

Personality and Interpersonal Influence: Low Adjustment and Low Competitiveness is Associated With Low Assertiveness

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between personality and interpersonal assertiveness styles, an important and neglected topic. In all, 396 working adults completed a six-factor personality test measuring work-related traits (HPTI) and a two-dimensional assessment of interpersonal styles (III) assessing four styles: Assertiveness, Passiveness, Hostile aggression, and Manipulative aggression. We were particularly interested in the correlates of aggressive and passive behaviour, as opposed to assertive behaviour. The results suggested that those with low Conscientiousness and Adjustment (i.e. Neuroticism) but high Competitiveness (low Agreeableness) were more interpersonally aggressive, while passivity was negatively associated with all traits, particularly Adjustment, but not with Conscientiousness. Regressions indicated very different traits associated with each of the four interpersonal styles. Assertiveness was associated with sex and age, but only one trait, Risk Approach (or Courage). Limitations of these findings and implications of assessing and teaching assertiveness are discussed and considered.

Keywords: Assertiveness, passivity, personality, adjustment, aggression

Introduction

The ability to communicate with and influence other people is fundamental to educational, occupational and social success (McSweeney et al., 2022). Throughout life, people are taught how best to charm, persuade and negotiate with others, and to adopt a healthy and functional communication and interpersonal style (Dhillon & Kaur, 2023). This paper is concerned primarily with the relationship between work-related personality traits and adaptive (assertive) and maladaptive (passive, aggressive) interpersonal styles. Unlike other studies in this area, which simply assess high versus low assertiveness, we have a measure that differentiates between three other types of non-assertiveness, which gives additional insight into assertiveness assessment and training.

Assertiveness involves appropriately expressing ideas, feelings, and interpersonal requests while respecting other's rights (Norton & Warnick, 1976). It can include both positive and negative expressions with the aim of achieving personal and instrumental goals. It is about the sensitivity, accuracy and appropriateness of giving and receiving interpersonal messages (Furnham & Henderson, 1984). Essentially, assertiveness means speaking up for one's

interpersonal freedoms and rights. Some have argued and demonstrated that assertiveness is a learnable skill rather than a personality characteristic (Arrindell et al., 1990; Burroughs & Somerville, 2013). However, the distinction between the two is less pronounced as people can improve and refine characteristics the same way they would any skill. The present study acknowledges assertiveness as a trait which can be taught.

Furthermore, assertiveness is considered a critical correlate of well-being, particularly in the workplace (Boisvert et al., 1985; Delamater & McNamara, 1986; Sarkova et al., 2013; Vagos & Pereira, 2019). Ames et al. (2017) defined assertiveness as “*the degree to which someone stands up and speaks out for their own positions when they are faced with someone else who does not want the same outcomes. ...Assertiveness matters for our outcomes, our relationships, and our well-being*”. (p2).

The literature on assertiveness has occurred in various phases (Peneva & Mavrodiiev, 2013; Pierce, 2021; Rich & Schroeder, 1976). The early phase was mainly concerned with the *definition* of assertiveness as a social skill that was seen to be associated with mental health and happiness (Alberti & Emmons, 1974; Crawford, 1988). The next phase involved the development of robust and sensitive *measures* of assertiveness (Galassi et al., 1974; Rathus, 1973). Many scales with different facets and psychometric properties still exist. Indeed, 40 years ago, Furnham and Henderson (1984) investigated the properties of five assertive measures, and there have been many developments since (Pfafman, 2017). Some of these measures, like the one used in this study, attempt to assess different types of interpersonal communication and assertiveness per se (Henderson & Furnham, 1983). In this study, we use a measure which essentially assesses four interpersonal communication styles based on a 2 × 2 model: Openness of Communication and Consideration of Others, where assertiveness is high on both dimensions.

