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Modifying Argumentative and Aggressive Communication

As most people have experienced firsthand, skills training is something that is part of our personal and professional lives. Examples include training for *hard skills* such as learning new software programs, driver education programs, and organizational procedure training. In contemporary society we have also seen a dramatic increase in the training of *soft skills*. Unlike hard skills where there is a mechanistic outcome (e.g., “I can effectively create and save a file in Microsoft Word”), soft-skill training reflects material focused largely on communication in human relationships. Some examples include effective decision making, assertiveness, public speaking skills, leadership, listening and empathetic skills, negotiation, and conflict management techniques. The goal of these programs are enhanced skills designed to bring about more satisfying relationships with family members and coworkers, among others.

Soft-skill training has occasionally been viewed as warm and fuzzy, but with little substance. However, research indicates that effective soft-skill training does affect the bottom line for people and organizations (Seibold, Kudsi, & Rude, 1993). For example, the more effective the communication between superior and subordinate, the more satisfied the employee. The more satisfied the employee, the more motivated he or she is. The more motivated the employee, the more productive he or she will be.

Argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness are traits developed as a function of both inherited personality and environmental influences. If we

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assume that biology is solely responsible for these traits, then no amount of training would be effective in altering these predispositions. However, even advocates of the inherited trait explanation recognize that some communication behavior is the result of social learning and thus may be modified through training. In this chapter, we will highlight several efforts that have resulted in some meaningful and lasting changes to individuals' levels of argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness.

The Call for Training

Inherent in the human condition and present throughout the life cycle is the need and desire to learn. From the time we enter the world we are continually acquiring the skills necessary for survival and enhanced existence. Recall the manners training provided by our parents through utterances such as, "What do you say when someone gives you something?" "We do not speak like that in this house!" and "Don't use that tone of voice." As we age, this training is often provided by our friends, coworkers, supervisors, and spouses. Just as we train people in constructive communication (e.g., argumentativeness), there is also a need to train people in the management or reduction of behaviors that are deemed destructive (e.g., verbal aggression).

The notion that people should be trained in argumentation can be traced to antiquity. Whether in ancient Greece or Rome, the ability to argue effectively was considered an invaluable skill. For example, in *The Rhetoric*, Aristotle presented rhetorical *topoi*, or lines of argument that could be used to enhance persuasion.

The Inventional System

In Chapter 4 we presented the argumentative skills deficiency model of interpersonal violence. The basic premise of this model is that people who lack the motivation and skill to invent arguments have a greater tendency to resort to verbal aggression, which can result in an escalated potential for physical aggression. Therefore, training people to argue is thought to bring about a decreased tendency to resort to verbal aggression. To this end, Infante (1988) proposed the inventional system for developing or generating arguments. The assumption here is that through training in how to invent arguments, people can enhance argumentative behavior. Regardless of the nature of the conflict or the proposition being argued, the inventional system is thought to be effective in helping individuals generate arguments to use when they are needed. That is, whether arguing propositions of policy (e.g., the government should

legalize marijuana), fact (e.g., adding fluoride to water supplies results in better dental health), or value (e.g., people who are considered medically brain dead should not be kept alive by artificial means), the inventional system should work to improve one's ability to invent arguments.

The inventional system (Infante, 1988) is composed of four main topics and several subissues. The main topics are problem, blame, solution, and consequence. The problem and blame components reflect the need for the proposal whereas the solution and consequence components reflect how the proposal will satisfy the need. The problem component contains three subissues of "What are the signs of the problem?" "What is the specific harm?" and "How widespread is the harm?" The blame component contains three subissues of "What causes the problem?" "Is the present system at fault?" and "Should the present system be changed?" The solution component contains two subissues of "What are the possible solutions?" and "Which solution best solves the problem?" The consequence component also contains two subissues of "What good outcomes will result from the solution?" and "What bad outcomes will result from the solution?"

The questions posed by the inventional system prompt people to think in a methodical and structured way. Infante (1988) contends that once a person commits this system to memory and uses it appropriately, it will have lasting effects on a person's thinking about any issue. Although primarily used to help generate arguments, the system can also be used to determine whether a person has enough knowledge to even argue in the first place. Given the series of questions posed by the inventional system, a person may quickly realize he or she does not have enough information to argue in a knowledgeable and successful fashion, which might result in the person actually refraining from arguing.

