A Grounded Theory of Women's Assertive Identity Negotiation

by

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Abstract

Assertiveness can be taboo for women. This is highlighted by recent social movements (i.e., #METOO) where women describe considerable self-doubt about their right to stand up to abuse. The onus for abusive behaviour lies with perpetrators. Assertiveness, though, is shown to mitigate the extent of abuse and is related to better mental and social health outcomes overall. Given the internal and external barriers women face to assertiveness, it is crucial to understand how women become assertive in spite of the obstacles. The purpose of this grounded theory study was to examine the processes through which women develop assertiveness. Questionnaire and interview data were collected from 11 women. Six reported currently struggling with assertiveness and five struggled in the past but considered themselves more assertive now. The resulting theory conceptualizes how women negotiate an assertive identity within the tensions of their social context. Participants' main concerns centered on belonging, evaluating, and costs of belonging. Processes in resolving these main concerns related to pursuing change, finding belonging, challenging evaluations, and developing an assertive identity. Assertive identity negotiation involved continual reflection and commitment to becoming assertive while balancing concerns about belonging and interpersonal consideration. Through this process of negotiating and balancing intra and interpersonal factors, women were able to move from a view that an assertive identity is one that *does not* belong to a view that an assertive identity *can* belong. This theory provides an empirical model to inform counselling practices in helping women overcome internal and external barriers to negotiating an assertive identity.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Michelle McLean. The research project received ethical approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name: "A Grounded Theory of How Women Develop Assertiveness" No. Pro00086368. No part of this thesis has been previously published.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The theme of paralyzing self-doubt is salient in stories from the #METOO movement (Grinberg, Ravitz, & Zdanowicz, 2017). Women describe uncertainty about their right to be assertive, such as saying no, when something does not feel right, or speaking out after abuse happens. This self-doubt is a likely contributing factor to the slow development of the movement, as social expectations of compliant behaviour inhibit women from acting assertively (Lease, 2018; Pfafman & McEwan, 2014). The onus for abusive behaviour lies with perpetrators. Assertiveness, however, which is the respectful expression of needs, ideas, emotions, and boundaries, can mitigate the threat or extent of abuse (Brecklin & Ullman, 2005; Kelley, Orchowski, & Gidycz, 2016; Kidder, Boell, & Moyer, 1983; Zerubavel & Messman-Moore, 2013). Given the magnitude of abuse exposed by the #METOO movement, it is an urgent priority, then, to understand how women develop assertiveness. Inquiry into this important social phenomenon can shed light on challenges women face to thriving in the current social context.

Recent literature on assertiveness is sparse. Popular during human rights movements in the 60s and 70s, older research focused on definition, correlates, and interpersonal dynamics of assertiveness. There has been a more recent attempt to delineate a cognitive model (Vagos & Pereira, 2010, 2016, 2018), however, the general question of how people *develop* assertiveness has been neglected. Surprisingly, given the barriers women face to assertiveness, there is also little scientific inquiry on the topic grounded in women's experiences. The purpose of this study was to address this gap by generating a grounded theory conceptualizing how women develop assertiveness. This goal was achieved through exploration of women's experiences of internal and external barriers to assertiveness and the *process* of how women overcome them. Results of this study are an empirically informed model of women's assertiveness development, which

enhances classical theoretical formulations. This expansion of assertiveness theory provides direction for testable hypotheses in future experimental research. It also points to markers for improving interventions, increasing the potential for long-lasting behavioural change. Such change is essential to transform narratives of self-doubt disclosed in the #METOO movement to narratives of empowerment that can interrupt marginalizing social conditions for women.

In this first chapter I highlighted the topic and significance of women's assertiveness and explained the purpose of the study. Chapter two is a review of assertiveness literature, including definition, history, and correlates of assertiveness, issues in assertiveness interventions, and barriers women face to assertiveness. Chapter three is an overview of the methodology used in this study, including the theoretical background of grounded theory, participant recruitment and selection, and details of data collection and analysis. Chapter four is a presentation of findings from the study, including categories and a theory of processes women experience in developing assertiveness. Chapter five is a discussion of these findings, what they mean for theory and practice in the area of assertiveness, and limitations and avenues for further inquiry.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In grounded theory, empirical data collected in the field is privileged over existing theories in the literature (Dunne, 2011). The goal is to inductively generate a theory grounded in raw data, rather than deductively apply extant theory to make sense of data. With this goal in mind, it is suggested that researchers have minimal exposure to literature on the topic prior to analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser, 1998). This is to minimize the possibility of imposing a preconceived theoretical framework on the data that might influence or stifle the emergence of concepts. In keeping with this tradition, the following literature is not reviewed in order to deduce testable hypotheses to verify theories about developing assertiveness. It is, instead, intended to provide definitional, historical, and current information to give a basic understanding of assertiveness, why it is important to psychological health, and its implications for women. This is followed by situating the rationale for the current study within empirical gaps around women's assertiveness development.

What Assertiveness is and Why People Might Want it

Assertiveness is the respectful expression of needs, ideas, emotions, and boundaries in interpersonal interactions (Pfafman, 2017). Respect is a key component of assertiveness. It means interpersonal behaviours are enacted with concern and care for all parties involved (Rakos, 1979). Assertiveness is not a unidimensional construct. Researchers have proposed the following factors as dimensions of assertiveness (Arrindell, Sanavio, & Sica, 2002):

1) Displaying and responding to negative and positive feelings: including requesting behaviour change in others, defense of rights or interests, refusing and making requests, giving and receiving compliments, and displaying affection toward others.
2) Expression of and managing personal limitations: including admitting lack of knowledge

on a topic, recognition of failure or shortcomings, ability to deal with criticism, and requesting help and attention.

3) Taking social initiative: including introducing oneself, starting a conversation with strangers, and expressing opinions.

Although these factors are highly correlated, the ability to be assertive on one dimension does not necessarily generalize to another (Arrindell & Van der Ende, 1985; Vagos & Pereira, 2018).

