A Regional Analysis of Assertiveness

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Co-cultural differences in assertiveness within the United States have not been explored, despite noted regional differences in communication patterns (Andersen, Lustig, & Andersen, 1987). This study examines assertiveness behaviors, focusing on university students from the Upper Midwest (n = 148) and the New York Metropolitan region (n = 159) who completed the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (Rathus, 1973). New York Metropolitan respondents reported significantly higher levels of assertive communication than did respondents from the Upper Midwest. Males in the Upper Midwest region reported significantly higher levels of assertive communication than did females in the same region. Implications for regional differences in assertiveness are discussed.

Keywords: Assertiveness; Assertion; Social Style; Regional Differences in Communication; Intercultural Communication

In the Upper Midwest region of the United States, the concepts of “North Dakota Nice” and “Minnesota Nice” are commonly used in discourse to describe socially expected communicative behaviors such as conflict-avoidance, indirectness and pleasantness. Ryan (2003) describes the communicative nature of these phenomena in an article discussing “Minnesota Nice”:

It’s a cultural norm in communication that dictates we talk nicely to one another in the belief that it is more respectful... [and] we rarely say what we really mean. We speak in a way that avoids conflict. We tend to couch our communication in a bundle of “niceties.” (para. 2)
On the other hand, in the New York Metropolitan region, the “New York State of Mind” construct refers to New Yorkers’ orientations and attitudes. While singer/songwriter Billy Joel (1976) avoids offering a specific description of this phenomenon, his song lyrics lend themselves to interpretation. When he sings, “I know what I’m needing/And I don’t want to waste more time” (para. 2), and then in the next verse explains that he is returning to New York City in search of “give and take” (para. 3), he not only alludes to many New Yorkers’ tendency toward time urgency, but also how they interact with others in a highly reciprocal, straightforward manner.

Although the “North Dakota Nice,” “Minnesota Nice,” and “New York State of Mind” constructs have yet to appear in scholarly literature, assertiveness is a related communication concept that has received research attention. Assertive communication emerges from the overarching concept of aggressive communication, of which there are two types: constructive (assertiveness, argumentative) and destructive (hostility, verbal aggression) (Rancer & Avtgis, 2006). Assertiveness refers to “the capacity to make requests, actively disagree, express positive or negative personal rights and feelings, initiate, maintain, or disengage from conversations, and stand up for one’s self without attacking another” (Richmond & McCroskey, 1985, p. 69). Alberti and Emmons (2001) further note that this type of communicative behavior “reflects genuine concern for [everyone’s] rights…[and] promotes equality in human relationships” (p. 6).

To date, no research has compared the differences, if any, in assertiveness by region of the United States. The current study is based on Andersen, Lustig and Andersen’s (1987) review of American regional studies in which they proposed research strategies for examining possible differences in regional communication patterns. Specifically, the present research study explores the following questions: Does scientific inquiry support the proposition that people living in the Upper Midwest have a tendency to avoid asserting themselves when communicating with others? Do individuals living in another region of the United States assert themselves more than people living in the Upper Midwest?

The Need for Regional Assertiveness Research

During the 1970s and 1980s, assertive communicative behavior attracted a good deal of attention from researchers in psychology and counseling. It has also been of interest to communication scholars over the years because in western societies, assertiveness can be a sign of communicative competence (Singhal & Nagao, 1993; Zakahi, 1985). Treating assertion as a communication construct, Norton and Warnick (1976) identified strong associations between the behavioral components of assertiveness from two of the most commonly used assertiveness surveys, the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (RAS; Rathus, 1973) and the College Self-Expression Scale (CSES; Galassi, DeLo, Galassi, & Bastien, 1974), and scores on two communication scales: the Predispositions toward Verbal Behavior (PVB; Mortenson & Arnston, 1974) and the Communicator Style Measure (CSM; Norton, 1974a, 1974b).
Also, Pearson (1979) uncovered a correlation between assertiveness and communication apprehension. Consistent with these findings, the current investigation framed assertion as a communicative behavior.

