



RESEARCH PAPER

Effectiveness of Rational Assertiveness Training in Reducing Interpersonal Problems: Single-Subject Design

¹Sidra Muhammad Butt and ²Dr. Erum Kausar

1. Lecturer, Institute of Professional Psychology, Bahria University Karachi Campus, Sindh, Pakistan
2. Senior Assistant Professor, Institute of Professional Psychology, Bahria University Karachi Campus, Sindh, Pakistan

Corresponding Author Sidramb@outlook.com

ABSTRACT

This research aimed to investigate the effectiveness of rational assertiveness training in reducing interpersonal problems in a single subject. Current literature indicates that adolescents typically adopt maladaptive strategies to resolve conflicts. Hence, suggesting the need to equip them with effective interpersonal strategies. One such tool is rational assertiveness training which creates assertiveness by modifying cognitions and behaviours. This was a pre-and post-intervention quantitative design using a 21-year-old female as its subject. The findings approved the hypothesis. Post-intervention assessment showed significant increase in level of assertiveness, as well as significant decrease in interpersonal problems as compared to pre-intervention assessment. Future researchers are advised to incorporate other methods of assessment, such as accounts of parents, to reduce social desirability. Additionally, the duration of the training is too short to produce long lasting changes, hence future studies may elaborate the training.

Keywords: Rational Assertiveness Training, Interpersonal Problems, Adolescent, Training

Introduction

Human interaction and conflict have been a major topic of psychological research over decades and scholars have been striving to unravel its different forms and effects in different stages of development. Initial theoretical concepts like that of Rahim (2002) conceptualized conflict as the expression of hatred or tension as a result of difference between individuals. This was later developed into the works of other researchers; Rahim (2002) later stressed the importance of opinion differences as being the antecedents to conflict. No matter what definition is more familiar to a person, there is no denying the fact that conflict is at the core of a lot of our challenges and obstacles. Adolescence is one of the most critical stages of research and interpersonal issues because it is marked by a stage of increased disunity with major physiological, psychological, and social developments (Steinberg, 1981; Steinberg, 2014). Adolescent females experience unique stresses and demand that might have a significant effect on their development of healthy interpersonal behaviors (Steinberg, 2014).

These issues have become more and more complicated and therefore have attracted the interest of researchers and practitioners who are interested in comprehending and meeting the special needs of this group of people. Most of these studies demonstrate that interpersonal issues in adolescence are reflected in various dimensions, such as inability to express emotions, sustain relationships, resolve conflicts, and handle conflicts. These difficulties are experienced in an intricate network of connections with family members, their peers, and the authority (Smetana et al., 2006). It has always been shown that the capacity to negotiate such relationships in adolescence has long-term effects on mental health, academic performance, and subsequent relationship trajectories (Steinberg, 1988;

Steinberg, 2014). The effects of bad interpersonal skills at such a sensitive age can be felt much later in adulthood in the form of career growth, love life and satisfaction in life.

Recent research that clarified the general reactions of adolescents in conflict settings show that there is a tendency to withdraw to maintain peace and avoid any further conflict (Montemayor and Hanson, 1985). On the other hand, destructive and otherwise non-cooperative behaviors, like cursing, kidding, and name-calling are commonly used (Ayas et al., 2010). Quite the contrary, the compromise style of conflict resolution proves to be one of the common conflict management tools, especially among girls (Owens et al., 2004).

The significance of effective interventions to deal with these challenges has been ever more evident. Although traditional methods of social skills training are useful, they are not necessarily capable of taking into account the complicated interactions between cognitive, emotional, and behavioral variables that affect interpersonal functioning in adolescence (Speed et al., 2018). This awareness has resulted in the development of more holistic intervention strategies such as rational assertiveness training which integrates the ideas of rational emotive behavior therapy with the methods of assertiveness training. Rational assertiveness training stands out as an effective intervention that can help in solving these multifaceted challenges. This is the combination of the methods of rational emotive behavior therapy and assertiveness training which allow adolescents to have both cognitive and behavioral resources to resolve interpersonal conflicts efficiently (Wolpe and Lazarus, 1966). The rational aspect assists the teenagers in recognizing and questioning irrational thoughts that can lead to their interpersonal problems, whereas the aspect of assertiveness provides the adolescents with applicable skills on how to express their needs and limits appropriately (Peneva and Mavrodiev, 2013).

Literature Review

Adolescence is a critical period in human development that has attracted the interest of many researchers who wanted to understand its bio-psycho-social processes. This will expose a multitude of obstacles, most of which are a result of the puberty stage.

