

A CULTURAL VALIDATION OF ASSERTIVENESS IN BRAZILIAN CHILDREN

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RESUMO

LIPP, M.N.; NOVAES, L.E.; NACCARATO A.; NOVAES M. e BARRETO, M.F.
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Para pesquisar a adequação do uso de treinos de assertividade com crianças brasileiras oriundas da literatura estrangeira, cinquenta e cinco casais responderam a um questionário de assertividade sobre seus filhos. Os pais indicaram não só como acreditavam que os filhos se comportariam em várias situações que envolviam assertividade, mas também como gostariam que eles se comportassem. Os resultados indicaram que os pais gostariam que os filhos se comportassem de modo assertivo em 80% das situações, mas previram que somente em 60% delas eles seriam assertivos. Os dados foram interpretados como dando evidência a favor da adequação de se utilizar treinos de assertividade nas crianças brasileiras, desde que adaptações culturais sejam feitas.

Palavras chave: *Assertividade, comportamento infantil, personalidade.*

Hasselt, Hersen, Whitehill and Bellack (1979) have pointed out that assertiveness is a social ability and that it can be taught to children as a means of preventing emotional problems in adolescence and adulthood. In fact, several authors have pointed to the lack of assertiveness as a critical factor in

the etiology of clinical problems such as depression (Alberti, 1977; Seligman, 1973), psychosomatic disorders (Fensterhein, 1972) and low self-esteem recommended assertiveness training as a therapeutic measure for adults as well as for children. In Brazil, where a great part of the psychological literature emanates from the United States, assertiveness training is often recommended in the psychological treatment of children (Di Nucci, 1981; Lemos, 1981). Nevertheless, one must consider that a specific behavior may or may not be socially acceptable, depending on the culture in which it takes place (Eisler, Hersen and Miller, 1975; McIntyre, Mauger, Margalit and Figueiredo, 1989; Thompson, Ishii and Klopf, 1990; Zane, Sue, Hu and Kwon, 1991). Brazil is a latin country known for the mild and diplomatic fashion in which business is conducted, apparently much different from the USA where Americans are taught to fight openly for their rights. It seems that the appropriateness of the use of a typically American assertiveness training in Brazil must be verified before it is applied in the treatment of children with social-skill deficits, to avoid the risk of creating more difficulty for these children in the attempt to alleviate their problems.

The present study was aimed a conducting a cultural validation of assertiveness training by means of testing Brazilian parent's perception and acceptance of their children's assertive behavior. It also was intended to identify whether fathers and mothers differed between themselves and between parents from other Brazilian cities in their attitudes towards assetiveness. An additional goal was to investigate if there was a correspondence between the way parents wished their children to behave and the way they foresaw them behaving.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 55 Brazilian middle-class couples recruited from the two largest cities in Brazil, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, and one smaller city, Campinas. Campinas has approximately one million inhabitants and is characterized by traditional lifestyles and values. Approximately half of the couples from each city had daughters, while the other half had sons between the ages of 6 and 11 years and were attending elementary school. Most women had high school education and were housewives, while the men were white-collar workers. Originally, it was planned to collect data on 20 couples from each city, however, 2 couples had to be eliminated from the samples of Rio and São Paulo and one from Campinas due to the fact that one of the parents in each pair did not return his copy of the questionnaire.

Measures

The instrument used for assessing responses was a multiple-choice questionnaire that contained 20 items describing specific daily life situations, followed by three possible choices of ways in which a child could behave under the described circumstances. These answers represented: (A) typically assertive, (G) aggressive, or (N) non-assertive responses as defined by Alberti and Emmons (1978). The classification of the answers in these three categories was done by three independent raters and only the items for which there was total agreement were utilized. They were presented in a counter-balanced fashion and were preceded by the letters a, b or c, depending on the order in which they appeared. After each set of answers, there were two blank spaces where parents were instructed to write first the letter representing the way they would like their child to behave **ideally**, and second, the way they thought the child would **really** behave if he were in the situation described.

