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Assertiveness in Marital Relationships Among Asian Indians in the United States

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The article is aimed at a clarification and psychometric treatment of the concept of assertiveness in marital relationships among Asian Indians in the United States by reporting a study that attempted to operationally define the concept of assertiveness through indicators grouped under courage, authenticity, and autonomy. The study was conducted in two phases. The first phase focused on identifying a scale of assertiveness consisting of items under the three indicators through a review of selected literature and having them evaluated and ranked by a set of judges who were knowledgeable in the field. The scale was then empirically tested during the second phase in a setting consisting of Asian Indian couples to check its reliability and validity. The study provided a meaningful understanding of how couples in a cross-cultural context express assertiveness in various ways. The study has implications for marriage and family counseling and for future research on assertiveness.

Keywords: *assertiveness in relationships; courage; authenticity; autonomy; Asian Indians*

The notion of assertiveness has been extensively used in popular literature and in social sciences, business, education, and leadership training. However, the usage of this notion seems to have often been rather simplistic, neglecting its possible multiple indicators or dimensions and applications in multicultural contexts. The major goal of our study on which this article is based was to explore a clarification of the notion of assertiveness in marital relationships among Asian Indian couples. The overall focus of this research was the psychometric treatment of selected aspects of the assertiveness process by identifying its varied styles and levels that are generally found in human relationships, particularly relevant to marriage and family. That was done by first developing a multidimensional scale of assertiveness and then testing it for reliability and validity in an empirical setting. We chose that setting to consist of the first-generation immi-

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grants in the United States from India (hereafter referred to as Asian Indians).

We, in this article, have two primary objectives: (a) to describe the development of a measure of assertiveness relevant in marital relations and to provide some evidence of its psychometric adequacy and (b) to use the measure to help us identify and interpret assertiveness styles and levels among the Asian Indian couples. It is our hope that our effort to operationally define assertiveness and test it in a cross-cultural setting is timely and will be meaningful in generating interest in applying it to marriage and family therapy.

MEANING AND INDICATORS OF ASSERTIVENESS

Assertiveness has been an important notion in counseling, psychology, and sociology for dealing with issues in, for example, (a) personality characteristics needed for functioning in certain roles in society (Cooley & Nowicki, 1984; Costa, Terracciano, & McCrae, 2001; Moskosky, 1984; Williams, 1985), (b) studying marital relations in cross-cultural settings (Farver, Narang, & Bhadha, 2002; Hofstede, 1998; Rahman & Rao, 2004; Twenge, 2001), (c) leadership development (Bower & Bower, 1991; Faber, 2002), (d) recovering mental health (Braiker, 2001; Enns, 1992; Jakubowski & Lange, 1978), (e) conflict management (Bishop, 1997), and (f) overcoming discrimination and prejudice, including violence and exploitations involved in gender relationships (Alberti & Emmons, 2001; Bloom, Coburn, & Perlman, 1975; Butler, 1981; Gallois & Wilson, 1993; Goodman & Fallon, 1998; Neff & Harter, 2002; Phelps & Austin, 1975; Rudrappa, 2004). However, the literature on assertiveness is loaded with a formula type of definition of this notion. For example, a large number of books and articles (e.g., Adama & McNeilage, 1982; Baer, 1976; Burns, 2001; Cotler & Guerra, 1976; Lindenfield, 1992; Lloyd, 1988; Paterson, 2000) focus on how to become assertive through rather descriptive and formula approaches, without providing adequate conceptual, theoretical, or methodological background for the subject.

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We have first focused on identifying selected indicators of the process of assertiveness in relationships before testing them in an empirical situation. Parts of our methodological approach in this study have been developed and empirically tested in other contexts in studies involving measurements of constructs such as marital intimacy (Singh & Khullar, 1989), adjustment to single parenthood (Singh & McBroom, 1992), and commitment to marriage (Singh & Kanjirathinkal, 1999). Similar though somewhat different, methodology for studying assertiveness has been developed by others (e.g., Eisler, Miller, & Hersen, 1973; Rathus, 1973).