In delineating boundaries of the assertiveness construct, it is often contrasted with two other primary interpersonal styles, aggression and passivity (Pfafman, 2017). Aggression is the use of force, coercion, or threats to achieve an interpersonal goal (Dunne & Daffern, 2017). Aggression can appear as confidence but is often motivated by a fear of not achieving a desired outcome (Anderson & Martin, 1995). Aggressivity lacks the mutual respect in assertiveness, functioning to achieve a goal regardless of interpersonal consequences. Passivity, in contrast, is the inability to express needs, ideas, emotions, and boundaries out of concern for interpersonal repercussions (Clegg & Moskowitz, 2017). Passivity can appear as agreeableness but is often based in a fear of negative social consequences associated with disagreeing (Anderson & Martin, 1995). Passivity functions to manage impressions, ensure social approval, and mitigate interpersonal conflict. Passivity, however, can lead to internal conflict when personal needs are ignored or go unmet. These response styles are not independent of each other (Ames, Lee, & Wazlawek, 2017). People can be aggressive, passive, or assertive in certain situations and not others. Response styles can also overlap, in the case of passive-aggression, which is aggressive tactics used in a covert manner.

Assertiveness is associated with a variety of positive outcomes. Increased assertiveness is linked to psychological and physical well-being, higher self-esteem, academic achievement, a

sense of agency, occupational success, relationship satisfaction, and decreased risk of substance use and sexual victimization (Gordon & Waldo, 1984; Hensing, Spak, Thundal, & Östlund, 2003; Lorr & More, 1980; Parray & Kumar, 2017; Sarkova et al., 2013; Kelley et al., 2016; Tanck & Robbins, 2008; Williams & Stout, 1985; Zerubavel & Messman-Moore, 2013). Comparatively, decreased assertiveness is associated with anxiety, depression, shame, feeling helpless, poor interpersonal relations, and other emotional problems (Arrindell, Sanderman, Van der Molen, Van der Ende, & Mersch, 1988; Arrindell et al., 1990; Bijstra, Bosma, & Jackson, 1994; De Man & Green, 1988; Filippello, Harrington, Buzzai, Sorrenti, & Costa, 2014; Gilbert & Allan, 1994; Maier et al., 2009; Rutten et al., 2016; St Lawrence, 1987; Wierzbiki, 1984).

Assertiveness is theorized to be beneficial for a variety of reasons. People experience a sense of agency and purpose where they can express themselves to get their basic needs met, to contribute meaningfully to the social world, and to establish fulfilling relationships (Anderson & Martin, 1995). In contrast, a reduced sense of agency is related to the development of various psychological problems (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Ryan, Deci, & Vansteenkiste, 2015). When needs go unmet or a person feels less agentic, it can stifle motivation and give way to issues like depression, anxiety, and social isolation (Deci & Ryan, 2012).

Where Assertiveness Came From

In a historical review, Peneva and Mavrodiev (2013) describe how the formal study of assertiveness began in the mid-20th century to address psychopathology. Salter (1950) studied the relation of assertiveness with depression, insecurity, and loneliness. Concluding that these psychological problems stemmed from inhibition, or a lack of assertiveness, Salter formulated conditioned reflex therapy to help clients more openly and spontaneously express their feelings, needs, and desires. The following decade, Wolpe (1961), a student of Salter's, began formally

developing assertiveness training for clinical practice. Training was aimed at relieving social anxieties and increasing self-esteem through behavioural methods. This primarily behavioural approach was later criticized by Wolpe's collaborator, Lazarus (1973), who contended that people needed more than relief from anxiety to be assertive. Lazarus defined assertiveness as a type of social competence and began working on a new multimodal therapy. Social skills became part of assertiveness training, moving beyond techniques for overcoming anxiety and self-expression. This therapy included additional elements such as personal development and psychoeducation to differentiate aggressive assertions from healthy ones. Lazarus' work paved the way for the use of cognitive techniques in the field of assertiveness training, such as incorporating cognitive processing and distortions into understanding assertiveness. Further study in this era resulted in more complex models of assertiveness that included cognitive, emotional, and behavioural components (Peneva & Mavrodiev, 2013).

Assertiveness grew in popularity during the human rights and humanistic movements of the 60s and 70s (Peneva & Mavrodiev, 2013). Several authors began publishing on assertiveness from a rights-based perspective (Alberti & Emmons, 2017; Bishop, 2010; Jakubowski-Spector, 1973; Smith, 1989). In this framework, assertiveness became about activating human potential and mutual respect of equality of rights. This involved the recognition of personal worth, while taking responsibility for respecting the equal worth of others. Assertiveness training became increasingly focused on teaching human rights, differentiating between aggressive and passive behaviour, expanding self-confidence and personal growth, addressing cognitive and emotional issues related to assertiveness, and behavioural methods, such as modelling and rehearsal.

While recent advancements have continued to refine the construct of assertiveness, there has been less focus on identifying developmental processes. Current research primarily centres on

domains of personality correlates, organizational communication, and assessing interpersonal dynamics around assertive behaviour (Ames, 2008a, 2008b; Peneva & Mavrodiev, 2013; Sims, 2017). Because of the psychological benefits of assertiveness, there have also been a variety of studies assessing whether training assertiveness skills increases the behaviour and improves outcomes in education, health care, and sport settings (Omura, Maguire, Levett-Jones, & Stone, 2017; Speed, Goldstein, & Goldfried, 2018).

Assertiveness Interventions

In a review of assertiveness training, Speed and colleagues (2017) describe assertiveness interventions as teaching clients a set of cognitive and behavioural skills to enhance functioning in interpersonal contexts. While training is varied, techniques can include:

1) Broken record: repeating requests or refusals until they are recognized by others.
2) Fogging: agreeing with part of others' requests/opinions while maintaining own position.
3) I-statements: used to voice one's feelings and wants without blaming others.
4) DESC method: Describe situation, Express feelings about situation, Specify desired behaviour change, indicate Consequence of failure to comply with behaviour change.
5) Teaching social intelligence: sensitivity to others' feelings (empathy) and behavioural skills for responding appropriately to those feelings (social skills).