Parents were not informed as to the classification of the choices as assertive, aggressive, or non-assertive to avoid response bias.

The questionnaire, written in Portuguese, was based on Bornstein, Bellack, and Hersen (1977); Di Nucci (1981) and Galassi (1974). These authors were selected because they are widely referred to in Brazil in the area of assertive training. Di Nucci is a Brazilian author who validated the relevance of the content of Bornstein et al (1977) and Galassi (1974) assertiveness scenes for Brazilian children.

Bornstein et al's Behavioral Assertiveness Test (BAT) for children consists of nine scenes which can be used to test and to train assertiveness in children. Nine statements were written to describe the situations represented in the scenes and were included in the present measure in random order.

Galassi and Galassi's assertiveness inventory (the College Self-Expression Scale) is composed of 50 items which involve a variety of interpersonal situations and is intended to be used with college students. Di Nucci (1981) adapted Galassi and Galassi's inventory to be used with school-aged children in Brazil. Nine items were randomly selected from Di Nucci's questionnaire. They were adaptations of Galassi et al's items 3, 6, 9, 16, 26, 36, 38, 39 and 42. The last two items of the questionnaire were formulated to include positive assertiveness, i.e. situations where to be assertive the child would have to express positive feelings.

Procedure

Two copies of the questionnaire were delivered to the house of each couple at which time, the instructions were read and explained to the subjects. The experimenter helped the subjects to choose a child (where parents had

more than one of school age), wrote his or her name on the questionnaire and instructed the parents to answer the questions, keeping in mind only the specific child chosen. Two days later, one of the experimenter returned to the couple's house to pick up the questionnaire.

RESULTS

The obtained data were analyzed in several different ways to verify: (a) if parents **ideally** preferred their children to behave in assertive, aggressive, or non-assertive ways; (b) how they predicted their children would behave in different situations; (c) if there was a significant difference between (a) and (b); (d) if mothers differed from fathers in their response choices; and (e) if there was a significant difference between parents from different cities in the way they responded to the questionnaire. The analysis per city was done because the three locations offer different life styles and child rearing practices are allengedly quite distinct.

Analysis of parent's preference for assertive, aggressive, or non-assertive behavior (ideally).

Table 1 shows that 80% of the responses chosen by the fathers on the way their children should ideally behave and 82% of the ones chosen by the mothers were assertive. These percentages were calculated by dividing the frequency with which each category (A, G, N) was chosen by the fathers or mothers separately, by the total number of father's / mother's responses to all items of the questionnaire.

Table 1 - Percentage of Total Response Choices made by all Parents Combined

RESPONSES	FATHERS		MOTHERS	
	IDEAL	REAL	IDEAL	REAL
Assertive (A)	80%	61%	82%	55%
Non-assertive (N)	14%	23%	13%	28%
Aggressive (G)	6%	16%	5%	17%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

The break-down of these results, by city, can be seen on Table 2. There was a systematic tendency for parents to choose assertive responses to describe how they would like their children to behave, regardless of the city tested. No significant difference between the parents of either sex from different cities, in regard to the choice of assertive response, was found when the Wilcoxon Sign Test was used. It is interesting to note that non-assertive responses were always more frequently chosen than the aggressive ones by both mothers and fathers. These results indicate that parents prefer their children to be assertive in most of the 20 situation surveyed. In some situations, parents felt their children should be non-assertive and only on few occasions should they be aggressive.

An overall statistical analysis revealed that there was a significant difference in the way mothers and fathers from the three cities responded as far as aggressive choices were concerned ($\chi^2(4) = 14.30$, $p < 0.01$ for mothers and $\chi^2(4) = 25.25$, $p < 0.01$ for fathers). Analysis of these responses showed that mothers from Rio de Janeiro choose more situations in which they would like children to be more aggressive than their counterparts from São Paulo and Campinas ($\chi^2(2) = 22.60$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 2: Percentage of Total Response Choices Made by Parents and Mean* number of agreements between I and R.