The third phase looked at the correlates and consequences of assertive behaviour and explored different ways of *teaching* assertiveness (Omura et al., 2017). It is generally agreed that assertiveness closely links to well-being and is teachable and trainable (Ames et al., 2017; de Sousa & da Costa Padovani, 2021; Noh & Kim, 2021; Plantade-Gipch et al., 2023). The fourth phase concerns the incorporation of assertiveness in the concept of *voice* (Burriss, et al., 2013; Eibl et al., 2020; Hosseini & Sabokro, 2022; Mohammad et al., 2023). Employee voice is often defined as giving people opportunities to express ideas, concerns and perspectives with authenticity and without fear of social or workplace consequences. The need for voicing concerns is a recognized issue that has come to the fore in the last ten years and has been measured extensively in research studies (Violato, 2022). Evidently, assertive individuals feel more capable of speaking up when they think the situation requires it. There have also been recent studies on sex differences in online assertive self-presentation strategies, with males being more assertive than females (Reed & Saunders, 2020).

Whilst there have been a number of studies associated with the measurement of assertiveness, there have been far fewer studies on the correlates of other, less adaptive communication styles, like passive aggressiveness. It is recognised that a passive interpersonal style is not the opposite of assertiveness but rather has very different properties. In this study, we used the model developed by Glaser (1983), which assesses people on two dimensions: the individual’s openness or candour (disclosure) and the individual’s consideration for others (respect). In this model, there are four styles that are modestly related to each other, of which assertiveness is one. Indeed, understanding the correlates of non-assertive communication styles, like hostile aggression, may give a better understanding of assertiveness and how to train it.

Personality and Assertiveness

This study is on personality correlates of assertiveness and associated interpersonal communication styles (Reynolds & Clark, 2001).

There are however, relatively few studies in this area (Carpenter et al., 2022; McCroskey et al., 2001; Ramanaiah & Deniston, 1993; Vestewig & Moss, 1976). De Vries et al. (2009, 2013) distinguished between six domain-level communicative behavior scales: Expressiveness, Preciseness, Verbal Aggressiveness, Questioningness, Emotionality, and Impression Manipulativeness. They showed that personality, as measured by the HEXACO Personality Inventory—Revised (HEXACO-PI-R) and Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R), was found to have medium to strong associations with communication styles, and supported the integration of the trait and communication styles perspectives.

Bagherian and Mojambari (2016) tested 430 adults using two standard and translated tests; they established, through correlations and regressions, that assertiveness was most related to low Neuroticism followed by Extraversion and Conscientiousness. Sims (2017) tested 245 adults of various ages using self-report scales. They found that both Agreeableness and Openness uniquely predicted Active Empathic Listening (AEL), while Assertive Extraversion had the most influence on assertiveness but did not uniquely explain AEL variance. Conscientiousness and Neuroticism had a small predictive influence on assertiveness.

It should be noted that the NEO-PI-R has assertiveness as a facet, and several authors have examined how NEO facets (including assertiveness) relate to personality and personality disorder (Reynolds & Clark, 2001). This is facet E3 defined as assessing people who are dominant, forceful, and socially ascendant. They speak without hesitation and often become group leaders while low scorers prefer to keep in the background and let others do the talking. There is also literature on the link between aggression and personality, with research suggesting links to Neuroticism and antagonism/disagreeableness (Bainbridge et al., 2022).

It is surprising that personality traits have been examined with respect to a number of other communication behaviours but not much related to assertiveness (Furnham & DeWaele, 2024). There are many service industries, such as sales, hospitality and journalism, that require staff to be interpersonally skilled and interested in selecting and training people who can be socially assertive. Understanding how personality traits relate systematically to various interpersonal styles is, therefore, a useful contribution to both the applied and academic literature. Further, it would be particularly interesting to understand the relationship between more work-related traits and various interpersonal influence styles.

This study used the High Potential Trait Indicator (HPTI), designed to assess traits in a work setting. A number of papers have used the HPTI (Cuppello et al., 2023a, 2023b; Furnham & Impellizzeri, 2021; Furnham & Treglown, 2018, 2021; MacRae & Furnham, 2020; Teodorescu et al., 2017). Four of the six HPTI scales are similar to those in the Big Five: Conscientiousness, Adjustment (low Neuroticism), Curiosity (Openness) and Competitiveness (low Agreeableness). The HPTI also has two additional scales: First, *Ambiguity Acceptance* (or Tolerance of Ambiguity, ToA), which assesses how an individual processes and perceives unfamiliarity or incongruence. Those tolerant of ambiguity perform well in new or uncertain situations and are able to learn and function in unpredictable times or environments (Furnham & Marks, 2013). The other variable is *Approach to Risk* or *Courage*, which is the ability to combat or mitigate negative or threat-based emotions and broaden the potential range of

responses. While Courage presents as the willingness to confront difficult situations and solve problems in spite of adversity, unchecked fear restricts the range of potential responses, typically leading to behaviours like avoidance or contrived ignorance. Courage is thought to be curvilinearly related to success in many work settings, with both high and low scorers being less successful.