For the purposes of this study, assertiveness was defined in a social-psychological sense in terms of an individual's own perceptions or interpretations of how assertive he or she feels in his or her marital relationships. We first identified three indicators of assertiveness in marital relationships based on a review of selected literature and conceptual relevance or logic. Although additional or other related indicators of assertiveness are possible, we focused on three indicators only. The titles of the indicators selected were courage, authenticity, and autonomy. Based on our knowledge of the literature, we determined that these three categories covered a broad understanding of the assertiveness. Meanings and rationales for the relevance of these three to assertiveness are briefly stated below.

Courage

According to Miller (2000), "There is no shortage of literature on courage, given that humanity has been recording tales of courage since the invention of writing" (p. x). Courage is an important aspect of an assertive behavior or personality (Tillich, 1952). It is represented by characteristics such as strong self-confidence, self-regard, guts, boldness, fearlessness, nonsubmissiveness (but nonaggressiveness), straightforwardness, achievement striving, and leadership (Buss, 2004; Costa et al., 2001; Twenge, 2001). Courageous persons do not readily compromise their principles or convictions and have the ability to take risk without being concerned about the adverse consequences. They have strength of character, zest for life, perseverance, endurance, and determination and tend to feel that they are in control of their lives (Kateb, 2004; Moran, 1956). They will confront even themselves when they feel they are wrong about making a decision. On the other hand, people who are not courageous are likely to be aggressive, violent, dominant, authoritarian, egotistical, perfectionists, rash, hateful, demanding, blunt, arrogant, controlling, and even repressive (Kateb, 2004). They also tend to generally have behavioral characteristics such as being timid, passive, fearful, a coward, selfish, and distrustful, along with an inferiority complex (Miller, 2000). The term *courage*, therefore, represents some of the major components of the definition of assertiveness in literature.

Authenticity

Another important concept relevant to assertiveness is authenticity. As one of the traits of assertiveness, it involves the individual being truthful, honest, spontaneous, genuine (rather than being artificial or pretentious or having a false front), straightforward (being able to say no without feeling guilty), frank, and candid (having candor in taking responsibility). It is based on a total awareness and understanding of one's self, plus an honest assessment and appraisal of one's personality (Neff & Harter, 2003). Human beings demonstrate different levels of authenticity in their relationships with others and through their life experiences (Smith, 1991). There is always consistency between authentic people's inner experiences and outer expressions of these inner experiences. Inauthentic people, on the other hand, are generally manipulative, conniving, inhibited or covert (rather than confronting reality), or judgmental and go around in life engaging in game playing with others and keeping a façade according to the demand of the environment (Weitlauf et al., 2000; Wrong, 1961).

Autonomy

The individual's sense of autonomy (or freedom) is also an integral component of assertiveness in a relationship. Autonomous people generally have a sense of independence or self-sufficiency and are likely to want to make their own decisions. They tend to be flexible, change oriented, open-minded, tolerant of diversity, and respectful of other people's freedom and rights. Deci and Ryan (2000) state that "at phenomenological level, human autonomy is reflected in the experience of integrity, volition, and vitality that accompanies self-regulated action" (p. 26). It seems that the degree of having a confidence in one's autonomy tends to exist on a continuum. At one end is autonomy, which gives the ability to an individual to think through a situation independently and clearly, and at the other end is fusion, whereby the individual leans toward emotional dependency on others (Bowen, 1985). Without autonomy and internal locus of control, one cannot experience competence in assertiveness fully (Beyers, Goossens, Vansant, & Moors, 2003; Cooley & Nowicki, 1984). Proponents of the self-determination theory maintain that autonomy is an innate psychological need of human beings. Deci and Ryan (2000) believe that autonomy is related to the experience of freedom and plays a crucial part in healthy human functioning. They also associate self-esteem and assertiveness with behaving autonomously. Drawing from the self-determination theory that looks at the individual's autonomy in a relationship as an innate need, Deci and Ryan claim that obstruction of the individual's freedom results in low self-esteem and frustration. Relationships where one party is oriented toward dominating the other tend to result in violence and abuse (Alberti & Emmons, 2001).