RESPONSES	CITIES											
	RIO DE JANEIRO				SÃO PAULO				CAMPINAS			
	F		M		F		M		F		M	
	I	R	I	R	I	R	I	R	I	R	I	R
Assertive	82	62	77	58	77	53	84	52	81	67	86	55
Non-assertive	13	24	15	24	12	29	14	36	16	27	11	23
Aggressive	5	14	8	18	11	18	2	12	2	17	3	22
MEAN OF AGREEMENT	11.3		8.3		11.0		10.4		11.7		10.6	

I = IDEAL; R = REAL
F = FATHERS; M = MOTHERS

* Total Mean number of agreements between Ideal and Real Behavior as perceived by parents

b - Analysis of parent's prediction of their children's behaviors (real).

Parents, of both sexes, from all three cities chose assertive responses as the ones their children would emit most often when faced with the situations described in the questionnaire. This is indicated by the choice of 61% of assertive responses for fathers and 55% for mothers, considering all cities combined as seen on Table 1. Percentages, per city, separately, are shown on Table 2, where it can be observed that there was little difference among the frequencies of assertive responses per city. Despite the lack of differences regarding assertive responses, an overall analysis which included assertive, aggressive and non-assertive responses showed a significant difference among responses from the three cities for fathers ($X^2(4) = 19.16$, $p < 0.01$) and for mothers ($X^2(4) = 24.24$, $p < 0.01$). Detailed analysis showed that this difference, in the case of mothers, came from the frequency of non-assertive and aggressive responses. Mothers from São Paulo predicted that their children would give significantly more non-assertive responses than mothers from Rio or Campinas ($X^2(2) = 13.34$, $p < 0.01$). Mothers from Campinas foresaw more aggressive responses than the other mothers ($X^2(2) = 9.70$, $p < 0.01$).

As far as fathers were concerned, the subjects from São Paulo predicted more non-assertive behavior from their children than fathers from the other cities ($X^2(2) = 13.20$, $p < 0.01$). There was no significant difference as far as the fathers' aggressive response choices were concerned.

c - Ideal x Real (I - R)

The last row of Table 2 shows the frequencies of I-R agreement demonstrated by parents in the three cities. It can be seen that mothers from Rio showed the lowest mean score of I-R agreement ($M = 8.30$), which indicates that these mothers thought that their children would behave differently from what they consider ideal in more than 50% of the cases. Even fathers from Campinas, who had the highest I-R consistency score, felt that children would behave as they see as ideal only in approximately 58% of the situations. These results indicate that parents perceived a lack of consistency between what they would like their children to do and what they are most likely to do. Table 2 shows that parents from all cities predicted many fewer assertive responses than they considered ideal for their children.

d - Fathers x Mothers

A comparison of mothers' and fathers' consistency score on the items was conducted to verify if fathers and mothers showed more or less agreement between I and R. It was found that they did not differ significantly in São Paulo and Campinas, but that mothers showed lower consistency scores in Rio ($X^2(1) = 25.50$, $p < 0.01$). When the scores of mothers and fathers were combined for ideal behaviors and compared with the sum of their scores for

real behaviors, a significant difference was found ($p < 0.05$) with parents agreeing more on the ideal than on the prediction of the real behavior of their children in the three cities together. An analysis of choices made by all mothers combined and all fathers combined showed that as a whole, they differ significantly in real ($X^2(2) = 7.81, 0.05$) and ideal ($X^2(2) = 6.20, p 0.01$). In the case of real, this difference comes from the number of non-assertive responses since mothers in São Paulo chose non-assertive type behavior more frequently than fathers ($X^2(1) = 1.21, p < 0.05$). This indicates that mothers, at least in that city, perceive their children as behaving in a non-assertive fashion in a number of situations where fathers imagine they would be assertive.

As far as the ideal condition was concerned, the difference came from the choice of aggressive type response, where fathers would like their children to be, in some situations, more aggressive than the mothers ($X^2(1) = 5.60, p < 0.05$).

