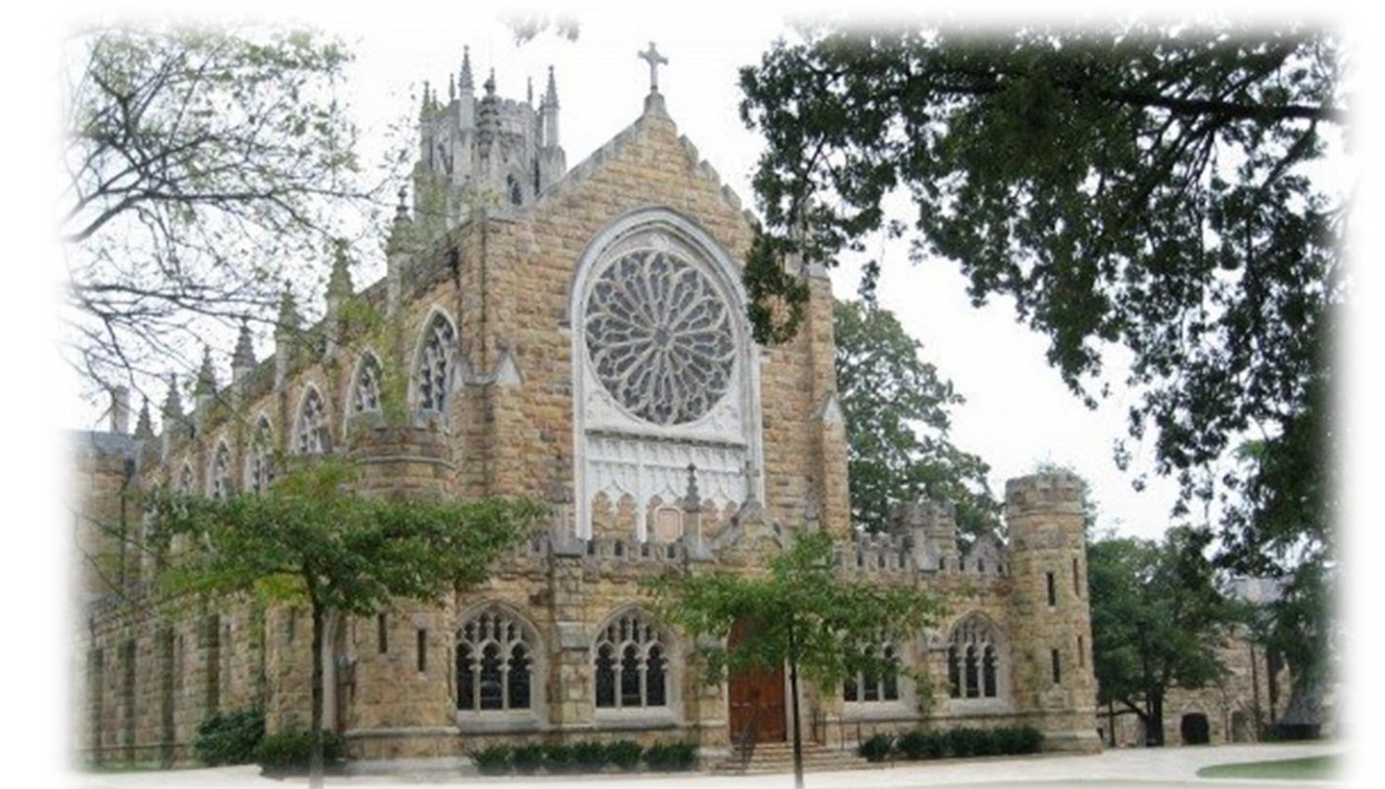


Latino/a Conceptions of Assertiveness: Preliminary Results from a Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Assertiveness has been defined as the verbal and nonverbal, direct expression of feelings (Gay, Hollandsworth & Galassi, 1975) and the positive, productive expression of one's needs, feelings, preferences or opinions (Rathus, 1973). Extant conceptions and measures of assertiveness have largely been developed with predominantly white samples. Four focus groups were conducted with community members who self-identify as being of Latino/a or Hispanic heritage. Groups were given a simple model of the intersection of active vs passive modes and assertive vs aggressive behavior, and were asked to discuss their perceptions of the concepts. Transcriptions of the focus groups were created and themes were identified. Themes include "assertiveness as a product of immigrant struggle", "increasing assertiveness with newer generations", "acceptance of authority" and "the ideal of passive assertion".