Although most of the assertiveness studies appeared many years ago when assertiveness was a more popular topic, insights gained from that research should not be dismissed or simply considered outdated. Assertiveness is still a timely topic with much applied value because it has much potential for improving human relations. While it is sometimes thought that developing assertion is only worthwhile for those who have difficulty saying “no” and standing up for themselves, assertive communication also provides positive alternative behaviors for those who tend to communicate aggressively and those interacting with aggressors.

Because communicating assertively involves maintaining respect for each individual’s needs during interactions, it is more optimal communicative behavior for maintaining positive human relationships and resolving conflicts than is aggression. For example, assertive communication behaviors could help students aged eight to fifteen who report that being bullied and teased are their most serious problems in school (Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001). The childhood roles of bully and victim can often have life-long behavioral consequences for such individuals. Keashly and Jagatic (2000), for instance, found that approximately 59% of working adults report being bullied on one occasion at their workplace each year, and nearly 20% indicated that they had experienced emotionally abusive behavior at work at least five times (Coombs & Holladay, 2004; Harden Fritz, 2002; Lim & Cortina, 2005; O’Leary-Kelly, Griffin & Glew, 1996; Pearson, Andersson & Wegner, 2001). Approximately 80% of these individuals were female, whereas only 20% of them were male (Workplace Bullying & Trauma Institute, 2003).

Lack of assertiveness is also evident in large numbers of American homes in which aggressiveness is prevalent, as estimates of the number of domestic assaults that occur annually range from about 960,000 to four million (United States Department of Justice, 2000). Experts have noted that training in effective expression of ideas is essential to reduce incidences of domestic violence (Williams & Williams, 1998).

Aggressiveness is not only a problem in workplaces and homes, it also is apparent on the nation’s roadways, where aggressive driving is a factor in approximately one of every five vehicle crashes in which there are injuries (Rose & Neidermeyer, 1999; Wadsworth, 2003). Consequently, Americans’ aggressive behavior is reflected in the perception of the country as a global bully (Walsh, 2003). Clearly, aggression is highly problematic in American culture.

Thus, contemporary society’s tendency toward aggression drives the need for more assertiveness research and training. Not only is assertiveness research important for understanding human interactions across an increasingly uncivil nation, in a highly mobile society like the United States, understanding the implications of regional communication patterns has become necessary as well. However, researchers have largely ignored the study of assertiveness and related research areas across America’s varied co-cultures (Rancer & Avtgis, 2006). Such investigations have potentially
profound implications on trans-United States businesses, relationships, conflict resolution and intercultural communication in general (Rancer & Avtgis, 2006). As Andersen, Lustig and Andersen (1987) suggest, “Regions are more than areas with distinct climatic and topographical characteristics; regions manifest homogeneous behavior and distinct psychological and communication patterns” (p. 128). In other words, regional subcultures are environments that both shape and are shaped by the people who live in them. Because of the interactive nature of this relationship, to understand a communicative behavior fully, it is useful to examine acculturated individuals in the context in which their communication regularly occurs (Andersen et al., 1987; Berry, 1990; Kim, 2001).

American Regional Studies

In the early 17th century, when European settlers arrived in the United States, they often established self-governed communities in different geographical areas (Kincaid, 1982). This process can be best understood by considering the concept of geographical clustering, which describes the tendency of individuals to congregate in homogeneous groups and establish communities instead of settling in isolation from one another. If the cultural composition of these groups within regions is different, it seems likely that there might be differences in regional communication patterns.

To explore such possibilities, Andersen et al. (1987) consider Gastil’s (1975) regional map (see Figure 1) as one of the best representations to use.

Figure 1 Regional Map of the United States. A regional map of the United States from R. D. Gastil, Cultural Regions of the United States (p. 29), Seattle: University of Washington Press. Copyright 1975. Reprinted by permission.
After researching early settlers at length, including studying their settlement patterns, personal characteristics (including communicative behaviors), and cultures, Gastil (1975) divided the US map into 13 regions. The Upper Midwest and the New York Metropolitan region were the two regions of interest in this study.

