights as well as one’s own, empathy and respect for the other, social competence, concern for relationship growth, direct and honest expression of feelings and desires, and recognition “that compromises need to be made in order for all parts involved to attain their goals” (p. 104). Thompson and Berenbaum (2011) developed a scale to distinguish between aggressive behaviour, which achieves needs through coercion and violation of others’ rights, and assertion, which reflects socially acceptable behaviours that get needs met without violating the rights of others, typically by including variants of the subsequent obligations. The scale, which also eliminated sexist and heterosexist language, demonstrates good reliability and validity in distinguishing between the two concepts. Thus, the behaviour chain definition differentiates aggressive behaviour, which only expresses rights, from assertion, which includes both expressive and obligation behaviours. The obligations, by encompassing only very general content, accommodate variability due to situational, social, and cultural factors, yet possess sufficient specificity to be reliably trained and effectively generalised to the natural environment (Rakos & Schroeder, 1979).

THE SKILL OF CONFLICT ASSERTION

As discussed earlier, research in clinical, school, and work contexts convincingly indicates that conflict assertive skills characterise psychologically adaptive, “healthy,” individuals and facilitate personal growth and satisfactions. But exactly what behaviours constitute this valuable skill? Certainly, overt response elements, such as verbalisations and eye contact, are important components. However, because the response must be sensitive to the context, covert behaviours must be integrally involved in selecting the overt responses that best meet the needs of the situation. Fortunately, the extensive research provides a good number of general guidelines for the development of a diverse behavioural repertoire that can be adapted to the specific circumstance.

Overt behavioural components

The overt response elements include:

- Content: the verbal behaviour of the asserter, or what the person says.
- Paralinguistic elements: the vocal characteristics of the verbal behaviour, or how the asserter sounds.
• Nonverbal behaviours: the body movements and facial expressions that accompany the verbal behaviour, or how the asserter *appears*.
• Social interaction competencies: the timing, initiation, persistence, and stimulus control skills that enhance the impact of the verbal behaviour, or how the asserter behaves in the *process* of the interaction.

The verbal content of conflict assertion includes the expression of rights and the emission of obligations, as described by the chain of conceptualisation presented above.

**Expression of rights**

The expression of rights is the core of any assertion, its *raison d'etre*. The specific content will vary as a function of the response class and situation, but will always include a statement of desire, affect, or opinion (Kolotkin, Wielkiewicz, Judd, & Weiser, 1984; Romano & Bellack, 1980). For example:

**Refusal:** “No thank you, I am not interested.”

**Behaviour change request:** “I feel that I am doing most of the housework” (statement of opinion or affect). “I would like to sit down and talk about our agreement” (request for new behaviour).

**Expression of unpopular or different opinion:** “I don’t think your job performance is up to our expectations.”

These rights statements exemplify important features of skilled responding. First, they utilise “I-statements,” in which the speaker assumes responsibility for personal feelings, rather than “you-statements” that attribute responsibility to the other person (Lange & Jakubowski, 1976; Winship & Kelly, 1976). For example, “You make me angry when you don’t do your share of the housework” is a very different communication than “I am angry because I feel I am doing more than my share of the housework.” The “I-statement” offers a legitimate yet unconfirmed perception, while the “you-statement” allocates responsibility to the other for a presumed problematic fact. Thus, it is not surprising that “I-statements” are strongly related to judgments of overall assertion, while “you-statements” are associated with aggression (Kolotkin et al., 1984). However, because “I-statements” do not characterise ordinary conversation, they may be difficult for many individuals to adopt (Gervasio, 1987), making them a particularly appropriate target of training programmes.

Expressions of rights are also direct, specific, and respectful. A *direct* statement contains a clear, honest, and succinct message that describes the relevant feelings, desires, perceptions, or opinions. However, brevity should not violate conversational rules; compound sentences joined by “and” or “but” should be employed (cf. Gervasio & Crawford, 1989). Additionally, an introductory “orienting statement” that signals the topic to be discussed is usually appropriate (e.g., “I have some concerns about the plans we made,” Kolotkin et al., 1984). Explanations are not included in the rights statement,
as they obscure the focus of concern and dilute the impact of the assertion, but may be emitted as a subsequent obligation (see below). A specific statement delineates the central issue clearly and avoids generalisations. “I have concerns about how we divide the housework” is much more specific than “I have concerns about how we divide our responsibilities.” The latter statement introduces a myriad of other issues (child care, financial matters, etc.) that can only confuse the discussion, dilute the focus, increase perceived demands, and impede problem solving. A respectful expression adheres to norms of politeness and avoids labelling, blaming, demeaning, attacking, or making motivational assumptions about the other person.

Thus, a direct, specific, and respectful behaviour change request simply describes the offending behaviour and then politely asks for a behaviour change. The expression of an unpopular opinion is similarly constructed: “I feel Issue 1 fails to recognise the real needs of the schools” is quite different from “Anyone who supports Issue 1 is deceiving himself and rationalizing.” The latter generalises (“anyone”), labels (“self-deceiving”), and makes motivational assumptions (“rationalising”). Refusal of unreasonable requests also incorporates these three features: “No thank you, I’m not interested” is all that is necessary in terms of expression of rights. Conflict assertions that lack directness are likely to be seen as nonassertive, those lacking respect as aggressive, and those lacking both as passive–aggressive, while lack of specificity may characterise all three alternatives to assertion.

The actual verbalisation of behaviour change requests and refusals likely will deviate from textbook guidelines in line with social and conversational norms. For example, behaviour change requests are conceptualised as containing a statement of feeling and a specific request for altered behaviour; however, while trained judges rate the specific request component as part of an assertive response, untrained judges evaluate it as bordering on aggressiveness and of little functional value (Mullinx & Galassi, 1981). This suggests that the specific request statement may be most appropriate when the conflict statement alone is insufficient (escalation is discussed below). Similarly, refusals include the stereotypical “no” but its direct verbalisation may be socially awkward and breach conversational conventions (Gambrill, 1995; Gervasio, 1987), as when a spouse responds to a partner, “No, I don’t want to see that film. Let’s choose one we both want to see.” An alternative approach is to embed the “no” within the response: “I know that’s not my kind of film. Let’s find one that we will both enjoy.”

A conflict assertion that only expresses a right has been termed a “standard assertion” and consistently is judged to be equally potent to and somewhat more desirable than, conventional aggressive behaviour, and less likeable but more socially competent, than nonassertive behaviour. Standard assertion is valued for competitive or socially skilled persons and in certain work settings (e.g., corporations, psychiatric hospitals), but it also is less likeable and more unpleasant than ordinary conversation and expressing positive feelings (see Rakos, 1991, for review). It is perceived as most effective when consistent across time and situations (Yagil, Karnieli-Miller, Eisikovits, & Enosh, 2006).

These conclusions are supported by research with a range of populations. Assertiveness in preschool children was associated with peer acceptance whereas aggressive behaviour was correlated with peer rejection (Ostrov et al., 2006). Standard assertion by older adults in health care encounters was evaluated as more competent and more
likely to provide future satisfaction than both passive and aggressive alternatives by older and younger subjects (Ryan, Anas, & Friedman, 2006), though a passive response was seen to promote more positive and less negative affect from the health care practitioner compared to assertive or aggressive behaviour. A follow-up study again found that young and older participants viewed standard assertion by older adults as more competent, more likely to achieve goals, and more likely to be successful than passive behaviours, particularly in community settings and for serious concerns (Ryan, Anas, & Mays, 2008). Standard assertion may help women cope with discrimination: compared to women who react passively, those who assert in response to prejudice are likely to be more satisfied with their response and achieve greater closure, as all asserters felt no further action was needed, whereas 78% of those who reacted passively viewed the issue as closed (Hyers, 2007). However, while a standard assertion clearly is likely to improve immediate outcomes, it also introduces a risk of social disapproval and of being perceived as aggressive.

