Assertiveness in Professional Women

ASSERTIVENESS IN PROFESSIONAL WOMEN

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This thesis is grounded in the Expectancy Violations Theory, developed over several years by Burgoon and Hale (1988). This study explores the ways in which professional women communicate and behave assertively in their organizations – sometimes in violation of social expectations that women should be meek and compliant rather than assertive. This study was devised to answer the following questions: In the continuum of assertive traits, which traits and practices do professional, self-described assertive women particularly value and strive for? What reasons do they provide? What moments in their lives do these women see as turning points when they began to learn about using assertiveness as a practice? The questions were explored in the context of two focus groups made up of a total of nine women in various organizations in a small Midwestern town. Participants in both groups value assertive traits that show support for others, as well as for their organization, including respect for the other, honesty, effective communication, and advocacy – some might say on the traditionally feminine side of the continuum of assertiveness. The women show a clear understanding of the difference between assertiveness and aggression, equating aggression with a focus on power and assertiveness as respectful and effective communication. Knowing that assertiveness is often more accepted in men than in women, the participants consciously choose when and how to behave assertively. Many have undergone profound transformational experiences, turning points, in which they pushed themselves to act assertively and even boldly when the circumstances required it. In the process, they discovered that assertiveness is an effective set of skills on which they can draw when the time is right.
We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree Master of Arts.

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Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Assertiveness has been the study of psychologists and communication scholars – as well as the topic of books in popular culture – for decades. In the field of communication, assertiveness falls within the study of interpersonal communication, and Stewart (2012) defines interpersonal communication as “the kind of communication that happens when the people involved talk and listen in ways that maximize the presence of the personal” (p. 36). Assertiveness is seen by such scholars as Sipe and Frick (2009) as being a “skillful” form of interpersonal communication in which participants are open to one another about their own feelings and perspectives and respect those of the other (p. 67).

This study focuses on a particular application of assertiveness: the use of this practice by professional women working in a small town in the Midwest. It explores the women’s perceptions of assertiveness, how others perceive them in their attempts to be assertive and professional, the traits and aspects of assertiveness they most value and strive to live out, the ways in which they have developed those skills, and the challenges and successes they have experienced over the years. Further, the study compares and contrasts the experiences of these women through such variables as the type of organization in which they work, the core values of those organizations, and their age and years of experience in their organization.

1.2 Importance of the Study

Today, in the early years of the 21st Century, the development of a culture of assertiveness is especially important in light of the rampant sense of division and violence in the Western culture (Sigler, Burnett, & Child, 2008, p. 91). A culture composed largely of assertive
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people would be an antidote to this often violent polarization because of the emphasis in assertiveness on respect and equality for all people involved. It would especially benefit our society to promote the practice of assertiveness among women, who are still in many cases brought up to be supportive and polite rather than forthright and assertive.

As Alberti and Emmons (2012) describe it, assertiveness is an effective interpersonal communication attitude meant to “promote equality in person-to-person relationships...[and] to exercise personal rights without denying the rights of others” (p. 8). Sigler, et al. (2008) thus see assertiveness as a “more optional communicative behavior for maintaining positive human relationships and resolving conflicts than is aggression” because it promotes harmony, ensures that all needs are met, and decreases the sense of resentment that can build up when those needs are not met (p. 91).

1.3 Statement of the Problem

If assertiveness can bring so many benefits to our society, one might wonder why it has taken so long for its practice to be universal – and why, in particular, professional women have such a difficult time expressing it. Litwin and O’Brien Hallstein (2007) state well the challenges that professional women have traditionally experienced – and continue to experience – in their efforts to be assertive in the workplace:

[W]omen are always already at a disadvantage because workplaces have many unspoken rules of behavior, rules, and communication norms that are fundamentally premised on masculine ways of communicating and interacting in the world. …[A]s a result, women are at a disadvantage because their communication strategies and expectations, speech community, and interaction
styles are distinctly different from masculine communication strategies and expectations. (pp. 129-130)

Much of communication and leadership literature has focused on assertiveness in professional women in particular because the directness and initiative most often associated with assertiveness are often seen as counter to the social expectations that women should be “helpful, affectionate, and nurturing” (Jordan-Jackson, Lin, Rancer, & Infante, 2008, p. 243). Because of the expectations placed on them as both professional and female, women have often had to choose when to be more assertive and when to use the softer traits more often associated with women (Aldoory, 1998, p. 97; Schullery, 1998, p. 360).

Among other issues, this study explores whether, in fact, the women participants have also experienced this need to decide when to behave assertively – and when to conform to social expectations. What factors drive these women to dare to act assertively – against the norms set out for them as females? And how do these women become transformed by the very practice of assertiveness when conforming to the expectations of others can be so much easier and safer?

1.4 Definitions of Terms Used

For the purposes of this study, it would be vital for readers to understand the difference between assertiveness and aggression. Alberti and Emmons (2012) describe aggression as a set of behaviors in which the aggressor speaks his or her own mind in a way that hurts the other person, and as one who controls others, makes choices for them, and is “self-enhancing at the expense of the other” (p. 41). In contrast, they describe an assertive person as one who does, indeed, voice his or her own opinion and possibly achieves goals, but always with respect for the other person – allowing the other his or her dignity (pp. 40-41). Women in this study identified
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tagression as a communication style and set of behaviors that try to grasp power over the other person, and assertiveness as a way to work with others to achieve a common goal.

In exploring how professional women value and practice assertiveness, this study assumes that assertiveness is not a fixed communication pattern practiced uniformly by all people, but rather a continuum of traits and practices. These traits and values, gleaned from the Assertiveness Inventory devised by Alberti and Emmons (2012) range from respect for the rights of others, helping others to “save face,” and helping others to achieve their goals to standing up for one’s own rights and expressing one’s emotions and opinions (pp. 12-13). These assertive traits range from concern for the other to concern for oneself and for one’s organization. This study focuses on the traits of assertiveness that are most valued by the women – and how these values relate to the organization in which she works and to that organization’s core values.

1.5 Organization of Remaining Chapters

The remaining chapters of this thesis provide background information on the study itself, provide and discuss the results, and draw conclusions.

Chapter 2, the Literature Review, offers the philosophical basis of the study, that each human being is worthy of respect and of being treated as a subject rather than an object. The chapter describes the evolution of the Nonverbal Expectancy Violations Theory, the communication theory that has served as the context of this theory. The literature review itself explores how this theory can be applied to the subject of this study: assertiveness in professional women. Finally, Chapter 2 lays out the two research questions that are explored in the study: which traits and practices of assertiveness do professional, self-described assertive women
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particularly value and strive for? What moments in their lives do these women see as the turning points when they began to learn about assertiveness as a practice?

Chapter 3 describes the methodology of the study in which the answers to the research questions are uncovered. The study involves two focus groups of professional women who work in organizations in a small, Midwestern town. This chapter also describes the ethical considerations in conducting the study, the confidentiality involved in the focus group discussions, and a brief description of the validity and reliability of the methods used in this qualitative study.

Chapter 4 describes the women in the two focus groups and gives a detailed list of the various areas of concern that were discussed in the groups – including the women’s view of the most important aspects of assertiveness; their perceptions of assertiveness, including their need to decide when and how to practice assertive behavior and their belief that assertiveness is accepted more readily in men than in women; assertiveness as a set of skills that need to be practiced; and their commitment to mentoring younger women to be assertive; the challenges they face in being assertive; and the turning points in their lives in which they were transformed, discovering within themselves the strength and flexibility to act decisively or speak difficult truths respectfully when these skills were required.

Finally, Chapter 5 concludes the paper, describing the key areas of discovery that came out of the study and the various limitations of the study, and offering suggestions for further, related avenues of research into assertiveness in professional women.
2. Literature Review

Theoretical Basis

Expectancy Violations

Professional women today face competing expectations. As professionals, many are expected to behave assertively and effectively in their relationships with others in their organizations. Yet, perhaps unconsciously, our culture still expects them to behave as the gentler, more supportive and more cooperative gender. Each woman has a unique personality, and some might genuinely have those gentler, more cooperative traits expected by our culture, while others might not. How women remain true to their nature – while meeting both cultural and organizational expectations – is the subject of this study.

Judee Burgoon’s Expectancy Violation Theory explores the benefits and risks of speaking or behaving in a way that is unexpected by the other (Griffin, 2012, p. 92). The gist of this complex theory is that, as long as people maintain the norms of communication, “the expectancies themselves and the nonverbal behaviors they govern should operate largely out of awareness” (Burgoon & Hale, 1988, p. 61). However, if one of the people violates subconscious expectations “to a sufficient degree to allow the deviation to be recognized,” the other person is distracted from the actual interaction to the source of the “arousal” of attention, leading to the receiver of the message the option to interpret the behavior in a positive or negative light (Burgoon & Hale, 1988, p. 62).