In early assertiveness research, training was shown to increase assertiveness along with improving symptoms related to anxiety, depression, psychosis, self-esteem, substance use, and interpersonal functioning (for a detailed review of efficacy studies, see Speed et al., 2017). Amidst optimism about the benefits of assertiveness training, however, there are mixed responses to the overall body of research on the topic. Most research on assertiveness training is more than 30 years old and has been critiqued for being methodologically unsystematic, working

with different definitions of assertiveness (e.g., some including aggressive responses), using unstandardized training, having no significant difference compared to other therapies, and trainees not being able to generalize skills learned in training to the external environment (Cianni & Horan, 1990; Derry & Stone, 1979; Galassi & Galassi, 1978; Heimberg, Montgomery, Madsen, & Heimberg, 1977; McFall & Marston, 1970; Rakos & Schroeder, 1979; Rich & Schroeder, 1976; Rotheram, 1984; Ruben & Ruben, 1989; St Lawrence, 1987; Van Hasselt, Hersen, & Milliones, 1978).

There remains a lack of research on assertiveness training as a stand-alone treatment in recent years (Speed et al., 2017). What exists of current assertiveness training research is usually implemented with treatments addressing a host of interpersonal issues, such as social anxiety disorder, deficits in social skills and prosocial behaviour, or problematic communication styles (Barth et al., 2016; Cuijpers, Van Straten, Andersson, & Van Oppen, 2008; Epstein et al., 2018; O'Donohue, Ferguson, & Pasquale, 2003; Swee, Kaplan, & Heimberg, 2018). This makes it difficult to distinguish what skills are being trained and to compare studies. Furthermore, assertiveness training is often subsumed under dialectical behaviour therapy, a combination of social skills training with emotional monitoring and regulation goals. Much of this research has shown inconclusive results for benefits over the long-term (Valentine, Bankoff, Poulin, Reidler, & Pantalone, 2015). There have also been mixed results for newer, more methodologically controlled studies (Lee et al., 2013; Omura, Levett-Jones, & Stone, 2019; Omura et al., 2017).

Several researchers have noted that these problems might be due to assertiveness training becoming widespread before an underlying theory of development was defined with enough precision (Heimberg et al., 1977; Vagos & Pereiera, 2016). Instead, research on assertiveness interventions primarily assesses efficacy. There is little focus on systematic inquiry into the

processes of assertiveness development and whether assertiveness training is, indeed, targeting these processes. To address this, Vagos and Pereiera (2010, 2016, 2018) have been building a cognitive model of assertiveness to enhance assertiveness interventions. The researchers argue that core beliefs underlie the ability to be assertive and propose that assertiveness develops through cognitive reframing of these core beliefs. This includes processing social cues differently, and subsequently, experiencing different emotional responses and behaviours. Vagos and Pereira's model builds on traditional assertiveness training by developing a detailed model of cognitive schemas related to assertiveness and interpersonal beliefs. Still, a model focused primarily on cognition might be insufficient for understanding the array of processes involved in the development of assertiveness. For example, Lazarus' (1982) cognitive-mediational theory suggests automatic, unconscious appraisals of the environment can stimulate emotions that interfere with desired behaviour. That is, people can know how to act or think they deserve to be assertive but stimuli from the environment can trigger an emotional response that deters them. Thus, in tandem with cognition, there is need to explore additional processes to delineate a more holistic working model of assertiveness development.

Women's Assertiveness

Understanding processes in the development of assertiveness is particularly salient for women. Anecdotes from the #METOO movement demonstrate women's self-doubt about being assertive in sexually charged situations. Research also indicates assertiveness is difficult for women across a variety of situations, generally. As a trend, studies have shown women are less assertive than men (Leaper & Ayres, 2007; Parham, Lewis, Fretwell, Irwin, & Schrimsher, 2015; Sigler, Burnett, & Child, 2008). Although these differences are not entirely straightforward, with some studies showing comparable levels of assertiveness across genders (Bridges, Sanderman,

Breukers, Ranchor, & Arrindell, 1991; Twenge, 2001). Although evidence for differences in assertiveness among men and women is inconclusive, differences in the social consequences of being assertive is a robust finding. Specifically, assertive women are perceived more negatively than assertive men by both men and women perceivers (Amanatullah & Morris, 2010; Crawford, 1988; Delamater & McNamara, 1986; Williams & Tiedens, 2016) and are more likely to experience punitive backlash (Amanatullah & Tinsley, 2013; Brescoll, Okimoto, & Vial, 2018; Netchaeva, Kouchaki, & Sheppard, 2015).

Gendered expectations pose a dilemma for the development of assertiveness in women (Lease, 2017). Hersen, Eisler, and Miller (1973) brought to attention that assertiveness training often focused on expressing anger and indignant feelings rather than on other dimensions of assertiveness, like expressing positive feelings toward others. These distinctions are important, as strong assertions from women are often perceived negatively due to gender norms (Lease, 2017). In order to build effective assertiveness interventions for women, a more nuanced understanding of how women develop and negotiate assertiveness in real world contexts is required.

The Current Study

The purpose of this study was to address gaps in scientific understanding of women's assertiveness development. While assertiveness training is ubiquitous, there are mixed results on its efficacy. This may be, in part, because of a lack of understanding of the underlying processes of development. Current knowledge on assertiveness development primarily evolved through theoretical deduction rather than empirical observation. Many of these theoretical foundations were developed 30 plus years ago and were primarily generated with little direct inquiry into women's experiences. Therefore, there is need for an updated theory on women's assertiveness development that explores women's experiences within the more recent historical and political

context. To address these gaps, I employed grounded theory, an exploratory methodology that allows for inquiry into less understood topics. With assertiveness research moving beyond defining and determining correlates, there is an opportunity to probe underlying processes of developmental change. As grounded theory is designed to specifically probe social processes of change, it is an ideal methodology to shed light on how women develop assertiveness within their social contexts (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2007).

