Social Skills Training and the Role of a Cognitive Component in Developing School Assertion in Adolescents

Russel A. McNeilly
University of New Brunswick

Charles Yorke
Souris Regional High School

Abstract

Forty-eight Junior High School adolescents (24 males, 24 females) were screened for unassertive school behaviour and randomly assigned to one of four groups: M — modelling only, I — instructions only, M+I — modelling and instructions, or C — control. The training groups consisted of six (45-minute) non-practice sessions, followed by three (45-minute) practice meetings. Significant improvements in self-reported assertion and in assertive behaviour for school situations was found for all training groups following practice. The emphasis on face validity for what was taught, identifying topics of considerable perceived importance and immediacy, and careful attention to contextual cues (setting and person), increased the value of cognitive components in SST with unassertive adolescents and enhanced the results. For guidance counsellors, the practical value of peer mediated versus adult mediated skills training is discussed.

Résumé

Quarante-huit adolescents d'une école secondaire de niveau premier cycle (24 garçons et 24 filles) initialement sélectionnés par leur attitude non-affirmée à l'école sont assignés à l'un des quatres groupes suivants: M — Imitation seulement, I — Instructions seulement, M-I — Imitation et Instructions, ou C — groupe contrôle. L'entrainement des groupes était constitué de six sessions (45 minutes) sans pratique, suivis de trois rencontres (45 minutes) de pratique. Une amélioration importante de l'affirmation de soi rapportée par l'adolescent et de l'utilisation de comportements d'affirmation de soi dans le milieu scolaire a été trouvée chez tous les groupes d'entrainement suite à la pratique. En mettant l'emphase sur la validité de ce qui était enseigné, en identifiant les sujets perçus comme important, en portant attention au caractère immédiat de la situation ainsi qu'aux indices contextuels (organisation et la personne), la valeur des aspects cognitifs a augmenté dans le programme EDHS pour les adolescents ayant un manque sur le plan de l'affirmation de soi, et par conséquent, a amélioré les résultats. Pour les conseillers d'orientation, la valeur pratique de la médiation par les pairs versus la médiation par l'adulte des habiletés d'entrainement est discutée.

INTRODUCTION

Counsellors and teachers historically have placed little emphasis on formal social skills training (SST). Investigations, therefore, into SST to improve social behaviour among adolescents in schools represent a fertile research area.

Traditionally, SST focused on changing the behavioural components of social responding, i.e., helping the client view change from an objective vantage point. In this way, behavioural targets such as eye contact, voice tone, tailoring verbal statements, speech latency, and others are

selected for change. Because of this preoccupation on behavioural change, little attention has been given to cognitions. However, recently (Hanson, 1984; Hartman, 1983; Meichenbaum, 1977) there has been a merging of primary response systems culminating in a cognitive-behavioural hybrid. The cognitive-behavioural hybrid has been associated primarily with the work of Meichenbaum (1975, 1977) in which talking to oneself can work to encourage appropriate behaviour. More recently, this new combined treatment has been gaining momentum, specifically since the introduction of the self-efficacy concept by Bandura (1977).

Expectancies

According to Bandura, success in psychological training results where expectations of personal efficacy or mastery over specific situations are created or strengthened. Bandura (1977) distinguishes between outcome expectancies, defined as "a person's estimate that a given behaviour will lead to certain outcomes" (p. 193) and efficacy expectations, defined as "the conviction that one can successfully execute the behaviour required to produce the outcomes" (p. 193). It is the efficacy expectancies that are stressed by Bandura as influencing an individual's choice of behavioural settings and activities, the amount of effort one will expend, and the duration for persisting with obstacles. Therefore, self-efficacy deals with the perceptions about one's ability to confront specific situations. It is one's inefficacy, or lack of conviction, that produces stressful or anxious reactions. Taking into account intervening cognitive processes enables an individual to predict future behaviour more accurately, on the basis of self-efficacy, than can objective accounts of responses to stressful learning situations.

Need for Studies Involving Adolescents

Recent outcome studies investigating the efficacy of cognitive strategies in ameliorating nonassertive patterns of behaviour have been directed primarily at adult populations. Despite linking cognitive restructuring to adolescents of the 1960s (Ellis & Bernard, 1983) and despite more recent evidence suggesting adolescents may benefit from cognitively oriented assertion training (Deluty, 1981), only a few studies have addressed adolescent populations.