Burgoon’s theory is based on earlier theories, notably that of anthropologist Edward T. Hall. In his study of the cultural aspects of time and space, Hall (1973) found that the very basic factor of a comfortable physical distance between people is culturally based; the person who
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feels that the other person is standing too close tends to react, perhaps by backing up. When one person stands unexpectedly far away from another in conversation, he or she might be seen as aloof and unfriendly (pp. 180-181).

Burgoon and Jones (1976) build on this theory in their own study of proxemics, or personal space (p. 131). They found that the amount of deviation from personal space expectations that one would tolerate depends on a number of interpersonal variables, such as whether the “initiator” of the action is seen as a “reward source…who demonstrates liking, acceptance, or approval” or a potential source of punishment, those who “appear unattracted to the reactant, who are critical, or who reject the reactant” (p. 137). They hypothesize that, on the whole, “violations [of personal space] closer than norm should have positive effects when initiated by a reward course and negative effects when initiated by a punishment source” (p. 141). In the opposite situation, if a “reward source” was farther away than expected, they would produce negative emotions, such as the feeling of being threatened; a source of punishment standing farther away would likely produce a positive reaction because of a reduced perception of threat (pp. 140-141). Burgoon (1978) later conducted a detailed pilot study on this and other hypotheses and, as a result, confirmed the above hypothesis (p. 140).

In their report on yet another experiment to clarify the Personal Space Violations Model, Burgoon, Stacks, and Woodall (1979) note the need to base the norms for personal distance on the preferences of individuals (p. 155). The study confirmed both “the role of physical appearance in influencing the reward value of an interaction” and the advantage of “conforming to the norm” of distance for “nonrewarding or punishing individuals” (p. 166). Burgoon and Aho (1982) conducted three field experiments on the validity in the “real world” of the original
model’s contention that “violations of [proximic] expectations may have positive consequences depending on the nature of the individuals engaging in a violation” (p. 71).

Burgoon and Aho (1982) carried the model further by studying “the communication process itself…so that the model could be more firmly enmeshed within the domain of communication” and to study “other nonverbal message forms” other than personal distance (p. 72). Their experiment did confirm that violations of expectations led participants to a deeper level, to “redirect their attention to interpersonal, social concerns” (p. 88) but it did not verify the effect of these violations on other nonverbal behaviors (p. 88). That verification was achieved by Burgoon and Hale (1988), as they studied the effects of the violation of expectations of “nonverbal immediacy” – whether body language such as eye contact and an open posture indicated that the other person was orientated toward or away from the reactor (p. 75). “Decreases in nonverbal immediacy…communicated detachment, nonintimacy, dissimilarity, and dominance” and thus brought about a negative reaction, while increases in nonverbal intimacy conveyed the opposite message and were received positively (p. 75). Thus, Burgoon and other theorists have broadened the earliest studies on violations of personal space to include a greater spectrum of communication.

Interpersonal Communication and Assertiveness

Assertiveness falls within the field of interpersonal communication, which Stewart (2012) defines as “the kind of communication that happens when the people that are involved talk and listen in ways that maximize the presence of the personal” (p. 36). Sipe and Frick (2009) describe it as a “skillful” form of interpersonal communication in which participants are open to one another about their own feelings and perspectives and respect those of the other (p. 67).
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Assertiveness has been a topic of study and discussion in academics and in popular circles since Alberti and Emmons (2012), in their classic work now in its ninth edition, challenged readers to develop this set of interpersonal communication behaviors. They defined assertiveness as “direct, firm, positive – and when necessary persistent – action intended to promote equality in person-to-person relationships’ (p. 8).

In their emphasis on fostering relationships of equality, Alberti and Emmons (2012) note the importance of speaking up for oneself but also of treating the other person with respect, even during conflict and confrontation (p. 8). They further distinguish assertiveness among non-assertive (passive) and aggressive behavior. The non-assertive person fails to express their own feelings and preferences in deference to others (p. 40) while the aggressive person “frequently hurts other people …by making choices for them and minimizing their worth” (p. 42).

Assertiveness can also be seen as a set of traits and behaviors that enhance personal relationships. Alberti and Emmons (2012) include an assertiveness inventory to help readers determine their own level of assertiveness. Their inventory includes such behaviors as expressing one’s emotions and preferences, standing up for one’s rights, showing respect for the other even in situations of conflict, and expressing positive regard for the other, maintaining eye contact, tact, and introducing oneself (pp. 12-13).

Psychologists Melvin L. Gay, James G. Hollandsworth, Jr., and John P. Galassi (1975) developed the Adult Self Expressive Scale (ASES) as a more professional, clinical means to measure assertiveness in adults, and as a complement to the professional College Self-Expression Scale (p. 340). The scale studied two dimensions of assertiveness: every-day situations that call for assertiveness and assertive behavior: from “expressing personal opinions
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and refusing unreasonable requests” to “standing up for legitimate rights [and] expressing negative feelings” (p. 341). A later study by the same psychologists recommended that the ASES be augmented by peer evaluations to get a more accurate measure (Hollandsworth, Galassi, & Gay, 1977, p. 410).

Much study of assertiveness has been focused on a particular trait: argumentativeness, which “enables a person to recognize controversial issues, to present positions on the issues, and to attempt refutation of the others’ position” – all with an emphasis on the issues at hand rather than the aggressive use of personal attacks on the other person (Onyekwere, Rubin, & Infante, 1991, p. 36). Infante and Wigley (1986) clearly distinguish between the assertive trait of argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness, which uses messages that “attack an individual’s self-worth in order to make the person feel less favorably about self” (p. 61). Infante and Wigley (1986) further note that people who lack the skill of argumentativeness often resort to verbal aggressiveness in order to win or hold their own in a debate or disagreement (p. 62). Another study by Infante and Rancer (1993) focused on the argumentative traits of advocacy, “the act of presenting and defending one’s own position,” and refutation, “attacking an opponent’s position” without engaging in personal attacks (p. 423). Their study confirmed the inherent skill and concern with complex issues involved in argumentativeness – and the danger that those who lack this skill could resort to aggressive, hurtful arguments (p. 424).

Woods (2015) describes feminine speech patterns as “a primary way to establish and maintain relationships with others” (p. 113). Feminine communication aims to “establish equality,” share experiences with others, and show support and understanding (p. 113), as opposed to masculine speech patterns that include more competitive elements, such as “establish[ing] status and control” (p. 114). In this way, many women do not have to counteract
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the tendency to be aggressive but rather their tendency to display more passive behavior. In a study of undergraduate students, Prisbell (1985) equated assertiveness with nonverbal behaviors such as eye contact, a relaxed attitude, and “availability for communication.” Students who scored higher in the scale of shyness, on the other hand, exhibited a lack of confidence and discomfort in social situations (p. 122).

Sigler, Burnett, and Child (2008) contrasted the direct, assertive culture of the New York Metropolitan area with the “nice” culture of the Upper Midwest which tends to avoid conflict (pp. 89-90). In discussing their tests that confirmed the stereotypes – even among people who were not native to the particular region in which they lived – Sigler, et al. (2008) found that the level of assertiveness can be associated not only with gender but with the surrounding culture (p. 98). Most telling, however, is their warning about the drawbacks of the passive “nice” approach of the Midwesterners and many women – it can lead to “passive-aggressive” communication which masks anger under a cloak of “social modesty” (p. 98). They point to the dangers of both aggression and passivity, noting that assertiveness is “optimal communicative behavior for maintaining positive human relationships and resolving conflicts” (p. 91).

Literature

Application of Nonverbal Expectancy Violations Theory to Assertiveness in Women

In attempting to apply the Nonverbal Expectancy Violations Theory to assertiveness in women, the first task is to explore our cultural expectations of women. In early studies, Baird (1976) noted the cultural view of women as “dependent, passive, fragile, nonaggressive, non-competitive …empathetic, intuitive, and supportive” (p. 180). Women are also seen as able to communicate “more effectively than males in social dimensions of group interaction” (p. 182).
Baird and Bradley (1979) showed the effectiveness of women as business managers, especially in how their management style on the whole has a positive effect on their employees’ job satisfaction, the quality of relationships, and the quality of communication (pp. 107-108). “In communication style, females generally were perceived to be more concerned and attentive than males, who in turn were perceived to be more dominant, more directive, and quicker to challenge than were females” – and thus not always as effective as women in building up employees’ morale (p.106).

Jordan-Jackson, Lin, Rancer, and Infante (2008) describe the Western culture’s view of women as “caring and other-oriented,” with “less emphasis on aggressiveness” and with a goal to “establish rapport and build relationships” (243). They contrast this with the expected goal of men’s conversation: “to maintain independence and to negotiate one’s status” (p. 243). Jordan-Jackson, et al. (2008) used the reactions of 108 undergraduate communication students to specially-produced videotapes to assess the students’ perceptions of women and men engaged in conversations that included aggressive behaviors; argumentativeness; and styles of affirmation or non-affirmation (pp. 246-247). The students reacted negatively to women who behaved assertively – a behavior more accepted when used by men – because the women did not fit the stereotype of women as “helpful, affectionate, and nurturing” (p. 243). Jordan-Jackson, et al. (2008) conclude that “when a woman behaves more assertively or a man behaves less assertively than what is expected, they may suffer social disapproval and be perceived less favorably than when they fulfill expectations” (p. 243).

