An Evaluation of Behavioral Skills Training to Teach Assertiveness Skills to College Students

Savannah Warrington & Sadie Lovett
Central Washington University

Introduction

Assertiveness can be defined as a set of behaviors that when combined and put into practice respect the rights of others as well as oneself (Alberti & Emmons, 2009). Previous research has shown that engaging in nonassertive behavior can have negative effects, and that assertive behaviors can lead to a healthier life (Eldeeb et al., 2014; Elliot & Gramling, 1990; Morgan, 1974; Larijani et al., 2010). There is limited behavioral research related to teaching this skill set; however, behavioral skills training (BST) may offer an appropriate intervention option. BST is a method for teaching skills that includes four components; modeling, instructions, rehearsal, and feedback. BST has been effective in teaching a range of skills to multiple populations (e.g., Jones et al., 1981; Miltenberger et al., 1985; Sarokoff & Sturmet, 2004). The current study evaluated the effectiveness of BST to teach assertiveness skills to college students. Generalization to novel situations along with overall satisfaction with training were assessed.

Method

Participants & Setting
-Participant 1 was a male graduate student, Participants 2 and 3 were female undergraduate students.
-Sessions were conducted in a private 2 m x 3 m room equipped with two chairs and a video camera for recording sessions.

Materials
-3 scenarios representing 3 different social situations relevant to a university student were used during training to prompt role-plays
-3 different scenarios were used to test for generalization of assertiveness skills.

Baseline/Training Scenario
1. Your roommate asks you to go to a party but you don't want to go.

Generalization Scenario
2. Your academic advisor recommends that you take a class that you would rather not take.

Figure 1. One baseline/training scenario and one generalization scenario.

Dependent Measures
-Percentage of assertive behaviors as measured by the Assertiveness Checklist (Project 12-Ways, 2007). Assertiveness was defined using behavioral definitions for 9 behaviors that comprise an assertive response (Figure 2). Assertive behaviors earn a score of 2 while nonassertive and aggressive behaviors both earn a score of 0 or 1.

Eye Contact
0 Does not look at person while speaking; looks down or away
1 Most of the time a relaxed steady gaze, looks down or away more than at other person
2 Relaxed, steady gaze occasionally looking away
1 Most of the time relaxed steady gaze, occasionally glares or stares into space
0 Glares at other person during interaction or stares into space showing lack of interest in interaction, stares directly at the other person throughout entire interaction

Facial Expression
0 Constant smiling or laughing, biting or wetting lips, swallowing or clearing throat excessively, or tensing and wrinkling face
1 Open and relaxed during most of interaction, occasionally emits behaviors as noted above
2 Remains relaxed, appears comfortable and attentive matches what the messages says
1 Open and relaxed during most of interaction, occasionally emits behaviors as noted below
0 Clenching teeth, flaring nostrils, jutting jaws, or pursed, tight-lipped mouth

Posture
0 Covers mouth or face with hand, excessive head nodding, fidgets with objects or self, constant shifting of weight, shoulders not symmetrical with body, or rubbing hands
1 Erect and relaxed during most of interaction, occasionally emits behaviors as noted above
2 Body erect and relaxed, appears well-balanced
1 Erect and relaxed during most of interaction, occasionally emits behaviors as noted below
0 Pounding fists, stiff and rigid, finger or hand waving or pointing, shaking head to express disapproval, or hands on hips

Voice
0 Overly soft, slow, or says nothing
1 Firm and audible most of interaction, occasionally overly soft, slow or says nothing
2 Firm and audible
1 Firm and audible most of interaction, occasionally overly loud or rapid
0 Overly loud and rapid

Speech
0 Whiny, monotonous affect, mumbles or is hesitant
1 Clear and expressive during most of interaction, occasionally emits behaviors as noted above
2 Expressive, clear, emphasizes key words
1 Clear and expressive during most of interaction, occasionally emits behaviors as noted below
0 Sarcastic or condescending

Calm
0 Does not take control of situation, reacts excessively calmly
1 Attempts to take control of situation, but eventually lets other person control the interaction
2 Firm and in control of the situation/interaction
1 Intermittently out of control, but eventually acts rationally
0 Yells, argues, becomes hostile or out of control during interaction

Respectful
2 Listens intently to other person during interaction
1 Belittles or cuts off other person, but eventually apologizes or attempts to make amends
0 Belittles other person or cuts person off during interaction

Statement of Purpose
0 Does not take a position
1 Expresses position, but not explicitly stated, may give in to others position without a compromise
2 Position direct and to the point, explicitly stated maintains position throughout but may come to a compromise
1 Expresses position yet attempts to push position on other individual
0 Pushes position on others, expects others involved to conform to their position.