However, research aimed at adolescents may prosper by considering the peaks and shortcomings experienced with adult treatment efficacy research. For instance, studies of training situations that are specific to behaviour problem relevancy (Jacobs & Cochran, 1982) and in terms of person and setting (Pentz, 1981) suggest that cognitive training will increase treatment effects. Moreover, cognitive restructuring affected

personal perceptions of verbal and nonverbal assertive behaviour, re-
duced anxiety, and increased satisfaction with assertive responding
(Jacobs & Cochran, 1982). Further, studies showed that covert modelling
changed assertive behaviour and self-efficacy strength (Pentz & Kazdin,
1982). The extension of training sessions, the use of self-report instru-
ments as screening measures, and the inclusion of a variety of assertive-
ness skills (rather than contrived behaviours such as refusal of requests or
asking for water in restaurants) (Stefanek & Eisler, 1983) are additional
untested recommendations in regard to the application of SST with an
adolescent population.

Purpose

This study responded to the need for more evaluative information on the
role of a cognitive variable set within the framework of social skills
training with adolescents. Two guidelines were used. One was to test the
training components in true settings, as opposed to those contrived
situations that have guided such previous assertiveness training research.
The second was to determine changes in adolescents' self-perceptions
required to execute assertive responses to produce desired outcomes.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 24 males and 24 females selected from an urban junior
high school. They ranged in age from 13 years 3 months to 16 years 7
months, with a mean age of 14 years 8 months. Criteria included a Rathus
Assertiveness Schedule Modified for Early Adolescents (RASM) score of
zero or less (Del Greco, Breitbach & McCarthy, 1981), indication of one
real significant school assertion problem, and ratings of unassertive
behaviour by at least two of four teachers.

Screening Approach

A total of 149 adolescents from 6 classes (3 classes of each grades 8 and 9)
were recruited for screenings for unassertiveness. The screening popula-
tion represented slightly more than one-sixth of the total junior high
school population (N = 180). The six classes were administered the
RASM. Sixty students scored 0 or less. Sixteen teachers rated students
familiar to them on six selected behaviours using a Likert format (Gard-
ner & Thompson, 1956) on social relation indexes and on a global scale
(1 to 10) measuring aggressiveness, assertiveness and unassertiveness.

Fifty-five of the 149 students rated themselves at or below 26 on the
RASM dependent measure for assertiveness, and were rated by at least

two of four teachers to have low levels of social abilities relative to similar age classmates. Having met this initial criteria, all 55 students were asked to complete a modified Galassi Self-Assessment Table (Galassi & Galassi 1977) for identifying specific assertion problem areas.

The 55 students (31 females, 24 males) each selected one school assertion problem that they would like to work on in training. Overlap in selections allowed arranging the selections in descending order along a frequency distribution. The twelve most frequently selected problem situations were used in the construction of modelling scenes for training. To realize a balance of male and female students, 7 of the 31 females that met program entrance criteria received an explanation that the volun teer response was greater than expected and were asked to await the conclusion of the program to receive a reward or training. The remain ing 48 students were divided into two groups (one for males, one for females) and randomly assigned to one of four conditions.

Preparation of Videotaped Models

Six students participating in school drama (three male, three female) and four teachers (two male, two female) familiar to program partici pants volunteered for role plays. In addition to being a member of the school drama club, the volunteer models were among the top academic students in their class and participated in three or more school clubs or organizations. The drama students and teachers were given training that included instruction on appropriate and inappropriate styles of assertive behaviour, and participated in role plays of each style of behaviour to point out the global and specific verbal and nonverbal distinction between these styles and the consequences of each. The concept of personl rights was introduced and a copy of the Canadian Constitution (adopted by Parliament of Canada in 1981) was available to reinforce the concept that respecting one another's rights will set a better tone for interpersonal communication.

Assessment

In addition to the screening measures, an audiotaped behavioural role play test (BRPT) was administered over three testing times (pre-, post- and post-2). The twelve most frequently selected problem situations were assigned numbers from the least frequently selected (#12) to the most frequently selected (#1).

The BRPT pre- and post-1 tests consisted of responses to six school assertion situations (#s 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11). The even-numbered situation were used to assess generalization of training post-test 2. Audiotaped responses were rated for components of assertive performance (9 in

total) and for overall category of success in handling the difficult asser-
tion task (10—not the least successful; 100—quite successful).