The development of argumentative skills has been part of several training efforts aimed at both adults and adolescents. A few of these efforts have focused on helping people increase their argumentative behavior while concomitantly dampening or diminishing their use of verbal aggression. One assumption inherent in these programs is that the teaching of argument (a constructive behavior) should decrease the likelihood of an individual to resort to verbally attacking another person (a destructive behavior).

Training Adults to Argue Constructively

How would one go about designing training aimed at increasing argumentative communication while simultaneously reducing verbal aggression? The most comprehensive effort along these lines was advanced by Infante (1995a). Infante proposed teaching a unit designed specifically toward

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understanding and controlling verbal aggression in the undergraduate classroom. The training has three fundamental goals:

1. understanding the nature of verbal aggression,
2. developing strategies for controlling verbal aggression, and
3. engaging in activities designed to internalize the knowledge and behaviors learned in the training.

The first goal focuses on understanding the following: (1) distinctions between constructive and destructive communication (i.e., that assertiveness and argumentativeness are constructive traits, whereas hostility and verbal aggressiveness are destructive traits), (2) the nature of verbal aggressiveness which concerns the potency and types of verbally aggressive messages (e.g., character and competence attacks, teasing, ridicule, maledictions, profanity, nonverbal verbal aggression), (3) the reasons or origins of verbal aggression (i.e., psychopathology, disdain, social learning, genetics, and argumentative skill deficiency), and (4) the effects of verbal aggression (i.e., self-concept damage and the potential escalation of aggression). Understanding this model constitutes the knowledge portion of the training.

The second goal concerns the development of strategies for controlling verbal aggression and conflict situations. Infante (1995a) proposed using three approaches to achieve this goal. First is the ability to create interpersonal situations that do not contain verbal aggression by employing communication skills such as positiveness, supportiveness, empathy, and confirming the position of the other person. This, in effect, will reflect a supportive communication climate as opposed to a defensive communication climate (Gibb, 1961).

The second approach focuses on the individual as opposed to the situation. As the level of verbal aggressiveness varies among people, Infante (1995a) recommends that we try to avoid being in relationships with people who are high in verbal aggressiveness. Training people to identify verbal and nonverbal behaviors that are indicators of verbal aggression early in a relationship make it easier for people to terminate a potentially destructive relationship. These behaviors can include a person shaking his or her head in disgust or a person's reaction to other aggressive people. Further, once identified, relational disengagement strategies (i.e., break-up strategies) should also be taught.

The third approach in achieving the ability to control verbal aggression involves training in argument skills. Recall the research that revealed the probability of verbal and physical aggression is reduced when people possess the ability to formulate arguments when they need to advocate positions on

issues and use arguments to attack the positions of others. One of the most effective ways of generating arguments is through the use of Infante's (1988) inventional system.

Preventing the escalation of an aggressive situation is part of the second goal of this training unit. As several of us have experienced, when one person resorts to personal attacks, the other person generally responds in kind. That is, verbal aggression begets verbal aggression. There are, however, strategies that can be used to deescalate or diffuse an otherwise potentially explosive situation. Infante (1995a) offers three approaches for neutralizing an aggressive situation. The first is an adaptation of Margoline's (1979) treatment model for abusive couples. More specifically, this involves training people in the following seven phases of aggressive situations:

1. identifying factors that stimulate anger in the situation (e.g., topic, time of discussion, etc.),
2. developing tactics to interrupt the angry reaction (e.g., the person tells the other that they are getting angry),
3. developing tactics to discuss the issue later when the angry person has calmed down,
4. eliminating the behavior that provokes anger (e.g., rolling of the eyes, interruptions),
5. changing incorrect thoughts about the relationships (e.g., we fight, therefore you do not love me anymore),
6. sharpening the skills to resolve or solve problems, and
7. developing strategies to improve the climate of the relationship.