The Kar et al. (2015) insightful study casts light on the complex character of these issues and its enormous effects on the psychosocial well-being of adolescents. Interestingly, Forbes and Dahl (2010) describe the association between pubertal development and the rising propensity to sensation seeking behaviours in adolescents.

Besides, Reena (2015) supports this idea, stating the relationship between the rate of puberty onset and the rise in depressive disorders, eating disorders, and substance abuse in adolescents. This increases dysfunction and exposes the adolescents to social rejection and other psychological stressor factors. Hence, these social pressures have bound to make some in impression on self-esteem as opined by Sinkkonen et al. (1998).

This connection is further supported by longitudinal research conducted by Martin et al. (2022), which found that early pubertal timing was associated with elevated risks of anxiety and depression, particularly among females. The research tracked 1,500 adolescents over five years, revealing that those experiencing early puberty were 1.8 times more likely to develop depressive symptoms compared to their peers with typical pubertal timing.

On the domestic level, the relationships between parents and adolescents can get disrupted. Research, like the research by Tunca, A. (2024), has shown that adolescents often feel like their parents don't understand or respect them as much as they used to. This feeling of being misunderstood or undervalued can produce conflicts in the parent-adolescent relationship, especially over everyday things like chores, curfews, or homework (Steinberg, 2003). Moreover, Fawzy Abdallah Yousef, et al, (2024) concluded on their meta-analysis on

parent-adolescent conflicts that, communication patterns established during early adolescence significantly predict relationship quality in late adolescence and early adulthood.

This is not the only thing; research indicates that teenagers are also experiencing a lot of conflicts and tension in their social groups. As an example, Adams and Laursen (2001) discovered that many teenagers often disagree over romantic relationships. Liking who, dating who, and who break up with who can all create drama and arguments between friends and make teenage relationships even more complicated.

Moreover, cross-cultural study puts a strong emphasis on the role of cultural values in conflict and emotional expression. To take an example, in a comparative study carried out across Eastern and western cultures, Rahim (2002) found out that collectivist societies which mostly dominate many of the Asian societies are prone to display various patterns of parent and adolescent conflicts as opposed to individualistic societies. Aspects of culture play a key role in the conflict resolution approaches and collectivism cultures tend to value harmony and shun direct conflict whereas individualism cultures might value assertiveness and direct honesty. Even the expression of assertiveness differs in various cultural contexts, as some cultures find nothing wrong with expressing emotions directly, whereas others might find it disrespectful or even disruptive to social harmony.

Unfortunately, many teenagers are left without the knowledge and resources that they need to be effective in dealing with these stressors. Research has shown that the two most common forms of coping mechanisms among most adolescents when put in difficult situations are withdrawal and problem-solving (De Wied et al., 2006). Nonetheless, new studies have revealed a change in tactics, especially in managing more hardcore conflicts. Nowadays, coercive tactics have become a common practice in the context of resolving a violent conflict, and the tactic of negotiation is only employed in less critical disputes (Tamm et al., 2018).

One might inquire, what constitutes the most effective approach to managing them? Introducing assertiveness training emerges as a pivotal first step in tackling these challenges head-on. Assertiveness, in its essence, embodies the ability to articulate one's thoughts and feelings in a direct and clear manner while also acknowledging and respecting the rights of others. It encompasses the skill of discerning between passive, assertive, and aggressive communication styles, enabling individuals to communicate their needs and concerns in a manner that is both assertive and respectful. This approach, as elucidated by Peneva and Mavrodiev (2013), is foundational in empowering individuals to advocate for themselves, uphold their principles, pursue their aspirations, and confront obstacles with resilience all while maintaining a demeanour of respect and composure.

Likewise, Rational Assertiveness Training Parray (2024) may also be applied to educate adolescents to think and act assertively. It includes the ideas of reward and punishment in acquiring new behaviours, as well as concepts of self-enhancement. Cognitive-behavioural approach is also applied in the training to replace irrational thoughts with rational ones. Notably, it highlights the key role of social support of family and friends in supporting assertive behaviour. Boudra, et al., (2024), have added to the concept of RAT the notions of how we perceive emotions (emotional intelligence), how we learn after watching others (social cognitive theory) and how we can be more mindful of our thoughts and emotions (mindfulness). In this contemporary approach, it is acknowledged that assertiveness is complicated. It focuses on the need to control our own emotions, learn through others, and be conscious about our thoughts and feelings in order to grow into confident and assertive communicators.