Our aim is to explore the relationship between personality and assertiveness and add to this field of research. We believed that the assertive style would be positively correlated with all personality traits, while the three less adaptive styles would be negatively correlated with all styles, particularly Adjustment. Specifically, based on the previous literature, we predict trait Adjustment would be significantly positively correlated with Assertiveness but negatively correlated with Passiveness, Hostile aggression, and Manipulative aggression (H1). Next, we predicted that Assertiveness would be strongly positively associated with Approach to Risk and Ambiguity Acceptance (H2). Finally, we hypothesized that Competitiveness (low Agreeableness) would be positively correlated with Hostile aggression and Manipulative aggression (H3).

Method

Participants

In all, 396 individuals completed the survey, of which 230 (58.1%) were female, 162 (40.9%) were male, 2 (0.5%) identified as non-binary, and 2 (0.5%) did not provide a response: coded as 0 = male and 1 = female. Roughly half ($n = 213$, 53.8%) were British, followed by South African ($n = 51$, 12.9%), Canadian ($n = 43$, 10.9%), American ($n = 38$, 9.6%), European ($n = 17$, 4.3%), Australian ($n = 14$, 3.5%), and Asian ($n = 8$, 2.0%). Eleven (2.8%) participants were from other regions, and one (0.3%) did not specify. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 73 ($M = 45.7$, $SD = 11.6$). Sixty-nine per cent ($n = 275$) of participants said they have a university degree, twenty-nine per cent ($n = 116$) said they do not have a university degree, and five respondents did not provide an answer.

Questionnaires

Interpersonal Influence Inventory (III; Glaser, 1983) is a 40-item questionnaire designed to measure assertiveness. The model upon which the inventory is based assesses people on two dimensions: openness or candour (disclosure) and consideration for others (respect). Four subscale scores measure hostile aggression, manipulative aggression, passive, and assertive behaviour. Furnham and Rawles (1994) established that the scales had modest alphas ranging from .61 to .76.

High Potential Trait Indicator (HPTI; MacRae & Furnham, 2020) is a self-reporting six-trait personality-based questionnaire with a seven-point Likert-type scale including 78 items (13 items per trait). The six traits of the HPTI are Conscientiousness, Adjustment, Curiosity, Risk Approach (also known as Courage), Ambiguity Acceptance, and Competitiveness (MacRae & Furnham, 2020).

Procedure

Participants were recruited from a pool of individuals who had completed a psychometric assessment provided by the test publisher Thomas International for genuine occupational test use, and subsequently volunteered to take part in psychology research. Participants were incentivized to take part by being offered brief feedback on their results following the study. Participants were emailed to inform them of the study and provide them with a link to complete. They gave their informed consent to analyse and publish the anonymized data. The study was conducted on an online survey platform. The research was approved by the committee LSA/TI/2022. Finally, participants were debriefed, thanked for their time and provided feedback on their results.

Results

Reliability

The reliability indices ranged from adequate to inadequate (see Table 2). From the HPTI, Adjustment was evaluated to be the most reliable scale ($\alpha = .81$) followed by Competitiveness ($\alpha = .79$), Curiosity ($\alpha = .77$), Risk Approach ($\alpha = .77$), Ambiguity Acceptance ($\alpha = .75$), and Conscientiousness ($\alpha = .70$). From the III, Aggressive Manipulative was the most reliable scale ($\alpha = .80$), followed by Passive ($\alpha = .71$), Aggressive Hostile ($\alpha = .70$), and Assertive ($\alpha = .64$), similar to the order found in Furnham and Rawles' (1994) study.