Primary data in grounded theory consists of interviews examining participants' main concerns about a problem and how they continually resolve them (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser, 1998). Two groups of women, those who reported currently struggling with assertiveness, and those who once struggled but were more assertive now, were interviewed about their experiences with barriers to assertiveness and processes involved in overcoming them. The rationale for studying both groups was to gain insight into women's main concerns while they were currently struggling with assertiveness and to understand how women resolved these concerns despite an initial unassertive starting point. Grounded theory is a flexible methodology that draws on various data sources. As part of triangulation and theory building, I also collected and compared quantitative data with interviews to describe and assess the diversity of the sample (Maxwell, 2010) and as sensitizing concepts to assist in theory building (Glaser, 1978). This consisted of a measure of assertiveness, plus correlates of assertiveness, including a measure of general emotional states (Speed et al., 2017), shame (Akin, 2009; Manago, Ward, Lemm, Reed, & Seabrook, 2015), and locus of control (Cooley & Nowicki Jr, 1984; Williams & Stout, 1985).

The intention of the current study was not to validate predetermined hypotheses, but to revisit the topic of women's assertiveness and build theory from the ground up. With little research on processes involved in the development of assertiveness and few studies addressing

its development from women's perspectives, this research can update and extend older theories and constructs with newer data and frameworks.

III. METHODOLOGY

Participants

Eleven women participated in the study, ranging from 18-39 years old. Seven identified as Caucasian, one Hispanic, one Latino, one Chinese, and one Sudanese. All were college educated to some degree, except one who was completing her final year of high school. Eight were students and three were working professionals. Six participants responded to posters recruiting women currently struggling with assertiveness and five to posters recruiting highly assertive women who once struggled with assertiveness. Based on these self-identifications, groups were labelled as high and low assertive for pragmatic purposes in reporting results. A clear delineation of these categories, however, was not supported by the data. Rather, quantitative and qualitative results indicated women's experiences fell on a spectrum of assertiveness. In addition to a psychometric measure of assertiveness, women were asked to rate their assertiveness on a scale of 1 to 10 at the start of interviews. This was to assess women's perceptions of their current level and the magnitude of change in their assertiveness. Women in the low group reported a range from 4-7. Women in the high group reported a range from 7-8, with all saying they were a 4 in the past. See Table 1 for a brief description of each participant.

Table 1.

Brief Descriptions of Participants

Low Group
Teresa (*5*) was a 39-year-old Caucasian administrative worker at a large educational institution. She expressed struggling with assertiveness at work and with her spouse, who was also conflict averse. Teresa did not view assertiveness as effective for problem solving in the domains she struggled with.
Hermione (*4*) was a 26-year-old Latina graduate student in natural sciences. She reported struggling with assertiveness with her college supervisor and colleagues. Hermione described a lack of assertiveness as contributing to depression. Wanting change, she attended personal counselling and professional development activities.
(No pseudonym) (*5*) was a 34-year-old Hispanic graduate student, with prior experience working in human resources. She expressed struggling with assertiveness with family, friends, prior romantic relationships, and at work. She was actively pursuing change in her assertiveness through education, counselling, and with support from her current partner.
Davina (*no data*) was an 18-year-old Caucasian in her first year of undergraduate studies. She described struggling with assertiveness in college group work and asking for needs in various domains of her life. Davina did not feel it was a big problem, though, and was not actively pursuing change.
Morgana (*6*) was a 23-year-old Chinese graduate student in an environmental program. She described struggling expressing her needs and standing up for herself with family and colleagues. Due to low assertiveness, Morgana lost a job opportunity and was actively working on change in order to reapply.
Vivian (*7*) was a 28-year-old Caucasian engineer and part-time MBA graduate student. She expressed struggling with assertiveness and being bullied in the work setting. Vivian, however, described "wearing the pants" in her long-term relationship.

High Group
Chaya (*4, 8*) was an 18-year-old Caucasian student in her last year of high school. She expressed being highly assertive with family and at school. She previously struggled to speak up and say no to requests from family and community members. Chaya was concerned she was becoming "too assertive" and was working on finding balance.

Oof (*4, 7*) was a 20-year-old Sudanese student in her first year of undergraduate studies. She described being highly assertive in most domains of her life. She previously struggled with saying no to requests and expressing herself to family and friends. Oof could ask for needs and set boundaries but wanted to work on expressing her emotions.

Jacinda (*no data*) was a 22-year-old Caucasian graduate who was applying to legal studies. She expressed being highly assertive in most domains of her life. Jacinda used to struggle with speaking up and saying no to family and friends. She wanted to improve her confidence, as she sometimes felt "anxious" about being assertive.

Jane (*4, 7*) was a 30-year-old Caucasian manager at a seasonal sports facility and forestry worker. She expressed being highly assertive with friends and at work. Jane previously struggled with speaking up and developing social relationships. She was uncomfortable with the "assertive" label but felt good about having more control in her life.

Mara (*4, 8*) was a 33-year-old Caucasian graduate student in the medical field. She expressed being highly assertive in most domains of her life. Mara spoke up for herself in various situations in the past but had always struggled with initiating social assertiveness. She described still being anxious when asserting herself and was working on being more personable.

Note. Numbers in parentheses represent participants' self-reported assertiveness on a scale from 1-10 (past, current).

Measures

A primary measure of assertiveness and measures correlated with assertiveness were administered to each participant. See Appendix A for sample items of each measure.

Scale for Interpersonal Behaviour. The s-SIB (Arrindell et al., 2002) is a 25-item scale intended to measure how people react in different social situations (e.g., *Refusing a request made by a person in authority*). Each item has two response scales, one measuring how tense people feel in a situation and the other measuring how often people behave the way described in the situation. The 'tense' response scale ranges from 1 = *Not at all* to 5 = *Extremely*. The 'behaviour' response scale ranges from 1 = *I never do* to 5 = *I always do*. The advantage of the s-SIB is the measure of both distress and frequency of engaging in particular behaviours. This allows for a nuanced understanding of differences between the ability to engage in more assertive behaviour and a subjectively comfortable stance toward engaging in more assertive behaviour. The s-SIB also taps the various dimensions of assertiveness, including displaying positive and negative feelings, expression of personal limitations, and social initiative.

The Positive and Negative Affect Scale. The PANAS (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) is a 20-item scale measuring how people feel on average using a list of feeling and emotion words (e.g., *distressed, proud, irritable*). Each word is scored on a scale from 1 = *Very slightly or not at all* to 5 = *Extremely*. This measure provides information about the pervasiveness of certain emotional states in a person's life.