The Upper Midwest Region

Although there is disagreement among scholars about which states comprise this region, Gastil’s (1975) classification includes northeastern Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, northeastern Nebraska, Minnesota, northern Iowa, Wisconsin, northern Illinois, Michigan, and northern Ohio. He considers the middle of Lake Michigan to be the dividing line between the Eastern and Western sub-regions of the Upper Midwest. For this study, the focus is on the area Gastil refers to as the Scandinavian District in the Western Sub-region of the Upper Midwest and the state of North Dakota is the site of primary interest.

Much of North Dakota is rural and sparsely populated. The population of the entire state is 642,200, with 9.3 people per square mile (United States Census Bureau, 2000e). Demographically, this region is extremely homogeneous. Only 1.9% of North Dakota residents are foreign born, and 92.4% of the population is Caucasian. Within this state, the five most frequently reported ancestries are: German (43.9%), Norwegian (30.1%), Other Ancestries (11.3%), Irish (7.7%), and Swedish (5.0%) (United States Census Bureau, 2000f).

The New York Metropolitan Region

In Gastil’s (1975) classification, the New York Metropolitan region includes the southeast corner of New York State and the northern part of New Jersey. The core of the New York Metropolitan region is, of course, New York City (NYC), the largest city in the United States, which is comprised of the following five boroughs in order from most to least populous: (1) Brooklyn (Kings County), (2) Queens (Queens County), (3) Manhattan (New York County), (4) the Bronx (Bronx County), and (5) Staten Island (Richmond County). The combined population of these five counties in 2000 was 8,008,278 people, with an average of approximately 32,313 people per square mile (United States Census Bureau, 2000b, 2000g, 2000d, 2000a, and 2000h). A more recent estimate of the population of New York City as an agglomeration is 21,850,000 (Brinkhoff, 2003).

This region has changed dramatically since the publication of Gastil’s book in 1975. Following the intense growth of the area during the last three decades, this “region stretches more than one hundred miles from Trenton, New Jersey, to Bridgeport, Connecticut. It encompasses all of Long Island and even includes one county in extreme eastern Pennsylvania” (Hudson, 2002, p. 66). A defining feature of this area is the New York Port. With its ideal location and accessibility to major communities in both New York and New Jersey, it attracted early settlers and has continued to draw immigrants from all over the world, which has resulted in this region becoming extremely heterogeneous. The majority of these immigrants...
typically settle in the inner city areas close to people of their own race and/ethnicity (Abu-Lughod, 1999).

**Assertiveness**

Scholarly interest in assertiveness appears to have begun in the 1940s. The development of this body of research reflects the dramatic social changes that occurred in the United States during this time as part of women’s and civil rights movements. These cultural changes appear to have prompted a research focus on differences in assertiveness based on the sex and race of the communicator.

Studies examining sex differences show a shift in assertiveness trends in recent years. Whereas some studies have revealed that men score higher on assertiveness measures than women (Feingold, 1994; Hollansworth & Wall, 1977; Kimble, Marsh, & Kiska, 1984; Nevid & Rathus, 1978), a meta-analysis conducted by Twenge (2001) of assertiveness studies from 1931–1993 indicates that although women’s assertiveness levels increased during this timeframe, this was not the case for men’s assertiveness scores. Twenge determined that there were not significant differences in assertiveness between males and females in the most current samples examined.

Many attempts have been made to examine differences in assertiveness attributable to race (Furnham, 1979; Garrison & Jenkins, 1986; Hall & Beil-Warner, 1978; Lineberger & Calhoun, 1983; Martin, Moore, Hecht, & Larkey, 2001; Ness, Donnan, & Jenkins, 1983; Niikura, 1999; Rodriquez, Johnson, & Combs, 2001; Thompson, Klopf, & Ishii, 1991; Thompson, Ishii, & Klopf, 1990; Thompson & Klopf, 1991; Thompson & Klopf, 1995; Yoshioka, 2000). However, no research has explored cultural versus racial differences in assertiveness. As people from many different races live and work in the same cities, more cultural assertiveness research is needed. To explore the implications of possible regional, or co-cultural, differences in assertive communicative behavior, this study examines the following hypothesis:

\[ H: \] Students in the New York Metropolitan region will report being more assertive than will students from the Upper Midwest.

