



## **Determination of the level of assertive behaviour of undergraduate nursing students in University of Port Harcourt.**

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## **Abstract**

Assertiveness is a communication style, which is considered an important behaviour for today's professional nurse and the key to successful relationship with clients, families and colleagues and for the profession itself. The aim of the study is to determine the level of assertive behaviour of undergraduate nursing students in the University of Port Harcourt. The study was a cross sectional descriptive survey design with an adapted structured questionnaire which contained two sections. Assertiveness schedule instrument using a four point Likert scale of strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree. The population of study comprised 2<sup>nd</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> level students at the Department of Nursing, University of Port Harcourt, who agreed to complete the questionnaire. Assertiveness level increased with the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> levels of study being more assertive than the lower levels of study. All statistical analysis was performed using statistical package for social Science (SPSS).

## **Introduction**

Assertiveness has been considered in the last two decades as necessary social skills for personal and professional competence. Assertiveness enables people to act in their own interest or stand up for themselves without undue anxiety. Nurses interact with patients, colleagues and other health care professionals on a daily basis, and this interaction is improved when nurses have good communication skills. Several studies have suggested that nurses lack assertive skills, and that this deficiency in assertiveness results in diminished communication efficacy, thus compromising patient care (Deltsidou, 2008, Ibrahim, 2011). By contrast, a positive association is considered to exist between assertiveness and definition of roles, occupation and job satisfaction (Deltsidou, 2008). Assertiveness has been defined as the ability to express one's feelings, opinions, beliefs and needs directly, openly and honestly, while not violating the personal rights of others (Ellis & Hartley, 2005; Hopkin, 2007). Assertiveness is a communication style, which is considered an important behaviour for today's professional nurse and the key to successful relationships with clients, families, and colleagues and for the profession itself (Hunt-Slamow, 2007). Assertive nurses are able to present suggestions in a direct, comfortable way, give and take criticism, assess the rights and responsibilities in a nursing situation, and act on assessment in a thoughtful problem-solving way (Clark, 2010). When nurses express a lack of confidence and a lack of assertiveness, patients may notice. If those patients do not feel that nurses are confident in their work, they

will not have a strong trusting relationship. However, on a day-to-day basis, assertiveness or assertive behaviour means to act in such a way as to stand up for yourself and your rights in a firm, non-aggressive way or manner. Being assertive is about acting with other people in such a way as to be heard and not to be trampled over or to be similarly abused (Gerstmann, 2009).

Assertive behaviour is often confused with aggressive behaviour; however, assertion does not involve hurting the other person physically or emotionally. Assertive behaviour aims at equalizing the balance of power, not in “winning the battle” by putting down the other person or rendering her/him helpless. Assertive behaviour involves expressing your legitimate rights as an individual. You have a right to express your own wants, needs, feelings and ideals.

Remember: other individuals have a right to respond to your assertiveness with their own wants, needs, feelings and ideals. An assertive encounter with another individual may involve negotiating an agreeable compromise. By behaving assertively, you open the way for honest relationships with others. Assertive behaviour not only is concerned with what you say but how you say it. Assertive behaviour is a skill that can be learned and maintained by frequent practice. People who are assertive express their point while at the same time respect the rights of others (Sudha 2005). These views are expressed without anxiety and fear (Ozkan & Sevig, 2007).

A school of thought defines assertiveness as an interpersonal behaviour that promotes the fact that all people in a relationship are equally important. Assertiveness is seen by Seyedfatemi, Behbahani and Hosenii, (2009), as a dimension of personality and is among the treatable interpersonal communication aspects

### **Materials and Method**

This was a cross-sectional study (descriptive study) involving students from 2nd - 5th year in the department of nursing science. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data. Assertiveness instrument developed by Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (RAS) (1973) was

used. It was designed using a modified four scale points of Always (A), Often (O), Rarely, (R), Never (N).

### **Inclusion criteria**

All students from 2nd - 5th year

### **Data Analysis**

The collected data were analysed using both descriptively and inferential statistics and presented in tables.

### **Result**

Table 1: Descriptive Summary of Assertive Behavior (based on items on RAS) N=205

The result on the student nurses' use of assertive behaviour based on items of the scale used to measure assertiveness (Table 1). For positively framed items, the following statements revealed situations of very high assertiveness: 'I strive to get ahead as well as most people in my position', (3.32±0.81); 'I am open and frank about my feelings', (3.08±0.94); 'when I am asked to do something, I insist upon knowing why', (3.06±0.79); and 'if someone has been spreading false and bad stories about me, I see him or her as soon as possible and "have a talk" about it', (3.00±0.96). About the negatively framed items, situation of very high unassertiveness was shown by the following statements: 'Most people seem to be more aggressive and assertive than I am', (3.36±0.75); 'I am careful to avoid hurting other people's feelings, even when I feel that I have been injured', (3.15±0.89); and 'I tend to bottle up my emotions rather than make a scene', (3.09±0.89).

Table 1: level of Assertive behavior of undergraduate N= 205

	Frequency	Percent	Range M±SD
Assertiveness score			47-103 74.70±8.45
Assertive (assertiveness > average)	84	41.0	
Unassertive (assertiveness < average)	121	59.0	

NB: A student is classified to be assertive if the summated score was above average which is 75 (which is the summated average of 30 items on 4-point scale).

### Discussion

The finding of this study indicated that majority of the student nurses were not assertive. Only 41.0% had an above average assertiveness. This is supported by Deltsidious (2008), who said that several studies have suggested that nurses lack assertive skills, and that this deficiency in assertiveness results in diminished communication efficacy, thus compromising care. The study also noted that other studies have shown that nursing is very stressful and those suffering from bullying and stress need to have high level of assertiveness to resist and cope successfully. Deducting from this, it implies that the stressful nature of the profession which includes bullying has the tendency to make nurses less assertive. This could also be the same for student nurses as they are exposed to the same practice during clinical postings, and probably lack basic stress coping strategies in the profession.

This is also somewhat in line with the findings of McCabe and Timmins (2005) who stated that assertiveness of nursing students were lesser before an assertiveness class. Thus, without training in assertiveness, student nurses were more unassertive. This finding also agreed with Miihmed and Zaki (2014), who discovered that nursing students have little level of assertiveness; although the study was conducted on first year female nursing students only. However, this finding is in contrast with the study of Ibrahim (2010) where above average (60.4%) of the students were assertive. This variation could be as a result of other underlying

factors that differentiates the population of study. For instance, Ibrahim (2010) also assessed the students' psychological empowerment, which was found to be positively related assertiveness, and found that about half of the students were empowered. The study equally discovered positive relation with assertiveness and family income. This background factor could have greatly contributed to their assertiveness thus resulting in the majority that were assertive.

## **Conclusion**

Majority of the student nurses were not assertive and only 41.0% had an above average assertiveness. Several studies have suggested that nurses lack assertive skills, and that this deficiency in assertiveness results in diminished communication efficacy, thus compromising care. The study also noted that other studies have shown that nursing is very stressful and those suffering from bullying and stress need to have high level of assertiveness to resist and cope successfully.

## **Declarations**

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**Conflict of interest:** No conflict of interest.

**Ethical approval:** It was approved by the ethical committee of University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria



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