

This Week's Citation Classic

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McFall R M & Lillesand D B. Behavior rehearsal with modeling and coaching in assertion training. *J. Abnormal Psychol.* 77:313-23, 1971.
[University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI]

Nonassertive college students were taught to be more assertive about refusing unreasonable requests. Training was provided through two sessions of role playing, with the treatment program administered via prerecorded audiotape. Variations in treatments across subjects assessed the contributions of specific components. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*[®] (SSCI)[®] indicates that this paper has been cited over 190 times since 1971.]

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"As a graduate student of George A. Kelly,¹ I was interested in exploring the potential psychotherapeutic benefits of role playing techniques. After joining the faculty of the University of Wisconsin, I began looking for a psychological problem for which role playing might be a sensible treatment method. Joseph Wolpe and Arnold Lazarus² had reported successfully using 'behavior rehearsal,' a form of role playing, to teach socially anxious clients to behave more assertively; therefore, I decided to evaluate experimentally the value of role playing methods for 'assertive training.'

"My first experiment³ (with Albert R. Marston) convinced me that the prevailing conception of assertiveness was too ambiguous to be measured satisfactorily. Since my primary interest at the time was in assessing the treatment

effects of role playing, I decided to finesse the definitional problem by focusing on an extremely narrow but reliably measurable subtype of assertive behavior—namely, the refusal of unreasonable requests. At times I have regretted choosing such a narrow and negative referent for assertive behavior, as it has contributed to the tendency for people to equate assertion with abrasive, aggressive, and self-centered behavior. Nevertheless, from a research perspective, it proved to be a good decision.

"The next experiment (with Diane Bridges Lillesand) became this *Citation Classic*. Generally, I think the study was influential because it provided other investigators in the area with a fresh experimental paradigm and a set of novel measures that resolved several assessment problems. The experimental treatments and behavioral measures were prerecorded on audiotape, which enabled other laboratories to replicate our work. The study also happened to be one of the first controlled experiments on 'assertive training,' which was destined to become a popular topic in the 1970s.

"Although the study initially received mixed reviews, the editor (Donald Peterson) fortunately decided to publish it. He suggested a change in terms—from 'assertive training' (Wolpe and Lazarus's term) to 'assertion training'—for grammatical reasons. Subsequently, this change provided an unintended gauge of the study's impact; one could monitor the spreading use of the revised term.

"In recent years my research focus has evolved from the original narrow interests in role playing and assertion to a broader and more basic interest in the relationships among social competence, social skills, and psychopathology."⁴

1. Kelly G A. *The psychology of personal constructs*. New York: Norton, 1955. 2 vols.

2. Wolpe J & Lazarus A A. *Behavior therapy techniques*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1966. 198 p.

3. McFall R M & Marston A R. An experimental investigation of behavior rehearsal in assertive training. *J. Abnormal Psychol.* 76:295-303, 1970.

4. McFall R M. A review and reformulation of the concept of social skills. *Behav. Assess.* 4:1-33, 1982.