Introduction

- The study of the assessment of assertiveness arose out of a behavioral treatment model for assertion. (e.g., Kazdin, 1979), as did the first items created to measure assertiveness (Wolpe & Lazarus, 1966).

- Subsequent measures of assertiveness clarified reliability and construct validity (Galassi, DeLo, Galassi, & Bastien, 1974; Gay, Hollandsworth, & Galassi, 1975; Hersen, 1979).

- The Rathus Assertiveness Scale (RAS; Rathus, 1973) is the most widely used measure of assertiveness and conceptualizes assertiveness as social boldness and frankness.

- Studies assessing minority groups in the U.S. with a variety of measures of assertiveness have yielded group differences, for example:
 - Less assertiveness for Japanese American compared to U.S. white-collar workers (Niikura, 1999).
 - Greater assertiveness for Black undergraduates compared to White undergraduates (Lineberger & Calhoun, 1983).

- Results of studies such as the above have been criticized for using measures such as the RAS, which are largely based upon White (dominant culture) conceptions of assertiveness, and thus cannot accurately compare such groups (Wood & Mallinckrodt, 1990)

- The current study seeks to lay the groundwork for a measure of assertiveness for the U.S. Latino/a population.

- Focus groups were used to:
 - Understand U.S. Latino/a conceptions of assertiveness, via contrast with other concepts such as assertion (Fray & Hector, 1987).
 - Identify themes of U.S. Latino/a experiences of assertiveness in their lives.
 - Identify themes of the impingement of non-dominant status and gender on the understanding of assertiveness.
 - Identify themes of situational assertiveness (Sue, Ino, & Sue, 1983).

Method

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of ten community members associated with a southern U.S. liberal arts college who self-identified as being of Latino/a or Hispanic heritage and included seven females and three males. The majority of the group ranged from age 18 to 25 with seventy percent while ten percent were between 46 and 55 and twenty percent were between 56 and 65. Fifty percent of the participants were of first generation in the United States, forty percent were second generation and ten percent said they were just visiting. The countries of origin consisted of Mexico (three participants), Costa Rica, Dominican Republic/Puerto Rico, Colombia (two participants), Cuba, Argentina and Guatemala.

Procedure

Prior to the start of the discussion within the focus group, a demographics survey was handed out. Then, the participants were given a series of questions to focus their thinking of assertiveness. These questions were simply a starting point, and all of them were not actually addressed, though some of the themes were brought up throughout the discussion by both the focus group leaders and the participants. Participants were also encouraged to examine a discussion model that showed the intersection of passive vs. active modes as well as assertive and aggressive modes (Aggressiveness vs. Assertiveness Model). Although they could talk about any cell in the model, they were asked to focus especially on the concept of passive assertiveness since this is the area we know least about.

Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. What do these terms mean to you?
2. Could you give examples of acting these ways?
3. What are the pros and cons for acting this way or these ways?
4. Can you think of times when you might act this way or it would be appropriate to act this way?
5. What are people like who act in these ways?
6. Are some people just like this ("This is the way they are")? Or do people only act this way because of the situation?
7. When would acting in each of these ways be best?
8. Not using names, can you think of people with whom it would be easier or harder to act this way?
9. How does culture matter?
10. Do you think it's different for men and women?

Participant Discussion Model

	Aggressive	Assertive
Passive (Indirect)	Passive Aggression	Passive Assertion
Active (Direct)	Active Aggression	Active Assertion

Results

After collecting data through transcribing audio recordings of each focus group, members of the research team read through and conjointly identified themes. These themes were developed by a majority of participants of the focus group and describe general patterns of assertiveness among Latino/as.