Additionally, because recent assertiveness studies have revealed little difference in the scores of men and women, the following research question is addressed from the regions of interest in the current study:

\[ RQ: \] Are there sex-related differences in students’ self-reported assertiveness?

**Method**

**Participants**

The 307 participants in this study were students enrolled in undergraduate communication courses at four universities, two of which were located in the Upper Midwest, and two of which were located in the New York Metropolitan region. To test for potential regional variations in assertiveness, the New York
Metropolitan region was selected as a comparison point to the Upper Midwest to maximize the possibility of difference. There were 148 participants (48.2%) from the Upper Midwest region and 159 participants (51.8%) from the New York Metropolitan region. Seventy-one participants (23.1%) were students at a small university in western North Dakota (site one), 77 (25.1%) were enrolled at a mid-sized university in eastern North Dakota (site two), another 77 (25.1%) were students at a mid-sized university in northeastern New Jersey (site three), and 82 (26.7%) were attending a large university in New York City (site four). One hundred and two participants (33.2%) were male, and 205 (66.8%) were female. Among the males, 65 (63.7%) were from the Upper Midwest and 37 (36.3%) from the New York Metropolitan region. Of the 205 female participants, 83 (40.5%) were from the Upper Midwest, and 122 (59.5%) from the New York Metropolitan region.

**Upper Midwest participants**
The average age of participants in the Upper Midwest region was 20.23 (SD = 3.97). Participants from this region were less racially diverse than those in the New York Metropolitan regional sample. Of the 148 participants from the Upper Midwest region, 138 (93.2%) were white or Caucasian, 6 (4.1%) were Asian, 2 (1.4%) were of two or more ethnicities, 1 (0.7%) was American Indian, and 1 (0.7%) was black or African American. Additionally, 121 participants (81.8%) indicated they had lived in the Upper Midwest region all of their lives; 27 (18.2%) had not. Of the participants who had not lived in the region all of their lives, the average length of time they had spent in the region was 9.13 years (SD = 7.59).

**New York Metropolitan participants**
The average age of participants in the New York Metropolitan region was 22.96 (SD = 7.89). Of the 159 respondents from this region, 97 (61%) were white or Caucasian, 20 (12.6%) were Hispanic or Latino, 16 (10.1%) were black or African American, 11 (6.9%) were Asian, 8 (5%) reported two or more ethnicities, 4 (2.5%) were Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 3 (1.9%) selected the “other” race/ethnicity category. Ninety two participants (57.9%) indicated they had lived in the New York Metropolitan region all of their lives; 67 (42.1%) had not. Of those who had not lived in the region all of their lives, the average number of years they had spent in the region was 6.89 (SD = 7.10).

**Procedures**
Prior to the data collection, the Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) at all four of the universities at which the research was conducted granted permission for students to participate. Data gathering began during Spring semester of 2004 and was completed in the Fall semester of 2004. Those at three out of the four of the research sites received surveys from individuals who had agreed to serve as survey administrators. These individuals distributed surveys to approximately 80 students
in any of the communication courses accessible to them and then returned completed questionnaires by mail to the primary researcher, who surveyed students at the remaining site. The schools that served as survey sites were chosen because of their locations within the Upper Midwest and the New York Metropolitan region, as well as on the availability of staff members and/or faculty to administer surveys.

Measure

The Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (RAS), developed in 1973 by psychologist Spencer Rathus, served as the measure of the dependent variable. The RAS is a 30-item Likert-type scale, 6-point (ranging from −3 to +3), with reportedly high alpha reliability estimates in previous studies, \( \alpha = 0.78 \) (Rathus, 1973). Participants rate how closely specific statements describe their communication with others most of the time. The highest possible theoretical score on this instrument is +90, while the lowest possible score is −90. The instrument maintained strong reliability among participants from the current sample (\( \alpha = 0.84 \), \( M = 13.89 \), \( SD = 24.49 \)).