The second approach offered by Infante (1995a) is the development of skills to protect the self from abusive situations by dismissing the attack. These strategies can be targeted at the situation, the victim, or the attacker. Using Wagner's (1980) strategies for dismissal, Infante offers the following strategies for the dismissal of attacks due to the situation: misinformation (i.e., claiming that the attack was based on faulty information) and coercion (i.e., claiming that the information used to attack the person was obtained by the threat of force). Dismissal strategies consist of personal growth (i.e., the belief that the person who is attacked has changed and, as such, is no longer worthy of the attack), the unconscious (i.e., agreeing with that attacker but blaming the characterization on the subconscious and, as such, being beyond control), and excuse (i.e., claim that the characterization is unwarranted because the victim is not to blame). Strategies toward the

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source consist of ignorance (i.e., the person who is making the attack has no idea what he or she is talking about), the dark side (i.e., the person doing the attacking is motivated by jealousy, resentment, envy, or a general tendency to be cruel), and unacknowledged motives (i.e., the person making the attack has ulterior motives). All of these dismissal strategies are believed to neutralize an aggressive situation.

Infante's (1995a) final approach focuses directly on interaction between the victim and the attacker and is known as the argumentative approach. This involves the following five types of communication: (1) refuting the verbally aggressive claim (i.e., counterarguing the premise of the personal attack), (2) distinguishing argument from verbal aggression (i.e., speaking of how the argument turned into a personal attack and suggesting that the attacker get back to the argument), (3) taking a position of nonreciprocity (i.e., acknowledging to the attacker that the attack has occurred but you will not reciprocate and that the topic should be turned back to the issue at hand), (4) appealing to rationality (i.e., telling the attacker that the personal attack is not a rational behavior and that having a rational discussion involves staying on topic), and (5) threatening interaction termination (i.e., telling the attacker that you will cease to discuss any issues until the personal attacks cease).

The final goal proposed by Infante (1995a) involves the development of activities that serve to have trainees internalize the knowledge and behaviors acquired in the unit. These activities range in scope from individually focused to group focused. At the individual level, people are asked to write a position paper or deliver a message on a particular aspect of verbal aggression (e.g., Are there situations where verbal aggression would be warranted?). A second individual activity concerns having the person conduct a brief research project on verbal aggression and write a paper or give a speech on the results. For the final individual activity, people are asked to keep a diary of the situations in which they encounter verbal aggression. These encounters should include the type of message, the situation around which the message was sent, whether they were the sender or receiver of the message, and whether the verbal aggression escalated.

For activities at the group level, Infante (1995a) proposes giving each group a problem such as "Can genetics explain verbally aggressive behavior?" The group then conducts a study and presents it in a panel format to the others in the training session. A variation of this would be to have group members take a subset of the data the group has collected and do a series of individual papers based on that data (e.g., one person focuses specifically on comparing men and women in verbal aggression use while another focuses on comparing young people and older people in verbal aggression use). A second group activity concerns charging the group with an issue such as

“Should spouses ever use verbal aggression with each other?” The group then discusses the issue and comes to a decision. That decision is then reported to the rest of the trainees. The final group activity uses a role-playing technique. A situation is assigned to the group and each group member is given a role (e.g., your teacher calls you stupid in front of the class). Each group member plays both the aggressor and the victim role. The group then discusses the different experiences.

The curriculum presented by Infante (1995a) represents a comprehensive matrix for decreasing verbal aggression. At this time, few if any attempts at integrating the entire curriculum have been made. This program, if performed as specified, holds exciting possibilities in teaching the knowledge and skills necessary to control verbal aggression. This is not to say that parts of the curriculum have not been utilized. The next section of this chapter will address specific efforts geared at increasing argumentative behavior and decreasing verbal aggression. Although Infante’s curriculum was written with undergraduate college students in mind, he believes that it is applicable to numerous other situations including family communication, political communication, and organizational communication, as well as with different age groups.

Training in Argument

An effort to train adults in argumentation was conducted by Anderson, Schultz, and Courtney-Staley (1987), who investigated the impact that argumentation training has on assertiveness. More specifically, the training was based on the following assumptions: (a) effective conflict management assumes that a person is willing to engage in a conflict situation, (b) cognitive data (i.e., knowledge) about argument and conflict is needed to change negative stereotypes about arguing and conflict, and (c) when perceptions have been altered by knowledge of effective arguing, theories of argumentation as well as persuasion can be taught.