Inter-rater reliability for behavioural components was consistenly high
(.90-.93) for level of success on the odd-numbered behaviour person
situations. Two mental health counsellors (M.A. in psychology trained)
familiar with social skills training programs served as raters. The raters
practice rated the videotaped modelling role play scenes prior to rating
student responses to the audiotaped BRPTs. A listing of screening instru-
ments and dependent measures (i.e., assessment plan) is found in Table
1. The dependent variables were analyzed separately for each treatment
condition.

TABLE 1

*Screening Instruments and Dependent
Measures—Assessment Plan*

	Pre	Post-1	Post-2
Dependent Variables			
RASM** (assertiveness)	Yes	Yes	**Yes**
BRPT*** (role play)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Screening Variables			
Teacher Ratings*	Yes	No	**No**
Galassi*	Yes	No	No

　* Used as a screening instrument only.
　** Used for both screening and measuring outcome.
　*** Used as a dependent measure only.

Training Procedure

The participants (N = 48) selected into the program were randomly
divided into one of four conditions: (1) modelling only (N = 12), (2)
instructions only (N = 12), (3) modelling and instructions (N = 12), and
(4) no treatment control (N = 12). Five students withdrew from the
training. Two students (one male from the M+I group and one female
from the M only group) terminated training due to dissatisfaction and to
experiencing difficulty in obtaining permission to attend sessions, re-
spectively. These two subjects withdrew prior to completing post-1 train-
ing assessment. Three students terminated prior to post-2 assessment.
One (male, C group) due to personal desire to quit school for the time

remaining in the term to obtain employment, and two others (one male I only group, and one female, C group) reported difficulties in receivin. permission to attend. Forty-three of 48 participants completed training

There were three treatment groups. All three received six 45-minut nonpractice and three 45-minute practice sessions; all practices wer. post-test after the nonpractice. Training began with a review of defin tions of assertion and nonassertion (Lange & Jakubowski, 1978) and rationale for why the group was meeting and what the sessions migh accomplish for the group. Reciprocity in respecting rights of others wa stressed in order to set the tone for better interpersonal communication

The Modelling Only group was taught verbal and nonverbal skills b watching relevant role play persons demonstrate appropriate assertior At each of the first six sessions videotapes were shown, followed b relevant discussions. Following post assessment, practice sessions ir volved behavioural rehearsal with dyad partners, role-plays in front of camera, and group and trainer feedback using a videotape playback, t. teach participants specific assertion component skills.

The Instructions Only group was taught to become aware of negativ. self-statements that inhibit assertive behaviour. A list of cognitive copin, steps (Meichenbaum, 1975: Alden, 1980; and Fecteau, 1983) was pres ented on audiotape together with written handouts of the same. On. step was reviewed per nonpractice session. Handouts were distribute. consisting of narratives of two (per session) school contrast scenes. Th scenes involved similarly aged students modifying self-defeating state ments. Discussions completed the sessions. Following post-1 testing practice sessions included instructor-led covert rehearsal of positive cog nitive coping strategies which were then practiced in dyads. Feedbac. from group members and trainer were used to identify positive vs negative self-statements and feelings that may accompany the differing thoughts.

The combined group was told during nonpractice sessions that b observing, reading and listening, they could learn to develop appropr. ate assertion skills and to replace negative thoughts with positive self statements. This group read and listened to the list of cognitive copin; strategy steps and viewed in vivo tape. Practice sessions involved rehearsa in dyads and practice in front of the camera. Group and trainer feedbac. focused on verbal and non-verbal components of assertive behaviou including positive self-talk. The control group was granted school permis sion to spend time in the school library.

Target Behaviours

Galassi Matrix: This measure defines an individual's assertion problem as seldom or sometimes engaging in an assertive situation and becoming very nervous or unduly anxious. From the problems selected by 55 subjects who met screening criteria giving compliments (61%), asking for help (47%), receiving compliments (43%), and initiating and maintaining conversation (41%) were indicated as difficult school assertion behaviours (Table 1). Most students expressed difficulty acting assertively with classroom teachers (including the physical education teacher) (78%), peers of the opposite sex (61%), peers of the same sex (51%), and their homeroom teachers (50%). Behaviours that were the least

TABLE 2

Social Skills Training
Modified Galassi Matrix Target Behaviours
and Persons Selection Results (N=55)

Difficult school assertion behaviours:	
Giving Compliments	61%
Asking for Help	47%
Receiving Compliments	43%
Initiating Conversation, etc.	41%
Refusing Requests	19%
Expressing Justified Anger	17%
Assertiveness difficulty towards:	
Other Classroom Teachers	78%
Peers of the Opposite Sex	61%
Peers of the Same Sex	51%
Homeroom Teacher	50%
School Janitor	14%
Target behaviours:	
Expressing Friendliness and Affection	28%
Initiating and Maintaining Conversation	25%
Target persons:	
Peers of the Opposite Sex	57%
Homeroom Teachers	19%
Other Classroom Teacher/ Phys. Ed. Teacher	14%

difficult were refusing requests (19%) and expressing justified ang<
(17%). Few students had difficulty being assertive with the school janit<
(14%).

