Measuring the Assertiveness of Low Income, Culturally Diverse Women: Implications for Culturally Competent Practice

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Statement of the Research Problem

Although assertiveness training programs have received much attention in the social work and behavior therapy literature, the identification of what constitutes appropriate and effective assertive behavior for women and for various cultural groups remains relatively unexplored (Comas-Diaz & Duncan, 1985). Generally, most standard measures of assertiveness have been developed for White, middle-class Americans (Garrison & Jenkins, 1986). Although most cross-cultural studies of assertiveness have suggested that assertiveness is culture-bound (Ness, Donnan & Jenkins, 1983), there has been little examination of how behavioral definitions of assertiveness differ across cultural groups and/or the extent to which they are similar.

The purpose of this dissertation research was to investigate in what ways behavioral indicators of assertiveness, culturally appropriate to low income African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian women differ from one another and from mainstream models. It rests on the assumption that differences exist in the meaning and manifestation of assertive behavior cross culturally. Consequently, the use of a single standard of assertiveness (i.e., mainstream models of assertiveness) may be biasing when applied to some groups although the direction and magnitude of the bias is unknown.

Research Questions

The fundamental elements of definitions of assertiveness include a direct expression of affect to another person, in a situation of some risk, with consideration of the feelings and desires of both sender and receiver of the assertive message. Past research has found that assertive responding is associated with a louder voice and with a more "marked" intonation. Additionally, in an assertive response the individual is less likely to submit to the demands of others and more likely to insist that the other person change his or her behavior (Eisler, Miller & Hersen, 1973).

The basis upon which definitions of assertiveness typically rest involve clinical judgement (Galassi & Galassi, 1978) and "general social usage" (Serber, 1972). Wolpe and Lazarus (1966) offered the following advice:

"A way of distinguishing truly assertive behavior from inhibited reactions on the one hand and aggressive responses on the other is to ask oneself whether or not a given response would appear fitting in the eyes of an objective onlooker. In practice, this means noting one's own reactions to the thought of somebody else performing the response" (p. 44).

Hence, what defines assertive behavior is relative to the social judgment of the evaluator. As such, what constitutes assertiveness is influenced by the cultural norms to which the evaluator abides.

Examining the gender and racial composition of the clinical and research samples upon which the behavioral components of assertion were identified and later empirically tested show that for the most part women and members of minority groups were minimally represented. The implication of this is that assertiveness as it has been defined is reflective only of the dominant sociocultural group, a criticism of most psychological constructs in general (Pedersen, 1979). A question then arises of the extent to which the assertive behavior of women and minorities will be systematically misjudged due to their linguistic and/or cultural differences.

Other areas of research have shown that these differences are enormous. For example, findings in linguistic research have repeatedly revealed that men speak more often, at greater length, with more intensity, and interrupt more than women (Eakins & Eakins, 1978; Swacker, 1975). Overall, the characteristics of women's speech have been negatively associated with emotionality, unsureness, questioning, and helplessness (Thorne & Henley, 1978). In response, it has been suggested in the relevant sociolinguistic literature that the topography of assertive behavior may be just the topography of male speech patterns (Tannen, 1990).

Linguistic differences are also evident cross culturally. There is a wealth of research documenting linguistic differences between anglo-european and Black english vernacular (see Smitherman, 1977). Differences are evident not only in phonology or syntax but in verbal patterns and nonverbal aspects as well. There are differences in prosodic cues (i.e., voice, pitch, intonation, and rhythm) (Cheek, 1976; Kochman, 1981), formulaic speech conventions (i.e., a fixed manner of speech that carries specific connotation), and gaze patterns (LaFrance & Mayo, 1976).

In addition to linguistic differences there may be a more fundamental discrepancy between the goals of assertive behavior as it has been defined by the mainstream and the values regulating normative behavior in other cultures. The concept of assertiveness rests upon values of individual rights, individualism, personal control and self-reliance. Riger (1993) argues that such a depiction of healthy and desirable behavior is itself a product of Western social and economic belief systems. However, these values are not necessarily equally endorsed by other cultural communities. Differences in the extent to which value is placed on the direct expression of individual wants have been reported for American Indian, Asian, and Hispanic groups (Comas-Diaz & Duncan, 1985; Fukuyama & Greenfield, 1983; LaFromboise, 1982).

Drawing from both cross-cultural differences in linguistics and values, the objectives of the research were twofold. The first was to identify, 3 new sets of criteria for the measurement of assertiveness; one set of criteria is culturally appropriate to low income Black women, another to low income Hispanic women, and a third to low income White women. The second objective was to contrast the assertiveness ratings obtained using these new criteria with those obtained using traditional criteria (i.e. those typically used in the measurement of assertiveness).

Methodology

The research followed a multiple stage process. In the first, videotaped interviews were obtained from 35 White, 41 African-American and 39 Hispanic low income women. As a group, these women were 36 years of age (sd=12.2) and supported 3 people on an average monthly income of $536.08 (sd=$445.29). The Hispanic group was primarily Mexican (75%) and Salvadoran (17%). All but four of the Hispanic women reported low acculturation levels, speaking and thinking primarily in Spanish.