Correlations

Table 1 shows the full correlation table. The correlations demonstrated a statistical association between being male and the traits Risk Approach, Competitiveness, and Assertiveness which confirms previous studies. There was a positive correlation between individuals' age and Adjustment, Risk Approach, Ambiguity Acceptance, and Assertiveness, and a negative correlation with age and Competitiveness, Aggressive Hostile, Aggressive Manipulative, and Passive. All were below .30, suggesting that the associations were small but not negligible (Cohen, 1988).

Table 1. Mean, Standard Deviation, Reliability, and Correlations of Scales.

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Alph a	P.re l	P.se p	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
(1) Sex	—	—	—	—	—	—										
(2) Age	45.7 3	11.6 4	—	—	—	-0.03	—									
(3) Conscientiousness	0.84	0.54	.70	.67	1.43	-.05	.07	—								
(4) Adjustment	0.55	0.64	.81	.80	2.01	-.09	.19***	.22***	—							
(5) Curiosity	1.00	0.68	.77	.75	1.73	-.07	-.02	.19***	.16**	—						
(6) Risk approach	0.53	0.57	.77	.73	1.66	-.21** *	.22***	.43***	.56***	.46***	—					
(7) Ambiguity acceptance	-0.0 2	0.45	.75	.71	1.56	-.09	.21***	.14**	.42***	.32***	.48***	—				
(8) Competitiveness	-0.1 4	0.52	.79	.78	1.87	-.16**	-.19** *	.28***	-.07	.01	.17***	.05	—			
(9) Aggressive hostile	-0.4 5	0.62	.70	.66	1.40	-.10	-.14**	-.02	-.29** *	.01	-.03	-.08	.47** *	—		
(10) Aggressive manip	-1.0 7	1.04	.80	.76	1.76	.02	-.12*	-.23** *	-.37** *	-.17**	-.28** *	-.26** *	.22** *	.66** *	—	
(11) Assertive	0.77	0.65	.64	.59	1.19	-.13**	.18***	.23***	.31***	.28***	.54***	.30***	.11*	.10	-.07	—
(12) Passive	-0.2 0	0.67	.71	.68	1.47	.08	-.23** *	-.17** *	-.44** *	-.25** *	-.48** *	-.37** *	-.10	.18** *	.30** *	-.43** *

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

P.rel = Person reliability.

P.sep = Person separation.

Note. Bold, underlined and italicised figures are those of primary interest in this study.

Table 2. Hierarchical regression models of Aggressive Hostile, Aggressive Manipulative, Assertive, and Passive.

Variables	R	R ²	ΔR ² change	B	SE	β	t
Aggressive hostile							
<i>Step 1</i>	.17	.03**					
Sex				-.13	.06		-2.01*
Age				-.01	.003	-.14	-2.72**
<i>Step 2</i>	.55	.31***	.28				
Sex				-.04	.06		-0.67
Age				.00	.002	.00	-0.02
Conscientiousness				-.15	.06	-.13	-2.59**
Adjustment				-.28	.05	-.28	-5.24***
Curiosity				.03	.05	.03	0.68
Risk approach				.10	.07	.09	1.31
Ambiguity acceptance				-.01	.07	-.01	-0.17
Competitiveness				.56	.06	.47	9.85***
Aggressive manipulative							
<i>Step 1</i>	.12	.02					
Sex				.03	.11		0.29
Age				-.01	.004	-.12	-2.38*
<i>Step 2</i>	.49	.24***	.23				
Sex				.03	.10		0.32
Age				.00	.004	.03	0.55
Conscientiousness				-.42	.10	-.22	-4.35***
Adjustment				-.38	.09	-.23	-4.09***
Curiosity				-.05	.08	-.03	-0.58
Risk approach				-.10	.13	-.05	-0.76
Ambiguity acceptance				-.22	.12	-.10	-1.79
Competitiveness				.58	.10	.29	5.92***
Assertive							
<i>Step 1</i>	.23	.05***					
Sex				-.17	.07		-2.59**
Age				.01	.003	.18	3.65***
<i>Step 2</i>	.55	.30***	.25				
Sex				-.02	.06		-0.37
Age				.01	.003	.08	1.77
Conscientiousness				-.01	.06	-.01	-0.16
Adjustment				.02	.06	.02	0.34
Curiosity				.06	.05	.06	1.20
Risk approach				.52	.08	.45	6.78***
Ambiguity acceptance				.07	.08	.04	0.87
Competitiveness				.06	.06	.05	1.06
Passive							
<i>Step 1</i>	.24	.06***					
Sex				.11	.07		1.58
Age				-.01	.003	-.23	-4.59***
<i>Step 2</i>	.56	.31***	.25				
Sex				-.03	.06		-0.48
Age				-.010	.06	-.14	-2.93**
Conscientiousness				.08	.06	.06	1.27
Adjustment				-.26	.06	-.24	-4.50***
Curiosity				-.08	.05	-.08	-1.68
Risk approach				-.28	.08	-.24	-3.63***
Ambiguity acceptance				-.15	.08	-.10	-2.02*
Competitiveness				-.14	.06	-.11	-2.24*