Checks related to the independent variable

T-tests revealed no significant difference in the mean scores for participants at either of the two sites in the Upper Midwest region, \( t(146) = -1.501, p = 0.135 \). Similarly, there was no significant difference in mean assertiveness scores for participants at the two sites in the New York Metropolitan region, \( t(157) = -0.166, p = 0.868 \).

As was previously discussed, to obtain accurate data regarding potential regional communication patterns it is necessary to study individuals who are completely acculturated in the region in comparison with those who are not (Andersen et al., 1987; Berry, 1990; Kim, 2001). Therefore, as a further check, we compared responses from students who were not lifetime residents of each region with those who were. For the Upper Midwest, assertiveness scores were not significantly different for lifetime and non-lifetime residents, \( t(146) = 0.198, p = 0.843 \). Similarly, in the New York Metropolitan region the scores were not significantly different for lifetime and non-lifetime residents, \( t(157) = 1.50, p = 0.136 \). Because no significant differences existed between the scores of the participants at the two sites within each region, individuals from the two New York locations were combined to form one sample, as were the scores for the two upper Midwest locations.

Analysis

To answer the hypothesis and research question, a 2 × 2 factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. The dependent variable was a participant’s overall assertiveness score. The first independent factor was regional location (either Upper Midwest or New York Metropolitan) and the second factor was biological sex (either male or female). Cell means and standard deviations were examined to determine
the direction of significant differences as there were only two conditions for each independent variable.

Results

The hypothesis predicted that self-reports of assertiveness would differ according to the region of the United States in which participants lived, being either the Upper Midwest or the New York Metropolitan region. The research question examined if there were sex-related differences in students’ levels of self-reported assertiveness. A \(2 \times 2\) ANOVA was conducted to evaluate the effects of regional location and biological sex on overall assertiveness. The means and standard deviations for assertiveness as a function of the two factors are presented in Table 1.

The results for the ANOVA indicated a significant main effect for regional location, \(F(1, 303) = 17.56, p < 0.001\), partial \(\eta^2 = 0.06\), a significant main effect for biological sex, \(F(1, 303) = 7.43, p < 0.01\), partial \(\eta^2 = 0.02\), and a nonsignificant interaction between regional location and biological sex, \(F(1, 303) = 1.49, p = 0.22\), partial \(\eta^2 = 0.01\). Examination of the effect sizes for each main effect indicates a small contribution from each factor to explain variation in assertiveness scores. Inspection of the cell means indicated that individuals from the New York Metropolitan region had significantly higher assertiveness scores than did individuals from the Upper Midwest, supporting the hypothesis. Independent of the regional location, males had significantly higher assertiveness scores than females, see Table 1. Follow up \(t\)-tests examined the within region variation of assertiveness among men and women. Results supported that men’s assertiveness scores were significantly higher than females’ assertiveness scores within the Upper Midwest region (\(t[146] = 3.01, p = 0.003\)). However, assertiveness scores were not significantly different between men and women within the New York Metropolitan region (\(t[157] = 1.00, p = 3.21\)).

Table 1 Regional Location and Biological Sex Means and Standard Deviations for Assertiveness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regional Location</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upper Midwest</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8.37</td>
<td>21.05</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-3.64</td>
<td>26.28</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Metropolitan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17.41</td>
<td>22.00</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12.83</td>
<td>25.18</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Totals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Midwest region</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>24.78</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Metropolitan</td>
<td></td>
<td>13.89</td>
<td>24.49</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male participants</td>
<td></td>
<td>11.65</td>
<td>21.73</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female participants</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.16</td>
<td>26.82</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

The results of this study revealed a significant difference in the self-reported assertiveness of participants living in the Upper Midwest and those living in the New York Metropolitan region. Interestingly, no significant differences in the assertiveness scores of lifetime residents and non-lifetime residents in either of these regions were found. Both results are consistent with Latané’s (1981, 1996) Dynamic Social Impact Theory (DSIT), which posits that, when individuals in close proximity to each other continuously interact with those with whom they come in contact during the course of their everyday lives, they adapt their communicative behavior in ways that make them more similar to their interlocutors. Given that there was no significant difference between the assertiveness scores of lifetime and non-lifetime residents of either region, visitors to different regions of the United States might experience challenges with perceived assertiveness and aggressiveness more so than residents who have assimilated into their co-cultures.