Interrelationships Among Indicators of Assertiveness

Courage, authenticity, and autonomy as indicators of the assertiveness process are assumed in this study as being conceptually and logically interrelated or interconnected to one another. One cannot, for example, fully experience courage without being authentic and vice versa (Twenge, 2001). In the same way, one cannot actualize courage in real behaviors without having some sense of autonomy (Costa et al., 2001). One needs to be courageous enough to take the risk and communicate one's intraexperience regarding the relationship without fear of negative consequences. Moreover, authenticity cannot be achieved without autonomy as one's sense of independence leads to self-acceptance, self-regard, and spontaneous expressions (Braiker, 2001). Overall, autonomy is the first step in having courage to be who one is or wants to be (Kateb, 2004). Links to interconnectedness among the three indicators of assertiveness provided us clues to their construct validity for the notion of assertiveness.

CONSTRUCTION OF AN ASSERTIVENESS SCALE

Procedures for Selecting Scale Items:

Phase I of Data Collection

A scale measuring individuals' perceived assertiveness in relationships was constructed through a sequence of procedures. Weitlauf et al. (2000), on the other hand, used a very different method to develop a 30-item scale to measure a range of assertive and nonassertive behaviors. We first identified a total of 68 items or statements relevant to courage, authenticity, and autonomy forms of assertiveness on the basis of relevant literature. Several individuals who were either teaching in the field of social sciences in three universities located in the southwestern United States or were marriage and family counselors in the area were first asked if they had dealt with the concept of assertiveness in their teaching and/or research. Those (21 in all) who admitted to being knowledgeable of the concept and showed willingness to serve as judges were asked to rank each item in terms of its conceptual relevance and importance as a characteristic of each of the three forms of assertiveness. Then, items in each of the three categories were rank ordered according to their importance rating (based on mean scores) and the consensus rating (based on standard deviation scores). Items that were consistently low on importance and/or consensus were either modified or dropped from further usage. Following this procedure, 21 items (8 for courage, 7 for authenticity, and 6 for autonomy) were selected for subsequent analyses. These items are shown in Table 1.

Description of Scale Items

Means and standard deviations for each of the scale items are shown in Table 1. Mean scores given in the table for

various items under the three types of assertiveness indicated the relative importance of each item in subscales. Items indicating a high degree of importance under the courage item given by the judges for individuals included being (a) self-confident, (b) nonfearful, (c) a risk taker, and (d) willing to take responsibility of one's own actions. However, the judges did not have significant consensus on the item stating that courage required one to be a risk taker. Four important items under authenticity were being (a) genuine and spontaneous, (b) truthful, (c) one's own true self, and (d) willing to say no without guilt. The judges had a relatively high level of consensus on all of those items. In the case of autonomy, only two items were considered by the judges to be important. These were (a) being determined to make one's own decisions and (b) having a sense of self-sufficiency and freedom. However, they had significant consensus only on three items: (a) having a sense of self-sufficiency and freedom, (b) avoiding dependency on others, and (c) having contentment in the present life.

TESTING THE ASSERTIVENESS SCALE

To assess the adequacy, validity, and reliability of the assertiveness scale and its subscales, we collected data in Phase II of our study through the following procedures.

Selection and Characteristics of Sample

A sample of Asian Indians residing in a metropolitan area in the southwestern region of the United States was systematically selected. We do not claim, however, that we had a representative sample of all Asian Indian families in that region. Nonprobability samples in exploratory research, such as the one reported here, are justified in cross-cultural studies where complete listings of all members of a particular population are not fully available (Ihinger-Tallman, 1986).

The sampling procedures employed in the study are as follows. First, we secured a membership list of addresses and phone numbers from a local association of the Asian Indians. Second, 402 persons in households in that list were contacted by telephone to determine whether (a) adults living in the household were first-generation immigrants from India who were currently married and (b) either the husband or the wife in each household would be willing to be interviewed in person. Third, 205 face-to-face interviews were conducted in which each respondent was asked to answer a variety of questions relevant to his or her marriage, including the assertiveness items described previously. In addition, we asked a few demographic and socioeconomic questions related to respondents' background. On average, each interview took between 40 and 60 minutes to complete.