Expression of subsequent obligations

Experienced clinicians always recognised that the standard assertion does not address social context, cultural norms, or the growth potential of a continuing relationship. Researchers followed suit and investigated the impact of the obligations that accompany rights, identifying a short explanation, an acknowledgment of the other person’s feelings, and offering compromises, alternatives, reasons, praise, and apologies as verbalisations that enhanced the social reaction to assertion without detracting from its potency (Rakos, 1991). These data, then, support the behaviour chain definition distinguishing assertion from aggression.

Assertions that include subsequent obligations have been termed empathic assertions (Rakos, 1986), and are judged to be as potent as, but more likeable and appropriate than, standard assertions. Empathic assertions are as effective as aggressive responses but provoke less anger. They are comparable to non-assertions in terms of likeability but more efficacious. Finally, they are as pleasant as neutral non-conflict conversation (see Rakos, 1991, for a comprehensive review).

The empathic assertion’s social validity makes it the generally preferred training goal, particularly when maintenance or enhancement of a continuing relationship is important (Wilson & Gallois, 1993). The specific components, which can be operationalised and reliably assessed (Bruch, Heisler, & Conroy, 1981) as well as successfully trained (Rakos & Schroeder, 1979), include:

- A short, truthful, non-defensive explanation for the expression of rights.
- A statement conveying understanding of the effects of the expression of rights on the other person; this can include a short apology that is directed toward the inconvenience or disappointment that will result from the expression of rights (e.g., “I am sorry you will have to miss the concert”) rather than an apology for the actual expression of rights (e.g., “I am sorry I have to say no”).
- Praise or another positive comment directed toward the other person.
- An attempt to achieve a mutually acceptable compromise when legitimate rights conflict, recognising that such a solution may not always be possible.
Paralinguistic and nonverbal components

The paralinguistic and nonverbal features are critical components of social skill (see Chapter 1), effective communication (see Chapter 3), and assertion (Gambrill, 1995). Women in particular strive to demonstrate emotional control and a conscious non-stereotypical presentation in confrontations (Wilson & Gallois, 1993). These elements of skilled communication have been the focus of a great deal of research, which is summarised below.

Paralinguistic characteristics

The features commanding the greatest attention are voice volume, firmness and intonation, response latency, duration, and fluency. An extensive review of the numerous research studies can be found in Rakos (1991).

Latency. Research failed to confirm an early hypothesis that hesitation indicates nonassertion and a short latency then characterises assertiveness, indicating instead the data suggest that situational variables such as sex of the participants and type of assertion are important factors. The speed with which a person responds will be related to his or her ability to process the situational information and determine the desired and appropriate response. In practical terms, a short latency is less important for effective conflict resolution than is the avoidance of a very long latency. If the desired response is difficult to determine or not in the current behavioural repertoire, then the appropriate assertion, with modest delay, is to request additional time to formulate a reply or to arrange a specific time for further discussion.

Response duration. A short duration was assumed to be characteristic of assertion, since nonassertive persons tend to produce excuses, lies, apologies, and long explanations. However, the inclusion of obligations will lengthen a conflict assertion, and in fact, Heimberg, Harrison, Goldberg, DesMarais, and Blue (1979) found a curvilinear relationship between assertiveness and duration: moderately assertive individuals exhibited much shorter duration than either highly assertive or nonassertive persons.

Response fluency. Fluency is considered to be an important paralinguistic feature of assertion, yet research finds only a very weak relationship with effective skill. However, because hesitant, choppy speech is associated with anxiety (Linehan & Walker, 1983), and anxiety can hinder effective assertion (Wolpe, 1990), it is likely that fluency does contribute to judgments of social skill. Interestingly, speech rate has not attracted the attention of researchers, but generalising from other paralinguistic data, it is likely that assertive individuals deliberately adjust their rate of talking to reflect the particular context.

Voice volume. The data on loudness is fairly consistent: effective conflict assertion is characterised by an appropriate, moderate volume that is louder than the speech produced in ordinary conversation and by nonassertive persons.

Intonation (inflection). Lay people consider intonation to be one of the most important features of effective assertion, particularly when at a moderate level. Like response duration, both highly assertive and nonassertive people evidence greater inflection than moderately assertive individuals (Heimberg et al., 1979).
**Firmness** (affect). Research consistently finds that high levels of firmness are strongly correlated with judgments of assertion in a variety of contexts and may even contribute more than content. The data suggest that the absence of vocal firmness is likely to detract from the impact of a conflict assertion, and that the development of an appropriately firm “tone” should be a high training priority.

**Summary of paralinguistic qualities**

Firmness, intermediate levels of volume and intonation, and moderate response latency and duration characterise effective conflict assertion, with the latter two showing particular sensitivity to situational variables. Intuitively, a fluent response and a moderate speech rate make sense but lack definitive empirical support. In general, appropriate conflict assertion requires flexible paralinguistic abilities that are sensitive to changing environmental conditions.

**Nonverbal characteristics**

Nonverbal behaviours convey a great deal of information in an assertive interaction (McFall, Winnett, Bordewick, & Bornstein, 1982) as they do in interpersonal communication in general (see Chapter 3). Research has examined the contribution eye contact, facial expression, gestures, and “body language” make toward effective conflict assertion.

**Eye contact.** Eye contact, a key characteristic of social and communication skills in Western cultures, is also an important component of conflict assertion. However, skilled and unskilled persons do not differ consistently in duration, suggesting that assertive eye contact involves flexible and intermittent use that avoids a fixed stare.

**Facial expression.** Deception and anxiety are both betrayed by a variety of facial movements and expressions (Ekman, 2001). Thus, it is not surprising that judgments of assertion, a presumably honest and non-anxious communication, are strongly influenced by overall facial expression as well as by specific mouth, eyebrow, and forehead cues, like fidgety mouth movements, wrinkled forehead, and moving eyebrows that communicate unassertiveness. These cues, which are used more by women than men, are more influential in evaluating female asserters; for example, women observers judge smiles by women asserters as harming effectiveness while males view smiles as enhancing a woman's assertion (see Rakos, 1991).

Facial expression, then, is an important component of assertion, especially for women. They are more astute than men at discriminating these cues in others but as asserters are also judged by them more strongly. Thus, women's concern with controlling their emotional personas (Wilson & Gallois, 1993) appears fully warranted.

**Gestures.** Socially competent persons increase their use of gestures in conflict situations and use their arms and hands differently than less skilled individuals; for example, their arm movements are smooth while speaking and still while listening. For both males and females, physical gestures enhance the evaluation while extraneous and restrained movements are viewed negatively, especially when the interaction involves opposite sexed participants (see Rakos, 1991). Thus, an appropriate repertoire of gestures is likely to enhance the effectiveness of conflict assertion.
**Body language.** Though experts discount the importance of body language, lay people consider it quite significant; an upright body, minimal extraneous movement, facing the other person directly, maintaining appropriate distance, and using purposive movement and posture shifts are associated with assertive behaviour. Non-assertiveness is linked with excessive nodding and head tilting, stooped, hunched, or shrugging shoulders, and squirming, rotating, or rocking torsos. These cues are more influential in the evaluation of male asserters, but overall, are the least important nonverbal responses, contributing only very modestly to perceptions of assertion.

