Pushing up to a point: The psychology of interpersonal assertiveness

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Abstract

For better or worse, most of us find ourselves surrounded by others whose goals and interests are not perfectly aligned with our own. And so each day, most of us face one or more versions of the same basic question: How hard should I push? When people assert themselves forcefully, they may get their way in some instrumental fashion, but they may fail to get along with their counterparts. When people forego pursuing their interests, they may get along with others, but their acquiescence may mean a failure to get their way. In this talk, I examine this balancing act, reviewing research on the perceptions and sources of interpersonal assertiveness. I discuss work that suggests perceivers often see actors as pushing too hard or failing to push hard enough, suggesting that the balancing act of assertiveness is a challenge for many people. I also present an account of the sources of interpersonal assertiveness, considering why some people in interpersonal conflicts are more likely to give in whereas others press aggressively to get their way. Past work has tended to focus on motivational factors that shape assertiveness, yielding abundant evidence that motivations matter. Here, I focus on expectancies--idiosyncratic predictions people make about the social and instrumental consequences of assertive behavior--as a source of behavior. Across several studies, I unpack the nature of assertiveness expectancies and find that individual differences in these expectancies predict behavioral assertiveness. These results suggest that expectancies deserve an important place alongside motivations in our psychological models and interventions.
On most days, it does not take a great deal of human contact for us to remember that other peoples’ goals and interests are not perfectly aligned with our own. We want to sleep in late and our spouse or child wants to get up early. We want a clean sidewalk, but our neighbor forgets to pick up after his dog. We want our work colleagues to meet the deadlines they have given us, but apparently they have other plans. Wishing it were otherwise—that everyone would want exactly the same things we do—is folly. Besides, it would not make for a very interesting world; variety is the spice of life. And so dealing with this “spice” is a significant part of the human condition. How do we cope with the ever-present fact that we are surrounded by others whose interests and goals diverge from, and sometimes oppose, our own? Do we press hard for our goals to be satisfied—and if so, why? Do we yield to others’ claims—and if so, when?

In this chapter, I want to argue that these questions of how hard we push pervade and to some extent define our lives. Accordingly, the matter of when and why people push hard or give in in interpersonal conflicts large and small deserves considerable attention and care. Indeed, it has been a topic of academic scrutiny for decades, including the literatures on interpersonal conflict, negotiation, and social dilemmas. There, a well-established theme in the account of who pushes hard and why is that motivations play a central role. Some people care more about winning; others just want to get along. This seems irrefutable. One goal of the present chapter is to describe past and recent work that takes a complimentary approach to motivation-focused accounts, highlighting the role of expectancies in interpersonal assertiveness. Pushing hard is not solely a function of what a person wants, but of
what she believes will happen when she makes a forceful demand or capitulates to others’ requests. I contend that a complete account of interpersonal assertiveness needs both of these pieces, expectancies and motivations. And because our lives have so much spice in them, with the question of “how hard should I push” shaping our behavior from sunrise to sleep, we need a complete account of interpersonal assertiveness.

Assertiveness defined

I begin by clarifying what I mean by the term assertiveness, which comes not so much from an a priori scholarly model but from my interpretation of everyday perceptions of interpersonal behavior. This could be seen as a folk model of interpersonal assertiveness: a dimension characterizing how a person responds in a situation in which her positions and/or interests are, or could be, in conflict with others’ positions or interests. In other words, when goals diverge, how hard does a person push? I believe actors’ behavioral responses to this question are generally arrayed in the minds of both actors and observers along a dimension ranging from avoidance and passivity at one extreme to aggression and hostility at the other.

Some concrete examples help to illustrate assertiveness as it is approached in this chapter. Imagine that a newly-formed work team gathers to discuss an important decision (e.g., a start-up management team debating market strategy or members of a new academic research center discussing a senior hire). In the first meeting, one member advocates one choice, but another believes this would be a disastrous move. Does the skeptical member speak up forcefully in this new group, unequivocally disparaging the option, and championing her own ideas? Does she
make a more diplomatic observation about the need for caution? Or does she hold back entirely, wishing to avoid confrontation and hoping that the truth will eventually emerge?