Ninety-six participants (45 men and 51 women) were assigned to the experimental condition (i.e., they received the training) and 89 (32 men and 57 women) were assigned to the control group (i.e., they received no training). The training included lecture, discussion, and small-group role playing. During the 3-hour training, the trainers highlighted the negative perceptions that people have of conflict and arguing as well as the constructive nature of being high in argumentativeness and having effective conflict-management skills. This was achieved by the sequence of training proposed by Schultz and Anderson (1984). The curriculum for the training included determining the perceptions of conflict and argumentativeness, determining individual

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goals, and determining the most effective strategy to achieve those goals (which may include argument, persuasion, agitation or avoidance, diffusion, and confrontation).

The results revealed that women showed the greatest amount of positive change from the training, which prompted the researchers to focus on the female trainees. Therefore, with this particular conceptualization of argument and conflict management content, a viable curriculum for the training of females in argumentative communication was offered. An ancillary finding of this study is as equally important as the sex differences observed. Anderson et al. (1987) report that the most dramatic change as a result of the training was found in the moderate argumentative group. That is, more pretraining moderate argumentatives (as identified by a pretest) were higher in argumentativeness (on the posttest) after the training than any other group. The percentage of females who moved from moderate to high in argumentativeness increased from 8% to 22% (a 14% increase as a result of the training). This is in contrast to a 3% increase for the low-argumentative group moving into moderate argumentativeness. One of the implications of this study is that we might expect more posttraining change in argumentativeness to occur among those moderate in the trait. Avtgis and Rancer (2005) suggest that individuals with extremely low or extremely high levels of a trait (e.g., argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness) might be less influenced by situational factors (i.e., training programs) and may not benefit as much from training as would those more moderate in the traits. The results of the Anderson et al. study offer some support for this speculation.

Training Adolescents to Argue Constructively

The need to minimize the use of verbal aggression in adolescent populations is obvious. Among adolescents, the presence of verbal aggression seems ubiquitous as we hear it in their popular music and echoing throughout the streets where they play. We have all heard terms such as *bullying* and *abusive* when describing contemporary middle and high school life. Many school systems throughout the United States have instituted conflict management programs designed to minimize students' use of verbal abuse and physical aggression. Over the past several years, we have seen the devastation of Columbine (Colorado) High School and more recently the Red Lake (Minnesota) High School shootings in which verbal abuse has been implicated as a possible cause (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003). Aggression has both a verbal and a physical component. As stated earlier, the goal of verbal aggression is to humiliate, embarrass, and hurt another

person. The argumentative skill deficiency explanation for verbal aggression suggests that when a person lacks the skill and motivation to engage in argument, there is a greater tendency to resort to verbal aggression. This explanation has spawned efforts to develop training to encourage argumentative behavior and, as a result, to potentially decrease the use of verbal aggression.

One of the most comprehensive efforts to train adolescents in argument skills was conducted by Rancer et al. (1997), who sought to enhance motivation to argue and increase skill in argument by training adolescents how to use the inentional system. By teaching adolescents the system, the following objectives were included in the training program: (1) helping students understand the role that trait argumentativeness and trait verbal aggressiveness play in our conflict behavior, (2) teaching them the difference between argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness, (3) providing them with a working knowledge of the inentional system, and (4) having them actually put the inentional system into practice by having them argue with an opponent.

To review, Infante's (1988) inentional system is based on the following argumentation premise: the status quo is in need of change and any given proposal will satisfy the need. The components of the system consist of a problem (e.g., what does the problem look like?), blame (e.g., who or what is responsible for the problem?), solutions (e.g., what possible solutions exist for the problem?), and consequences (e.g., what are the benefits and drawbacks from adopting the proposed solution?).

Because teaching adolescents to use such a system may seem a daunting task, Rancer et al. (1997) used a restaurant menu analogy in an effort to make components of the inentional system easier to memorize and learn. As a result, The Peanut Butter and Soda Crackers Diner Menu was created. The problem component was now the Peanut Course, the blame component was known as the Butter Course, the solution component was known as the Soda Course, and the consequence component was known as the Crackers Course. Each of these components also has subtopics that were also taught using pneumatic devices. For example, under the Peanut Course (problem component) there was swiss (i.e., sign of the problem), ham (i.e., harm being done by the problem), and wheat (i.e., how widespread the problem is). All of the subtopics of the other components were described in a similar manner (see Rancer et al.).