**Summary of nonverbal responses**

Eye contact, facial expression, gestures, and to a lesser extent body language, all influence evaluations of conflict assertion. Facial expression for female asserters may be especially important. Overall, steady but not rigid eye contact, a calm, sincere, serious facial expression, flexible use of arm and hand gestures, and a relaxed, involved body posture characterise behaviour judged to be assertive (see Rakos, 1991; Vagos & Pereira, 2009). Body movements should be fluid and purposeful when speaking but quiet and inconspicuous when listening.

**Process (interactive) skills**

The overt skill components are emitted within an ongoing social interaction. Their impact, therefore, depends on competence in the process skills of response timing, initiation and persistence, and stimulus control.

**Response timing**

Competent assertiveness requires the discrimination of the verbal, nonverbal, and situational cues that indicate when it is appropriate to respond. Socially unskilled persons misjudge situational cues, talk relatively little, and mistime their statements and gestures (see Rakos, 1991). This suggests that an assertion’s effectiveness will be related to its timing within the conflict interaction.

**Initiation and persistence**

The decision to behave assertively in a particular situation involves covert responses to be discussed shortly. On occasion, passivity or compliance may be preferred options, as when the realistic risk of assertion is excessive or the offending person’s situation invites extraordinary “understanding.” However, when assertion is the desired option, the initial verbalisation should be the **minimal effective response** (MER), defined as “behaviour that would ordinarily accomplish the client’s goal with a minimum of effort and of apparent negative emotion (and a very small likelihood
of negative consequences)” (Masters, Burish, Hollon, & Rimm, 1987, p. 106). The MER operationalises the social rules of minimising conflict and relationship strain (cf. Wilson & Gallois, 1993). If the MER proves ineffective, and the decision is made to persist, escalation is appropriate. This may involve increasing the intensity of paralinguistic qualities (voice volume, intonation, affect, response duration) and/or expanding the use of appropriate nonverbal behaviours such as gestures and body language. Typically, the verbal content will be modified in some manner. For example, in continuing relationships, further explanation may be provided, empathy increased, or additional potential compromises suggested. Aversive consequences may be articulated or the specific behaviour change request added if the statement of the problem alone fails to alter the behaviour in question. Consider, for example, a credit card representative in an airport who approaches you with an offer you do not want and does not respect your lack of interest. Appropriate assertion might involve the following:

**MER:** “No, thank you, I am not interested.”

**Escalation 1:** “No, I told you: I am not interested.”

**Escalation 2:** “I am not interested.” (Louder volume, firmer affect and intonation.)

**Escalation 3:** “I told you three times I am not interested. Please respect that or I will contact your supervisor.” (Volume, affect, intonation maintained or increased slightly from previous response, and aversive contingency specified.)

Determination of the MER is critical because an escalated response emitted as an initial assertion, a common error by novices, likely will be evaluated as inappropriate and aggressive, which may result in negative consequences for the asserter and reinforce beliefs that such behaviour is indeed risky. For instance, Escalation 2 above would likely be perceived as aggressive if emitted as the initial response.

Effective persistence requires that the asserter maintain the conflict focus and resist manipulations (Rakos, 1991). In non-continuing relationships, the asserter is served best by a repetitive response that avoids the introduction of new material, as modeled in the airport example above. If the credit card salesperson persists, and begins to describe the “free” travel contest, and frequent flyer miles that accompany the card, the appropriate assertive response remains: “No, thank you, I am not interested.” This avoids the manipulative ploy of discussing freebies, a shift in focus that extends the interaction. Maintaining the focus in such a situation usually means simple repetition without qualification; if you say, “I am not interested at this time,” you may be asked why not “now,” and then “when,” and if “lack of need” is the problem, there is actually a good reason to get the card.

Maintaining the focus is particularly difficult in a valued continuing relationship when the asserter is starting to behave less submissively. The new behaviour is inconsistent with the other person’s expectations and is likely to arouse negative feelings such as hurt or anger. This makes persistence in ongoing relationships by the novice a greater challenge than for experienced asserters who have taught their social environment to expect self-enhancing behaviour. Escalation must be highly skilful to maintain the focus while simultaneously addressing the issues that impact on the long-term integrity of the relationship. The escalations ideally embed repetitions in diverse syntactic surface structures (Gervasio, 1987) and in layers of elaborations. For example,
suppose a father whose adult daughter comes to his house for dinner every Sunday now learns that she won’t be coming this week:

**MER:** “Dad, I won’t be coming to dinner this Sunday. I’ve made plans to see some friends – we’re going to a party. I know this disappoints you because you look forward to my visits so much. But I’ll see you again next Sunday as usual.” (This MER expresses the unpopular communication along with an explanation, attention to feelings, and a potential mutually acceptable compromise.)

**Father:** “I do look forward to your visits so much. And I invited two friends of mine to meet you. Couldn’t you meet your friends after dinner?” (Father at this point is responding with an appropriate assertion of his own – a request for a behaviour change – and includes an explanation and potential compromise.)

**Escalation 1:** “Dad, if I come to dinner, I’ll miss a good deal of the party. I see you are very disappointed I won’t be here Sunday, but this is an exception. It’s a special party that I really want to attend. I know you’ll miss me, but it’s only one time.” (Repeated expression of the unpopular content, with additional explanation and empathy, all offered with a changed surface structure.)

**Father:** “Then go with your friends to your party! I wish you cared more. I’ll just cancel the dinner.”

In this complex continuing relationship, the daughter’s assertion results in her father experiencing an unexpected loss of reinforcement and the feelings of hurt and anger that frequently accompany disappointment. Protecting the relationship and maintaining the focus in this situation involves an increased attention to underlying feelings, repetition and possible expansion of the explanation, and a wider search for a mutually acceptable compromise. The focus will be maintained best if the asserter can manage the exceptionally difficult task of addressing these verbalisations to the existence of the feelings rather than to the content of the feelings.

**Escalation 2:** “Dad, I see how angry and disappointed you are that I will not be coming for dinner this Sunday, but as I said, I very much want to go to this party. There will be a lot of new people there, and I’ve been feeling a bit isolated lately. I hope you understand. But how about this for a compromise: I’m free Wednesday evening – I can stop by for a few hours after work, we can get dinner together, and of course I’ll still come next Sunday. How does that sound?”

This escalated response repeats the assertion, attends to the feelings the father is experiencing, expands the explanation, offers a new compromise, and changes the surface structure. It does not lose the focus by becoming defensive through a debate on the extent of “caring” for father or the relative importance of different relationships. Caring, if present, can be demonstrated through the compromise. Sometimes, however, the interaction will continue and the content of the feelings will have to be addressed more directly, resulting in an increased probability of losing the assertive focus.

**Escalation 3:** “Dad, I really do understand your feelings about our dinners, and I enjoy them very much, but sometimes other important engagements occur on Sundays.
I love you very much even if I miss dinner this week. Anyway, as I said, I am free Wednesday evening. I’d like to stop by then – how does that sound to you?”