Imagine directors of two non-profit organizations who share a building and are planning for much-needed renovations. One director begins by telling the other he expects his organization’s space to be entirely refurbished even though he intends to pay only a small share of the cost. Does the other director show resistance and push for greater cost-sharing, politely probe for areas of potential adjustment, or accept the offer as given?

Lastly, consider a manager preparing to give a subordinate his annual face-to-face review. She is pleased with his work in some areas, but finds other parts of his performance appalling. Does she focus the conversation on a blunt and unflinching dissection of his problems and their costliness? Does she applaud his strengths, describe his shortcomings, and offer her support? Or does she avoid problem areas altogether, keeping the conversation short and positive?

These cases highlight the kinds of daily choices individuals make in their interpersonal assertiveness toward others. These situations and behaviors may seem disparate, but I believe that they have a common underlying psychology that shapes actors’ choices about behavior and observers’ interpretations of acts. I define assertiveness as a dimension in everyday perceptions reflecting an individual’s interpersonal willingness to stand up and speak out for their own interests and ideas, pursuing their objectives and resisting others’ impositions. As shown in Figure 1, one end of this folk spectrum entails passivity and yielding while the other
end features aggression and hostility. In between are gradations ranging from engagement and initiation to collaboration and resistance. The term assertiveness itself seems to do double duty in everyday use, referring to this overall spectrum of behavior (e.g., “He needs to decrease his assertiveness”) as well as to a moderate or moderately-high point on the spectrum (e.g., “She is assertive”).

*Figure 1. The everyday perception of assertiveness*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Illustrative behavior or style</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conflict</strong></td>
<td>Avoidant, trivializing</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Candid, constructive</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Belligerent, demanding</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Negotiation</strong></td>
<td>Weak opening, ready concessions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong opening, integrative solutions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Extreme opening, aggressive tactics</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Teamwork</strong></td>
<td>Silent with opinions, conformist</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Egalitarian, open, engaged</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Confrontational, dominance-seeking</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Influence</strong></td>
<td>Suppliant, appeasing</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Active, forthright, persuasive</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Bullying, cajoling</td>
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<td><strong>Decision making</strong></td>
<td>Equivocal, indecisive</td>
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<td>Proactive, inclusive</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Unilateral, self-serving</td>
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Some scholars may initially see this spectrum as muddled, confounding dimensions that deserve to be separated (e.g., pursuit of one’s own interests versus
attacking others’) and making neighbors out of constructs that are qualitatively foreign to one another (e.g., aggression and assertion). I agree that more fine-grained distinctions deserve to be made in some kinds of scholarly accounts. This single spectrum definition is meant to capture everyday thinking about pushing back and I believe its value becomes apparent when it is put to work in explaining peoples’ reactions to assertiveness and their choices about assertive behavior.

**Assertiveness and outcomes**

I eventually want to present an account of choices of assertive behaviors (how do people decide how hard to push?) but I first turn to some evidence of how assertiveness relates to actual interpersonal outcomes (what happens when someone pushes hard?). This step lays important groundwork for the nature and role of assertiveness expectancies because it seems entirely likely that peoples’ folk theories of assertiveness will at least partly reflect how actual assertiveness plays out. Put another way: people decide how hard to push in part because they predict, flawlessly or not, what happens when they push hard or give in. So what happens when people push hard or give in?

My answer to this question comes from research I’ve done with Frank Flynn in the domain of organizational leadership (Ames & Flynn, 2007; see Ames, 2008a and Ames, 2009 for reviews). We began by reviewing thousands of open-ended anonymous comments professionals, including working managers and MBA students, gathered from co-workers on their behavioral strengths (e.g., what makes them effective) and weaknesses (e.g., what behaviors could be developed or improved). Assertiveness was not much of a factor in comments about strengths,
which tended to revolve around intelligence and conscientiousness. However, references to assertiveness dominated weakness comments. Importantly, they did so in both directions, with some comments referring to too much assertiveness and others referring to too little. What many professionals and leaders struggle with, at least in the eyes of onlookers, is striking the right balance with assertiveness, pushing hard enough to get things done but not so hard that they fail to get along.