Note. Gender was coded as 0 = Male, 1 = Female.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Aggressive Hostile had a moderate to large positive correlation with Competitiveness ($r = .47$), and a small to moderate negative correlation with Adjustment ($r = -.29$). Aggressive Manipulative had a moderate negative correlation with Adjustment ($r = -.37$), small negative correlations with Risk Approach ($r = -.28$), Ambiguity Acceptance ($r = -.26$), Conscientiousness ($r = -.23$), and Curiosity ($r = -.17$), and a small positive correlation with Competitiveness ($r = .22$). The Assertive scale had a large positive correlation with Risk Approach ($r = .54$), a moderate positive correlation with Adjustment ($r = .31$) and Ambiguity Acceptance ($r = .30$), and small positive correlations with Curiosity ($r = .28$), Conscientiousness ($r = .23$) and Competitiveness ($r = .11$). Inversely, the Passive scale had a moderate negative correlation with Risk Approach ($r = -.48$), Adjustment ($r = -.44$) and Ambiguity Acceptance ($r = -.37$), and small negative correlations with Curiosity ($r = -.25$) and Conscientiousness ($r = -.17$). In short, the less adaptive communication studies were correlated with a personality profile more associated with lower well-being and occupational success.

Regressions

Hierarchical multiple regression was used to evaluate four models. Each model had sex and age entered in the first step, followed by the six HPTI traits. The dependent variables of each model were Aggressive Hostile, Aggressive Manipulative, Assertive, and Passive: see Table 2.

Aggressive Hostile. Sex and age produced a statistically significant model, $F(2, 388) = 5.56$, $p = .004$, accounting for 2.8% of the variance ($R^2 = .03$) in Aggressive Hostile behaviour. The unstandardised coefficients (B) indicated that age had a significant, negative effect on Aggressive Hostile behaviour ($B = -.01$, $p = .007$). It further revealed that males portray more Aggressive Hostile behaviour than females ($B = -.13$, $p = .05$).

After controlling for sex and age, the second step involved adding the six HPTI traits as predictors of Aggressive Hostile behaviour. The overall model was significant, $F(8, 382) = 21.08$, $p < .001$. The addition of the HPTI traits significantly increased the explained variance in Aggressive Hostile behaviour ($\Delta R^2 = .28$, $p < .001$). Sex ($B = -.04$, $p = .51$) and age ($B = .000$, $p = .98$) were no longer statistically significant contributors to the model. Of the HPTI traits, Competitiveness made a significant positive contribution to the model ($B = .56$, $p < .001$), whereas Adjustment ($B = -.28$, $p < .001$) and Conscientiousness ($B = -.15$, $p = .01$) made significant negative contributions. The remaining traits did not significantly contribute to the model.

Aggressive Manipulative. Sex and age did not make a statistically significant model, approaching significance, $F(2, 388) = 2.897$, $p = .06$, and accounted for 1.5% of the variance ($R^2 = .02$) in Aggressive Manipulative behaviour. The unstandardised coefficients indicated that age had a significant, negative effect on Aggressive Manipulative behaviour ($B = -.01$, $p = .02$). Sex did not contribute to the model ($B = .03$, $p = .77$).