Escalation in continuing relationships requires expanded content and therefore longer response duration, but louder volume, greater firmness and inflection, and increased use of nonverbal cues will depend on the context. If the other person in a valued relationship continues to experience negative feelings, an assertion directed at the negative feelings may be necessary, either immediately or at a later, planned time. Persistence should be conceptualised as the behaviours required over time to solve the problem as best as possible. As the interaction continues, issues may shift, and further escalation may become counterproductive. A new, legitimate issue usually indicates the need for a new MER rather than endless escalation:

**MER:** “Dad, I want to talk to you about our phone conversation last week. You sounded hurt and angry, and seemed to equate caring with always making Sunday dinner. I would like to talk about that because I think I need some flexibility in my plans.”

(This MER includes an orienting verbalisation and the conflict statement component of a behaviour change request.)

Persistence increases the chances for a desired outcome but cannot guarantee it. Covert skills (see below) are necessary to accurately assess the situation, avoid rationalisations that justify passivity, and decide whether to assert and how much escalation is desirable given the importance of the conflict, the nature of the relationship, and the probable positive and negative outcomes. Persistence is likely to be most effective when it embodies consistency, as consistent responses over time to the same situation increase perceptions of assertive effectiveness (Yagil et al., 2006).

**Stimulus control skills**

Stimulus control skills facilitate effective, socially acceptable assertion by altering the context in which the assertion is emitted. Antecedent stimulus control involves arranging the environment prior to asserting so that the likelihood of a favourable outcome is maximised. These skills are assertive behaviours themselves: requests to move to a private room prior to a confrontation, requests for a delay prior to making a decision (which provides time to identify and rehearse appropriate responses), or inquiries to the other person regarding convenient times to set aside for the discussion of concerns. They may also involve self-management skills that inhibit assertions judged to be inappropriate or counterproductive. Conflicts that are discussed in private, at the right time, without time pressures, and with prior deliberation are more likely to be resolved satisfactorily.

Consequent stimulus control refers to reinforcing the other person (see Chapter 5) for listening to and/or complying with the assertion. Providing contingent verbal reinforcement for desired behaviour in response to an assertion is likely to encourage similar behaviour in the future and may also minimise negative perceptions of the conflict interaction (Levin & Gross, 1984; St. Lawrence, Hansen, Cutts, Tisdelle, & Irish, 1985).
Covert behavioural components

Cognitive skills are core components of social skill (see Chapter 5). They categorise and manipulate information and are essential for the self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and self-reinforcement that comprise behavioural self-regulation (Kanfer & Schefft, 1988). For example, socially skilled and unskilled persons differ in the standards they employ to evaluate their actions. Skilled persons utilise objective criteria based on situational and interpersonal cues that generate social roles, norms, and rules, as well as empirically grounded expectations generated by personal experience. Unskilled individuals, on the other hand, rely on subjective standards that focus on idiosyncratic, nonempirical beliefs, perceptions, and expectations (Trower, 1982). The ability to use empirically based, objective criteria requires conceptual complexity (CC; Schroder, Driver, & Streufert, 1967), through which individuals make increasingly precise discriminations among situational cues, allowing consideration of broader and more varied viewpoints, increase the use of internally but rationally developed standards for problem solving, and integrate more information and increase tolerance for conflict.

The importance of CC for assertive performance is clear: assertive individuals demonstrate greater CC than nonassertive persons, and further, high CC people, compared to low CC ones, manifest a better knowledge of assertive content, superior delivery skills, and more effective use of adaptive cognitions. Further, high CC individuals behave more assertively and include more obligations in conflicts involving continuing relationships (Bruch, 1981; Bruch et al., 1981). Ongoing relationships demand the greatest ability to utilise multiple perspectives and internal rational standards to resolve conflict and enhance the relationship. Conflicts involving noncontinuing relationships require less CC since social norms provide fairly straightforward behavioural guidelines. The specific cognitive abilities necessary to produce a rational, empirical analysis of and response to a conflict include knowledge, self-statements, expectancies, philosophical beliefs, core beliefs (schema), problem-solving skills, social perception skills, and self-monitoring skills.

Knowledge

Both nonassertive and assertive persons accurately categorise and differentiate passive, assertive, and aggressive responses and nonassertive individuals can describe or enact appropriate assertive responses (see Rakos, 1991), reflecting clinical observations that deficiencies in response content knowledge account for some, but by no means all, instances of nonassertive performance.

A second category of essential knowledge concerns the social rules, norms, and expectations that are likely to operate in particular contexts or circumstances (Wilson & Gallois, 1993). Unskilled persons, as noted above, are likely to lack accurate social cue knowledge (Trower, 1982).

Self-statements

A “negative internal dialogue” interferes with competent social responding (Meichenbaum, Butler, & Gruson, 1981). Negative self-statements are exemplified by “I will be
embarrassed if I speak up” and “He won’t like me unless I agree.” Positive versions might be “My opinions are valuable” and “I have the right to express myself.” Assertive persons emit approximately twice as many positive as negative self-statements when confronted with social conflict, while nonassertive individuals produce approximately equal numbers of each (see Rakos, 1991). Direct training in these self-instructions, apart from any other intervention, has resulted in significant gains in assertiveness (e.g., Craighead, 1979). Wine (1981) noted that self-verbalisations that are labelled as “negative” or “dysfunctional” typically focus on the needs of others and fear of rejection, and stem from a “feminine” emphasis on relationships (Wilson & Gallois, 1993). A masculine bias is avoided if such self-statements are conceptualised as conciliatory, nurturant, and communal, and the positive/negative continuum is replaced with one anchored by autonomy and affiliation; from this perspective, effective conflict assertion entails significant use of autonomous self-statements.

An expectancy is a cognitive behaviour that makes a specific prediction about performance in a particular situation. Outcome expectancies predict the probability that specific consequences will be produced by a particular response, and in some circumstances can be the strongest predictor of assertive intentions (e.g., asserting to smokers in Bulgaria, Lazuras, Zlatev, Rodafinos, & Eiser, 2012). Assertive and nonassertive persons expect standard assertion, and to a lesser extent empathic assertion, to have greater negative long-term effects on a relationship than non-assertion (Zollo, Heimberg, & Becker, 1985). However, assertive individuals expect conflict assertion will produce more positive short-term consequences and fewer negative ones than do non-assertive persons (see Rakos, 1991). Nonassertive and assertive persons do not differ in their identification of the possible consequences but in the probability that the potential outcomes will actually occur. Further, assertive individuals perceive the potential positive consequences of assertion as more desirable and the potential negative ones as more unpalatable while nonassertive persons may rationalise to reduce the perceived demand for engaging in a conflict interaction (Blankenberg & Heimberg, 1984; Kuperminc & Heimberg, 1983). Recent research with MBA students found that both instrumental goal outcome expectations and social outcome expectations are correlated with self-reported assertion and that persons with strong assertion outcome expectations are more likely to prefer high assertive response options (Ames, 2008a). Further, Ames found a curvilinear relationship between assertion and both social and instrumental outcome expectations: persons expect that moderate amounts of assertiveness will maximise the cost-benefit criterion, though they differ regarding the point at which the ratio is maximised, while assertiveness at low and high levels (which here can include aggressive responses) reduce positive outcome expectations.