Of the married Asian Indians interviewed, 118 were males and 87 were females. However, the respondents were not married to each other in the sample. Most of them had been married before coming to the United States through

TABLE 1
Central Tendency and Standard Deviance for Each Item in the Assertiveness Scale

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I. Courage		
1. Having self-confidence/regard	2.94	0.49
2. Being bold and active	1.06	1.56
3. Being unafraid and nonfearful	2.91	0.46
4. Being a risk taker	2.34	1.51
5. Taking responsibility for own actions	2.35	0.32
6. Seeking recognition and being influential	1.67	1.98
7. Being nonsubmissive and nontimid	0.89	1.23
8. Taking stand for what is right	1.07	0.61
II. Authenticity		
1. Being genuine and spontaneous	2.08	0.37
2. Being truthful, nonmanipulative, and honest	1.91	0.32
3. Being frank, straightforward, and candid	1.08	1.41
4. Being open to criticism	0.91	1.98
5. Being loyal to one's true self, without pretense	1.89	0.58
6. Having to say no without guilt	2.16	0.28
7. Being affective and compassionate	0.88	1.98
III. Autonomy		
1. Being determined to make own decisions	1.81	1.51
2. Having a sense of being self-sufficient and free	1.97	0.39
3. Having to avoid dependency and enslavement to others/relationships	1.39	0.42
4. Being tolerant of differences among others and respectful of their freedom	0.84	2.30
5. Being open for change	0.64	2.25
6. Having a sense of contentment in the present state of life	1.18	0.53

NOTE: $n = 21$.

parents and within their own caste, social class, and religion. Only 2% were married to a non-Indian, more than three fourths had two or more children, more than 70% owned their homes, more than 90% of the males and 55% of the females had college degrees, and a majority of males were holding professional jobs (largely in medicine, engineering, computer science, and teaching) or owned businesses. However, only about 40% of the females held full-time or part-time jobs. Median monthly family income reported by respondents was slightly more than \$5,100.

Studying Asian Indians

We decided to select an Indian population for the empirical testing of the scale for the following reasons. First, we had experience and interest in studying Indians. Second, Indians have constituted one of the fastest growing ethnic populations in the United States for the past three decades (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, 2000). There was an estimate of nearly 1.7 million Indians in the United States in 2000, compared with their population of less than 16,000 in 1965 (Parrillo, 2006). Third, Asian Indians seem to be proud of their culture with respect to marriage and family commitment (Bumiller, 1990; Parrillo, 2006). Singh and Kanjirathinkal (1999) state that being predominantly first-generation immigrants in the United States at present, Asian

Indians generally are Hindus, are traditional, have good proficiency in English, are patriarchal, and prefer marriages to be arranged by a family of origin within the context of caste and regional considerations. Historically, marriage in Indian society has been considered to be a sacrament and not a contract (Kapadia, 1966). The perspective of marriage as sacrament rather than contract seems to be particularly emphasized by Indian males in their opinions about females (e.g., as wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters; Mitter, 1991).

Asian Indians in the United States are ethnically diverse in terms of cultural backgrounds related to multiple languages (e.g., Hindi, Bengali, Gujrati, Malyalam, Telegu, Tamil, and Panjabi), regionalism, food habits, dress codes, and religions (e.g., Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, and Sikhism). Although mainly males in their population started to migrate to the United States in small numbers in the earlier part of the past century as farm workers, they became engaged predominantly as professionals (e.g., about 68% of all newly admitted Asian Indians pursue professions and managerial occupations such as engineers, physicians, dentists, teachers, researchers, and skilled workers), with a tendency to officially list themselves as Whites and having a motivation to seriously invest in homes and seek higher education for their children (Parrillo, 2006). Brown and Hull (1990) report that nearly half of

Asian Indians are in relatively high-status job categories, at twice the rate of Whites. Also, unlike other Asians in the United States, Asian Indians are not concentrated in particular areas or in a single state and appear to be better assimilated into the world of work (Wei, 2003). However, it seems that the cultural and social adjustment of the first-generation Indian immigrants, particularly those in the lower-middle socioeconomic status (SES), has been difficult and problematic (Singh & Unnithan, 1999). Many of them appear to emphasize traditional socialization of their children and tend to be socially distant or formal with other Americans in family and social affairs (Dasgupta, 1989; Parrillo, 2006). In addition to all sorts of articles on the Web, there are more than 100 magazines, newspapers, and television channels dealing with various regional, language, and cultural needs of Asian Indians. We found numerous ads for matrimonial needs of their younger generation in those media. Matrimonial ads are placed by parents, older brothers, and sisters for young males and/or females who are considered to be marriageable. Prospective marrying couples usually meet with an excuse to eat together along with the families of both. Generally, prospective couples talk to each other first before going to elders for formalizing the marriage through a ceremony, including exchanges of gifts for the bride and groom. Asian Indians also have started grocery stores with varied food items imported from India, along with those specializing in Indian clothing, jewelry, and restaurants in most midsize and large cities in the United States (Agarwal, 1991). We counted more than 250 local, regional, and national associations that serve this population (e.g., www.garamchai.com). An analysis of the assertiveness styles in Asian Indian marriages should be meaningful for comparative purposes.