Through the years, women have effectively adapted their communication style to fit the needs of the time. For example, Keith (2007) shows that late 19th-century African-American women social activists such as Mary Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells, speaking out on the grave
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injustices against their people, used “a more masculine speaking style as opposed to a feminine one because of the challenges in their situation in the United States at this time” (p. 2). White women of their time employed more passive, feminine tactics: use of personal examples and a “somewhat tentative” tone, and an effort to “appeal to the sentiments of the audience” (p. 13). Keith (2007) concludes that African American activist women’s situation – rather than their gender – “determined their speaking style” (p. 24).

Some 100 years later, in interviews and follow-up with five female public relations educators and five practitioners, Aldoory (1998) found that women still use this “situational approach” (p. 97). Participants used “two-way communication” in which they engaged the other party, often focusing on the other person’s needs or on the desire to work closely with the other person to settle a conflict (p. 90). She concluded that the women in her study were “situational” in their approach to leadership – making use of either assertiveness or the more feminine, “two-way” language, depending on the situation (p. 97).

Much of the literature shows that professional women still struggle to balance their assertive leadership qualities with the expectations of others – and the effects those expectations have on their professional and personal lives. Schullery (1998) notes the importance of argumentativeness for managers and supervisors in their efforts to “advocate for their departments” (p. 360). The most successful women were “moderately argumentative” (p. 359): those who are too low in argumentativeness cannot be effective advocates for their departments, while those who are too high violate the expectations of women, making them less likely to be promoted (p. 360).
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Pfafman and McEwan (2014) found that professional women still face this quandary: “either ‘too female’ to be professional or ‘too professional’ to be female” (p. 202), and often to be “both assertive and polite” (p. 203). In interviews of 18 women in 15 organizations, Pfafman and McEwan (2014) found that, to be successful, they had to use a number of strategies to balance assertiveness with politeness or other softer communication skills expected of women (p. 206) while men’s consistent use of assertiveness was acceptable (p. 211). One participant spoke of having to “hide” one aspect of her personality – her feminine nature or her assertiveness – while making use of the other, as the situation demanded (p. 204). Another transferred to another department within her organization to a position that required less assertiveness and more of her ability to coach and serve others (p. 215).

Still other studies focused on the types and cultures of organizations and how they affected the communication patterns of women employees. Peters and Froehlich (2006) studied the roles of women in German public relations firms, contrasting their status in corporations – in which the focus was on the image of the particular company – and public relations agencies, which tend to be smaller and to work with diverse clients (p. 6). They speculate that women prefer public relations agencies because the agencies are “less dominated by a masculine culture” found in corporations. Women also appear to do better in the smaller, less competitive environment of agencies. “[I]t is argued that men lack crucial sensitivity and empathy towards maintaining relationships with clients, journalists, target groups,” while women’s personalities and skills give them an advantage in this environment (p. 11). Thus, some women choose fields and organizations that demand less competition and assertiveness and more relational skills (p. 18).
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Elmore (2007) studied the effects of the predominantly male culture on 15 women who had quit after working in daily and weekly newspaper newsrooms (p. 20). Participants described a culture that “encouraged toughness but scorned other emotions” (p. 21) and in which female reporters were often assumed not to be able to withstand certain assignments and were thus “saved” from those situations by their male colleagues (p. 22). Women in the newsroom tended to be strategic in their communication behavior; for example, those who wanted to succeed could “emphasize more masculine traits on the job” to give them the opportunity to serve as leaders or receive better assignments (p. 25). Others capitalized on what they saw as helpful traits in journalists, such as a “more empathetic, human-centered interviewing style” (p. 24).

A very brief study of the assertive communication style of women who work for a community of Dominican Sisters – including four Dominican Sisters and a lay woman – has shown that these women have acted assertively, yet on the continuum of assertive behaviors that tends more toward care for the other person (Kelley, 2015, p. 2). In the study, the women noted the value of assertiveness in helping them to get their own point of view across when working with others, of having women’s voices accepted, yet they also seemed to emphasize the value of showing respect to the other, especially colleagues and those who worked for them (p. 5).

Rationale

Studies through the years have been consistent in showing that women’s communication style is expected to be more polite, agreeable, compliant, cooperative, and other-directed than that of men. Even in the 21st century, when the white, middle-class culture of the U.S. Midwest – the dominant culture studied in this paper – appears to support and value women as equal to men in the workplace, women have still felt the pressure to comply with these expectations,
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while also being effective as organizational leaders. At the same time, organizational leadership studies have shown the effectiveness of women in following their natural inclination to coach and support their employees.

Many of the studies about assertiveness in women have been about the women and about how women are perceived. Women, in effect, have been the objects of these studies. This study aims to both to confirm the findings from the very brief study noted above and to explore women’s own perceptions about assertiveness – what they value in this communication trait and how they shape their own form of assertiveness. This study will take a qualitative approach to exploring further these questions:

RQ1 – In the continuum of assertive traits, which traits and practices do professional, self-described assertive women particularly value and strive for? What reasons do they provide?

RQ2 – What moments in their lives did these women see as turning points, when they began to learn about assertiveness as a practice?

2.5 Philosophical Assumptions

The philosophical underpinnings of this study are primarily those of utmost respect for each human being as a subject – a philosophy taught so beautifully by Buber (1973). In his classic work, *I and Thou*, Buber (1973) writes of the most the most basic of relationships: “The basic I-You establishes the world of relation” in which both parties are respected subjects (p. 56). The “I-It” relationship, on the other hand, makes the “it” – whether a thing or a human being – as the “object” to be acted on rather than a respected being (p. 55).
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As stated above, then, the purpose of this work is not to treat the women involved as inanimate objects to be studied, but as women who willingly and honestly reveal their own truths about how they perceive themselves in relationship to others. It will be a way to explore – with them – what it means to be women who strive to be equal to others, to be assertive with others in a way that is unique to each individual woman. It will be an opportunity to collaborate with the women involved in such a way that we might help to advance our society’s understanding of assertiveness.
3. Scope and Methodology

3.1 Scope

This study is a limited, exploratory investigation into how professional women from a small, rural, Midwestern county understand and practice assertiveness in their professional lives. It will provide the opportunity for women in a cross section of occupations to explore for themselves during the interview process the values that they place in the continuum of assertive traits, the expectations that are placed upon them by their organization and the public with whom they work, their own expectations of themselves and their colleagues and the ways in which they may – or may not – violate those expectations, depending on the current situation.

The study is also designed to discover and hypothesize in a preliminary way the possible connections between the women’s organizational culture and the values that they place on assertiveness. For example, do women in more competitive fields frame their assertive behavior on making their voice heard among their colleagues, while women in religious or service-oriented fields focus on showing respect for the other? What consequences do these women face if they violate the expectations of their organization’s culture?

Because of its geographical limitations and the small sample of women, this study is not intended to serve as a comprehensive exploration of the general population of professional women, nor is it intended to yield definitive and completely objective results. Rather, it is intended to be a snap shot on how particular women handle the expectations of others – and their own – in their practice of assertiveness. Even with its limitations, the study could also be seen as the basis for a more comprehensive, quantitative study, and one that could be replicated with other women and men, in broader geographical locations and organizational cultures.
3.2 Methodology

This study takes a qualitative approach, making use of focus groups, one of the most basic techniques, to “document real events [and] record what actual people say (with words, gestures, and tone)” to get a glimpse of the professional lives of women (Neuman, 2011, p. 175). Qualitative research explores the “social context” of the people who are involved – the time, place, emotions, and culture that are involved – to help develop an accurate interpretation of the particular situation (p. 175). Thus, the study will focus not so much on quantitative numbers of the women involved, but on the meaning they place on their own situation (pp. 175-176).

Because of time limitations, this study was drawn from in-depth discussions by two focus groups of professional women. The first focus group was composed of four lay women who work at the Motherhouse of a congregation of Catholic sisters, as leaders and managers of various components of the organization: an advisory board, campus facilities, the congregation’s retreat center, and management of the nursing staff of the retirement center of the sisters. The women represent a variety of ages and years of experience with this congregation. This organization was chosen because it has a well-established culture that respects the individual while striving to be of service to those in need and faithful to the Gospel of Jesus. The results of these interviews could be a confirmation of an earlier study in which four women who served in this organization appeared to focus their assertive behavior on respecting and supporting the other person, even in cases of confrontation and conflict (Kelley, 2015, p. 5).