Self-efficacy expectations refer to a person’s belief that he or she can emit a specific response in a particular circumstance (Bandura, 1977). Assertive individuals evidence much stronger self-efficacy in conflict situations than do nonassertive persons (Chiauzzi & Heimberg, 1986). Finally, assertive individuals demonstrate greater situational efficacy expectations, which describe the confidence a person has of being able to generate any successful response to deal with a specific situation (Chiauzzi & Heim-
For instance, the strongest predictors of Greek non-smokers’ intentions to assert to a coworker violating a no-smoking policy are specific self-efficacy beliefs related to smoking assertions and successful past assertive behaviour to transgressing smokers (Aspropoulos, Lazuras, Rodafinos, & Eiser, 2010; Lazuras et al., 2012). Thus, assertive persons approach conflict situations with an adaptive appraisal of the context and a realistic self-confidence in their ability to emit appropriate and effective behaviours.

**Philosophical beliefs**

Ellis (1962; Ellis & Grieger, 1977) has identified at least a dozen “irrational” beliefs, of which several are directly related to assertion:

1. demands for perfection in self and others in important situations, which lead to self- and other blame when inevitable fallibility occurs;
2. demands for universal approval from significant others;
3. conditional self-worth and personal rights, based on external achievements or approval;
4. catastrophising, or magnifying the meaning of an undesired outcome;
5. viewing passivity as preferable to active intervention, in the belief that things will “work out” eventually without “rocking the boat.”

These irrational thoughts generally are produced only in response to subjectively important issues: the person fails to accept that events in the world occur without regard to the personal value ascribed to a particular situation. Thus, someone may very rationally tolerate incompetence in a meaningless hobby (e.g., volleyball), yet react with extraordinary emotion to an objectively similar event of subjective import (e.g., an audition).

Underlying all irrational thinking is a basic logical error: things, people, or events should be a certain way. Ellis argues that the use of “should” elevates legitimate desires that may or may not be met into absolutistic value-laden demands that if unmet lead to emotional upset and turmoil that prevents rational analysis and effective problem solving. If, on the other hand, unfulfilled desires are viewed rationally as unfortunate events that one wished were otherwise (“it would be better if …” rather than “it should not have happened …”), the person will exhibit thoughtful concern that can contribute to resolution of the issue.

Research supports the importance of rational thinking as a contributor to assertive competence (see Rakos, 1991). Nonassertive individuals endorse more irrational ideas than do assertive individuals. In conflict situations, nonassertive persons entertain the possibility of many more negative “overwhelming consequences” than positive ones, while assertive persons consider similar frequencies of each. Therefore, rational alternatives to the irrational beliefs are likely to facilitate assertive responding.

Thus, the typical nonassertive person might engage in the following thought process: “I must assert myself without any mistakes or the assertion will fail [self-perfection], the other person will think I’m weird or will be hurt or angry [universal approval],
and that would be absolutely terrible [catastrophising]. It would be my fault [self-blame] and confirm that I am no good [conditional self-worth]. It will work out better if I let it pass and see what happens [inaction].” These belief statements might be prefaced by additional irrational ideas: “I don’t have the right to infringe or make demands on this other person [conditional rights]” and/or “I should not even have to deal with this situation because the other person should not be acting this way [other-perfection/other-blame].” This cognitive framing will lead to emotional upset, experienced often as blame, shame, guilt, anger, anxiety, depression, immobilisation, avoidance, aggression, ruminations, self-denigration, or other negative affective states.

Rational beliefs can be taught fairly directly. The initial step requires the identification of the specific irrational thought(s) produced in the particular context. Non-assertive people frequently are so practised in irrational thinking that they do not actually covertly verbalise the irrational thoughts, but behave “as if” they did. Following specification of the actual or implicit thought, the individual is taught to challenge it by actively substituting a rational alternative, first in behaviour rehearsal and later in the actual situation, and then assessing whether emotional arousal has decreased and effective problem solving increased. The general content of the rational alternatives would include the following:

**Acceptance of imperfection:** I am human and imperfect, and in a complicated world I will make mistakes even when the situation is important to me and I very much want to behave competently. There is no reason I should behave competently simply because it is important that I do so, although it would be nice […] Other people also are human, live in the same complex world, and will make mistakes in situations that are important to me. There is no reason that others should act in the exact fashion I judge to be desirable, just because it is important to me, although it would be nice if they did. (These thoughts avoid self/other-blame and accept inevitable human imperfection and limits of control.)

**Acceptance of disapproval:** I cannot always satisfy everyone who is important to me, even if I always place their needs ahead of my own, because the world is too complicated and capricious. It would be nice if I could, but there is no reason why I should do so. (These beliefs recognise that some rejection or disapproval from others is unavoidable.)

**Noncatastrophising:** Negative outcomes are unfortunate, inconvenient, unpleasant, perhaps even bad – but not terrible, horrible, awful, or unbearable. I will try to resolve the problem when possible and adapt to the situation when change is not feasible, even when the issue is important to me, because the world does not know or care what is important to me. Things, including people, are as they should be even if not as I want them to be, and demanding that they should be different ignores the complexity of the world and the reality before me – though it would be nice if my desires were met. (These cognitions clarify the nature of the world and foster a realistic understanding and acceptance of one’s place in it.)

**Action:** Since the world is not oriented toward fulfilling my desires, active attempts to influence it will increase the probability that I will achieve my desires. Without action on my part, events in the complex world are unlikely to just work out. (These thoughts promote personal responsibility for change, though they do not demand that such efforts be successful.)
Unconditional self-worth: I am inherently worthy, and have the same rights as anyone else, including the right to assert myself, regardless of my achievements, social status, or income. (These ideas accept one’s unqualified self-worth and human rights.)

A similar rational thrust underlies Vagos and Pereira’s (2009) suggestion that cognitive schema, or core beliefs, characterise individuals who are skilled at conflict assertion. Theoretically, the assertive person sees the social world as based in reciprocity in terms of respect and nurturance, accords to others the same rights as oneself, and seeks to achieve common goals in relationships. Empirically, they contend that persons who exhibit low levels of assertiveness develop negative schema that see others as unpredictable and uncaring, that view the self as so unlovable and imperfect that strict emotional control must be exerted, and that perceive subjugation to the other as necessary for relationship maintenance. Their assertiveness schema assessment instrument demonstrates good psychometric integrity and identifies four factors: outer emotional support, functional personal abilities, interpersonal management, and affective personal ability (Vagos & Pereira, 2010).

The direct modification of irrational thinking has been an important component of assertiveness training programmes since the early 1970s, but “rational relabeling” is most effective when intervention also engineers successful behaviour changes that reinforce the new rational thoughts (see Rakos, 1991).

Social perception skills

Accurate perception and empathic role-taking are cognitive skills and components of “emotional intelligence” (Burgoon & Bacue, 2003). Nonassertive individuals are deficient in accurate perceptual skills, evidencing less sensitivity to situational cues, misjudgment of others’ emotional reactions, and misinterpretation of prevailing social norms, especially with requests of low or moderate reasonableness (see Rakos, 1991, 2006). The legitimate rights of all participants are most difficult to determine in ambiguous contexts, requiring refined conceptual skills that can assess situational considerations, make appropriate reasonableness determinations, and synthesise the resulting increase in positive and negative thoughts into adaptive, accurate discriminations. Distorted judgments of circumstances may be a prime contributor to a decision to behave nonassertively. When norms are clear, however, perception of assertive rights is more salient; for example, female police officers who view sexual harassment as a policy violation are more likely to judge harassment actions as severe and address the issue through assertiveness (Chaiyavej & Morash, 2009).