Factor Analysis

The factor analysis using principal components with oblique rotation was performed on the scale items that had been conceptually incorporated initially. Factor analysis was justified in this exploratory study to detect patterning of subscales, with a view toward the discovery of new concepts and to the possible reduction of items (Singh & Kanjirathinkal, 1999). The factor and the communality loadings on each item were calculated based on data from the survey of Indians and are reported in Table 2. We arbitrarily chose a .65 factor or communality loading as the cutoff point for considering the appropriate relevance of an item in a subscale. Based on our survey data, the factor analysis retained the same three subscales, although not all of the items loaded consistently on subscales for which they were initially written. However, we did not shuffle items from one subscale to the other because the communality loadings were not strong enough to warrant that. Data indicated in Table 2 show that findings from the factor analysis confirmed the construct and the content validity of items in the subscales, which were selected and ranked by the judges in Phase I of data collection.

TABLE 2

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Coefficients for the Assertiveness Subscales

Subscale	No. of Items	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α
Courage	8	12.75	4.88	.806
Authenticity	7	19.22	7.351	.925
Autonomy	6	11.84	6.753	.856
Overall Assertiveness Scale	21	37.53	12.45	.885

NOTE: $n = 205$.

Reliability of the Subscales

The means, standard deviations, and values of coefficient alpha for the subscales and for the overall assertiveness scale are presented in Table 2. The alphas support the reliability of each of the subscales and the overall assertiveness scale and justify the incorporation of the three subscales into the overall scale. Support for internal consistency among items in each of the subscales and between each subscale and the overall assertiveness scale is also indicated by the first three columns in Table 3. Data show that courage is the best predictor of assertiveness (Goodman and Kruskal's gamma coefficient of interrelationship between courage and overall assertiveness is the strongest), although both autonomy and authenticity are also significantly related to assertiveness. The authenticity subscale had the weakest (though statistically significant) relationship with the overall assertiveness scale and with the courage and autonomy subscales. Overall, a relatively high internal consistency among indicators demonstrates reliability of the assertiveness scale.

SELECTED FACTORS RELATED TO ASIAN INDIANS' ASSERTIVENESS

We attempted to have an additional indicator of the construct validity of the three subscales on assertiveness by correlating them with selected theoretically relevant variables. A few variables were selected for this purpose of assessing their correlations with each of the subscales and are shown in Table 3. Gamma was used for indicating the strength of the bivariate associations among variables that were measured at ordinal or interval levels. Gender was measured at nominal level (C was used to assess the strength of relationship in that case). Some of the interpretations of relationship are summarized below.

Gender

Data in Table 3 indicate that gender was significantly correlated to all forms of assertiveness in marriage. Further examination of trends in data indicated, however, that female respondents possessed a higher level of authenticity than did males (this is consistent with findings McFall, 1981, had for the American population). Considering the cultural background

TABLE 3
Correlation Coefficients Showing Interrelationships Among Subscales
and Their Relationships With Selected Factors

Factors	Courage	Authenticity	Autonomy
Courage		.28*	.51*
Authenticity			.26*
Overall Assertiveness Scale	.49*	.23*	.39
Gender	.34**	.39**	.47**
Socioeconomic status	.27*	.15	.34*
Age	-.26*	.11	.23*
Level of communication	.35*	.38*	.19
No. of years married	-.24*	.17	.31*
No. of years in United States	.13	-.10	.18
Criteria used for marriage decision			
Traditional	.18	-.23*	-.09
Emotional/love	.22*	.29*	.14
Rational	.17	-.33*	.19

NOTE: $n = 205$.