Five other women were chosen from among organizations participating in the United Way campaign of the small, rural Midwestern county with the help of a colleague who formerly
worked for the United Way campaign and who also participated in the focus group. The women represented a local insurance agency, two local non-profit organizations, and a health system. This diversity enabled the researcher to make a comparison among the various organizational cultures and the ways that the women in the focus groups meet – or did not meet – the cultural expectations of those organizations in their expressions of assertiveness.

The women were personally invited to participate in the focus groups by the researcher or her colleague as an opportunity to discuss – in confidence – how they see assertiveness in their professional lives, in their particular organization; the expectations they face from their colleagues; their own struggles and challenges in being assertive; and instances in which they had been successfully assertive. The focus group format is designed to give participants an open, friendly forum in which to voice their concerns with other women professionals; exchange ideas; and gain insights into new, more effective, ways that they can communicate with others.

The discussion in the focus groups was based on both closed and open questions, which are listed in the appendix. The closed questions helped to determine such information as the type and culture of the organization in which each participant works; how long she has worked there; and her role or title. This provides the hard data which can be used in comparing the experiences of assertive women in different organizational cultures. The open-ended questions were designed to give the participants the opportunity to give detailed descriptions of their experiences and the emotional impact that these experiences have had on them, to shape the “narrative” of their experience (Neuman, 2011, p. 525).

3.3 Data Analysis
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Qualitative researchers “begin with the point of view of the people we study [to] find out how they see the world and define situations” (Neuman, 2011, p. 177). Thus, analysis of this study has involved interpretation of transcriptions of the focus groups and the themes presented during the discussions.

The recorded discussions by the focus groups were analyzed through the system of open coding of the various themes that arose in the focus groups (Neuman, 2011, p. 511). Color-coding the participants’ mention of various qualities and aspects of assertiveness helps to uncover how often these themes arise for each participant and to compare the similarities and dissimilarities of themes among the various organizational cultures. The results of the focus group discussions were also analyzed as narratives. Neuman (2011) points to narrative analysis as a qualitative technique to study the social settings of the people involved (pp. 524-525). This method will allow the analysis of the women as individuals in their efforts to respond assertively to their organizational experiences as a way to explore “overall framework” of the various roles that women are expected to play (pp. 524). The analysis of the data from the study group, while focusing on the specific situations of the women involved, will also add data to further, more general studies of assertiveness in professional women.

3.4 Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity in qualitative research is not as stringent and objectively measured as required in quantitative research (Neuman, 2011, p. 216). In qualitative research, reliability refers to “dependability and consistency” of the data by using “a wide variety of techniques” (p. 214). During the focus group sessions, the researcher was able to make observations of the participants’ nonverbal cues and group interactions, along with their verbal
Assertiveness in Professional Women narratives. These various facets of the participants’ communication in the focus groups allowed for consistent, reliable observation. To be valid, qualitative research must be truthful and authentic, “offering a fair, honest, and balanced account of social life from the viewpoint of the people who live it every day” (p. 214). This study meets that requirement of validity, describing and exploring the truths experienced by the women in their working lives. In many cases, the women’s experiences were laid out exactly, word for word, as the women themselves described them – and often included the women’s own conclusions that they had drawn from that experience. The analysis of the data from the focus groups is also valid in that it will be an “accurate representation of the social world” as seen by the women involved in the focus groups (p. 456).

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Neuman (2011) recognizes several ethical prohibitions in conducting research; the research must “never cause unnecessary or irreversible harm to participants…and never unnecessarily humiliate, degrade, or release harmful information about specific individuals that was collected for research purposes” (p. 145).

Participation in the focus groups was completely voluntary, and participants had the opportunity to preview the questions that were asked. The focus group sessions were recorded, and each participant was asked for the record whether she voluntarily consented to participate in the study. The facilitator also laid down the ground rules: the identity of each participant will remain confidential in the study’s written report of the discussion, and participants were free not to answer any of the questions that made them uncomfortable and to leave the process at any time.
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The atmosphere in the focus groups is intended to be informal and open, allowing each woman to express her own experiences. Every precaution was made against participants personally attacking or embarrassing other participants. From the beginning, the focus group facilitator will make it clear that the experiences and perspectives shared in the course of the discussion would be kept confidential and that no disrespect for other participants would be tolerated.
4. The Study Analysis and Results

4.1 Introduction

This study involved gathering the perceptions and experiences of assertive communication from professional women meeting in two separate focus groups. Participants in Focus Group 1 were four professional lay women who work at the Motherhouse (headquarters) of a congregation of Catholic sisters, located in a small, Midwestern town. To ensure confidentiality, the first names of the women have been changed. With this understanding, the participants readily gave verbal consent to take part in the study and allowed the discussion to be recorded and transcribed for accuracy.

Participants were Bonnie, the associate director of the retreat house; Hannah, facilities director; Monica, executive director for one of the congregation’s advisory boards, and Penny, who serves in management in the congregation’s residential center for retired sisters.

Focus Group 2 was made up of five women who work in leadership or management in organizations around the county: Becky, the director of quality resources for two hospitals in a large health care system spanning two states; Cindy, director of a nonprofit organization that serves low-income families; Fran, in management at a large local insurance agency; and Sarah, in management at a local YMCA. Also participating in Focus Group 2 was Paula, who currently serves in management at the Motherhouse but who recently worked in a local community agency and was able to recruit members of Focus Group 2 through her contacts. All of these organizations – including the lone for-profit, the insurance agency – have among their core values a strong focus on service to individuals and to the community. The organizations also play
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pivotal roles within the small community – either for members of the community at large or for specific population within the community, such as low-income families or insurance clients.

4.2 Results

During the focus group discussion, participants were asked to introduce themselves and to note where they worked, how long they have worked there, their title, and a brief description of how they understand assertiveness. Questions dealt with such areas as their organization’s core values; their personal assessment of their current level of assertiveness; assertive skills and values that they particularly value; their development in assertive skills; a description of a turning point in their practice of assertiveness and of an incident in which they were assertive during a time of conflict; and the way others in their organization perceive them when they are behaving assertively.

Members of both groups are middle-class Caucasians, representing the majority of the residents of their particular small Midwestern town. However, they represent a diversity of ages. In Focus Group 1, Bonnie, Monica, and Penny are all in their 60s, while Hannah, relatively new to working at the Motherhouse, is in her 30s. The diversity in members of Focus Group 2 is greater: Becky is in her 60s, Sarah and Cindy are in their 50s, Fran is in her 40s and Paula is in her 30s.

Age was a factor in the experiences of the women. The older women, for example, noted that their upbringing had predisposed them to greater cultural biases against assertiveness in women. In a quick interchange during Focus Group 1, Monica and Penny shared their challenges. “It’s taken me years to overcome being too passive, just practicing my skills to get my voice heard,” Monica said. She and Penny agreed that their initial experience was that
women should be “seen and not heard.” At the same time, their greater years of experience had given them more opportunities to develop their assertiveness. “I think it definitely takes time,” Becky said in Focus Group 2. In Assertiveness, “you continue to learn skills and learn…not to go too far and cut people off, to really hear what people are saying. It takes practice – years and years of practice.”

The younger participants, who grew up in an era when assertive women were at least nominally more accepted, still had to fight the expectations that women behave meekly and play a supportive role in their organization. Fran, in Focus Group 2, said that in her interactions with her team of 11 men in her insurance agency, “I feel that my role is just to be the eyes and ears and participate, but not be the assertive one there.” This confirms findings by scholars such as Pfafman and McEwan (2014) who noted that the professional women in their study “encountered resistance if they adopted the assertive style they saw in their mentors but they received positive reinforcement for politeness” (p. 208). Thus, the younger women, while apparently coming of age in a time when professional women were more accepted, still had to contend with at least unconscious expectations of female behavior – without the years of experience and enhanced confidence that benefitted the older women.

Analysis of the transcript of these focus group discussions uncovered a number of themes largely held in common by members of both groups. The various words and concepts discussed by the women were placed into five broad categories for easier study and analysis. The results were drawn from the number of incidents in which the women mentioned or discussed the concepts.
Three of these categories deal with qualities or skills that the women found as integral to assertiveness.

**4.2a Communication Skills**

The first of these categories encompasses a number of communication skills recommended for assertive leaders. These were drawn from a list of effective communication skills described by Sipe and Frick (2009) to help leaders to function interdependently with team members (pp. 51-52), but were also mentioned by the focus group participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>FG1</th>
<th>FG2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constructive feedback</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct, open communication</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective Communication</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuasion through facts</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>19</strong></td>
<td><strong>14</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants noted the value of communicating effectively with their superiors, their peers, and those who reported to them. Many of the women emphasized both listening to others and being listened to. For example, Sarah, of Focus Group 2, said that she was most successful in her assertiveness when she has been “listening and at the same time not get[ting] so focused on what I’m trying to get across, but instead being willing to listen and hear the other point of view.”
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Women in both focus groups saw the value of effective communication as a general assertive behavior. Fran, of Group 2, stated explicitly that “assertiveness to me means to effectively communicate what you want” as well as what you need. Open, direct communication was seen as a specific method of effective communication for the women in Focus Group 1. Penny, a nurse by training, said she learned to be “direct and forthright” in her career out of necessity. “It’s critical to patient care,” she said. She has carried this assertive style into her work in management. “I think sometimes my directness can set people back, so I have to be careful exactly how I approach [a situation].” Hannah, also in Group 1, expressed her concern that younger professionals have lost the ability to communicate directly and often hide behind email to get their point across, but “you can’t lose that face-to-face touch. …You get so much more resolved, so much more done, when you have that face-to-face [communication].”