Conversation Content
0 Ambiguous, interacts evasively thus avoiding conflict
1 Clear content but overly explanatory during interactions, makes justifications
2 Firm and to the point not evasive nor overly explanatory
1 Clear content but brings up unrelated issues/feelings
0 Veers off track and brings in outside unrelated emotions or examples

Figure 2. Operational definitions for assertive behavior

Method Continued

Dependent Measures continued.
-Satisfaction survey given at completion of study to determine how helpful and applicable the participant found the training.

Please read the following statements and indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree. Please circle one of the corresponding numbers that best fits with your feelings.

1. I feel this training was helpful in learning to be assertive.
Strongly Disagree 1   Disagree 2   Somewhat Agree 3   Agree 4   Strongly Agree 5

2. I have had the opportunity to use the skills from training in my everyday life. (Continue only if answer is yes)
Yes   No

3. I have become more assertive in social interactions with friends and family since starting this training.
Strongly Disagree 1   Disagree 2   Somewhat Agree 3   Agree 4   Strongly Agree 5

4. I have become more assertive in interaction with my professors, boss or other individuals of authority.
Strongly Disagree 1   Disagree 2   Somewhat Agree 3   Agree 4   Strongly Agree 5

5. I have become more assertive in interactions with strangers since starting this training.
Strongly Disagree 1   Disagree 2   Somewhat Agree 3   Agree 4   Strongly Agree 5

6. I am more likely than prior to this study to stand up for my rights and opinions since starting this training.
Strongly Disagree 1   Disagree 2   Somewhat Agree 3   Agree 4   Strongly Agree 5

Figure 3. Satisfaction survey given to participants.

Procedure & Experimental Design
Participants 2 and 3 were run using a concurrent multiple baseline design. Participant 1 was run nonconcurrently. The procedure is outlined below.

Pre-Training (Baseline) Sessions
• Session: 5 to 10 minutes
• Primary investigator (PI) read a scenario and allowed participants time to respond
• PI scored participant performance using the Assertiveness Checklist
• Both training and generalization scenarios were assessed during pre-training sessions.

BST: Session 1
• Session: 20-30 min
• The need for assertiveness skills was discussed, and the assertiveness definitions were presented.
• A video model was presented demonstrating nonassertive, aggressive and assertive behaviors for scenario # 1
• Rehearsal in the form of a role-play began and the primary researcher provided positive and corrective feedback.
• This process continued until the participant achieved a score of 80% on the assertiveness checklist.

BST: Session 2
• Session: 20-30 min
• Scenario #2 and #3 were presented, and the participant was scored using the assertiveness checklist.
• If the participant reached the 80% criterion training was complete.
• If the participant did not meet mastery on scenario #2 or #3 then BST began (as described above).

Post-Training Sessions
• Sessions were similar to pre-training sessions.
• Responding at 80% for 3 different scenarios across 3 sessions was considered mastery at post-training.
• Satisfaction questionnaire was administered following completion of the final scenario during the last session.

Figure 4. Outline of the study procedure.