Experience of Shame Scale. The ESS (Andrews, Qian, & Valentine, 2002) is a 25-item measure of people's experiences of embarrassment, self-consciousness, and shame in the last year (e.g., *Have you avoided people who have seen you fail?*). Each item is scored on a response

scale ranging from 1 = *Not at all* to 4 = *Very much*. The ESS consists of three dimensions, characterological, behavioural, and bodily shame.

Levenson Locus of Control Scales. The LLOC (Levenson, 1973) is a 24-item scale measuring how much personal control people feel (e.g., *I can pretty much determine what will happen in my life*). Each item is scored on a response scale ranging from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 6 = *Strongly agree*. The LLOC includes three dimensions of how much control people perceive in their lives, including chance, powerful others, and internal locus of control.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted on women's experiences struggling with and developing assertiveness (see Appendix B for interview schedules). Interviews were approximately 60 to 90 minutes long and were audio-recorded. Questions were open-ended to facilitate a detailed account of women's main concerns, such as "Tell me about your experience with assertiveness?" and "Tell me about your experience with *becoming* more assertive?" for high and low assertiveness, respectively. Additional probes were asked for clarification and elaboration, such as "Tell me more about that?" or "What was that like?" Women were also asked about their definition of assertiveness to understand if participants' conceptualizations of assertiveness were similar to the construct as defined by the research literature.

Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Women were recruited through campus posters and email listservs for students, faculty, and staff (Appendix C). Recruitment was purposive in finding a sample of women with the specified experiences around assertiveness. Those interested in the study were screened through a brief telephone interview to determine if they met criteria for inclusion. Women were included in the study if they were 18+ years old and reported currently struggling with asserstiveness, or

previously struggling with assertiveness but now being more assertive. After the initial screening interview, an email was sent to those eligible to participate. The email contained a unique ID code, a link to a secure online survey consisting of demographic questions (Appendix D) and the quantitative measures, and a list of timeslots for scheduling an interview. The email also provided instructions to use the unique ID code for the survey to ensure confidentiality when dealing with third party software. After completion of the survey, in-person interviews were conducted on a university campus in a private room. In-interview and post-interview member checks were completed by summarizing and paraphrasing interviewees every so often to ensure I understood their meaning and as a request for feedback on a summary of results, respectively. Out of 11 women, four women from the high assertiveness group provided written feedback on the results summary indicating the summary made sense and reflected their experiences.

Consent was asked at each point of data collection (Appendix E). Women were debriefed after the interview about the interview experience and provided further details about the study and numbers to call in case any distress was experienced later on. Interviews were transcribed by the researcher to gain familiarization with the data. To protect participant data, paper consent forms were stored in a locked cabinet in a locked room and electronic data was stored in password protected files on an encrypted computer. After download, all quantitative data was deleted from the online survey software. Pseudonyms were also used in the presentation of findings and any identifying information was concealed in descriptions and quotes. A reimbursement for cost of parking or public transit was also offered to ensure accessibility and no hardship was experienced for women participating in the study.

Grounded Theory Design

Grounded theory is useful for developing theory on social psychological processes. It was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) to overcome bias in theory formulation through the use of a systematic inductive method of theory generation that is grounded in the data. There are a variety of formulations of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). I primarily drew on an emerging constructivist approach to data collection and analysis. My rationale for this is that the emerging design's flexible approach to category formation allows for development of interpretive skills and creativity as a novice researcher (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser, 1978). The constructivist element recognizes the interaction of the researcher in interpreting participants' accounts. It also recognizes that meaning is constructed based on individuals' life experiences and social knowledge, with no singular interpretation able to capture the diversity of meanings possible within a single event (Charmaz, 2014).

In emerging designs, core patterns, new information, and shared meaning about a phenomenon emerge from the data as the building blocks of the theory (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser, 1978). Conceptual hypotheses are made about the data in order to work it into a theoretical model of interrelated categories. This moves the analysis beyond descriptive details of participants' lives into a conceptualization of latent patterns and a larger abstract theory. Rather than static themes, grounded theory provides a working model of how themes are interrelated and move together. This process approach to data helps discern a series of actions and interactions among people or events pertaining to a particular topic. It is not an overly exact description of a process, replicating every detail involved for every possible case, but enough to provide guidance about how a phenomenon works. In this way, a grounded theory provides a general "map" of a specific process (Glaser, 1978).

Although patterns are said to emerge from the data, it is important to acknowledge the role of the researcher in the construction of theory (Charmaz, 2014; Ponterotto, 2005). Positioning myself in this research, I am a straight white woman who considers herself moderately assertive. My interest in this topic stemmed from witnessing myself and other women struggle with various barriers to assertiveness. Preparing to become a counsellor, I recognized the need to advocate for one's own value is often integral to well-being and healthy relationships. Assertiveness as a personal responsibility, however, is sometimes difficult for me to reconcile with a social world that is often not receptive to women's assertiveness. Looking through a feminist lens, I questioned how to encourage women to be more assertive when there are often social repercussions, or when their assertiveness is expected to look like men's. I became curious how women develop assertiveness and what this looks like. It is with knowledge of the tension I felt between agency and social constraints that I undertook this research.

Grounded theory is a systematic approach to data collection and analysis. It cannot escape, however, what Rennie (2012) describes as the "unavoidable hermeneutics" involved in qualitative analysis. That is, that it is through the researcher's lens that the meaning of participants' words is filtered. Nonetheless, rigorous quality criteria were adhered in order to ensure the emerging theory would be useful for real world application. During analysis, I followed four quality criteria for grounded theory when generating codes and categories for the overall theory (Glaser, 1998). The first criterion was *fit*, which means the theory has an enduring quality to it that transcends time, place, and people. The second criterion was *work*, which means the theory must be congruent by accounting for variations in the data without neglecting to explain multiple perspectives, contradictions, or exceptions. The third criterion was *relevance*,

which means, if the theory fits and works, it should be relevant. The final criterion was *modifiability*, which means the theory is not rigid, but rather, flexible to findings from new data.