The women saw constructive feedback as key way to work effectively and assertively with peers and people who report to them. Monica, of Group 1, sees assertiveness as the ability to be positive and “to be able to voice freely what you actually believe.” The key to being assertive in an organization, she said, is to produce positive change by working with others constructively.

Others saw persuasion through facts as an assertive form of communication – keeping the discussion focused on concrete situations at hand rather than on personal differences. Becky, a member of Group 2 who serves in two small hospitals in her state in a health system based largely in a neighboring state, has had to use this technique frequently to represent the interests of her hospitals. In arguing her case, she said, she needs to point out that her state’s laws are different from the health care laws of the other state. “So it’s speaking from facts, using the law and
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knowledge” that has been an effective means of persuasion, she said. “I think the knowledge is so important, to speak with that authority.”

Ironically, Fran, also in Group 2, saw the discussion of personal feelings – in addition to facts – as a way to communicate effectively. “For me it boils down to ‘I statements’ and my feelings” – stating her own emotional reaction to someone else’s actions rather than accusing the other person of doing something wrong. Fran is thus following the traditional assertiveness practice recommended by Alberti and Emmons (2012): ”Use ‘I-messages’ to express your own feelings, rather than passing on the responsibility for how you feel to someone else” (p. 81).

4.2b – Leadership Skills

The second category of emerging themes, particularly in Focus Group 1, dealt with leadership skills, as focus group participants spoke of the various ways that they tried to lead assertively in their organizations. Of special concern to the participants was the need to collaborate with others, be decisive and take action, and seek solutions to problems rather than placing blame or focusing on personal issues. Table 2 shows the frequency that these themes were discussed in the two focus groups.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>FG1</th>
<th>FG2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decisiveness/Action</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking Solutions</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The vast majority of the discussion on leadership skills took place during Focus Group 1; this was largely led by Hannah, who in the past few years began working in a leadership position at the sisters’ motherhouse after serving professional roles in other organizations. She above all tended to use the vocabulary of leadership – terms such as collaboration and inclusivity – while the other women in her group confirmed her description of how these skills were employed at the motherhouse.

Women in Focus Group 1 in particular spoke of the importance of being empowered in their work – and in turn empowering younger colleagues. Bonnie said that, when she has had to make decisions, she was told by her superior, “That’s your job. You make that decision. …You don’t need to ask me everything.” This message from her superior, she said, gives her the permission she needs to act assertively and decisively in her position. Other members of Focus Group 1 spoke of their own sense of empowerment in working in this organization led by women, Catholic sisters. “That’s one of the perks of working and living on this campus,” Bonnie noted. “You’re empowered and you have role models, and you’re encouraged, and you’re valued. You can start as a housekeeper but that doesn’t mean you won’t end up as a finance person.” Hannah described the working environment for the most part as a “support system where you feel, ‘I can be involved in this, or I can step up and gain the knowledge that’s needed to be more assertive.’”

Decisiveness, the ability to take action, was also a valued quality. “Being decisive, making a decision and not being wishy-washy is a trait of assertiveness,” Cindy, of Group 2, said. Hannah, of Group 1, spoke of the need to be involved, to be part of the team and part of the
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solution, while Monica, also in Group 1, spoke of her own need earlier in her career to push herself, to speak out at every meeting.

Several participants told of incidents in their past when they had to take action – in spite of inexperience – because of the need for somebody to step in and take command of a situation. Hannah, of Group 1, recalled an emergency that took place while she was the manager of the patient switchboard registration area of a small hospital. During the night shift, after a rare shooting in the small town, both the shooter and the victim were brought to the same emergency room in neighboring beds, surrounded by their families. “It was a very volatile situation and I was pretty much the only manager there,” she recalled. Although she didn’t know what to do any more than others in the room, she said, she took action to prevent a greater emergency from taking place. By taking charge in this incident, she gained confidence to act decisively in similar situations.

Women in both groups also noted the value of inclusion. In Group 2, Sarah upheld it as a particular value of the YMCA, the organization’s efforts to ensure that its services are open to everybody, regardless of such factors as inability to pay. Fran, in the same group, noted her habitual efforts to ensure that everyone is included in a discussion, even going so far as to help a less assertive person make her point or to speak up for her. Cindy equates inclusion with empathy, “listening to the others in the room and hearing their sides” as well as your own.

In Group 1, Bonnie said she often feels the need to ensure that “everything works for everybody,” that everybody’s needs are met. Hannah emphasized the need to avoid offending others, but rather to include them in the process of collaboration. “That’s going to show you as assertive rather than demanding.”
4.2c – Personal Qualities

The two focus groups also uncovered a number of personal qualities that they believe are integral to assertiveness: confidence, honesty, passion, a positive attitude, and respect. Table 3 lists the number of times that these qualities were discussed within the groups.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>FG1</th>
<th>FG2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty/integrity</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passion</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Attitude</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>21</strong></td>
<td><strong>20</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of all of the assertive qualities, confidence was the one most often mentioned by members of both focus groups. Hannah, of Group 1, closely associated assertiveness with confidence, with being “comfortable in your own skin, so you don’t have to worry about what’s going around you. You’re comfortable with your decisions and who you are.” Paula, in Group 2, stated her belief that self-confidence is key to being assertive. She sees the need for confidence even in so simple a matter as calling a credit card company to dispute a charge. “You’ve got to have that confidence to say, ‘I know that that charge isn’t right’ or ‘I feel strongly that this is the
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way we should go.’” She added that confidence comes with experience, with gaining more knowledge in one’s field through the years.

Along with confidence, the women valued a positive attitude as a component of assertiveness. Cindy, of Group 2, believes that assertiveness itself is a positive attitude, a positive approach to living, compared with the more negative approach of aggression. Monica, of Group 1, noted her own belief that assertive people bring a positive message to those around them and are thus able to work well with others.

Two assertive qualities were only discussed in one group. Members of Focus Group 1 saw honesty, being true to themselves, as key to assertiveness. Bonnie noted an important moment in her career when she refused to do something she had been asked to do because it made her feel uncomfortable. Although she had to endure a year of anxiety, not knowing the full repercussions that this stance would have on her career, she felt that “by sticking to my principles and my values and my integrity, I put myself on the path of becoming the woman I want to be and the woman I think I’ve become.” Fran, in Focus Group 2, related her insurance agency’s emphasis on integrity. “We do what we say, and we say, ‘no excuses’” for not accomplishing what they’ve promised.

Members of Focus Group 2 saw the value in a related quality: passion, caring deeply about a particular issue or concern. The women agreed that passion can drive them to be assertive – and can put them in danger of going too far and becoming aggressive. Being passionate about an issue “can take it too far and then maybe it does become aggressive,” Sarah said. Noting the situational nature of assertiveness, she added that she would be more likely to choose to be assertive if something she passionately cared about was at stake. Cindy, also in
Group 2, cited “deciding what you’re passionate about” as one of the key components of assertiveness.

Focus Group 1 members also discussed respect. Both Hannah and Monica spoke of the need to be respectful of others – especially those who disagreed with them – in department meetings and discussions. Penny noted the importance of getting a message across to others without being condescending or disrespectful.

4.2d – Assertive Practices and Behaviors

Another set of themes deals with a variety of assertive practices and behaviors: advocating for others; standing up for oneself, including setting limits; and learning and teaching assertiveness skills. The breakdown for discussion of these themes can be found in Table 4.

Table 4

| Incidents of Assertive Practice Themes in Focus Group Discussions |
|-------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Theme                   | FG1 | FG2 |
| Advocacy for others     | 4   | 6   |
| Standing up for self    | 7   | 2   |
| Learning/teaching skills | 13  | 8   |
| **Total:**              | **24** | **16** |

The women in both focus groups strongly believed in the value of learning and teaching the skills of assertiveness through such means as mentoring, taking advantage of a supportive environment, and watching others who exhibit assertiveness skills. Becky, of Group 2, believes that learning to be assertive “definitely depends on mentoring. …It’s a matter of having those
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role models and mentors in your lives,” from parents to “people in our careers who have helped us on that journey over the years.” Sarah, also in Group 2, said she has relied on mentors to help her understand when she has “crossed the line” from assertiveness to aggression in a moment of passion.