*Chi-square for these Goodman and Kruskal's gamma coefficients are significant at .05 level or less. **Chi-square for C values for gender are significant at .05 level or less.

of India, women are relatively more emotionally genuine than are men in experiencing relationships (Bumiller, 1990; Mitter, 1991). Males, on the other hand, expressed having a greater sense of autonomy than females did. Also, most of the male respondents in our data were the primary source of income in the family. That, in addition to patriarchal background in the Indian family, may explain a desire among males for seeking autonomy. The two genders, however, did not differ significantly in possessing degrees of courage as a part of assertiveness.

SES

The SES of each respondent was assessed with respect to years of schooling, occupational prestige, and income based on the approach used by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. Results indicated that respondents' SES was significantly correlated to both courage and autonomy but not to authenticity. It is likely that people with a higher SES demonstrated a higher degree of self-confidence and independence than did the ones with a lower SES. However, authenticity as a personality trait crossed social class boundaries.

Age and Years of Marriage

A negative gamma coefficient in our data indicates that Indian married persons who were younger, or had been married for fewer years, were far more courageous in expressing assertiveness than were those who had aged. On the other hand, older persons and those who had been married for a while expressed a greater sense of autonomy than did the younger ones. It is possible that a sense of courage among people declines as they mature in age or in years of a relationship, but their desires for autonomy could increase with age, despite the codependency they still might have in marriage.

Level of Communication in Marriage

We asked Asian Indians about how communicative they were with their spouse in marriage. Results indicated that respondents' perceived communication in marriage was significantly related to their marital assertiveness in selected respects. Our data in Table 3 indicate that those in marriage who thought that they communicated effectively with each other as spouses had a higher level of courage and authenticity aspects of assertiveness. However, the communication levels did not make significant difference with regard to their sense of autonomy.

Number of Years Spent in the United States

We assumed that Asian Indians who had been in the United States for a longer time would have a higher degree of assertiveness than would those who were here for a shorter duration. Studies (e.g., Twenge, 2001) show that changing sociocultural environment affects people's attitudes and personalities in the long run. However, data in Table 3 indicate that there were no significant differences among respondents on the basis of how long they had been residing in the United States. A longer stay here did not significantly change respondents' assertiveness level, though their degree of authenticity went down somewhat.

Criteria Used for Decision to Marry

It is interesting to note that couples who had married based on traditional arrangements of marriage generally lacked assertiveness, and those who followed a lower degree of traditionalism were more authentic in relationships. Those who used rational or pragmatic criteria for making marriage decisions also lacked authenticity. However, respondents

who used emotional (e.g., falling in love) criteria for marriage tended to demonstrate a higher degree of courage and authenticity, compared with those who considered emotional bases of marriage as less important.

CONCLUSION

The notion of assertiveness gained meaning when defined in terms of selected indicators such as courage, authenticity, and autonomy. The employment of a systematic methodology, ranging from identifying particular items under each indicator of assertiveness to empirical verification of their formulations, should generate ideas for additional research on the subject. A focus on a particular cross-cultural context enabled us to think critically about assertiveness and its potentials for comparative applications.

We attempted to develop and test an assertiveness scale measuring assertiveness in relationships. It seems that the overall scale and its subscales for the three indicators were theoretically meaningful and empirically valid and reliable to a significant extent. The initial development of the scale and its subscales through literature review and with the help of knowledgeable judges appears to be useful in studying the assertiveness levels in a cross-cultural context. The factor analysis aided in developing confidence in the selection of scale items. In addition, the application in the context of the first-generation Asian Indian immigrants in the United States provided interesting interpretations. For example, it was revealing to find that even the highly educated immigrants largely used traditional criteria for selecting spouses. Women in that population seem to lack assertiveness, particularly related to their sense of autonomy. However, we will need to test the assertiveness scale in samples of newer generations of these immigrants to assess changes in their subculture. Additional research will also be needed using samples from other populations to further establish the conceptual formulations of assertiveness.

This study may help marriage and family therapists to understand the dynamic and the nature of marital relationship between the first generation of the Asian Indian couples in the United States. We plan to replicate the same methodology to identify assertiveness styles among Middle Eastern American couples, Chinese American couples, and general American populations to compare the relative value of our findings. Studies may also be needed to see if the second-generation immigrants are different in assertiveness styles in marriage as compared with ones of the first generation.

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