Summary of the results

It was found that the majority of the Brazilian parents tested showed a significant preference for their children to behave in what is defined as an assertive manner and predicted that in about half of the situations sampled, their children would indeed be assertive. There was a significant difference between the ideal and the real conditions, indicating that children were significantly less assertive than parents wished. Fathers and mothers agreed mostly on what the ideal behavior would be for their children, but disagreed on how they would actually behave.

Some differences were found among cities which related mostly to the distribution of non-assertive and aggressive responses. Fathers and mothers from São Paulo predicted that their children would be non-assertive more than parents from the other cities, and São Paulo fathers wished their children would be more aggressive at times. Mothers from Campinas predicted more aggressive responses from their children which they did not see as ideal; while the ones from Rio wished theirs would ideally be more aggressive on some occasions.

DISCUSSION

The lack of consistency found between how assertive parents would ideally like their children to behave and how they predicted the children would behave indicates that assertiveness training is indeed a valid treatment procedure to be utilized with Brazilian children.

The questionnaire used was based on instruments widely used in the USA to train assertiveness. The instruments have been tested by the authors (Borstein et al. 1977. Galassi and Galassi, 1974) and include items on which

there is no doubt as to the ideal behaviors for Americans being the assertive one. Yet, there was not total agreement on the assertive responses being the ideal response since in 20% of the situations the parents would prefer their children not to be assertive. These results may indicate that, as Eisler et al (1975) mentioned, a specific behavior may or may not be acceptable depending on the culture where it occurs. In this case, any assertive training of children in Brazil should take this factor into consideration.

Although there was a very high agreement between fathers and mothers in terms of the ideal response, there was some disagreement in terms of the actual behavior, with fathers predicting more assertive responses than mothers. It could be that children behave differently in the presence of mothers and fathers, or that there is a true difference in perception of fathers versus mothers.

In testing couples from three different cities, it was expected that differences in the degree of acceptance of assertiveness, aggressiveness, and passivity in children would be found. However, this was not the case in terms of assertiveness. Significant differences appeared only as far as aggressive and passive responses were concerned, with mothers from Rio de Janeiro and fathers from Sao Paulo wishing for more aggressive responses in their children. In the latter case, it could be that fathers perceived their children as overly passive and compensate for this by desiring more aggressive responses. In the case of mothers from Rio, it could be that the daily violence registered in that city leads women to believe that one must be somewhat aggressive to survive.

CONCLUSION

According to the results obtained, it is possible to infer that Brazilian children in the three studies are only assertive in about 50 to 60% of the situations presented. Considering that their parents would like to see them being assertive in approximately 80% of the situations, one can conclude that assertiveness training would be an appropriate procedure to be utilized by child therapists in Brazil. However, notice must be made of the fact that the information was obtained from reports of parents and not from direct observation of the children, and therefore, could contain a bias as far as the parent's subjectivity is concerned. Furthermore, since 20% of the situations sampled were judged by the parents as not requiring assertive responses, it would be advisable that any assertiveness training should be adapted to fit the social characteristics of the Brazilian culture. This is an important issue since the proper adaptation of a child will depend, to a large degree, on what the parents are willing to accept as appropriate behaviors in the natural setting.

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SUMMARY

LIPP, M.N.; NOVAES, L.E.; NACCARATO, A.; NOVAES, M. e BARRETO, M.F.
A cultural validation of assertiveness in brazilian children. Estudos de Psicologia, 9
(3): 31 - 40, 1992.

To test the adequacy of conducting clinical work with children, using assertiveness training which is based on USA literature, fifty-five Brazilian couples answered a questionnaire on the assertiveness of their children. Parents indicated not only how they felt their children would behave in several situations involving assertiveness, but also how they would like their children to behave. Results indicated that the parents would like their children to behave in an assertive manner in 80% of the situations, but predicted that only in about 50 to 60% of the situations their children would actually be assertive. Results were interpreted as providing evidence of the adequacy of the use of assertive training in Brazilian children as long as cultural adaptations be made.

Key words: *assertivity, children behavior, personality.*

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