After controlling for sex and age, the six HPTI traits were added as predictors of Aggressive Manipulative behaviour. The overall model was significant, $F(8, 382) = 15.38$, $p < .001$. The inclusion of the six traits significantly increased the explained variance in Aggressive Manipulative behaviour ($\Delta R^2 = .23$, $p < .001$). Age was no longer a significant contributor to the model ($B = .002$, $p = .59$), and sex remained insignificant ($B = .03$, $p = .75$). Of the HPTI traits, Competitiveness made a significant positive contribution to the model ($B = .58$, $p < .001$), whereas Conscientiousness ($B = -.42$, $p < .001$) and Adjustment ($B = -.38$, $p < .001$) made

significant negative contributions. The remaining traits did not significantly contribute to the model, though Ambiguity Acceptance approached significance ($B = -.22, p = .08$).

Assertive. Sex and age made a statistically significant model, $F(2, 388) = 10.31, p < .001$, accounting for 5.0% of the variance ($R^2 = .05$) in assertive behaviour. The unstandardised coefficient indicated that age had a significant positive effect on assertive behaviour ($B = .01, p < .001$), and males exhibited more assertive behaviour than females ($B = -.17, p = .01$).

Following the control of age and sex, the second step was adding the six HPTI traits as predictors of assertive behaviour. The overall model was significant, $F(8, 388) = 10.31, p < .001$. Including the HPTI traits significantly increased the explained variance in assertive behaviour ($\Delta R^2 = .25, p < .001$). Sex was no longer a significant contributor to the model ($B = -.02, p = .71$), and the significance of age was reduced ($B = .01, p = .08$). Of the HPTI traits, Risk Approach was the only trait that made a significant, and positive, contribution to the model ($B = .52, p < .001$).

Passive. Sex and age made a statistically significant model, $F(2, 388) = 12.01, p < .001$, accounting for 5.8% of the model ($R^2 = .06$) in passive behaviour. The unstandardised coefficient indicated that age had a significant, negative effect on passive behaviour ($B = -.01, p < .001$). The contribution sex made to the model was not statistically significant ($B = .11, p = .12$).

After controlling for age and sex, the six traits were added to the model as predictors of passive behaviour in the second step. The overall model was significant, $F(2, 388) = 21.22, p < .001$, accounting for 30.8% of the explained variance in passive behaviour ($\Delta R^2 = .25, p < .001$). Sex remained insignificant ($B = -.03, p = .63$), and the significance of age was reduced ($B = -.008, p = .004$). Of the HPTI traits, Risk Approach ($B = -.28, p < .001$), Adjustment ($B = -.26, p < .001$), Ambiguity Acceptance ($B = -.15, p = .04$), and Competitiveness ($B = -.14, p = .03$) had a significant negative contribution to the model.

Discussion

Our measures had acceptable levels of reliability, and the correlational results were readily interpretable. It is important to note that the HPTI does not have a measure of Extraversion which is a trait clearly related to Assertiveness, but does have traits like Risk Approach not assessed in many widely used measures.

Our three hypotheses were supported. The Aggressive Hostile style had a moderate to large positive correlation with Competitiveness (low Agreeableness), while the Aggressive Manipulative style had a moderate negative correlation with Adjustment (low Neuroticism). The correlations indicated that except for Conscientiousness, all the traits were positively associated with Assertiveness and negatively associated with Passiveness. That is, interpersonally assertive people tended to be emotionally adjusted, open, tolerant of ambiguity, interpersonally courageous, and competitive. Indeed, the recent literature on the HPTI suggests that is usually the profile of a successful individual (Cuppello et al., 2023a). Interestingly, the personality variables accounted for between a quarter and a third of the variance suggesting a close association between personality and communication styles as asserted by de Vries et al. (2013).

The regression results highlighted the importance of individual traits and variance accounted for. Many of the traits that were significant in the correlations ceased to be in the regressions partly because of the intercorrelation of the six traits ($.01 < r < .56$)

However, it was in the regressions that we gained a better understanding of interpersonal communication styles. In line with previous literature, we found that older males were most *Assertive* (Crawford, 1998). It was surprising that Risk Approach (Courage) was the only significant trait in the regression, though the HPTI manual offers some insight, stating: *Risk approach indicates how someone deals with challenging, difficult or threatening situations. "People who score high consider a broad range of options, choose whichever they believe to be the best one and then act quickly. They are willing to confront challenges directly and immediately. Individuals with lower risk approach scores tend to avoid challenges or conflict until they have no other choice" (p14)*. This suggests that interpersonal assertiveness may be measured and encouraged by social risk-taking.