With assertiveness training, people are given the tools to operate in the complexities of interpersonal communication and face confrontations with confidence and dignity. Many

research also demonstrate the effectiveness of assertiveness training in alleviating mental issues among various demographics and cultures. As an example, Lin et al. (2004) carried out a study, which proved that psychiatric patients, who learned assertive communication skills, reported that their self-esteem and general well-being increased.

In addition, assertiveness training can be used not only in Western environments but also in Eastern cultures as research work in these regions demonstrates. A study by Manesh et al. (2015) in Iran indicated that the benefits of assertiveness training programs were concrete and led to relief of symptoms of social anxiety among Iranian population.

Assertiveness skills are also very important in guiding adolescents through interpersonal difficulties. The studies conducted prove that assertiveness training equips adolescents with the ability to put forth their views in a calm manner as they learn to listen actively thus the relationship between them becomes constructive. Asif et al. (2021) discovered that this training positively impacts the social-emotional skills of adolescents, resulting in more effective resolving conflicts.

Hypotheses

H1. Rational Assertiveness Training will be effective in increasing level of assertiveness.

H2. Rational Assertiveness Training will be effective in reducing interpersonal problems.

Material and Methods

The present research employed a pre- and post-intervention quantitative research design. The pre-intervention assessment was done followed by the training lasting for 7 weeks, after which post-intervention assessment was carried out to measure the effectiveness.

Sample

The subject of this case study was a 19-year-old female residing in Karachi, Pakistan. She was pursuing an undergraduate degree and was willing to undergo rational assertiveness training. She reported interpersonal problems, primarily in relation to her mother and struggled with expressing herself. In combination, she was unable to effectively resolve interpersonal conflicts. On the Functional Idiographic Assessment Template Questionnaire-Short Form (FIAT-Q-SF) (Darrow et al., 2014), she scored 129. Her training sessions were conducted once per week, for 7 weeks at the Umeed-e-Nau clinic at Bahria University.

Measures

Informed Consent Form

Subject was asked to fill out a consent form which mentioned the purpose of the research and its duration. It also mentioned that her participation would be voluntary, she has the right to withdraw and that confidentiality would be maintained.

Demographic Information Form

The demographic information form was administered to collect personal data for the research. It included questions regarding age, gender, relationship status, family setting and whether she was undergoing therapy. Also, respondent's name was not asked to maintain anonymity.

Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (RAS; Rathus 1973)

Subject's level of assertiveness in pre-and post-intervention was measured by the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule. It was developed by Spencer Rathus in 1973 to measure a person's level of assertiveness and any change in assertive behaviour that may come after assertiveness training (Rathus, 1973). The scale consists of 30 items scored on a Likert scale ranging from 'very much like me' to 'very much unlike me'. Items present social situations in which one is required to speak up for oneself, such as 'I complain about poor service in a restaurant and elsewhere'. The scale is applicable for all individuals having a basic understanding of English. The total score is achieved by adding numerical responses for each item and comparing it to the percentile scores given for each gender. In a sample of 764 college women and 637 men, this test had a moderate to high test-retest reliability ($r = .78$) and split-half reliability ($r = .77$). Gustafson (1992) found the test to be reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$).

Functional Ideographic Assessment Template Questionnaire-Short Form (Darrow et al., 2014)

The Functional Idiographic Assessment Template Questionnaire-Short Form (FIAT-Q-SF) was used to measure interpersonal functioning in pre-and post-intervention assessments. Developed by (Darrow et al., 2014), the FIAT-Q-SF aims to streamline the assessment process in therapies such as Functional Analytic Psychotherapy (FAP). It consists of 32 items scored on a Likert scale, capturing six domains of interpersonal functioning, including avoidance of intimacy, emotional expression, and conflict management. Respondents rate their agreement with statements such as, "I avoid asking people for help in meeting my needs." The FIAT-Q-SF is applicable to individuals with a basic understanding of English and is particularly useful for identifying therapeutic targets and tracking progress over time. Scores are derived by summing responses and analyzing them across the six factors. In validation studies, the FIAT-Q-SF demonstrated moderate internal consistency across subscales (Cronbach's α ranging from .64 to .82) and significant test-retest reliability over a one-month interval ($r = .776$), indicating its psychometric robustness.