Assertiveness as a product of immigrant struggle

Participants discussed that Latino/a people who have emigrated to the United States from other countries acted in an actively assertive manner. These immigrants had to work hard, overcome numerous obstacles and continually assert themselves in order to reach the United States. Participants noted that immigrants have maintained this sense of assertiveness and have also taught their children to act assertively.

"...They worked in like terrible jobs or whatever. They worked their way up, so like, they're a really strong family. Active assertion is like the way that I've learned like to succeed."

"...people walking thousands of miles from Mexico and Central America for hopefully better job opportunities to provide for their families...the population from Latin America is one of active assertive sort of population."

"... if someone...made that, that decision to come to that other country, and gone through all that work to get there. They're more likely to be a little more active assertive person than someone who's stayed in the same life."

Increasing assertiveness with newer generations

Participants discussed how they felt that the longer their family had been in the United States the more they saw assertiveness increase. For example, younger generations would be more comfortable challenging the opinion of others.

"...students in the U.S. are really encouraged to...have critical thinking skills when they are in, in class."

"...in Costa Rica we are taught just these are the facts, accept them."

Acceptance of authority figures

Participants discussed the culture differences in acceptance of authority figures. In U.S. culture, for example, students are expected to challenge and question ideas presented in the classroom, both by their professors and their fellow classmates. Participants believed this to be an act of assertiveness, for, as they explained, the custom in South America is to accept the views and statements of the authority figure, i.e. the professor. Respect for authority was also discussed in relation to assertiveness, in that being assertive against an authority figure often shows a lack of respect for the individual.

"So the American students come like develop the personality to be always constantly critically thinking about things and defending their positions...Whereas for us it's more like okay I accept this and I'm not gonna like fight for it."

"So you'll never think about saying 'Oh, you're wrong'...you will never challenge a professor or teacher to say, 'You are wrong,' you know, 'This is what it should be.' So, I think it's very cultural."

Results Continued

The ideal of passive assertion

Participants discussed the benefits of acting in a passive assertive manner. They maintained that this may be an ideal way to act because one is able to assert one's opinion, yet not belabor it. Participants described the pressure to be accepted in white, US culture and thus a need to be agreeable and avoid acting aggressively.

"...I think that passive assertion is when you state your stance on something and then you uh don't feel the need to repeat it, and you, you just say that is how I feel about this. And you say it once, and then whatever else happens is fine because you've made your position clear. And you can passively maintain that position without having to constantly assert that position."

"You have to be nice to get through, through life. To keep your job, you have to be nice. And at times, you know, you have to know when is the time to, to act up, to say something, because, personally, we won't be quiet."

Cultural misunderstanding of expressiveness

Participants discussed how cultural differences can affect how one acts assertively in various situations. Participants expressed concerns that the majority culture may not accept the values and ideals of the Latino/a population. Participants noted that they have to pick and choose their battles carefully.

"...We are taught that the world has six continents, and Americans were taught that, in the US they're taught that there are seven continents...I got the question wrong [and] I was kind of like defending my position at first but the people in that class were...like trying to overpower, I guess in a way like, my background in terms of knowledge."

"I was working on a project for my History class...and one girl said one thing and...I totally disagreed with her...and she said, 'Well we need to stop arguing and just pick a project.' I didn't think I was arguing, I thought I was being actively assertive, not loud or anything. ...That might have been a cultural thing or personal experience."

Discussion

- While previous research with largely White populations developed constructs of assertiveness centering around frankness and social boldness (Rathus, 1973), our focus group participants contextualized assertiveness within family history, culture and the immigrant experience.

- The results of this study are only preliminary; three more focus groups are planned, two of which will be conducted with a more recent immigrant sample and in native Spanish.

- As themes become solidified through more group data, further research will concentrate on the development of U.S. Latino/a culturally appropriate items measuring assertiveness.