This stands in contrast to a long tradition of work on individual differences as linear predictors of leadership effectiveness (though there are important exceptions, such as Fleishman (1995) and Simonton (1985)). Past work has tended to hypothesize about and test for qualities that are positively and linearly associated with leadership—that is, more of a given attribute (intelligence, ambition, extraversion, etc.) means more effective leadership. However, our work on qualitative comments from co-workers suggested a curvilinear, inverted-U-shaped relationship between assertiveness and leadership effectiveness. Indeed, several follow-up studies with managers using continuous rating measures have shown that both comparatively low and comparatively high assertive leaders were rated as less effective by coworkers than those in the middle range (Ames & Flynn, 2007).

To unpack why this happens, we decomposed outcomes into two domains: instrumental and relational outcomes. In brief, we found that each domain seemed to account for the effect at one end of the spectrum. Instrumental outcomes (getting one’s way, getting things done) seem to improve noticeably as actors move from low to moderate assertiveness, with fewer gains beyond that point. Relational outcomes (getting along with others) seem to improve considerably as actors move from high
to moderate assertiveness, with few gains beyond that point. Thus high assertive leaders tended to be ineffective largely because they failed to get along whereas low assertive leaders tended to be ineffective largely because they failed to get their way or get things done.

This work brings assertiveness into the spotlight as an important factor in leadership that has been incompletely understood historically. I believe these results speak more broadly than organizational leadership, though, by characterizing the consequences of interpersonal assertiveness as a curvilinear effect with instrumental and relational components. What happens when people push very hard? They may undermine their relationships without gaining much instrumentally. What happens when people give in? They may lose instrumentally without gaining much relationally. While situational differences surely dictate different appropriate levels of assertiveness in a given situation (see Ames, 2009), it seems that there may be some middle range of assertiveness that tends to optimize outcomes. This idea is the starting point for an expectancy-based account of assertive behavioral choices: what does an individual actor believe is the optimal level of assertiveness? Do individuals vary in where they believe this optimal point lies—and does such variance predict their behavioral choices? The notion that expectancies such as these govern behavior is certainly not new and so before zeroing in specifically on assertiveness expectancies, it is worth recognizing this context.

*Expectancies*
From its earliest days, psychology has recognized that people have expectations about the others around them and that these beliefs have a function in regulating behavior (see Roese & Sherman, 2007 for a review). Much of the scholarship on interpersonal expectancies has focused on expectations about other people’s characteristics and behavior, as in work on stereotyping and self-fulfilling prophecies (e.g., Miller & Turnbull, 1986), and with internal working models of others, as in research on attachment styles (e.g., Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005; Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000). Numerous researchers have highlighted the importance of competitive expectations about others, linking conflict behaviors to a prediction that one’s conflict partner may be aggressive, hostile, or untrustworthy (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1994; Diekmann, Tenbrunsel, & Galinski, 2003; Kelley & Stahelski, 1970; Van Lange, 1992).

Such basic expectations about others are certainly important. However, the assertiveness expectancy account presented here departs from this tradition by stressing expected reactions by another to one’s own assertive behavior. Rather than basic or non-contingent expectancies, this account deals with contingent ones: If I do X, another person will do, think, or feel Y. Building on social cognitive models of behavior (e.g., Bandura, 1986; Mischel & Shoda, 1995), several noteworthy traditions of work have examined such contingent expectancies. One body of research deals with relational schemas or scripts and their impact on relationship behavior and self-construal (see Baldwin & Dandeneau (2005) for a review). Research in this vein has shown, for instance, that the amount of anger displayed in a close relationship depends on anticipated partner response (Fehr, Baldwin,
Collins, Patterson, & Benditt, 1999). A related area of inquiry has examined rejection sensitivity, which revolves around “anxious expectations” of interpersonal rejection and the associated activation of defensive responses that can have negative or even self-fulfilling effects (e.g., Downey & Feldman, 1996). Elsewhere, researchers examining gender dynamics in negotiation have linked women’s assertive behaviors to “anticipated backlash,” namely women’s expectations of how their behavior will be viewed and derogated by others (Amanatullah & Morris, in press; Bowles, Babcock, & Lai, 2007).