Empathic role taking is necessary to understand the viewpoint of the other person, which allows the asserter to predict the impact of an assertion on the recipient (an antecedent obligation) and develop an empathic statement, and then search for a mutually acceptable compromise (subsequent obligations) (Rakos, 1991). The superior social evaluation of the empathic assertion relative to the standard one highlights the importance of empathic role taking in conflict resolution. Key components of this skill are the discrimination of the cues that indicate empathic responses will facilitate the interaction and recognising when to use them (see Rakos, 2006 for review).
The systematic problem-solving skills necessary for social competence (Meichenbaum et al., 1981; Trower, 1982) are deficient in a variety of clinical populations (Schroeder & Rakos, 1983). These skills include problem recognition and acceptance, problem definition and goal setting, generation of potential response alternatives, decision-making (assessment of alternatives in terms of likely outcomes), and solution implementation and evaluation (D’Zurilla & Nezu, 2010). In general, assertive and nonassertive persons generate a similar number of potential response options but nonassertive individuals have difficulty recognizing the problem and choosing an option (see Rakos, 2006).

Problem-solving skills play a critical role in the assertion behaviour chain. The antecedent obligations are involved in problem definition and assessment (determining the rights of all participants and whether assertion is the preferred option). The subsequent obligation to seek a mutually acceptable compromise is largely dependent on the ability to generate alternative solutions. Because these features contribute to conceptual complexity, problem-solving skills may provide the means through which the former attribute can be operationalised and trained.

Responsible assertion is based on an accurate perception of the circumstances: a situation appropriate for assertion must be distinguished from other social ones and acquire the properties of a discriminative stimulus. This learned cue is comprised of the person’s reactions to the situation and will prompt the early behaviours in the assertion chain, i.e., the antecedent obligations. In effect, the assertive person attends to his/her reactions and discriminates those suggesting assertion might be appropriate.

The self-monitored cues can be behaviours, emotions, and/or cognitions (Rakos & Schroeder, 1980). Behavioural cues include actions that are indirect, hostile or avoidant, such as hints, phony excuses, excessive apologies, withdrawal, aggression, passive-aggression, or submission. Emotional cues include frustration, resentment, shame, guilt, anger, depression, and upset. Cognitive cues are seen in excessive ruminations and self-statements that blame or denigrate the self and others, rationalise the unimportance of the issue, and are generally affiliative (negative) or irrational. When these behavioural, emotional, and cognitive reactions are produced in response to a social conflict, they are the primary signals that assertion could be considered.

Assertion, however, is performed much less often than it is considered (e.g., Hyers, 2007), a finding compatible with research indicating that self-evaluations of assertiveness correlate poorly with external assessments of the skill. People underestimate the extent to which they are either dominant or submissive in assertive situations (Leising, Rehbein, & Sporberg, 2006), with only 35% demonstrating accurate self-evaluation of assertiveness (Leising, Rehbein, & Sporberg, 2007). In business negotiations, over 55% of under- and over-assertive persons believed others saw them as appropriately assertive (Ames & Wazlawek, 2014) and approximately 40% of those who emit appropriate assertive behavior believe others view their actions as over-assertive. This error in discrimination gets communicated to the negotiating counterpart, who is likely to use
disapproval, hurt etc. in a manipulative manner, particularly when strong relational concerns are present (Ames & Wazlawek, 2014). A similar situation may be present in leadership contexts, where most coworkers and supervisors are seen to be either over-assertive or under-assertive (Ames & Flynn, 2007; Ames, 2008b). Furthermore, self-ratings of assertiveness can be misjudged on a group level: two immigrant groups in Israel scored similarly to each other and lower than nonimmigrants on a self-report measure, but both immigrant communities judged themselves to be as assertive as the nonimmigrants and more assertive than the other immigrant group (Korem, Horenczyk, & Tatar, 2012). Thus, interventions targets for training accurate self-monitoring skills should include both an awareness of actual competencies in past conflict situations and the ability to discriminate the cues suggesting assertion may be indicated.

**THE SOCIAL VALIDITY OF CONFLICT ASSERTION**

Technical proficiency, immediate outcome, cost-benefit, and social validity were discussed earlier as four assertion outcome criteria. A skilled assertion that meets social and cultural norms nevertheless may still fail to produce desired short-term outcomes or enhance the long-term stability of a relationship. Because these risks are inherent to assertion, the social reaction to it becomes a critical factor influencing the decision whether to behave assertively in the present situation and in the future as well.

**General findings**

Both observers and recipients of assertions judge standard assertion (expression of the assertive right without the inclusion of obligations) to be more socially competent, but less likeable, than nonassertive behaviour, and to be at least as potent as, and more favourably evaluated than, aggressive behaviour (Rakos, 2006). The social acceptance of a standard assertion can be increased by inclusion of obligations, as discussed above, and also by more extensive and broader interaction with the asserter as will occur naturally in most ongoing relationships. Thus, individuals who emit positive assertions (e.g., offering help, expressing compliments or thanks), general conversational comments, and task-oriented interactions along with standard assertions are viewed as more likeable and competent than persons exhibiting standard assertion alone (see Rakos, 1991). For instance, Kern and Paquette (1992) found that college students' evaluations of their roommates' likeability and social competence was significantly correlated with the roommates' level of conflict assertion ability.

The improved evaluation of assertiveness when accompanied by empathic elaborations and/or broader contextual experience offers asserters in continuing relationships confidence that their assertion can be successful and appropriate. For example, Nichols, Graber, Brooks-Gunn, and Bovin (2006) found that sixth graders from an urban school overwhelmingly employed a “simple ‘no’” strategy when engaging in smoking refusal but relied more on stating one's position and generating alternatives when refusing to go along with a shoplifting invitation. However, junior high school raters judged the “simple ‘no’” response in both the smoking and shoplifting situations as less effective than more reasoned explanations, probably because such instances of adolescent peer
pressure typically involve continuing relationships (Nichols, Birnel, Graber, Brooks-Gunn, & Bovin, 2010). Expressing the obligations is consistent with social expectations and thereby enhances the potency of the assertion (Wilson et al., 2003).

The conclusion that empathic assertion is judged more favourably than standard assertion and comparable to nonassertion receives support from recent research suggesting that a “moderate” level of assertiveness, which typically corresponds most closely to the empathic–assertive response, is more effective than aggressive or “over-assertive” responses in balancing goal attainment with relationship maintenance. Lee (2014) found that children’s assertiveness was positively correlated with peer acceptance when the asserter demonstrated high social interest: “[conflict] assertions may provide peer acceptance if the asserter shows consideration for other children’s feelings” (p. 921). Similarly, condom use was most likely among adolescent couples who exhibited moderate assertiveness, as opposed to low or high levels (Schmid et al., 2015).

This curvilinear relationship suggests that the constant negotiation and self-advocacy of highly assertive individuals may elicit resistance or emotional interference. “In couples with modest levels of assertiveness, balancing negotiation and positive interaction may have led to a less threatening environment, where condom use could be discussed and implemented without threatening individual autonomy or relationship intimacy” (p. 98). Ames and Flynn (2007) also found a curvilinear relationship between perception of leadership effectiveness and assertiveness among MBA students evaluating coworkers and supervisors. Using a definition of assertion that included elements of aggressive behaviour, they found that both high and low levels of assertiveness were associated with lower ratings of leadership skills, including judgments of current effectiveness and future leadership success. “Thus, highly assertive leaders tended to be ineffective largely because they failed to get along, whereas relatively unassertive leaders tended to be ineffective largely because they failed to get things done” (p. 383).