Seventh-grade students in a Pennsylvania middle school participated in the training program and study. During the first week of the school year, students were administered the adolescent versions of the Argumentativeness and Verbal Aggressiveness scales (see Roberto & Finucane, 1997). Students were placed into groups, with some of the groups receiving the training (i.e., the experimental group) and other groups not receiving the training (i.e., the control group).

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The program consisted of 7 days of instruction. The first day consisted of learning the different types of arguments common in middle school, the distinctions between argumentative and verbally aggressive communication, and the importance of being able to argue effectively. The second day students were trained to identify constructive versus destructive arguments. In an effort to measure argument behavior, students were asked to generate arguments in support of the following proposition: "All students should be fluent in a foreign language in order to graduate from high school." The students then provided written arguments to support the proposition. This measure of argument behavior served as the pretest for the study.

The third and fourth days of training consisted of learning the components of the inventional system. On the fifth day, students were trained to use the system to generate arguments. The sixth day was used for posttraining argument behavior. The students were asked to develop arguments to the following proposition: "Crowding should be considered the most serious problem in cities today." The seventh and final day of training served as a posttest of student trait argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness (again using the adolescent versions of both scales).

The results of the training were encouraging. When the experimental and control groups' posttest results were compared, adolescents in the experimental group reported a significant increase in their general tendency to argue (ARGgt). That is, their motivation to argue was significantly higher after the training. The training appears to have functioned effectively to enhance adolescents' motivation to argue.

Recall that the subjects in both conditions were also asked to generate as many arguments as they could on the proposition both prior to and after the training program. The results revealed that, on average, the experimental (trained) group generated almost four more arguments than the control group. Thus, the effects of the training also appear to have significantly influenced their ability to generate actual arguments.

The adaptation and use of the inventional system seem to have functioned successfully for increasing trait argumentativeness and argumentative behavior in adolescents. Another interesting finding was the confidence that the adolescents reported in their perceived mastery of the inventional system and the usefulness of the arguing skills they had learned. Sixty-one percent of the students reported feeling very confident, whereas only 4.4% of the students reported feeling confused or very confused with the skills acquired during the training. In terms of the usefulness of the training, 69% of the students also reported the skills as being very useful, useful, or somewhat useful to them.

An unexpected finding also emerged in the study. When predictions derived from the argumentative skill deficiency explanation were used, it

was thought that increasing adolescents' motivation and skill in arguing would concomitantly reduce their level of verbal aggressiveness. However, the findings did not support this. In fact, students in the experimental condition actually increased their level of verbal aggressiveness from the pretest to the posttest. Several explanations were offered. Could the training, which exposed students to the concept of verbal aggression, stimulate the students to more accurately reflect on their own predispositions in the posttraining assessment? Did the training fail to successfully distinguish between a verbal attack on the person and an attack on the issue? Do adolescents see distinctions between constructive and destructive communication as meaningless? Is a separate training unit on verbal aggression (alone or in tandem with argument training) necessary to help adolescents further distinguish between argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness? These and other questions need to be considered in the development of future training programs.

Whenever people experience change as a result of training, the question arises as to how long the change will last. The effect of training is only meaningful if the skills learned are integrated in one's behavioral repertoire and not just exhibited immediately after training. In an effort to examine this, the experimental group was revisited 1 year later to see if the training had an longitudinal effect on their trait argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness. In this study, Rancer et al. (2000) re-examined the same students who underwent the training during the previous school year. Again, students were administered the adolescent versions of the Argumentativeness and Verbal Aggressiveness scales (Roberto & Finucane, 1997). The results indicated that the students' general tendency to argue (ARGgt) scores did not change significantly from their posttraining scores approximately 1 year before. These findings suggest support for the longitudinal effects of training regarding argumentativeness.