In addition to these criteria, I drew on general qualitative research quality criteria to enhance the trustworthiness of findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This included enhancing *credibility* through the use of quotes as supporting evidence that results accurately represent the data, *transferability* through summaries of participants' contexts to allow readers to determine whether results are applicable to their or others' situations, *dependability* through describing the research process in sufficient detail as to be replicable, and *confirmability* through minimizing bias with regular reflexivity, triangulating quantitative and qualitative data, and ensuring results are reflective of information gathered from participants. Grounded theory also establishes trustworthiness through its highly systematic approach to data collection and analysis and a focus on grounding theory in the data (Glaser, 1998). The following describes key elements of the methodology.

Theoretical sensitivity. Theoretical sensitivity means being sensitive to what data are important in developing the grounded theory (Glaser, 1978). This requires the ability to separate pertinent and non-pertinent information to the topic of study. I gained theoretical sensitivity from reviewing assertiveness literature, prior experience researching various interpersonal topics, working with psychotherapy clients struggling with assertiveness, and through continual exposure to the data during collection and analysis.

Theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling is a method to guide areas of inquiry for theory development. This involves collecting and analysing data simultaneously. Results of the initial analysis are then used to determine following areas of inquiry to contribute to the

differentiation, elaboration, consolidation, and validation of conceptual categories and theory (Glaser, 1978).

Theoretical sampling guided the interview schedule and number of women recruited for the study. This meant adding questions to the interview schedule as new areas of inquiry were established by analysing prior interviews. It also meant recruitment ended once conceptual saturation was established in the collected data (i.e., no new information arising in interviews). While theoretical sampling usually does not delimit where and who to collect data from, I utilized purposive sampling in order to learn about a central phenomenon in specific cases (i.e., assertiveness in women). The goal of this sampling strategy was to ensure a pool of data that included women's experience of struggling with and developing assertiveness. I began with one interview each of low and high assertiveness participants to become sensitized to relevant concepts. I then sampled low assertiveness participants until it became clear what their main concerns around assertiveness were and the properties, dimensions, and interrelations of these concerns. I then sampled high assertiveness participants to saturate categories involved in resolving these concerns. Sampling from higher and lower assertive groups also provided opportunity to compare if women's main concerns differed based on their level of assertiveness. For example, if women who became assertive had different struggles with assertiveness in the past than those currently struggling with assertiveness.

Disconfirming cases are also often sought to augment theory. For example, two participants who responded to the struggling with assertiveness recruitment ads reported that assertiveness was not necessarily desirable to them and one participant who responded to the high assertiveness recruitment ad said she was told by others that she were assertive but she was

not fond of being viewed as such. These participants added nuances to the categories, however, given time limitations of this study, it is likely these concepts were not fully saturated.

Substantive and theoretical coding. Substantive coding involves categorizing the data, while theoretical coding involves interrelating these categories to develop an overall theory. I began substantive coding with line by line *open coding* of each interview to create as many categories as possible. During this phase, I used a set of questions for each interview: "What is the main concern faced by participants? What accounts for the continual resolving of this concern?" Coding families were also referenced during this process (Glaser, 1978), which included looking for concepts like causes, context, identity, social norms, and so on. After coding each interview, codes were examined for commonalities and grouped into categories. With each interview, codes were placed in existing categories or new categories were created to accommodate them. Once all codes were categorized, I examined them to formulate properties of each category. Through this process, the core category of how women resolved their main concerns around assertiveness emerged. Next, I employed *selective coding*, which is the process of coding only for incidents that relate to the core variable. This involved reducing and refining the list of codes and categories as I analysed new interviews. I used hard copy transcripts for open coding and MS Word documents for the selective coding phase. I kept a code list document that was continuously refined and updated with each interview. Finally, I began *theoretical coding*, which involved systematically relating the core category to other categories and using the data to validate relationships between them. As a more abstract theoretical framework stabilized, I brought existing literature in and integrated it with results to hone the theory (Glaser, 1998). This included integrating theories I was familiar with and seeking novel theories to help explain the diverse ideas emerging from the data.

Constant comparison. Constant comparison is an ongoing process throughout coding and theory generation phases. This involved continually comparing codes, categories, and memos within and across each other to generate higher order categories and the overall theory. In this process, coded incidents were compared to each other for similarities and differences, which created the base for categories. Categories were then compared to more incidents to see if the incidents fit the category and to generate properties of categories. Then, categories were compared to categories to generate hypotheses about their interrelations and establish how to best organize them into a coherent theory. At this point, literature was consulted, compared, and contrasted with the emerging theory as another source of data (Dunne, 2011).

Memos. Memos are written and reflected on during the process of data collection, coding, and theoretical analysis. I wrote memos immediately after interviews to inform theoretical sampling, such as new areas for inquiry on the interview schedule. Theoretical memos about the data and conceptual connections between categories were taken during coding and theory generation to capture ideas and acknowledge and articulate preconceptions about the data. Here, I reflected on how my values and social identity could influence the research process. Memos were sorted by topic into categories and how they related to the core category. I recorded memos in computer documents and on the back pages of hard copy transcripts.

IV. ANALYSIS

The following sections provide a summary of quantitative results, women's definitions of assertiveness, the overall theory, and women's main concerns and how they resolved them.

Quantitative Results

Quantitative data was collected for the purpose of describing the sample and triangulating results. The interpretation of scores was limited to highlighting trends in scores as no inferential statistics were run due to the small sample size. Scores on the s-SIB confirmed women's self-reported levels of assertiveness. Women in the high group were more likely to report being less tense about and engaging in more assertive behaviour than the low group. Women in the low group, however, reported engaging in positive assertions and expression of personal limitations nearly as much as the high group. Inconsistent with prior research, there were few differences between groups on the correlates of assertiveness. Women had comparable scores on the PANAS, EES, and LLOC. These unexpected results are discussed in the limitation section. See Table 2 in Appendix A for women's mean scores on measures by high and low group.