All participants were asked to role-play what they would say and do in each of six different situations. The vignettes, crafted in consultation with local agency service providers, were as follows:

Vignette 1:   After ordering food at McDonald's, a female worker gives the respondent (R) a dollar less in change than she should get.

Vignette 2:   R lends her coat to a girlfriend who fails to return it as agreed.

Vignette 3:   R must ask her girlfriend to move out of her place.

Vignette 4:   R goes to a convenience store and is in a hurry but the male store clerk ignores her and continues to talk on the phone.

Vignette 5:   A neighbor's 12 year old son goes to the store for R but does not give back the change as expected.

Vignette 6:   A male friend shoves R during an argument then apologizes.

As can be seen, three of the role plays involved interacting with another woman, and three involved interacting with a man. Role plays were conducted by a racially/ethnically matched male and female confederate.

Responses to the role plays were the foundation upon which the new criteria were developed. To begin the process of developing the criteria, a panel of twelve key informants reviewed the videotapes. Informants were African American, Hispanic, and White women who were regarded as assertive by their own peers and who had taught and/or had an interest in the area of women and assertiveness. The informants were asked to choose illustrative passive,

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assertive, and aggressive responses to each of the vignettes. African American informants were asked to comment only on the behavior of low income African American women, Caucasian informants on that of low income Caucasian women, and Hispanic informants on low income Hispanic women. If two or more panelists gave the same designation to a given response, then that response was included in the purposeful sample. By this method, a sample of 139 responses (out of possible 690) was identified containing passive, assertive, and aggressive responses of women from each of the three groups to each of the six vignettes.

Next, a team of African American, Hispanic and Caucasian coders was assembled to conduct an exploratory content analysis of the interviews identified by the key informants. The results of the content analysis became the basis for the new criteria. A scoring protocol was developed awarding points for responses falling into an assertive content area. Additionally, based on cultural linguistic literature and informant opinion, a new scoring protocol for voice tone was also worked out. The verbal content and voice tone scores were summed to yield an overall assertiveness score ranging from 0 to 4.

Finally, all participant responses that were not reviewed as a part of the development of the new criteria were double coded using both the new criteria and mainstream criteria. Following more traditional procedures, verbal content and voice tone were awarded 0, 1, or 2 points depending on the extent to which they matched following the descriptions. Assertive verbal content was defined as stating clearly what the respondent wants and what she would like the other person to do, telling the other person what she is feeling, using "I" statements, acknowledging the other person's situation and/or feelings, and/or telling the other person what possible consequences may be expected. Assertive voice tone was defined as a firm and confident manner of speech. Similarly, subject scores across the two categories were summed to give an overall mainstream verbal response score ranging from 0 to 4.

Results

The new criteria are fundamentally different from the mainstream criteria in that they are substantively specific. They detail courses of action that are in themselves considered to be passive, assertive, or aggressive responses to specific situations. In contrast, the mainstream criteria are specific in terms of delivery but vague in terms of substantive content. That is, within the criteria it is only specified that a "direct" statement or request be made. However, what constitutes an appropriate communication is not specified. The reason for this is that the mainstream criteria typically are used pan-situationally.

The content analysis produced seven to twelve content areas for each group across the six situations. In four of the situations, the same content areas emerged for each group but were differentially classified as passive, assertive, or aggressive by key informants. The direction of the disagreement was in keeping with suggestions made in the literature (e.g., behavior coded assertive by the Hispanic group was coded passive by the non-Hispanic groups).

Generally, the Black and White groups were more likely to make explicit reference to consequences or obligations on other's part that impelled him or her to comply with the respondent's request. Such a contractual approach was generally regarded as appropriate. The Caucasian group had the largest range of content categories spanning the inability to formulate a response to more extreme threats or acts of violence. In contrast, the African American group had fewer types of aggressive acts, however the range of assertive acts for this group included behaviors that the other groups defined as aggressive. In general, the Black women sanctioned more direct and forthright approaches as assertive strategies relative to the other groups. Finally, the Hispanic group took a more deferential approach. Much more emphasis was placed upon correctly addressing the other individual and adopting good manners when speaking.

When the culturally appropriate and mainstream scores were contrasted by Wilcoxon signed rank tests, the culturally-appropriate criteria were found to yield the same or higher ratings than the mainstream criteria for the same behavior. These findings may suggest that the mainstream criteria may unfairly depress the assertion ratings of low income women across some situations.

Utility for Social Work Practice

Examination of the new criteria and obstacles faced in their development yield important lessons for what may constitute cultural competency. For example, it was found that cultural bias may arise out of three sources: (a) the substantive content of the criteria, (b) the personal biases of the coders, (c) and the differential implementation of the criteria by the coders. Analogously, cultural bias in social service may arise out from the substantive content of the intervention, the biases of service delivery personnel, and the dynamic relationship between the intervention and those who deliver the service. Finally, findings suggest critical lessons in terms of culturally appropriate treatment and process may be gained by monitoring and recording the decisions and the outcomes of culturally diverse personnel. An accumulation of such monitoring may become the basis of important empirically based training tools. Understanding the similarities and differences across culturally diverse, competent workers in the delivery of the same service may be an important way to understand how meet the needs of increasingly diverse clientele.

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