The current study also shows significant differences in assertiveness as a result of biological sex. Independent of the region, males had significantly higher assertiveness scores than females. This indicates that an individual’s assertiveness can be a product of both their biology (nature) and culture (nurture) (Cole & McCroskey, 2000). Also, although scholars have yet to explore specifically whether or not there is a relationship between urban and/or rural living and assertive communicative behavior, the strong influence of agriculture in the Upper Midwest may help to explain males’ higher assertiveness levels in that region where traditional gender roles are still a salient part of the agrarian lifestyle.

Relatedly, it may be that there is a tendency toward passive-aggressive communication in that part of the country, particularly for females who are socialized to repress their anger. In a non-region specific study of girls, Simmons (2002) observed what she refers to as “a hidden culture of aggression” (p. 15), in which passive-aggressive communicative behaviors frequently occur. It could be that this phenomenon is more pronounced in the Upper Midwest where the combined emphasis on traditional gender roles and social modesty, as discussed below, is still strongly influential in shaping communicative behavior.

Relatedly, a possible explanation for both the co-cultural and sex differences in assertiveness relates to the size and density of the populations in both regions. As Baum and Paulus (1987) point out, in areas with high population density, individuals often experience stress because they feel they do not have enough control over their environment as a result of the high frequency of unwanted interactions with others and overall lack of privacy. Clearly, there is a dramatic difference in both the size and density of the populations surveyed in the New York Metropolitan region and the Upper Midwest. As previously mentioned, the core area of the New York metropolitan area is home to 32,313 people per square mile; in New Jersey, the number of individuals per square mile is 1,134.4 (United States Census Bureau, 2000b, 2000g, 2000d, 2000a, and 2000h, and 2000c). In North Dakota, the location of the Upper Midwest samples, there are only 9.3 people per square mile.
It may be that most individuals, male and female alike, feel a need to be very assertive when social crowding and unsolicited social contact is such a prevalent part of their lives. Therefore, they may respond to these pressures by communicating assertively in an effort to get their wants and needs met and/or set boundaries with others.

Furthermore, Wirth’s (1999[1938]) argument that cultural homogeneity or heterogeneity shapes individuals’ behaviors in given environments is also instructive when examining the co-cultures in this study. In the Upper Midwest, the majority of the population is culturally similar, with a predominantly northern European ancestry. The New York Metropolitan region, however, is culturally diverse. Individuals may feel that they have to be more assertive as members of a highly diverse population because they are faced with interacting with many people whom they perceive to be different from themselves. Perhaps in more homogeneous areas, like the Upper Midwest, greater cultural similarity means there is less potential for disagreement and conflict.

Historically, Scandinavian countries have been well represented in the Upper Midwest. Among the Scandinavian countries of origin for many of the early settlers of the northern plains, the existing body of research involving assertive communicative behavior only includes studies from the country of Finland (Thompson & Klopf, 1991, 1995). These researchers found that on assertiveness measures, Americans scored significantly higher than Korean, Finnish, and Japanese participants. Moreover, when social styles were compared, the Finnish and the Japanese respondents were similar in their lower levels of assertiveness than the American and Korean participants who were also comparable communicatively.

Consequently, an important concept to consider when examining the regional nuances of communication in the Upper Midwest, including assertiveness, is the Scandinavian construct of janteloven, or jantelagen, in Swedish. Originating during the Viking era, “janteloven” refers to “an unspoken code of behavior based on the idea that ‘Thou shalt not believe thou art special’” (Dean, 2003, p. 2). This social representation may help explain why the assertiveness scores for the Upper Midwest participants were so much lower than those of the New York Metro area respondents. This strong attachment to social modesty may still be affecting the socialization process of those who grow up in the Upper Midwest and the cultural adaptation process of those who move to the area from other regions. One could argue that the social constructs of “North Dakota Nice” and “Minnesota Nice” are more historically recent terms referring to how the beliefs central to the janteloven concept manifest in individuals’ communicative behaviors in this part of the country.