Defining Assertiveness

A comprehensive definition present across interviews was that *assertiveness is the ability to respectfully express one's ideas, opinions, objectives, emotions, and needs, and to insist these expressions be taken seriously*. Women's descriptions of assertiveness were varied in the details and included terms like "having a voice," "standing up for yourself," "making opinions, wants, and desires known," "being comfortable saying what you think," "not owing it to others to stay quiet," "willingness to deal with conflict," "maintaining your position in the face of opposition," and "being firm in convincing others of your standpoint." Some women stated that assertiveness was about mutual respect and finding middle ground between passivity and aggression—being

"firm but polite." Others described it as "having control over one's life and self" by knowing personal values and setting boundaries. These definitions highlighted women's desire to contribute expressions of personal identity to interpersonal engagements and their desire for those contributions to be valued. This desire to be part of the social world, and its implications, comprised the core of the current theory.

Assertive Identity Negotiation Theory

The core category of *assertive identity negotiation* captured the processes involved in women's development of assertiveness. This category identified women's main concerns around belonging and negative social evaluations, and how these concerns were resolved through the continual negotiation of various intra and interpersonal factors. Starting from an initial belief that an assertive identity was one that could not belong, an ongoing negotiation of these factors eventually allowed women to embrace an assertive identity as one that could belong. Categories and properties of each category were organized to show relations within and between main concerns and solutions. The overlapping and intersecting of categories demonstrate the complexity of processes involved in struggling with and becoming more assertive. See Figure 1 for a model representation of women's assertive identity negotiation.

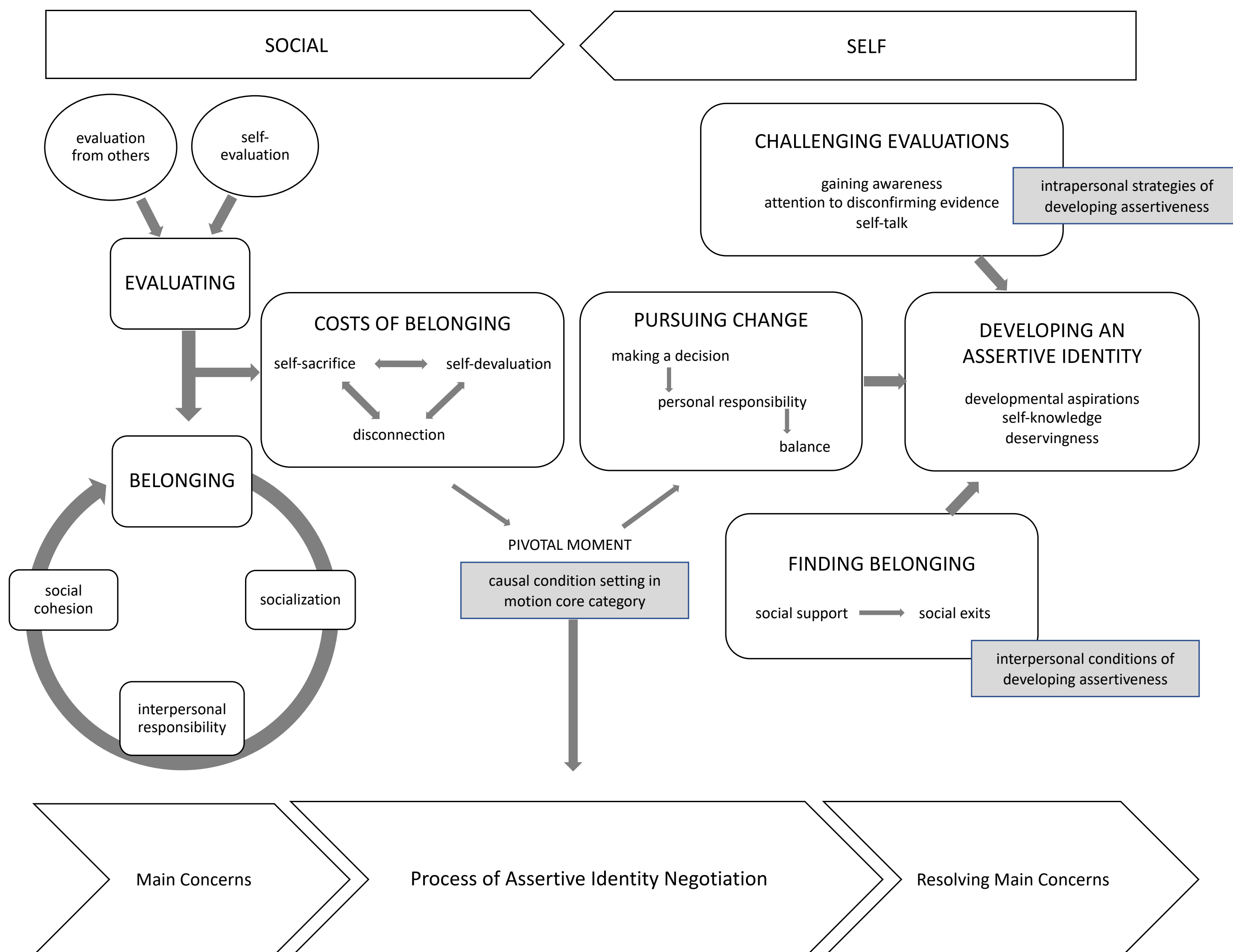

Figure 1. *Model of Assertive Identity Negotiation.* Women were socialized to take interpersonal responsibility for social cohesion in order to belong. This was reinforced through self- and other-evaluations about women's roles as acquiescent rather than assertive. The desire to belong and fear of negative evaluation were costly. Women sacrificed themselves in a cycle that led to them to devalue their needs and feel disconnected from others, which led them to sacrifice more in an attempt to establish belonging. A pivotal moment of awareness broke this cycle and a process of assertive identity negotiation began. Women made a decision to change, took personal responsibility for change, and worked to balance new behaviour. Conditions and strategies women employed to become more assertive included internally challenging negative evaluations of women's assertiveness and finding likeminded external supports. These processes contributed to women developing an assertive identity, by helping them negotiate who they wanted to be, how they wanted to participate in the social realm, and the belief that they deserved to do so.