In all of these programs of work, people are portrayed as having different internal models of how others will react to them or their behavior. Person-to-person variance in these models has been linked to a variety of interpersonal behaviors and outcomes, such as psychological adjustment. Together, this body of work suggests that there is substantial promise in exploring how general assertiveness expectancies might shape behavior—how hard people push—across a variety of contexts. Those who pessimistically expect that high levels of assertiveness will be costly will tend to show lower levels of assertiveness than those who optimistically believe that high levels of assertiveness bring benefits. This is consistent with Mischel’s (1973) notion of “idiosyncratic stimulus meaning”: each person transforms an event or object into some distinctive meaning, based on their own history and presumptions, and acts on their goals in light of these meanings. With assertiveness, I suggest, people make idiosyncratic forecasts of the social and instrumental consequences of a given forceful or acquiescent behavior. As social cognitive theories of personality suggest, these expectancies shape behavior and can
help researchers to predict it. I believe people who regularly push harder or capitulate more readily often have different expectations about what happens when they assert themselves. However, to harness assertiveness expectancies in our conceptual models and to use them in our research, we first need to establish the form these expectancies typically take and how they can best be measured, a matter to which I turn next.

*The nature of assertiveness expectancies*

   Based on the prior work showing that interpersonal assertiveness often has a curvilinear, inverted-U-shaped effect on interpersonal relations (Ames & Flynn, 2007), I expect that many people will have curvilinear expectancies, assuming that they can push up to a point, but no further without incurring damage to their outcomes and/or relationships. For instance, in a negotiation, people may feel that making a moderately assertive opening offering could be effective, but at some point of heightened assertiveness, an opening could backfire, undermining both results and relationships. While people in general may show this form of expectancy, individuals will vary in what point they think they can push up to. Some may be very optimistic, assuming they can display very high levels of interpersonal assertiveness before incurring costs. Others may be much more pessimistic, assuming that even modest levels of assertiveness could spell trouble. If this characterization is correct, it would invite a research approach that attempts to identify an individual’s perceived “optimal” level of assertiveness or some kind of proxy for this expectancy.

   I tested this idea by asking research participants to literally draw their expectancies (Ames, 2008, Study 1). Participants received a blank chart, with an X-
axis indicating degrees of assertiveness and a Y-axis indicating either social or instrumental outcomes; they were then asked to draw a line representing the outcomes they would generally expect for each level of assertiveness. Pilot work showed that people found this task to be an intuitive way of expressing their expectations that were sometimes hard to put into words. As expected, the majority of participants (some 60 to 70 percent) drew lines that had a clear inverted-U shape, with a midpoint and downturned ends, for both social and instrumental outcomes. Responses from undergraduate students and MBA students were nearly identical. This suggests that assertiveness expectancies often take the form of implying an ideal or optimal level of assertiveness that varies from one person to the next and could be taken as a measure of expectancies. The drawing results also showed greatest variance at the extremes: most everyone agreed that some middle level of assertiveness led to good outcomes; people varied more considerably on the outcomes they thought would be associated with extreme levels of assertiveness. This was especially true for expected instrumental outcomes at high assertiveness: some people thought high assertiveness would bring instrumental gains, others thought it would backfire (see Figure 2). This suggests that expected outcomes for very high levels of assertiveness would be another way of measuring expectancies.

Figure 2. Plots of expectancy drawing means and variance
Assertiveness expectancies and behavior

Having characterized assertiveness expectancies as often taking a curvilinear form and varying from person to person at extreme levels of assertiveness, I sought evidence linking these expectancies to behavior. Initial evidence comes from the line drawing study noted above, where measures of both optimal assertiveness (the level of assertiveness for each participant that yielded the greatest social or instrumental outcomes) and extreme assertiveness (the expected social or instrumental outcomes for the lowest or highest levels of assertiveness) were associated with self-reported assertiveness. However, non-self-report measures of assertiveness would arguably make a more compelling case.