In conclusion, regional differences in assertive communication have important implications not only in the day-to-day lives of individuals who travel to different regions within the nation, but also for those who already live there. As businesses continue to expand within the United States, understanding such regional differences in assertive communication is crucial for maintaining successful business relationships. For example, individuals visiting or relocating to the New York Metropolitan
region should expect to engage in more assertive communication when interacting with New Yorkers.

Awareness of this regional difference in communication may help individuals to avoid becoming offended or personalizing it when miscommunication and/or disagreements occur when individuals from the New York Metropolitan region assert themselves and respond very directly to them during interactions. This exemplifies the crucial distinction between being assertive and being perceived as assertive. Some individuals may interpret constructive, argumentative behaviors, in fact, as being aggressive (Rancer & Avtgis, 2006); therefore, respondent perceptions about the communicative behaviors of others are important to consider.

Correspondingly, individuals who visit or move to the Upper Midwest region can expect people to be less assertive and forthright about their thoughts and feelings. Therefore, individuals traveling or moving to the Upper Midwest region may need to develop skills in “reading” the residents’ nonverbal communication and encourage them to openly discuss their opinions, needs, and wants. Again, the respondent’s interpretation of the communicative behavior of their interlocutors can be decisive (Rancer & Avtgis, 2006).

For those already residing in the New York Metropolitan region and the Upper Midwest, the results of the current study make it clear that commonly held assumptions about assertiveness, or the lack of it, in these regions, are not merely stereotypes. Knowing that there is such a wide variation in assertive communicative behaviors between these two regions can prompt individuals to consider whether or not the accepted levels of assertion in their own region are beneficial or detrimental to their relationships with others in a situation-by-situation basis, and make changes in their communicative behaviors if they so choose.

This study has at least two limitations worthy of note. First, self-reports are vulnerable to the problem of demand characteristics; specifically, when respondents try to please the researcher. Attempts to discern the goals of a study and figure out the research instrument are distracting and can contribute to problems of reliability, not to mention validity. However, this is unlikely to be the case with the current study because the researchers were only on-site at one of the four sampling locations. Also, at all of the locations, including the site where the primary researcher surveyed the students in person, precautions were taken to present the survey to the students in a very general way as simply a means of learning more about “how they communicate most of the time.”

Second, despite the many strengths of the RAS, the instrument does not address passive-aggressiveness, and, thereby limits the range of communicative behaviors about which participants can provide information. This study does not offer any insight into how often students forego assertiveness and choose to engage in a passive-aggressive style. Such results could be important, as “North Dakota Nice” and “Minnesota Nice” communicative behaviors could be interpreted as passive-aggressive. The results of the current investigation highlight the need for studying nonverbal communication and different types of high versus low context communication within the broad parameters of national differences.
Not surprisingly, research suggests that low argumentative people perceive high argumentative (constructive) people as verbally aggressive (destructive) (Rancer & Avtgis, 2006).

Further exploration of potential cultural differences in assertiveness also remains a valuable research pursuit. Because of the existing body of research demonstrating the culturally relative nature of assertion, a worthwhile challenge awaits researchers. They now have the opportunity to critique existing assertiveness measures in light of what the research community has learned about cultural differences in assertiveness since the 1970s and 1980s when many of the existing measures were published.

In this increasingly culturally-diverse nation, there are countless occasions in which communicating assertively could lead to more harmonious human relations. However, there is a fine line between assertiveness and aggressiveness. Less assertive communicators maybe exhibit this behavior as their own way of demonstrating cultural sensitivity toward others. Clearly, our understanding of intercultural communication is enhanced by examining the finer gradations of assertiveness within cultures.

References


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