From the situations selected by students to work on in the trainir
programs the most frequently chosed were peers of the opposite s<
(57%), homeroom teachers (19%), and other classroom teachers i
cluding the physical education teacher (14%). School counsellors, sh<
teachers and school janitors were never chosen. Expressing friendline
and affection (28%), and initiating and maintaining conversation (25%
were behaviours most frequently selected for targets in the assertic
training program.

Training Outcome

Data were evaluated with one-way ANOVA to determine between-grou
differences. Newman Keuls comparisons followed when significant d
ferences were produced. Within-group ANOVAs assessed whether initi
outcome results produced differential pre- to post-1, pre- to post-2 ar
post-1 to post-2 changes.

TABLE 3

*ANOVA on Self-Report Assertiveness
for Within Group Differences*

Groups	df	F value	Significance
M+I	2,32	8.97	$p<.01$
M	2,31	6.30	$p<.01$
I	2,32	4.85	$p<.05$

Self-Report Assertiveness: One-way ANOVA did not yield significant diffe
ences between groups on either pre- or post-1 test results. Howev<
significant between-group difference was found for post-2 test assertiv
ness scores $(F(3,39) = 8.80, p<.01)$ and 1 $(F(2,32) = 4.85, p<.05)$ (Tab
3). Newman Keuls tests revealed the same two pairs of means we:
significant, namely, post-2 and pre- and post-2 and post-1 for groups
and M+I, whereas only post-2 and pre- was significant for the Instructio
Only group.

Behavioural Role Play Test: ANOVA findings between treatments we:
not significant for pre- and post-1 testing but were significant for post
testing $(F(3,39) = 14.71, p < .01)$. All treatment groups were rated

significantly more assertive than the C group and the M+I group rated as more assertive than the instructions only group as indicated by Newman Keuls post hoc analysis.

ANOVA results of within-group changes were significant for all treatment groups (M+I group (F(2,32) = 31.94, p < .001), M group (F(2,32) = 14.55, p < .001) and Instructions Only group (F(2,32) = 6.24, p < .01) (Table 4). Newman Keuls comparisons revealed all three BRPT repeated measures (Pre- to Post-1, Post-1 to Post-2, Pre- to Post-2) were significant for the M+I group, while only two conditions (pre- and post-test 2 and post-test 1 and post-test 2) were significantly different for the M only and the I only groups.

TABLE 4

ANOVA on Behavioural Role Play Test
Results for Within Group Differences

Groups	df	F value	Significance
M+I	2,32	31.94	p<.001
M	2,32	14.55	p<.001
I	2,32	6.24	p<.01

DISCUSSION

This study emphasized methodological rigour by including necessary social stimuli (person, setting to reach specificity) in training situations and by using pertinent screening criterion which aided relevant target problem selection. Findings revealed that when given the opportunity to select a target behaviour from a wide base of behaviour and person combinations, participants do not pick "canned" or contrived ones typically found in traditional Assertiveness Training. A similar finding with male and female adults is reported by Jacobs and Cochran (1982). Instead, adolescents choose behaviours that would lead to improved social relationships such as showing affection, initiating and maintaining conversation and giving and receiving compliments, all positive assertive behaviours (of a rather personal variety). When problem behaviours are selected and they are found to be of a personal nature, the behaviours are expected to heighten the effectiveness of assertion training. This feature points to the problem highlighted by Stefanek and Eisler (1983) when they exposed weakness in similar research: "Surprisingly, few of the investigations have dealt with 'positive' assertion behaviours, such as conversation skills or giving and receiving compliments" (p. 309).