Several subsequent studies (Ames, 2008, Studies 3 and 4) pursued and found such evidence. For the independent measure of expectancies, participants predicted social and instrumental outcomes for a range of specific behaviors spanning from low assertiveness to high assertiveness. For instance, participants reviewed a
scenario involving a manager’s low-ball offer in a salary negotiation. Participants went on to consider a number of responses, ranging from accepting the low-ball offer to responding with an aggressive counter-offer, and then rated the outcomes they expected would result, such as final negotiated salary and liking and trust for the new employee on behalf of the manager. In another scenario, participants imagined they were in a team meeting with a fellow manager who recommended a strategic initiative they knew would not be successful. Participants rated outcomes for responses ranging from saying nothing to vociferously and forcefully objecting. In effect, across these scenarios, participants made a forecast of what they thought would happen if they yielded ground or fought hard. To what extent would they get their way? And to what extent would they get along? These expectancies served as an independent variable, tapping into participants’ more general views of what happens when they push hard or give in.

As expected, participants’ self-reported expectancy measures based on a series of specific but hypothetical situations predicted indices of participants’ assertive behavior based on reports from negotiation counterparts and real-life coworkers. Those who expected relatively minimal costs for high levels of interpersonal assertiveness (e.g., they thought a manager would find an aggressive counter-offer in the salary negotiation acceptable) were seen by partners in an unrelated dyadic, fixed-sum negotiation exercise as considerably more assertive. Expectancies also predicted the value claimed in negotiation settlements: those who were more optimistic about the payoffs of highly assertive behavior achieved more favorable deal terms. In another study, participants were rated by work colleagues
for their typical level of assertiveness in the actual workplace (e.g., standing their ground in a conflict). As predicted, those who were more optimistic about the payoffs of highly assertive behavior in the scenarios were seen by work colleagues as considerably more assertive in the workplace.

In sum, people vary in what they expect happens when they push hard or give in ... and these idiosyncratic expectancies are predictive of assertive behavior. But are these effects distinct from the effects of motivations, such as a desire to win or a concern for maintaining relationships? Are expectancies themselves merely reflections of motivations? The next section takes up these questions.

 Assertiveness expectancies and motives

Over the last half century, scholars of conflict, negotiation, and social dilemmas have repeatedly linked interpersonal conflict behavior to underlying motivations—variously identified as preferences, concerns, priorities, orientations, and values. While interaction-specific objectives surely matter (e.g., “I want my manager to give me a 10% raise today”), considerable attention has been paid to more general social motives (e.g., “I don’t care what happens to others as long as I get what I want”). One of the most active traditions of such work revolves around dual-concern theory (e.g., Carnevale & Pruitt, 1992) and motivational orientations (e.g., Messick & McClintock, 1968) which posit that people vary in their attitudes about their own and their conflict partners’ outcomes. Combinations of these dimensions yield different orientations that are often labeled pro-self or competitive (concerned with maximizing the positive difference between self and other), individualist (concerned solely with one’s own outcome), and pro-social or
cooperative (concerned with maximizing joint outcomes). An abundance of research has linked these social value orientations to assertive behaviors in social dilemmas and games (e.g., McClintock & Liebrand, 1988; Van Lange, 1999) and in conflict and negotiation (e.g., De Dreu & Van Lange, 1995; De Dreu, Weingart, & Kwon, 2000; Olekalns & Smith, 2003).

While these social orientations seem to account for the bulk of motivational work on conflict behavior, other interpersonal motives have been invoked as well, such as communal values (e.g., Amanatullah, Morris, & Curhan, 2008), agreeableness (e.g., Barry & Friedman, 1998; Graziano, Jensen-Campbell, & Hair, 1996), and need to belong (e.g., De Cremer & Leonardelli, 2003). In addition, there is evidence to suggest that identity motivations, such as the need to save face or maintain an image of toughness, can affect conflict behavior (e.g., White, Tynan, Galinsky, Thompson, 2004). In short, ample evidence shows that what people care about affects their assertiveness in conflict and negotiation. Put simply: motives matter.