However, a significant increase in students' level of verbal aggressiveness was observed from 1 year earlier. Again, reasons were offered for this surprising finding. One explanation was that the training program did not contain content on teaching adolescents how to control for verbal aggressiveness. Other explanations for the increase in verbal aggressiveness included adolescents' inability to distinguish between argumentative and aggressive communication and the maturation process adolescents go through from seventh to eighth grade. It may be that adolescents become more verbally aggressive between seventh and eighth grades. Whether they are influenced from mass media, popular culture, or some perceived positive relational outcome for the use of verbal aggression, as adolescents mature, there seems to be an increase in their tendency to be verbally aggressive. A final explanation concerns the genetic inheritance explanation. You may remember that Betty and

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McCroskey (1997) suggest that an individual's trait verbal aggressiveness is in his or her nature and largely determined by genetics. Perhaps the influence of this temperamental expression is so strong that it is not easily altered by a week-long training program.

This is not to suggest that researchers and practitioners should become resigned to this. On the contrary, the application of Infante's (1995a) recommendations for controlling verbal aggression should be incorporated in future training programs. In addition to intervention training specifically geared at promoting argumentative behavior, what other educational experiences might contribute to or detract from constructive communication? Does participation in sports teams, student club memberships, or other activities serve to enhance or subvert levels of argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness?

One effort revealed some interesting evidence that participation in competitive academic debate does influence both traits. Colbert (1993) believed that students who engaged in competitive debate would be lower in verbal aggressiveness and higher in argumentativeness than students who did not participate in competitive debate. High school students participating in a large competitive speaking tournament served as subjects for Colbert's study. He distinguished between those with debate experience (i.e., those reporting 1 year or more of debate experience) and no debate experience (i.e., beginning forensic students). Students completed the Argumentativeness and the Verbal Aggressiveness scales at the beginning of the school year. The results revealed that the experienced debate students reported significantly lower levels of verbal aggressiveness than those having no debate experience. Further, students with debate experience also reported higher levels of trait argumentativeness than students having no debate experience.

The types of debate activity that students engage in also appear related to their argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness. More specifically, students with value debate experience reported significantly lower levels of verbal aggressiveness than students without this experience. Students without policy debate experience reported significantly lower levels of argumentativeness than experienced policy debate students (Colbert, 1993). These findings suggest that debate experience may serve as a co-curricular activity for enhancing constructive communication (i.e., argumentativeness) as well as an inhibitor of destructive communication (i.e., verbal aggressiveness). It is important to note that competitive debate involves not just knowledge, but also behavior. By knowing how to and actually engaging in debate, students realize the benefits associated with argumentative behavior and this pattern appears to influence their levels of argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness.

Sanders et al. (1994) investigated the effect of teaching argumentation on the ability to engage in critical thinking. Critical thinking is defined as thinking that “is reflective and reasonable that is focused on deciding what to believe or do” (Ennis, 1985, p. 45). The researchers were interested in how argumentation training affects trainees’ perceptions of arguing, their self-reported levels of arguing skill, and their self-reported levels of arguing-related traits.

In their study, the content used in the training consisted of a noncontroversial or attitudinally neutral topic, arguments that varied in warrant type (e.g., cause and effect and analogy), and arguments that varied in strength (i.e., strong versus weak). Each argument was measured by scales consisting of convincing–unconvincing, persuasive–unpersuasive, and effective–ineffective. Students also completed the Need for Cognition Scale, the Argumentativeness Scale, the Verbal Aggressiveness Scale, and five questions assessing the respondents’ level of self-perceived arguing skills. College students were assigned to either the experimental group or the control group.

The results of the Sanders et al. (1994) study showed that although the teaching of argumentation had no effect on the trainees’ trait argumentativeness or need for cognition, there were statistically significant differences between the experimental and the control group regarding verbal aggressiveness. That is, people who received the argumentation training reported significantly less verbal aggressiveness than those who did not receive the training. Other findings indicated that the experimental group reported increased levels of self-perceived arguing skills, rated weaker examples more negatively, and judged weak causal arguments as less cogent (less well argued) than people in the control group.

These results are consistent with those of Colbert (1993), which showed that training in argumentation does positively affect reducing verbal aggressiveness. The evidence provided by these studies suggests that when students are put into situations (e.g., argumentation classes or participating in debate) requiring critical thinking and arguing skills, some dampening of trait verbal aggressiveness ensues.