Procedure

First and foremost, permission to use the measures was taken from the respective authors. Then, approval from the Ethical Review Board was sought. Once that was received, the researcher began search for a subject and was approached by the identified subject. After being briefed about the voluntary nature of her participation and the relevant details of the training, data collection for the pre-intervention phase begun, wherein subject was administered forms in the following order; consent form, NRI-RQV, RAS and demographic form. After this the rational assertiveness training began which lasted for a total of 7 weeks, one session per week. After the intervention phase, subject was given scales for assertiveness and interpersonal conflict to collect post-intervention data. Statistical analysis was used to measure mean differences in levels of assertiveness and interpersonal conflict between the two phases to determine the effectiveness of the training. Throughout the research process, the researcher made sure that subject was protected from any psychological damage and was fully aware of the true purpose of the research.

Table 1
Session overview for Rational Assertiveness Training (7 weeks)

Training Session no.	Objective	Training Activities & Homework
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explain Assertiveness Training, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explained the cognitive-behavioural approach of the training in building assertiveness. Subject was informed that the training

	<p>including communication styles.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain the importance of attitudes and how those can lead to disappointment and failure. • Discuss difference between actually making a difference VS. wishing things were different. 	<p>will focus on building assertiveness behaviourally and then cognitively.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion and explanation of communication styles (Appendix G). • Subject identified that she tends to use passive and aggressive ones with family and friends. • Discussed how the world is not the way it should be (Appendix H) and how this attitude actually hinders progress. Subject identified that this attitude stops her from sharing her opinion because others may not agree. • Discussed how we tend to engage in wishful thinking as opposed to actually taking steps that bring about change. This motivated the subject to shift her focus from wishing she could be assertive to actually taking steps recommended in this training that made her more assertive.
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify Assertive behaviours that subject needs to adopt. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject was presented the list of ten assertive behaviours (Appendix I) and she identified the ones applicable to her. • The following behaviours were highlighted: (1) be able to say No, (2) take the first step in forming new friendships, (3) keep in touch with friends, (4) express yourself directly and spontaneously, (5) ask for what you want. • Each assertive behaviour was discussed in detail and the measures required in order to become more assertive. • Homework: Practise the assertive behaviours highlighted in session.
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow up and review homework. • Building a problem-solving attitude. • Pinpointing behaviour that keeps her from acting assertively and then specify a goal that moves her towards assertiveness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback: subject expressed her gratitude for her mother. She was also able to tell her project mates what she did not agree with. • Subject was asked to choose a behaviour she wishes to change. She chose the aggressive outbursts she has with her mother. • Then it was explained that she has three alternates: tolerate it, avoid it or change it. After understanding the first two were not viable, she decided to change it. • The behaviour that keeps from assertiveness was bottling up her anger and then lashing out in the end. • The assertive behaviour 'express yourself directly and spontaneously' discussed in the previous session was identified as the goal here. She had to express her disagreement calmly right when it arose. • The idea that she does not have to amputate her aggressive, rather replace it with assertiveness was discussed. • Homework: count and record the times she expressed herself calmly.
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow up on homework. • Identify and discuss the hurdles in becoming assertive. • Shift subject's focus from behaviours to cognitions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback: subject reported expressing herself calmly with mother 10 times throughout the week. However, sometimes she was too impulsive and spoke aggressively. • Trainer explained how becoming assertive can produce hurdles in relationships that can keep you from becoming assertive. • Going from passive to assertive will likely bring about verbal punishments from the other member of the relationship. It was explained that these labels are their opinions which they are entitled to. Subject was encouraged to reply calmly and politely. • Subject was asked to identify the possible remarks she encounters from friends when she states her disagreement and then come up with assertive responses. • While going from aggressive to passive, the subject does not receive any harsh labels. • Subject was educated about the impact of fostering self-reinforcing thoughts to encourage herself. Such as thinking 'I finally am able to express myself calmly' or 'I was able to decline that request assertively'. • Homework: implement self-enhancing thoughts after acting assertively.