The women also spoke of their own need to mentor younger colleagues. Penny, in Group 1, spoke of her efforts to mentor the younger nurses she works with, giving them the support they need to make their own decisions. “I always said to them, ‘If you can tell me that you handled this this way and why you thought it was the very best thing you could do for that sister at that moment, I’m going to support you.’” She and the other members of Focus Group 1 agreed on the need to pass on what they had learned from others and give younger colleagues the support they need to grow in assertive skills.

Members of both groups also saw the benefit of simply watching others to see how they handle a situation that requires assertiveness. “You’re always picking up new ideas from other people and how they handle situations,” Cindy said in Group 2. Penny, of Group 1, noted, “I still to this day watch people very carefully at meetings, people who I know are successful…the way they word things, the way they express themselves.” Just by making those observations, she said, she has developed her own skills.

Women from both groups also emphasized the need to use their assertive skills to advocate for others. Fran spoke in Group 2 of her tendency in meetings to watch out for others who are not as articulate and assertive and to make sure that their voice is heard. The women who had been involved in nursing especially saw themselves as advocates for their patients. Penny, of Group 1, recalled a time when, as a staff nurse, she had trouble controlling a patient’s blood pressure and repeatedly called the doctor to consult with him. When he told her not to take
the patient’s blood pressure again and not to call him again, she retorted, “I will take the blood pressure again and if it’s this high, I will call you.” In spite of the intimidation of arguing with a doctor, Penny said, she knew that she had to act in the patient’s best interest.

In a similar vein, the women in both groups saw the need to be advocates for themselves, which included standing up for their own beliefs and setting limits on their time commitments. For Becky, of Group 2, assertiveness is “working constructively to represent ourselves or others who we’re working with.”

4.2e – Gendered Perceptions of Assertiveness

The final set of themes relates to the women’s perception of assertiveness. The common themes that arose in this area are, in effect, interrelated: participants note that assertive behavior is more acceptable in men than in women. Because of this, the women are “situational” in the way they behave assertively, and thus make conscious decisions over when and how to be assertive. They also see assertiveness as a set of skills that can only be developed through deliberate practice. The incidents of the discussion of these interrelated themes can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>FG1</th>
<th>FG2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Situational</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires conscious choice</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills need to be practiced</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More accepted in men than women</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Members of both groups spoke frequently of their perception that assertiveness is situational – that how and even whether they use their assertiveness skills depends on what situation they find themselves in. Factors include who else is involved and whether or not they are in charge at the particular time. Sarah noted in Group 2, for example, that she would be more assertive if she was more passionate about a particular issue. Paula, in the same group, noted that she would take more of an assertive lead in a situation in which she has more expertise than others, while if “I’m sitting at a table with people who have been doing fund-raising longer than I’ve been alive, I’m the quiet one. I have nothing to say in that group because they know way more.” Monica, of Group 1, stated that her own assertive behavior depends in part on the venue and on the other people involved in the situation.

A related theme is the conscious choice that the women make whether or not to be assertive in a particular situation – or how they will show their assertiveness. While both groups spoke an equal number of times about the situational nature of assertiveness, more women in Focus Group 2 spoke of making a conscious decision, perhaps because they serve in organizations that are not led predominantly by women and more often have to determine how they will be judged for their assertiveness. Fran, the only woman in a team at her insurance agency, noted the importance of “pick[ing] your situations.” During meetings with her team of 11 men, she said, “I feel that my role is just to be the eyes and ears and participate but not to be the assertive one there.” Becky finds herself in a similar situation, dealing with a Board of Directors that is mostly men for a health care organization made up largely of women. “I find myself biting my tongue just to keep the peace and realize when it’s not mine to handle, he can
do whatever he wants.” Cindy spoke of the need to “choose our battles,” deciding whether an assertive act would be perceived as assertive or aggressive.

Women in Focus Group 1 recalled times in previous organizations when they had had to decide when to be assertive. However, they also noted particular challenges within the motherhouse organization itself; lines of authority are not drawn by gender as much as by the authority of the sisters in leadership – who are generally older than the lay women who work for them. Thus, while the women who work at the Motherhouse are generally supported when they demonstrate assertiveness with others in the organization, they often find it a challenge to be assertive with the sisters in leadership. Monica pointed to this dynamic, to the occasional reluctance of the sisters to accept new ways of operating. “So we’re kind of stuck and we know it’s got to change,” she said. “It can’t go on the way it always has.” As executive director of one of the advisory boards, she has found the assertiveness to convince the leaders to go against the long-standing tradition of only including sisters on the board – to open up the board to lay associates and to other lay people who have expertise and experience in the area.

Recognizing the need to make conscious choices, the women also described assertiveness as a set of skills – almost a tool kit – that need to be practiced. “Practice is the key to all of it,” Monica stated in Group 1. She recalled her earlier days in her career, when she had to set a goal to speak and to assert herself at least once during every meeting. “Just practicing my skills to get my voice heard, I think, was the biggest challenge for me.” Becky, in Group 2, sees the development of assertiveness as an effort that takes time – and that is never completely accomplished. “You continue to learn skills or to control your passion and not cut people off, to really hear what people are saying,” she said. “It takes practice – years and years of practice, and there are times when it goes well and I am pleased and there are times it doesn’t.”
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With all of their efforts to learn and practice assertive skills – and to choose when it is appropriate to use them – the women recognized in their discussions that assertiveness appears to be more acceptable when practiced by men than by women. Hannah, in Group 1, noted that the same action performed by a man and a woman could earn the man the title of a “good leader” and a woman the perception that she is cranky and nagging. In Group 2, Cindy spoke of her belief that women are falsely judged by others in the organization as being aggressive when they are, in fact, acing assertively. Sarah, the first female executive at the local YMCA, still occasionally hears the comment, “If a man were running the situation, it would be different. …I’ve seen women be treated differently through the years in certain situations where a male could get away with [assertive behavior].” Still, she believes that this double standard has been lessening somewhat over the years.

4.2f – Core Values of Organizations

Along with the common themes on assertiveness, the women in the two focus groups described with great ease and understanding the core values of their organizations. In Focus Group 1, while the women all worked for the same organization, they also spoke of the specific values of their individual departments. Bonnie noted the retreat center’s special emphasis on hospitality, which she also sees as part of the spirituality of the sisters. Along with the sisters’ mission statement that calls for peace, truth, and reverence for life, the members of Focus Group 1 also cited efforts to improve the world, to develop healthy and positive relationships, and to develop peace, justice, and mutual respect.

Participants from Focus Group 2 work in diverse organizations, yet many of their core values have similar emphases. The women from the three non-profit organizations described values that focused on the common good. For example, Cindy’s organization has a mission to
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“meet the basic needs of low-income families in [the] county with respect and without judgment,” promoting the dignity of their clients. Sarah cited the values of the YMCA as youth development, healthy living, and social responsibility. She summed up the mission in this way: “helping youth to develop to their fullest potential, helping people find ways to live a healthier lifestyle, and then making sure that everything we do is available to everyone.” Paula, who works for the sisters, understands their mission as “preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ,” and ministering in the areas of education, health care, and service to the poor.

Sarah described the values of her health care system in terms of the “old verbiage,” which includes collaboration, compassion, team work, and excellence. In addition, she said, the system focuses on innovation, which makes a difference because of the frequent, significant changes that take place in the health care field. Through recent efforts to rewrite the system’s mission and vision, the 5,000 employees helped to name the value of improving their patients’ health and well-being.

Fran’s organization – the only truly for-profit agency represented in the two focus groups – values “integrity in every aspect, in every position across the board”; respect for everyone “both inside the organization and outside”; stewardship; and innovation, taking advantage of “any technical advances that can make our clients’ lives easier.”

4.2g – Personal Narratives of Assertiveness

Members of the two focus groups frequently enlivened their discussion of the themes of assertiveness and the core values of their organization with personal narratives about how they lived out assertiveness. In many of these stories, the women displayed amazing examples of assertiveness in situations that truly called for an assertive and often bold response – often pulling assertive skills from within when the occasion demanded it. Examples include stories
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related above: Hannah’s decisive, “take-charge” actions in the emergency room when the shooter and his victim were in neighboring beds and Bonnie’s staunch refusal to take an action that made her feel uncomfortable – at the cost of a year anxiety over losing her job. Fran, of Group 2, told of being in charge of building a carpet store. “There were only male carpenters and construction people telling me how they thought things should be,” she recalled. “While they knew more and had more experience than me, they also didn’t have my vision. … Being put in an uncomfortable situation can do wonders to help you increase your assertiveness levels.”

Two participants told of episodes when, very early in life, they exhibited amazing assertiveness skills. In Group 2, Paula said her parents owned two auto parts stores, each managing one of them. Paula recalled being in a back room of the store that her mother managed and hearing a customer yelling at her mother. Paula was about seven years old at that time. “I never even thought twice,” she said. “I got up and I went to this mechanic and I said, ‘If you have a problem with my mother, you can take it up with me.’” The man calmed down.