Results

All three participants responded low during pre-training probes on all scenarios. Current results show that following two sessions of BST, participants reached criterion during post-training probes (see Figure 5).
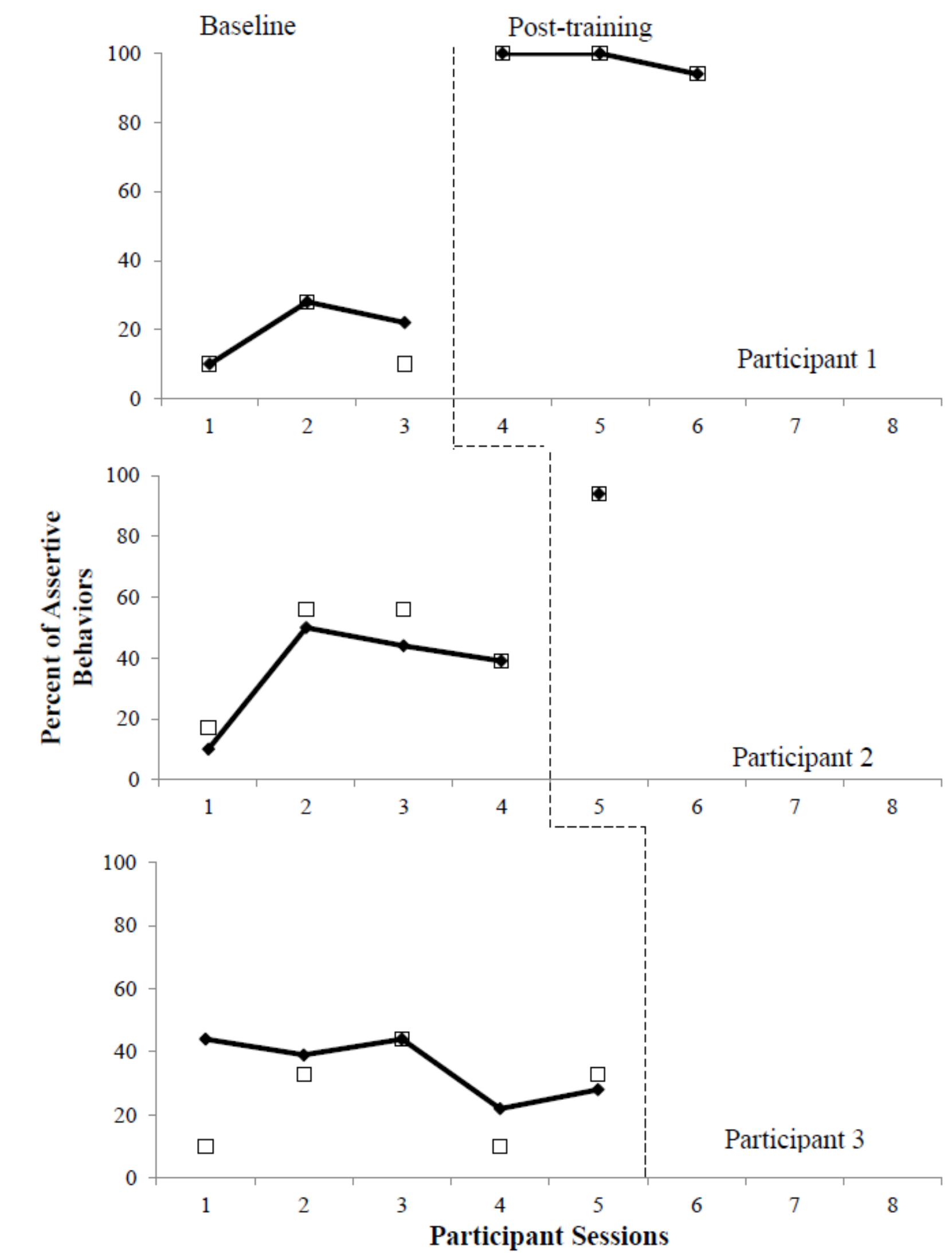

Figure 5. Percentage of assertive behaviors scored using the Assertiveness Checklist.

Table 1 shows the results of the satisfaction survey. At this time only participant one has completed post training and had the opportunity to complete the survey. Participant 1 rated himself as being in agreement with finding the training helpful, and becoming more assertive in interactions with individuals of authority and with strangers. He rated himself as somewhat agreeing with becoming more assertive in interactions with friends and family. Participant 1 also somewhat agreed that they were more likely to stand up for their rights following training.

Table 1

Satisfaction Survey Results

Questions	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3
I feel this training was helpful in learning to be assertive.	4		
I have had the opportunity to use the skills from training in my everyday life.	Yes		
I have become more assertive in social interactions with friends and family since starting this training.	3		
I have become more assertive in interactions with my professors, boss, or other individuals of authority.	4		
I have become more assertive in interactions with strangers since starting this training.	4		
I am more likely than prior to this study to stand up for my rights and opinions since starting this training.	3		

Discussion

The current results indicate that BST is effective for teaching assertiveness skills to college students. At this time only Participant 1 has completed the entire study showing that assertive behavior was successfully trained and maintained through three post-training sessions. Generalization also occurred with three novel scenarios presented during post-training. Participant 1 also indicated in the satisfaction survey that the training was useful and applicable to everyday life. Participants 2 and 3 have not yet completed the post-training phase of the study. However each participant met criterion during BST sessions and Participant 2 performed above criterion in her first post-training session. Participant 2 also showed a significant improvement with the generalization scenario that was presented during the first post-training session.

While this sample size is adequate for the single subject design of the study in order to demonstrate external validity the study should be replicated. A limitation to this study is the lack of in situ training, training in the natural environment. Because of the nature of the study it was impossible to complete in situ training with the participants. In situ training has been shown to increase scores in follow-up assessments when compared to the use of BST alone (Johnson et al., 2006).

At this point in time the full effectiveness of BST in teaching assertiveness skills can not be determined. However the current data indicates that BST will be effective in teaching assertiveness skills in various social situations.

References: Available upon request