5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback on previous session • Understand the difference between and relationship of our thoughts, feelings and behaviours. • Learn to take responsibility of emotions. • Learn to deal with unassertive thoughts.
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback: subject reported struggling with replacing thoughts initially but felt nice after she was persistent. • Trainer introduced the thought-feelings-behaviour cycle: the perception of a situation determines the kinds of thoughts one experiences. These in turn invoke feelings which will later on translate into behaviours. Thus, highlighting the importance of the sense we make of a situation. • Furthermore, trainer explained that there are essentially two types of thoughts: rational and irrational. One has to argue with irrational thoughts in order to reach to a rational thought. • Arguing irrational thoughts with: alternate thoughts based on reality, being firm and straightforward with oneself. • Subject identified that she tends to perceive objection of her work from peers as a sign of disrespect ('she is challenging my judgement'). Hence, she responds angrily. • Alternate rational thought identified 'her remark only indicates that she does not like some of my work and that is her opinion'. • Trainer then explained the importance of taking responsibility for one's emotions (saying 'I feel angry over....' instead of saying 'you are making me angry by doing.....'). • Subject rephrased her experience of anger as 'I felt angry over what my peer said'. • Homework: practise arguing with irrational thoughts and taking responsibility for emotions.
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow up on homework. • Cognitive exercises to act assertively. • Brief about termination.
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback: subject reported that taking responsibility for emotions has dramatically reduced the anger she feels towards her mother as it creates the understanding that the anger is under her control. • Trainer explained that cognitive exercises are skills that help us deal with difficult situations rationally before they actually happen. • Cognitive exercises include: voluntary cortical inhibition (VCI), Self-instruction training and covert modelling. • VCI: practicing 'arguing with irrational thoughts' for a real-life situation using imagination. • Self-instruction training: give yourself rational instructions to act assertively. • Covert modelling: imagining someone (the model) handling a situation assertively and then mimic them. • Each of these skills were explained and practised in session. • VCI and self-instruction were practised in conjunction. The subject chose an encounter with her friend where she had to disagree. It took three trials for her to respond assertively. • Subject was informed about termination in next session. • Homework: practise cognitive exercises.
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow up on activities of 'mind tricks' • Recap of previous sessions so as to integrate everything learnt
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback: cognitive exercises conducted in previous session helped her in encounters with friends. • All the takeaways from the previous 6 session were discussed so the subject knew how to integrate cognitive and behavioural strategies in order to act assertively.

Results and Discussion

Post-intervention was done after the Rational Assertiveness Training was completed, and the measures were used to test the effectiveness of the training. The analysis demonstrated that the participant improved her assertiveness score of -38 (pre-intervention) to 28 (post-intervention) and her interpersonal issues score of 129 (pre-intervention) to 82 (post-intervention). This indicates a drastic change in the level of assertiveness and also a drastic reduction in interpersonal problems.

This study findings reveal that Rational Assertiveness Training has been successful in reducing (significantly) the level of assertiveness form -38 (pre-intervention) of the

subject to 28 (post-intervention), and in reducing the level of interpersonal problems of the subject (129 pre-intervention) to 82 (post-intervention). It demonstrates that two hypotheses: 1) Rational Assertiveness Training will be active in level of assertiveness increase, 2) Rational Assertiveness Training will be active in interpersonal problems reduction are proved.

The effectiveness of the intervention in enhancing assertiveness is explained by the fact that it combines the concepts of behavioral theory, Social Learning Theory, and Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy. The comprehensive nature of the training, which was based on the principles of cognitive restructuring, self-instruction, and behavioral practice, offered the participants a powerful set of instruments to design assertive communication strategies. This finding is consistent with Lin et al. (2004), who found that interventions combining cognitive and behavioral components produced more sustainable improvements in social competence compared to single-approach interventions.

The intervention seems to be especially helpful in addressing the issues of interpersonal intimacy, conflict and expression of emotions. Interpersonal intimacy scores dropped to 30 (post-intervention) (compared to 46 (pre-intervention)) and conflict scores dropped to 8 (post-intervention) (compared to 16 (pre-intervention)). This observation is echoed by studies by Elbarazi, et al., (2024), who discovered that assertiveness training led to substantial decrease in interpersonal sensitivity and enhanced relationships satisfaction among college learners.

The psychological approach to intervention goes beyond the appearance of communication skills. The dramatic changes in emotional control have far reaching consequences for the mental health of adolescents. The results are consistent with those of Jandhyala and Kumar, (2024) who showed that assertiveness training may be a protective element of social anxiety and depression due to the improvement of emotional competence. Cognitive elements of the training, including the detection of irrational thoughts and the execution of visualization strategies, seemed to be the main mechanisms of facilitating behavioral change, which is supported by Santos (2024) in his analysis of the significance of cognitive restructuring in the interventions of social skills.

Conclusion

The objective of the current study was to evaluate the effectiveness of Rational Assertiveness Training in minimizing Interpersonal Problems. Findings on this case study demonstrate it to be a useful instrument in addressing interpersonal issues.

Recommendations

- The present study relies on self-report measures which are prone to social desirability. Hence, future research should incorporate more tools for assessment, such as reports from parents or peers.
- The duration of the research (7 weeks) is too short to bring about long-lasting effects. In order to ensure that adolescents' cognitive and behavioural patterns of assertive behaviour are improved throughout life, the training should be extended.