Becky, also of Group 2, knew in eighth grade that she could not continue in the Catholic K-12 school she had been attending; her family could not afford it. For her part, she was considering whether she was called to religious life and wanted to spend time in a public high school to experience more of life. Her homeroom teacher, a Dominican sister, confronted her and told her that she had to stay in the school, even offering her a scholarship. Becky firmly held her ground and told her she was not staying – partly to help her family but also because moving on to a public high school was her own desire.

Sarah, in Group 2, summed up the dynamic of these episodes aptly: in these uncomfortable, often critical situations, “you either find your assertiveness or fail.” Participants in both groups thus generally understood assertiveness as a set of practices that they needed to
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develop and continually practice if they want to perform effectively and professionally in their organizations, particularly in moments of crisis or challenge. While they marveled at Paula’s and Becky’s ability to tap into assertiveness at their early ages, they also understood that assertiveness in itself is a necessary set of practices for professionals.

4.2h – Challenges of Assertiveness

The focus group participants were also candid about the challenges they face in their efforts to be assertive. At the most basic level, many of the women found that they were challenged in the early days of their careers by their lack of experience, knowledge, and confidence. Paula, of Group 2, said in best in her description of her early days of working at the motherhouse 20 years ago – before she went on to work for other professional organizations and return to work at the motherhouse.

When I first started working here, I was 19, I think, and I was sitting around a leadership table with four sisters and somebody who worked here for 20 years. So, I didn’t say anything at those meetings – nothing! What could I say that would even make sense with this group of people? I just didn’t have the confidence.

Paula said that now, with her years of experience and greater confidence, she could most likely hold her own with that same group of people. At the same, she added, if she were to sit with a group of development experts, she would again revert to being quiet and listening – but by conscious choice.

Participants agreed that assertiveness can be more of a challenge with people who hold tightly onto their authority – whether or not that authority is based on gender. Becky, of Group 2, feels that, in working with people who have power or authority, “it’s definitely a challenge to try
to make your point be known. You have to recognize who the authority is, and you might not have the authority. All you can do is try to make your point.”

For Penny, in Group 1, the challenge of working with some people in authority is making her point without becoming aggressive. “You have to be almost over-assertive or almost toward the aggressive side because you have to be able to get your point across and you’re not really listened to.” In a similar vein, she struggles with making her point when several people disagree with her. “I think it’s harder to assert yourself – it is for me, any way, standing alone or almost alone.”

In general, the women felt challenged by the need at times to go against society’s expectations of women and to risk being judged negatively because of their assertiveness. Unfortunately with women, sometimes being assertive is seen in more of a negative way and looked at as being aggressive,” Sarah said in Group 2.

Monica said in Group 1 that her biggest challenges are being assertive enough to make her voice heard in a meeting or other discussion and “saying no” to requests “out of respect for my own time and sanity. My time is limited and it’s a valuable commodity, and so that’s where I still work hard to…say ‘no’ earlier rather than later.”

4.3 Discussion

The results of this study are a clear confirmation of the Nonverbal Expectancy Violation Theory, which states that “there are circumstances under which violations of social norms and expectations may be a superior strategy to conformity” (Burgoon & Hale, 1988, p. 58). In many circumstances, the women in the focus groups violated social expectations that women should be meek, quiet, and helpful. When they felt the need to assert themselves and followed up on this need – often for the sake of the organization or another person – they derived some benefit from
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violating expectations, often strengthening themselves in the process. At other times, when they found that circumstances called for a less assertive approach, the women behaved less assertively, complying with often unstated cultural norms for women. A case in point is Fran’s decision to be less assertive when meeting with her team of 11 men because her assertiveness would not be accepted.

Perhaps Penny best stated the gist of the Nonverbal Expectation Violation Theory:

> I think people feel the risk in being assertive. … You just have to think about what the benefit is, too. Is the benefit worth the risk? And so, I think that is the important thing. Yes, there is risk, and yeah, we accept that as part of being assertive and trying to do what is right.

Thus, the results of this study confirm what had been discovered in other studies: that women consciously and intentionally choose when to use the tool kit of assertiveness – and when to meet the standard, social expectations of women (Aldoory, 1998; Pfaffman & McEwan, 2014; Schullery, 1998).

Professional women must deal with organizational and cultural expectations in addition to those of society at large. Earlier studies have shown the various expectations of regional cultures in the United States (Sigler, Burnett, & Child, 2008) and of various organizational cultures (Elmoor, 2007; Peters & Froehlich, 2006). This current study has provided an opportunity to expand on research into the relationship between women’s assertiveness patterns and the culture of the organization in which they work: how the women negotiate these more specific cultural expectations.

Participants in Focus Group 1 represent a much more homogenous organizational culture. Although they work in separate departments – which entail, to a degree, different values and
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expectations – the values and culture of the congregation of Catholic sisters influence all of the departments. The organization is run, for the most part, by women, with a greater expectation that the professional lay women exhibit solid communication skills, including assertiveness. The women in Focus Group 2, by contrast, generally have to contend with the more traditional organizational culture in which men play key roles – and thus with more traditional, though perhaps unconscious, social roles and expectations for women. At the same time, only the women in Focus Group 2 spoke of the passion that drives them to be assertive when necessary – even in the face of a traditional organizational culture that might misunderstand this assertive behavior.

These general cultural differences account for some of the different emphases in the focus group discussions. For example, the participants in Focus Group 2 placed much greater emphasis on the need to make conscious choices of when to be assertive – whether they or their organization would most benefit from compliance with, or violations of, the expectations of women. Focus Group 1 participants felt much more supported and empowered to be assertive in their daily work, and thus had less need to decide whether or not to violate expectations. In most cases, assertive behavior would conform to, rather than violate, expectations. Hannah spoke to the dichotomy of expectations in the two general organizational cultures: the Motherhouse campus run by the sisters and organizations with a greater male corporate influence:

I think back…to other places where I’ve worked, other corporations.

[Assertiveness is] not an expectation in a lot of jobs, and I know with other roles I’ve had, you weren’t expected to stand up. There was a handbook and there were procedures, but you weren’t expected to go above and beyond. I definitely think it’s a cultural thing here, and we’re very fortunate to have that experience [of
being supportive in assertive behavior], because it’s not that way in a lot of places.

As mentioned above, the women in Focus Group 1 deal with lines of authority that are not drawn by gender, but by the dynamic of vowed religious sisters – the authority figure in this organization – and lay employees, as well as along generational lines. Thus, lay professional women who find it difficult to confront somebody in authority, or who are intimidated by their relatively lower level of experience could, in many instances find behaving assertively while working at the Motherhouse to be a challenge. This squares with findings in other studies that an individual’s expression of assertiveness is influenced by factors other than gender. For example, Elmore (2007) found that women who had left the predominantly male culture of newsrooms did so not only because of gender differences but also because of individual differences in “race, ethnicity, age, experience, and other characteristics” (p. 24).

The organizational differences might also account for the discrepancy in emphasis on leadership skills. The total of five leadership practices were mentioned 22 times in Focus Group 1, compared to only six times in Focus Group 2. The Motherhouse is one of the largest employers of the local town, giving employees frequent opportunities to work together as teams in such areas as collaboration, inclusivity, and problem solving. The organizations represented by the members of Focus Group 2 – with the exception of the health system – are much smaller, and in many cases the women work predominantly with clients rather than colleagues. However, a different flow of conversation in the two groups could also account for the disparity in the mention of leadership practices, since, as noted above, they seemed to be a subject of particular interest to Hannah in Group 1. Even with some differences in cultural organization and expectations, however, the experiences of the members of both focus groups showed clear
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similarities. Across the board, the women saw the need to mentor, be mentored, and advocate for others, and valued such assertive traits as confidence and a positive attitude.

The women in both groups understood the situational nature of assertiveness and society’s tendency to value this trait in men more than in women. This belief has been confirmed in a number of studies. In an early study, for example, Baird (1976) noted the stereotypes of the different genders, learned early in life: more active, with greater “aggressive-assertive tendencies” and overt leadership skills than women (p. 190), who in turn are expected to be “dependent, passive, fragile, nonaggressive…inner-oriented, empathetic…and supportive (p. 180). Jordan-Jackson, Lin, Rancer, & Infante (2008), in a study based on similar gender stereotypes, found that students who watched videos of men and women using the same aggressive words disapproved of the women. The women were seen as more aggressive than the men because they did not behave according to the students’ expectations of women (p. 253).

The discussions in the focus groups also answered the two research questions put forth for this study.

RQ1 – In the continuum of assertive traits, which traits and practices do professional, self-described assertive women particularly value and strive for?