This makes sense, though it is interesting that none of the other traits were significant. It implies that the most important factor in interpersonal communication styles is the initiation of difficult communication that may fail in its ultimate intentions. It often takes interpersonal courage and communicative self-confidence to be assertive given the probability of possible rejection and humiliation. Most other studies in this area have identified low assertiveness with high Neuroticism (Bagherian & Mojamari, 2016; Sims, 2017) but failed to differentiate between various types of low assertiveness.

It is interesting to note that many of the personality instruments widely used in this area do not assess Risk-Taking or Courage, despite its importance in many jobs (Furnham & Impellizzeri, 2021). Clearly many situations that require assertiveness also require people to be courageous given that the communication may fail or be misinterpreted.

By contrast, four of the six traits were significant predictors of the trait, *Passive*. The III test feedback notes that Passive Behaviour is inhibited, self-denying, conflict avoidant and is associated with an individual ignoring their needs and feelings in an attempt to satisfy those of others. It also notes that as a result, they experience low self-esteem, frustration and sometimes withdrawal because anger and other feelings are turned inward. The results in this study indicate that those with a Passive style were low on Adjustment (high in Neuroticism) and low on Risk Approach (Courage), Ambiguity Acceptance and Competitiveness. Thus, individuals who are often ignored or overlooked in social situations tend to maintain a mixture of reading social situations, anxiety about being misunderstood or rejected, and not taking social risks.

Concerning the Aggressive Hostile communication, the test feedback states that this style results when an individual employs a high degree of candour yet gives little consideration for the thoughts and feelings of others. Such individuals come across as domineering, pushy, self-centred, self-enhancing and, at extreme, abusive, threatening and authoritarian. The regression indicates that this communication style is associated with being highly Competitive (low Agreeableness) and low on Adjustment and Conscientiousness.

The description of the Aggressive Manipulative style is that this behaviour pattern results when a person is neither candid with their motives nor considerate of the other person's rights. They find more subtle ways to convey their reaction and feelings, and neither the Hostile Aggressive nor the Manipulative Aggressive gives others much consideration. However, the difference between the two is a matter of directness: One is upfront and unconcerned with others, while

the other is subversive and unconcerned with others. The regression results imply that the same three traits are associated with Aggressive Manipulative in the same way as with the Aggressive Hostile communication pattern, suggesting that something other than these traits differentiates the Aggressive Hostile from the Aggressive Manipulative styles.

Implications

An inability to be interpersonally assertive and express oneself or have a voice can have many negative consequences. Hence, it is important to acquire assertiveness skills. This work suggests that personality variables are related to communication style, which means it should be relatively easy to evaluate the latter by using the former. It is certainly more common to use personality rather than communication style tests in assessment and evaluation and knowing the relationship between the two could be very useful.

Just as introverts can learn to become socialisable, it would seem quite possible to teach those with a passive style how to become more assertive and interpersonally competent. Acquiring these skills is important to achieving personal, social, and work-related goals for both oneself and colleagues. The question is how to change or influence communication patterns, particularly the teaching of assertiveness.

Both Aggressive styles are associated with high Competitiveness (low Agreeableness), low Adjustment (high Neuroticism) and low Conscientiousness, which is, from many points of view, a very undesirable profile as it is associated with a poor work and relationship record (Cuppello et al., 2023a; Furnham & Treglown, 2021). In this sense, it may be helpful to offer people with these traits assertiveness training.

Limitations

Like all others, this study had limitations. We used cross-sectional self-report data, which may have issues with method invariance, dissimulation and the inability to infer causation. Although we had a large adult sample, participants tended to be middle-class, middle-aged individuals. Subsequently, the results may have differed slightly with much younger or older people. Ideally, it would have been desirable to have a behavioural or observational measure of communication style and a larger, more representative population.

Ethical Approval

This was sought and obtained (SLA/2022/02).

Informed Consent

Participants gave consent for their anonymised data to be analysed and published.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Footnotes

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Data availability statement

This is obtainable from the first author upon request.

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