The results about expectancies reviewed above raise the question about how motives and expectancies relate. Will the link between expectancies and behavior remain after controlling for motivations, or will it be overshadowed? Are expectancies simply derivatives of motives? I expect that whereas assertiveness expectancies might be related to social motivations, an independent expectancy-behavior link will generally remain after controlling for motivations. The logic can be illustrated by work in the domain of risky choice that distinguishes between risk preferences and risk perceptions (e.g., Weber & Milliman, 1997). Risk preferences, analogous to motivations, concern a person's appetite for risk. Risk perceptions,
analogous to expectancies in the current account, concern a person’s assessment of how risky a given option is. Empirically, these preference and perception constructs have proven to be distinct and both appear to exhibit independent effects on risky choice (e.g., Weber & Hsee, 1998). Two people could have identical risk preferences, but differ in their choices because one perceives the option as risky and the other does not. In the domain of conflict, two people could have identical motives—the same concerns for maintaining relationships, for instance—but differ in their assertiveness simply because one expects a behavior would damage a relationship and the other does not.

In brief, the recent work I have done on assertiveness expectancies is consistent with this idea. Across the studies (Ames, 2008), I found weak or non-significant links between expectancies and measures of motivations, including social value orientations, conflict styles, unmitigated communion, and basic questions about concerns for winning and maintaining relationships. In other words, expectancies are not mere reflections of motivations. Further, across the studies, both expectancies and motivations appeared to be simultaneously and separately predictive of behavior, suggesting that they each have a distinct role to play. Assertive behavior appears to be a product of both what people care about and what they believe will happen when they give in or push hard.

I have not yet found evidence for an interaction between expectancies and motivations. However, the logic for such interactions seems clear. Imagine a team leader advocating on her team’s behalf to an organizational leader. She might expect that the harder she pushes, the more costly it will be in terms of her relationship
with her leader, but the better she will do in terms of resources for her team. Along with these two expectancies would be two motivations: concern for her relationship with the leader and concern with the resources for her team. It stands to reason that if she cares vastly more about, say, her team's resources, the resource expectancy would be more predictive of her behavior than the relationship expectancy. Alternately, if she cares very little about the team's resources, it seems unlikely that the resource expectancy would be a powerful predictor of her behavior. In short, the expectancies that matter most in predicting our behavior are likely those about outcomes that mean the most to us. A full account of interpersonal assertiveness and behavioral choice would likely need to have roles for both motivations and expectancies as well as an interaction between the two.

Sources of expectancies

Evidence that expectancies are an important predictor of assertive behavior naturally raises another question: where do expectancies come from? The fact that expectancies seem to carry across domains implies an underlying core, such as basic working models for the self, others, and relationships that are built up over the course of a lifetime (e.g., Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005). Self-esteem may be part of this core. Baldwin and Keelan (1999) argued that individuals higher in trait self-esteem had more positive interpersonal expectancies about their own ability to secure affiliation from others. Indeed, there was some evidence of a modest positive link between self-esteem and optimal assertiveness in the line drawing study discussed earlier (Ames, 2008, Study 1). Those lower in self-esteem were more pessimistic about their ability to pursue their interests without suffering
relational costs. Future work might further explore the links between assertiveness expectancies and relevant working models or schema, such as self-esteem, rejection sensitivity, and attachment styles.

While expectancies may be partly rooted in long-held models that accumulate over a lifetime, they may also be shaped and reinforced—validly or not—by more immediate evidence. Part of the process no doubt reflects the fact that people only experience the outcomes of behaviors they choose, not of behaviors they forego. Such is the case with anxiety disorders, where someone afraid of driving over bridges for fear of collapse, for example, never does so, and thus does not experience the outcome of safely driving over a bridge, left instead to imagine that the worst might have happened if they had done so. Someone who is pessimistic about asserting his own opinion in a group setting systematically holds back, never experiencing the positive effects of speaking up and thus never overturning their overly-pessimistic expectancy. Confirmation biases and selective interpretation no doubt also play a role. Someone who is optimistic about her ability to push hard without damaging relationships may see what she expects to see in the wake of a conflict. She may take superficial signs of acceptance as a signal of her counterpart’s contentment even though the counterpart’s ample resentment is lingering below the surface.