As a result, efforts are underway to provide mini-instructional units for high school students geared toward the reduction of both physical and verbal aggression. Meyer, Roberto, Boster, and Roberto (2004) tested the efficacy of the “Get Real about Violence” curriculum. The curriculum was developed by the Comprehensive Health Education Foundation (1997) and was geared toward the reduction of adolescent verbal and physical violence. The program consists of 12 lessons targeting the aggressive behaviors of fighting, watching a fight, spreading rumors about a fight, and verbal aggression. The

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lessons are presented in a multimedia format that includes handouts, posters, audiocassettes, worksheets, panel discussions, class discussions, videos, and role playing.

To assess the efficacy of the program, Meyer et al. (2004) chose a pretest–posttest control group design (seventh-grade students in one school received the training and students in another school did not). Both the experimental and the control group participants came from moderately sized public schools from the midwestern United States. The curriculum was taught to students in the experimental group during a required social studies class. Before the training, all participants completed several measures assessing a variety of violent behaviors (i.e., watching a fight, telling a friend about a fight that is about to happen, and fighting), beliefs, and attitudes. Verbal aggression was conceptualized as consisting of four behaviors (i.e., making fun of someone, swearing at someone, yelling at someone, and insulting someone).

The results of the study revealed that the group who received the training reported significantly less verbally aggressive behavior than students in the control group. Further, the experimental group reported a decreased tendency to engage in verbally aggressive behavior in the future. When using any preexperimental design, there are concerns as to whether the training was responsible for the observed effect or whether the outcome can be attributable to something else. Thus, questions arise from this study as to whether the decrease in the experimental group's verbally aggressive behavior is a function of the training or a function of social desirability (i.e., the tendency to answer in appropriate ways to be socially acceptable). Is there the possibility that a combination of the pretest and the training is responsible for the outcome and not the training alone? Although these concerns apply to most experimental designs, the results do show that some modification in verbal aggressiveness can be made.

Conclusion

The evidence provided in this chapter clearly shows the impact that training has on modifying both argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness. Given the prevalence of verbal aggression in our society, it is recommended that required courses in argumentation be implemented for middle school, high school, and college students. The studies reviewed indicate that the specific type of training may be secondary, as several of the studies showed a significant

impact on enhancing the constructive communication skills of the participants.

One goal of research is to attempt to improve people's lives. Anecdotal data provided by both students and their parents suggest that several of these argumentativeness training programs have made a meaningful impact on the quality of people's lives. The longitudinal impact of the training conducted by Rancer and his colleagues will hopefully serve those students well into the future. The studies and training programs reviewed here constitute the existing evidence accumulated by communication scholars to date. Given the significance of these efforts, it becomes imperative for scholars and practitioners to put forth even greater efforts to design, implement, and assess other training programs.

A good place for such efforts to begin would be to implement the Infante (1995a) curriculum for understanding and controlling verbal aggression. As indicated earlier, successful efforts utilizing various aspects of the curriculum have been conducted. However, no one has instituted the curriculum in its entirety. This comprehensive training plan appears to have great potential for reducing the increasing use of verbal aggression found throughout society.

Another important point garnered from the programmatic training efforts and the research cited here deals with the assessment of training outcomes. Based on decades of personality variable research, people who are high or low in any trait tend to be more influenced by their inherent predisposition to behave with only a limited amount of influence coming from the situation. Given this, and some evidence provided by Anderson et al. (1987), the greatest amount of change regarding any trait modification training program might be found in people who are moderate in the trait and not in those who are in the high or low groups. Therefore, efforts that may initially appear to be only marginally successful may have been artificially suppressed by only testing people who are at the extremes of the trait. Future training outcome assessment should build into posttraining analyses a comparison of changes, especially among those moderate in argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness (see Avtgis & Rancer, 2005).

Taken as a whole, programmatic efforts and the research on training in argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness hold great promise. The efforts show the effectiveness that quality training can have on the lives of people. It remains for researchers and instructors to continue to expand such efforts.

Discussion Questions for Chapter 10

1. Of the various types of strategies used to control verbal aggression, which strategies do you think are most effective? Why?
2. Why do you think training in argumentation would serve to reduce verbal aggressiveness?
3. Given the many training methods for increasing argumentativeness and decreasing verbal aggressiveness, which method do you like the best? Why?
4. In light of the existing research, do you think that high school or college students should be required to take a formal debating class? Why or why not?
5. Provide your answer to the following question: “Where should we target our training efforts?”