As seen above, the women in the focus groups strive for traits and practices that would bring about effective communication in their organizations: listening, constructive criticism, empathy, directness and openness, and persuasion. In addition, they sought to develop assertiveness to enhance their leadership skills and their relationships with colleagues, superiors, people who reported to them, and customers or clients. Thus, they focused on empowerment, efforts to seek solutions to problems, inclusion, decisive action, and collaboration. Hannah expressed the women’s efforts to be assertive leaders in their organizations well: “[When] we
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include ourselves and try to be part of the team and be part of the solution and collaborate
together, that’s showing our assertiveness as well.” As noted above, the women in both groups
value the assertive traits of confidence, honesty, passion, a positive attitude, and respect.

In many ways, many of the traits and practices valued by the focus group participants fall
to a degree within society’s expectations of women; these traits demonstrate an attitude of
concern for the other and the ability to work with others to reach a goal. However, many of the
more difficult practices – direct communication, decisive action, and persuasion – could at times
violate the expectations that our Western society has of women. Overall, though, even these
more difficult, less “feminine” traits are valued by the members of both focus group as way to be
of service and to lead effectively. For example, Hannah, of Group 1, saw assertiveness in the
leadership skills of collaboration, of working together as part of a team. Cindy, in Focus Group
2, noted the distinction between assertiveness and aggression: “Assertiveness is finding a
balance, where aggression is more about winning and power.” Thus, even when the women
moved to the difficult aspects of assertiveness, those least expected to be practiced by women,
they tended to do so for the benefit of others and to further the work of the organization – not to
enhance their own power and prestige.

RQ2 – What moments in their lives do these women see as turning points when they
began to learn about assertiveness as a practice?

Many of the women in the study clearly spoke of turning points in their lives when, at
difficult moments, they had to stretch themselves beyond their own comfort to take decisive
action. Dunn (2014) would describe these stories as “narratives of self-transformation” (p. 133),
as a “sense-making activity in which the act of story telling is part of the construction of self” (p.
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134). She gives the examples of groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, in which members are expected to tell their personal stories of falling into addiction and later turning to sobriety and recovery. In telling these stories, members of Alcoholics Anonymous are “learning to shape their individual narratives in ways that are consonant with the expectations of the community” (p. 134).

Members of both focus groups demonstrated this use of personal narrative. In sharing their personal stories, they confirmed in themselves the transformation that had begun when they first made those acts of assertiveness and personal courage. In effect, through these narratives, they empowered themselves and encouraged one another to continue the progress in assertiveness that they had begun years ago – much as the women in Focus Group 1 stated that they had been empowered through their work at the motherhouse.

For example, in Hannah’s description told above of stepping in during a volatile situation in the emergency room to prevent further injury – she was able to construct herself as a leader with a calming influence who could prevent a volatile situation from erupting and causing even more damage. Penny, in defying the direct order of a doctor not to take the patient’s blood pressure or call the doctor again out of concern for the well-being of her patient, took herself a step closer to making herself into the advocate that her patient needed.

The narratives of the other women also had the effect of transforming the narrator as well as inspiring her listeners. Bonnie stayed strong in her determination not to follow a request that would have violated her integrity, and Fran asserted her own vision over the expertise of the men who worked for her as she supervised the building of a carpet store. Both Paula and Becky shared early experiences of being assertive: Paula in standing up for her mother in her
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confrontation with the auto parts store customer and Becky in expressing her preference for attending a public high school.

In all of these cases, the women made the deliberate decision to step beyond society’s expectations and their own sense of comfort to take a strong stance in a matter of concern for themselves and others. These decisive turning points placed them more firmly on the journey of assertiveness, helping them to realize their own ability to choose their own path to integrity and to making a difference. As Penny pointed out, “Once it worked out, once you realize that it worked out and that you feel that you did the right thing, it helps you do it again” – pursue the practice of assertiveness for the good of one’s self, one’s organization, the people who are served, and – ultimately – society at large.

Through these turning points, these “narratives of self-transformation” (Dunn, 2014, p. 133), their continuing efforts to learn about and practice assertive skills, and their desire to share these skills with others, the women in these focus groups and the women represented by them are forging their own path toward assertiveness and effective living.
Chapter 5: Summaries and Conclusions

5.1 Limitations of the Study

This exploratory study on assertiveness in professional women uncovered some fascinating insights, such as the awareness of small-town professional women of the risks and advantages of taking on assertive traits in the work place. However, the study was necessarily limited due to time constraints. It was narrow in scope, only covering a small number of women in a small Midwestern town – certainly not a large enough representation of professional women to offer a scientific study.

The diversity of the participants was also narrow. Because of the location, size, and nature of the town, the population is fairly homogenous, with a population that is largely white and a growing minority of Hispanic residents. Thus, the women in the focus groups were of largely homogenous ethnicity, all white. The professional women taking part in the study were also all middle class. The greatest diversity was in their ages, which ranged from mid-30s to late 60s.

Limited diversity could be found in the organizations that the participants represented. The women in Focus Group 1 all worked for the Motherhouse of the Catholic sisters, but in different departments, with different kinds of management responsibilities and fields, from nursing to an advisory board, a retreat center and overall facilities management. The organizations in Focus Group 2 were slightly more diverse: another office from the sisters’ Motherhouse, a local YMCA, a local social service agency for low-income families, a two-state health system, and – the only for-profit organization – a large local insurance agency. Yet, all of
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these organizations, even the insurance agency, focus largely on service to their various constituents.

Because the study focuses on women in a small town, it covers only two narrow but inter-related cultures within North American life: that of a congregation of active Catholic sisters and the culture of a small-town, rural community. In both cultures, community is important and competition – at least in the organizations represented – does not play as key a factor in the work of the organizations as it might in a larger town or a city.

Thus, because of the narrowness of the study, it can be properly considered a very small slice of the experience of women professionals – hardly a scientific sample from which to judge the experiences of all women who seek to bring assertiveness into their work lives.

5.2 Recommendations for Further Study

In spite of the limitations of this study, it does present a methodology that can be easily replicated and built upon in other settings. For example, a researcher could survey a wide cross-section of professional women as to their preferences in expressing assertiveness and follow up with interviews or focus groups. Quantitative or qualitative studies could also be conducted on a wider and more diverse range of women. For example, a study could compare the responses and experiences of women in competitive organizations and fields with those of women who work in religious, non-profit, or service organizations. Studies could focus on women who are diverse in a number of other factors: race, ethnicity, class, and education level, for example. Another researcher might compare the responses of men and women in their experiences of assertiveness in their professional lives. In particular, these studies could explore the particular values within the continuum of assertiveness that are valued and practiced by these various groups. How do
they perceive and live out assertiveness in their professional lives, and how much do these values conform to the core values of the organizations in which they work?

Finally, the development of assertiveness within individual women could be explored through a longitudinal study, tracing how participants progress in various aspects of assertiveness over time. What draws them to become more assertive, and how is this manifested in their work throughout the years?

5.3 Conclusion

Though admittedly limited in scope, this study has confirmed a number of findings uncovered in other studies: the conflict that professional women face between meeting social expectations of women and acting assertively and effectively in their organizations, as well as the tendency of professional women to choose when to be assertive and when to serve in a more traditional female supportive role.

The experiences shared by the participants in the focus groups have also uncovered some fresh ground. The women have identified aspects of assertiveness that they find most effective and most favorable to the way they view their roles and their own philosophies. They have emphasized such values as respect for others; advocacy for their own values and for the needs of others; teamwork; inclusion; honesty and integrity; and effective, respectful communication.

While many of these values appear to mesh well with the traditional service and supportive role of women, the focus group participants have also found within themselves the strength and personal power needed to go beyond the comfortable. They have been able to step in and prevent a crisis from worsening; defend their mother – at an early age – from the verbal
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abuse of a customer; stand up for their own values at the risk of losing their job; and advocate for their own vision in spite of disagreement by a number of experts.

In these instances, the women have found themselves empowered and transformed – able to go beyond the limits set for women by society and – perhaps more importantly – set by themselves. In taking these bold and uncomfortable steps, they have discovered their own inner strength and a flexibility that allows them to operate at an optimum level in their professions: playing the supportive role of listener and affirmer when needed but, in other cases, asserting themselves and going beyond social expectations when the situation calls for a bolder word or action. They – and so many other women and men who may not have voiced their own acts of courage in assertiveness – can help pave the way for a culture that celebrates true assertiveness in all people as a way to “maintain positive human relationships and resolv[e] conflicts” (Sigler, et al., 2008, p. 91). In a world fraught with terrorism, greed, violence, and hatred, this interpersonal development of true, respectful assertiveness offers a shining ray of hope.
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Appendix: Focus Group Questions

Please describe the type of organization in which you work and your own role in the organization.

How long have you worked there?

What are the core values of your organization?

How assertive – or non-assertive – do you believe you are?

What do you see as the most important aspects of assertiveness?

What are some examples of how you demonstrated assertiveness in the midst of a conflict?

How did you develop your assertiveness skills over the years?

Have you had any mentors who helped you to develop assertiveness skills?

Do you recall any particular turning points in your practice of assertiveness?

What aspects of assertiveness would you like to improve on?

How are your assertiveness traits perceived by your superiors and by your colleagues?