The examples just discussed suggest that people may often not effectively revise or calibrate their expectancies, bringing them in line with reality. The implication may seem disconcerting: left to their own devices, people with misguided expectancies may not overturn them. However, I believe the facts that
expectancies shape behavior and that expectancies can be revised in the face of evidence and feedback is a rather hopeful one. Although people may not naturally or spontaneously confront the right kinds of evidence, individuals, organizations, and trainers can find ways to help them do so, potentially leading to more effective assertiveness and constructive interpersonal conflict. One widely-used tool in organizations is multi-rater feedback, which can give recipients a chance to confront what others think about their behavior and whether they are regularly pushing too hard or giving in too readily. Many professional schools, including business schools, regularly use roleplay exercises in negotiations and other courses, allowing students to debrief one another after the fact. These experiences often yield feedback that the world does not ordinarily offer, such as a negotiation counterpart revealing that a student could have pushed much harder. In sum, while people may often succumb to selective evidence and confirmation biases in reinforcing invalid expectancies, there are opportunities to revise expectancies, helping people to better achieve the outcomes they desire and to more effectively coordinate their behavior with others. Overly pessimistic individuals might see that they have room to push harder without endangering their relationships, and thus may gain comfort in speaking up and standing their ground. Overly optimistic individuals might discover that their behavior is harming their relationships and subsequently adjust how they engage in conflict.

*Expectancies and interpretation*

The evidence noted here suggests that assertiveness expectancies shape behavioral choices. I want to end by briefly noting how they may also shape
interpretations of others’ behavior. One way in which they likely do so is through the projection of our own expectancies onto others, which then become a lens for evaluating their behavior. A basic version of this is that, in general terms, we expect others will act in what we see as the optimally assertive way. For example, faced with a situation in which my interests conflict with my boss’, my pessimistic expectancies guide me to, say, give in … and I would expect someone else in my position to do the same. Unpublished studies I have done suggest that people seem to project their own assertive choices onto others: if I expect I would push hard in a certain situation, I assume most others would, too; if I expect I would capitulate, I assume most others would do likewise.

I suspect this may happen in part because we project not only our behavior but our underlying expectancies onto others. One way of putting it is that “I grade you on my curve.” Take the example of optimistic Oliver and pessimistic Peter interpreting their co-worker Andrea yelling at her colleague Beth in the midst of a verbal conflict. Pessimistic Peter’s first instinct might be to project his own behavior onto Andrea (“I’d be very unlikely to yell because it would hurt my relationship with Beth so Andrea won’t yell”), but he is now faced with having to explain Andrea’s behavior, the yelling. He might grade her behavior according to his own expectancies: “I think yelling at someone would make them feel awful, and that would hurt our relationship … therefore, given that Andrea yelled, she must know but not care that this will make Beth feel awful, thus Andrea must not care about her relationship with Beth.” Meanwhile, optimistic Oliver might have a different
interpretation of Andrea’s yelling: “I think yelling at someone isn’t such a harmful thing ... so, even though Andrea yelled, she probably still cares about Beth.”

When people have different interpretations of behavior (e.g., pessimistic Peter thinks Andrea’s yelling means she does not care about Beth whereas optimistic Oliver thinks the yelling signals something else), that divergence itself can be a source of stress and conflict. Thus, assertiveness expectancies can enter into interpersonal conflict in two ways: first, by shaping behavioral choices and second, by shaping interpretations of others’ behavior. Both of these entry points have the potential to make conflict worse, through poor behavioral choices and misinterpretations. Likewise, both have the potential to make conflict more constructive, through effective choices and correct interpretations, and therefore deserve further study.

**Conclusion**

Variety is the spice of life and so our lives are, in many ways, enriched by interacting with others who aspire to things that we do not. But the fact that we are surrounded by people with different objectives and interests means that we are in a constant series of conflicts, mostly low grade ones, throughout our days, confronting again and again the same question: How hard should I push? Should I resist my spouse or child? Should I defy my neighbor or boss? Should I give in? All of us who interact with other people answer on ongoing barrage of such questions, often finding our answers seamlessly, perhaps even unconsciously. As scholars, we already know some about how people answer these questions, but we can, should, and no doubt will know more. I believe assertiveness expectancies have the
potential to help us better understand how people choose how hard to push and that complete models of assertive behavior should afford a place for expectancies. Yet variety is the spice of life and I would be disappointed if other scholars did not see the matter differently. I look forward to them pushing back, but maybe not too hard.
References