Even in situations of acquaintance sexual aggression, many women emit “diplomatic” assertions in response to verbal coercion and then escalate to more forceful assertions when the coercion becomes physical. The tendency to resist initially with a moderate assertion is particularly strong among women who harbour strong relationship expectations (trust, respect, affection, etc.), suggesting they predict that a moderate assertion may produce successful short-term and longer term outcomes (Macy, Nurius, & Norris, 2006). The authors note that “the balancing of social relationship concerns against safety and well-being concerns” (p. 497) might be an appropriate target of intervention programmes.

Even empathic assertions, however, are judged less positively when they are perceived to be overreactions to reasonable requests or to cause harm to the other person (see Rakos, 2006). And at times, recipients of appropriate empathic assertions may react negatively, highlighting the notion that assertion always involves some amount of risk; for example, patients’ assertive behaviour in the service of shared treatment planning is not rated positively by physicians (Hamann et al., 2011).

Conflict assertion generally has been seen as a powerful tool for women to challenge sexism. Nevertheless, many women writers contend that behaving assertively entails
significantly greater risks for females than for males despite the failure of more than 30 studies published in the 1970s and 1980s to confirm such a bias (see Gambrill, 1995; Rakos, 1991; Wilson & Gallois, 1993, for extensive discussions).

This gender research primarily was conducted with American college students in contexts that established arbitrary social interactions at a time when the notion of questioning authority was common and assertiveness was trendy. The handful of studies that appeared in the 1990s strongly indicate that conflict assertion is riskier for women than for men. More recently, Williams and Tiedens’ (2016) meta-analysis found that “explicit dominance” (e.g., behaviour change request, expressing unpopular opinion) compromised a woman’s likeability but not perceived competence compared to a man. However, men and women did not differ in likeability when exhibiting “implicit dominance,” which involves nonverbal and paralinguistic ways of influencing the other person. These data are consistent with the social rules governing conflict assertion by women – but not by men – that emphasise obligation behaviours and even submission (Wilson and Gallois, 1993).

Despite relying on obligations, women still expect empathic assertion to result in more problematic long-term consequences than do men (Zollo et al., 1985), and recent research supports that concern. In the work environment, for example, women expect assertive self-advocacy in a job interview to result in significantly greater “backlash” than do men (Amanatullah & Morris, 2010), and female medical residents believe their gender impedes their ability to direct patient care, leading them to select less assertive options for handling hypothetical clinical situations (Bartels, Goetz, Ward, & Carnes, 2008). Women in a superior organisational position elicit in the men they supervise a sense of threat and increased counter-assertiveness, especially if the woman is seen to be power-hungry and acting in self-interest (Netchaeva, Kouchaki, & Sheppard, 2015). Women who promote themselves in a direct and confident manner decrease their social attractiveness (Rudman, 1998) and are perceived as less socially skilled than males who engage in similar behaviour (Rudman & Glick, 1999). These devaluations are in response to socially dominant behaviours (e.g., competitiveness) rather than to demonstrations of competence. Women can, however, temper unfavourable judgments by meeting general expectations of communality (e.g., exhibiting warmth, sensitivity, and caring; Rudman & Glick, 2001) and by discriminating where such behaviour is valued (e.g., outcome-oriented businesspeople, see Rakos 2006).

Thus, women, to a much greater degree than men, are expected to assert themselves in a rule-consistent manner, especially when the situation activates the stereotype of the caring, nurturing female (Tinsley, Cheldelin, Schneider, & Amanatullah, 2009), by, for example, relying on obligations to resolve conflict (Wilson et al., 2003) or advocating for another rather than herself when bargaining competitively (Amanatullah & Morris, 2010). To accomplish this, women must discriminate gender-based social rules and integrate self-interest with a warm and communal interpersonal style. These skills are considerably more sophisticated and complex than the relatively straightforward response that characterises effective assertion by males (Carli, 2001). For Rudman & Glick (2001), this means women must be “bilingual” – simultaneously competent and nice. The greater demands and risks women face constrain their assertion and result in significant real-world consequences such as salary and promotion disadvantages (Babcock & Laschever, 2003; Wade, 2001). Women ask for
less than men when negotiating starting salary and make fewer requests related to working conditions, and those that they do make are more likely to involve home rather than job concerns (Babcock & Laschever, 2003). Tinsley et al. (2009) provide a detailed set of “bilingual” behavioural prescriptions for “women at the bargaining table” that suggest accepting and using the core feminine stereotype to meet expectations while simultaneously working to reduce its activation and challenge the legitimacy of dichotomous gender roles. Adding to the demands women face, it is more important for them than for men to emit assertive responses consistently across time and settings (Yagil et al., 2006).

Given the historical devaluation of assertion by females (see Rakos, 1991, 2006), it is not surprising that women who adhere to a traditional view of gender roles are significantly less assertive than women who prefer being respected to being liked in a job interview (Mallet & Melchiori, 2014) or, more generally, who have embraced a more active, egalitarian social role (Curtin, Ward, Merriweather, & Caruthers, 2011; Hyers, 2007). Women who adopt a contemporary female role can make an informed decision about the value of assertion in a particular situation by understanding the gender biases of the recipient and the social rules that establish expectations (Gallois, 1994); given the modest increase (0.46 standard deviations) in assertiveness by women in the last third of the 20th century (Twenge, 2001), it appears that the cost-benefit value of assertion is slowly increasing for women.

**Response classes**

The studies assessing the perception of various response classes of standard assertion have produced conflicting data: in some studies, behaviour change requests are rated as most socially acceptable, while expressing unpopular opinions is judged most favourably, especially when the asserter is a friend rather than a stranger. On the other hand, refusals by strangers are judged more positively than refusals by friends or behaviour change requests by either. Friends, as part of an ongoing relationship that includes a wide variety of experiences, can accept a difference of opinion without explanation, compromise, or empathy, but expect a refusal of a request to include elaborations (see Rakos, 1991, for details). These data, then, support empathic assertion as a primary strategy for resolving conflicts in continuing relationships.

**Level of assertiveness**

Socially competent persons judge assertive responses to be more likeable, effective, and appropriate than aggressive and nonassertive ones, but nonassertive persons, who expect more negative outcomes from assertion, view such behaviour relatively unfavourably. However, when nonassertive persons have the opportunity to evaluate a spectrum of behaviour that is broader than a single interaction, their evaluation of the asserter is similar to that of assertive persons (see Rakos, 1991, 2006). Nonassertive persons, with a lower level of conceptual complexity, improve their judgment of conflict assertion when it is portrayed concretely and in concert with other responses that have clear social acceptability.
Cultural values

The activism, pragmatism, rationality, and ethical relativism that legitimise assertion embody middle-class, American, Caucasian male values (Wine, 1981). Thus, the specific behaviours and attitudes fostered by this ideology will not be congruent with the cultural assumptions of all societies or ethnic groups. In the US, for example, African Americans perceive assertive behaviour by an African American as more aggressive than similar behaviour emitted by a white person, and value aggressive and standard assertive behaviour more, and empathic assertion less, than do whites (see Rakos, 1991, for summary).