The results of this study are encouraging. Cognitive-social skills of unassertive, shy adolescents improved, especially when practice through role playing was introduced in the training regime. Student participants receiving the various training programs were able to perform at increased levels an array of component skills (voice tone, speech latency, tailored sentences, construction of alternatives to assertive situations, coping for extended times in audiotaped role plays, personal feeling and position statements) more quickly than students in the control group. Students in the cognitive and/or modelling groups also reported increased perceptions of mastery, or of ability to execute the above skills necessary for producing favourable outcomes. Furthermore, these changes were supported on self-reported assertiveness measures.

The cognitive-behavioural strategies adolescents used to respond to other adolescents, and strategies used to respond to adults in school situations were expected to be quite different (Meisels & Selman, 1984). Therefore, sensitivity to the contextual cues including the target persons and immediacy of assertive needs or problem relevancy will provide for future research a critical guidepost in determining how best to provide training to the needs of adolescents. This was one of the major interests in the current research and seemingly a major advantage of the entire Cognitive Social Skills Training (CSST) program. The real life quality of the problems presented in training such as the familiar setting with high profile peers as models (though not so perfect as to discourage students from trying the skills being taught) and recognizable school staff members, allowed early interest in the program to emerge. Some suggested uses of this format, which included audio visual scenes, audio role play opportunities, and stimulus materials may include application to regular classroom teaching by school personnel who do not have specific psychological background or training in administering CSST. The input received from the adolescent subject prior to program delivery made it possible to calibrate the high demand assertiveness situations at school. This input did yield benefits for unassertive adolescents and may be useful to other groups as well. Sarason and Sarason (1981) note that disadvantaged students may not be able to identify specific faults in their social behaviour but they may be more able to identify situations where these weaknesses have no impact.

More research is needed to explain why changes in behavioural responses to the BRPT were not greater than recorded prior to practices. One may suggest that the effect of peer pressure inhibited expected learning, especially in groups receiving the modelling component. In this sense, peer pressure impedes adequate development of skilled responses for personal growth, coping ability and capacity for social adaptation. Festinger (1954) highlighted the importance that other individuals have on another social identity. Therefore, when considering

CSST with adolescents, a critical factor to consider is the influence of peer perceptions.

One way to deal with peer pressure would be to introduce peer social initiations that would endorse social skills training. The peer social initiation is aimed at changing perceptions from "other-transformed" statements ("If I try this others will think badly of me") to "self-transformed" statements ("If I try this I have a chance of qualifying"). This form of peer facilitation can be introduced in the early stages of Cognitive Social Skills Training.

Guidance counsellors, teachers, and youth counsellors may teach skills to adolescents from their several perspectives, but this information is presented very often from a position that is not representative of the adolescent milieu. It is adult-mediated. The sustaining effects of adult-mediated skills training to adolescents are not long-lasting (Strain and Timm, 1974). Perhaps a reason for the lack of transferring of skills from the training environment may be due, as Gouldner (1960) explains, to the norm of reciprocity. Just as drug treatment (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous) therapists are familiar with and often dependent upon the culture of their clientele to promote sustained abstinence and successful service delivery, so too counsellors dealing with adolescents can benefit from knowledge of and support from adolescent cultures to promote and prompt real and rewarding changes.

SUMMARY

This study lends support to the claim made by Jacobs and Cochran (1982) that problem relevance and specificity in situations enhance the role of a cognitive component in effecting change. The results would indicate, as Morley et al. (1983) have noted, that the cognitive component is definitely a key element in social skills training. Thus, cognitive intervention for changing assertive behaviour, and the adolescent's perceptions of this, promise to be an effective tool in school counselling, perhaps most effective when adolescent peers are involved in the service delivery.

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About the Authors

Charles Yorke received the B.Sc. (St. F.X.), Hons. Psych. and M.Ed. from the University of New Brunswick. He won the Dunlop Award for the M.Ed. thesis in Social Skills Training. He is Head of Guidance at Northside Victoria District School Board, Nova Scotia, and President of the Atlantic Chapter of CGCA. His research interests include Cognitive Social Skills Training, Career Development and Community Psychology.

Russell A. McNeilly received an M.A. (McGill) in Ed. Psychology and a Ph.D. (Lond.) in Child Development and Ed. Psych. (Clinical Applications). He has been Professor of Counselling and Educational Psychology at U.N.B. for 25 years. His research interests include Cognitive Social Skills Training, School Psychology, Health Psychology and Human Rights Education.

Address correspondence to: Charles Yorke, Head of Guidance, Cedar High School, Neil's Harbour, Nova Scotia, B0C 1N0.