Racial discomfort in dealing with assertion is exemplified by findings that white observers felt more intimidated by either style of assertion when emitted by an African American than by a white and judged the empathic assertion more positively than the standard assertion when the asserter was white but not when he was African American (Hrop & Rakos, 1985). Absent newer data, these findings suggest training goals for blacks asserting to whites might place greater emphasis on strategies to foster awareness of, and then to decrease, whites’ discomfort with black assertiveness. African American judges, on the other hand, had relatively unfavourable perceptions of both styles of assertion when performed by a white as compared to a black, judging the behaviour to be more aggressive. They perceived empathic assertion by whites to blacks as less positive than standard assertion in the same context, but reversed their judgment for black-to-black interactions, in which the obligations significantly enhanced the evaluation of assertion. Therefore, different training goals for assertion to African Americans may be indicated: standard assertion for white asserters, empathic assertion for black asserters. The continuing evolution and importance of race relations in the US in the past 30 years suggests that updated data could provide even firmer treatment guidelines.

Generalisations about the appropriateness of assertive response styles for members of diverse cultural and ethnic groups must be made cautiously. Japanese, Malaysian, and Filipino adults (Niikura, 1999), Asian-American adults (Zane, Sue, Hu, & Kwon, 1991), and Turkish adolescents (Mehmet, 2003) were found to be less likely to engage in conflict assertion than their Western counterparts. Nevertheless, assertion that accommodates cultural norms is an accepted communication style in a wide range of societies (e.g., the Igbo in Nigeria; Onyeizugbo, 2003). Further, sensitivity to cultural values that are communitarian and tradition-bound can form the basis of successful intervention with a wide array of ethnic groups (see Fodor, 1992; Wood & Mallinckrodt, 1990) and non-Western cultures, as detailed earlier. A novel and idealistic application across cultures is Dwairy’s (2004) proposal that training Israeli Palestinian-Arabs in conflict assertion skills could help them coexist more harmoniously within the individualistically oriented Israeli milieu, particularly if a companion intervention helped Israelis to understand the communitarian foundation of Palestinian society.

CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS

Recent assertiveness training research aimed at empowering seniors and assisted living residents, international students at university, and women in the workplace was
reviewed briefly earlier. A fourth focus is sexual assertiveness, which has commanded by far the most interest.

**Sexual assertiveness**

Investigators have focused on two sexual assertions: insistence on condom use, a behaviour change request, and refusal of, or limit setting with, aggressive or coercive sexual behaviours.

**Condom use assertiveness.** Sexual assertiveness is a key factor in increasing condom use. Adolescents who communicate directly about condom use are more likely to use them, especially when they talked successfully in the past about condom use and developed strong efficacy beliefs in their ability to insist on use (Widman, Noar, Choukas-Bradley, & Francis, 2014). Adolescents’ condom use is correlated with a high level of individual assertiveness but with a moderate level of total “couples assertiveness” that fosters shared control and open discussion (Schmid et al., 2015). Women who unambiguously insist on condom use have greater self-efficacy beliefs in their condom assertion skills, emit more self-instructions to be condom assertive, and believe such behaviour will strengthen the relationship (Wright, Randall, & Hayes, 2012). Sexual assertiveness for condom use predicts unprotected sex in men and women, with lower levels of condom use assertiveness related to greater sexual victimisation (Morokoff et al., 2009). Stoner et al. (2008) also found that greater sexual assertiveness in women is related to a lesser history of sexual victimisation and to an intention to use condoms that is strong enough to withstand intoxication. Morokoff et al. suggest that sexual assertiveness training could be a valuable addition to victimisation prevention efforts, especially for assault and abuse survivors.

**Coercion resistance skills.** Low levels of sexual assertiveness consistently are related to sexual victimisation (Franz, DiLillo, & Gervais, 2016; Livingston, Testa, & VanZile-Tamsen, 2007; Walker, Messman-Moore, & Ward, 2011; Zerubavel & Messman-Moore, 2013) and revictimisation (Katz, May, Sorensen, & DelTosta, 2010; Kearns & Calhoun, 2010; Kelly, Orchowski, & Gidycz, 2016; Livingston et al., 2007). The lower sexual assertiveness of women victims has been linked to fear of sexual powerlessness and emotional dysregulation (Zerubavel & Messman-Moore, 2013), social anxiety (Schry & White, 2013), excessive body self-surveillance (Franz et al., 2016), traditional femininity ideologies (Curtin et al., 2011), and positive relationship expectations (e.g., trust, respect, affection) (Macy et al., 2006). Interestingly, while high sexual assertiveness is clearly adaptive, women who possess the skill are more apt to blame the victim of a sexual assault who initially behaves unassertively, even if she subsequently escalates her resistance to verbal and physical refusal behaviours (Rusinko, Bradley, & Miller, 2010). The authors point out this may have implications for jury selection in cases involving sexual assault, as a victim-juror may be predisposed to blame the assaulted woman for being victimised. In terms of treatment issues, they suggest highly assertive sexual assault victims may embrace a greater amount of responsibility for the attack and experience greater self-blame and guilt.

The consistency with which low levels of sexual assertiveness skills are correlated with sexual victimisation suggests that assertiveness training should be included in prevention and intervention packages (e.g., Senn, Braksmajer, Hutchins,
Recently, two sexual assertiveness training programmes underwent randomised controlled investigations. Simpson Rowe, Jouriles, McDonald, Platt, and Gomez (2012) evaluated the Dating Assertiveness Training Experience (DATE) programme for teaching young women sexual resistance skills. Compared to the placebo group, college women who completed DATE were less likely to be victims of sexual assault in the following 12 weeks and more assertive in responding to an attacker. Simpson Rowe, Jouriles, and McDonald (2015) investigated the My Voice, My Choice (MVMC) programme with urban, mostly Hispanic, high school girls and found that it too reduced reports of sexual victimisation in the following 12-week period; among girls with greater prior victimisation, a population the authors note is particularly resistant to intervention, MVMC reduced the risk of psychological distress and victimisation (e.g., being threatened, verbally abused, or gossiped about). Finally, the recently developed Sexual Assertiveness Questionnaire (Loshek & Terrell, 2015) may prove useful in intervention programmes; it assesses skills in initiating and communicating about desired sex, refusing unwanted sex, and communicating risk factors and previous sexual experience.

Assertion is a situation-specific social skill that is particularly useful for conflict resolution. It, along with its training procedures, has settled into a comfortable role in a wide range of settings. As the rapid changes of globalisation and socioeconomic development (cf. Santos et al., 2017) bring people of diverse cultures into closer contact with each other, increasing numbers have concluded that their society’s long-term interests are served when its members are skilled in assertiveness, with its contemporary egalitarian social philosophy that encourages responsible action to challenge the interpersonal, social, cultural, and legal barriers that prevent fair sharing of power and resources.

CONCLUSION

Assertion is a situation-specific social skill that is particularly useful for conflict resolution. It, along with its training procedures, has settled into a comfortable role in a wide range of settings. As the rapid changes of globalisation and socioeconomic development (cf. Santos et al., 2017) bring people of diverse cultures into closer contact with each other, increasing numbers have concluded that their society’s long-term interests are served when its members are skilled in assertiveness, with its contemporary egalitarian social philosophy that encourages responsible action to challenge the interpersonal, social, cultural, and legal barriers that prevent fair sharing of power and resources.

REFERENCES