Main Concerns Related to Assertiveness

Women disclosed a variety of concerns related to assertiveness. These were broadly grouped into three main categories, *belonging, evaluating*, and *costs of belonging*, which are detailed in the following sections. Central to women's concerns was the tension between wanting to belong and wanting to express personal identity. This tension, and the propensity to favour belonging over self-expression, had various implications for women's lives. Women reported struggling with similar barriers across high and low groups, although the accounts of women still currently struggling with barriers were often more detailed and vivid.

Belonging. The category of belonging included properties of *social cohesion, interpersonal responsibility*, and *socialization*. Women's talk was filled with the concept of belonging and the need to be accepted by others. The path to belonging appeared to be through maintaining social cohesion among people they interacted with. Most described valuing socially cohesive behaviours like "cooperating," "helping," and "caring." Women's talk was also filled with a yearning to express themselves and contribute socially. There were lingering concerns, however, that this could lead to rejection from others. Assertiveness, then, was a potentially disruptive force to social cohesion, possibly upsetting others and risking social acceptance:

> I don't want to put pressure on people and making their lives more stressful. I think it's really easy to be pushy, accidentally. You want everything to be in concordance with everyone's wants all working out so there's no conflict or annoyance in the back of people's minds about you. I want everyone to get along, and want people to like me, so I don't want to put stress on them. (Davina)

> I think a lot of it is worrying what people will think of you. You don't want to seem unpleasant or… you know, like you're trying to cause trouble. You just want to go under the radar and not be noticed. So, yeah, I think that's the biggest barrier. (Chaya)

For social cohesion to be possible, interpersonal responsibility was a must. This meant following established social rules, such as listening to and considering others, helping and not

hurting, and making useful contributions that do not "waste people's time." These rules inhibited women from contributing unique aspects and strengths of their identity, as they felt responsible for ensuring interpersonal interactions were acceptable to others. In turn, many women expected interpersonal responsibility from others. They described frustration with unfair reciprocity of socially cohesive behaviours. Others' lack of interpersonal responsibility put women in a position that required either accepting the lack of consideration from others or asserting themselves. This pressure to be assertive was met with resistance from some women, as they believed others were equally responsible to contribute to social cohesion:

> If people aren't doing the right thing, or the thing that I want them to, I often think there's no point in saying something because if they were gonna do the right thing, then they should be doing the right thing. Like I have some colleagues that it's their responsibility to do a certain task, and that task affects my work. But I've already told them what they need to do, so if they're not doing it, I don't want to be bothered to confront them about it because they would be doing it if they wanted to. So, I don't assert myself because sometimes there's no point… I'd be devastated if I wasn't holding up my end of doing what I was supposed to be doing. (Teresa)

> I feel they can push me around because I don't want to stick up for myself. I'd like to change. If I want to get into management, I have to learn how to politely be assertive. Maybe this is a good training ground for me to learn, but I still feel like, "Why do I have to learn this? Why can't we as a society just listen, be polite to each other?" (Vivian)

Women's stories highlighted the role of socialization in learning that, to belong, it was their responsibility to maintain social cohesion. Women reported automatically engaging in conflict avoidant behaviours to not upset others, such as staying quiet, putting the needs of others first, saying yes to requests, not challenging authority, adhering to the feminine gender role, and making themselves less visible—including eschewing leadership positions. This had the effect of women minimizing their own needs to meet a standard of behaviour they were taught to maintain. Not all, but most women explicitly spoke of early socialization experiences that taught them certain behaviours were good, and others were unacceptable and punishable:

> I took ballet as a child and that was quite a gendered experience. The teacher always said, "it's not lady-like to lean on walls or cross your arms or to sit a certain way." We always had to be delicate and elegant and the language was very gendered: "Ladies do this, girls don't do that." All of those qualities they were promoting were kind of like the gentle, very charming and endearing qualities. (Morgana)

> It's weird because in my family, especially women, are [passive]. So, when I'm trying to do something different, I always have in my mind the figures of my mother and grandmother, who are very passive. It's hard to be different than them. (No pseudonym)

> I was in this constant state of not really knowing whether to share my voice with [mom], because she's a very controlling person. If you say something to set her off, then she can just go pretty messed up, like, ballistic. So, it's kind of like, when you're around my mom, you're walking on shards of glass. You have to be very careful. (Jacinda)

Evaluating. The category of evaluating included properties of *self-evaluation* and *other-evaluation*. Across interviews, women engaged in a variety of self-evaluations. These primarily consisted of judgments about their ability to be assertive. Many women described themselves as "shy," "naïve," "introverted," or having "low self-esteem." Some reported bullying, neglect, or rejection from peers in their childhood due to these characteristics. These early experiences left them feeling like they did not belong and excluded from developing social skills. As adults, this meant many women evaluated themselves as interpersonally ineffective. Some evaluated prior attempts as "failures" or went "completely off the rails." Others expressed fear of becoming angry and labelled as "aggressive" if they were to assert themselves in a conflict. Another said, "bad outcomes" would happen because their heightened anxiety while being assertive might be interpreted by others as "negativity, aggression, or a threat." The fear of being wrongly perceived by others appeared to stem from an ideal identity they measured themselves against. Ideals ranged from being "helpful," "easy-going," to "competent." This ideal would be challenged if women's attempts at assertiveness were evaluated by others as "selfish," "forceful," or "dumb":

> I'm scared that if I say something and its wrong, or it sounds dumb, that they're gonna think, "you clearly have no idea what you're talking about." I think that really holds me back from being more assertive. (Hermione)

> I would like to be easy going, very open minded, and I think [not being assertive] helps facilitate that, or at least facilitate people to see me as that kind of person. (Davina)

> I've always said yes to my supervisors, so now I have to be argumentative to [boss]. And, to me, you shouldn't say no to your boss, you shouldn't argue with your boss. (Vivian)

The fear of being negatively evaluated was substantiated in many cases. Women described being evaluated by others across a variety of circumstances. Evaluations were often made in hierarchical environments where the women were in a lower position of power, although this was not always the case. Evaluations included direct character judgments, such as being called "immature" by a boss, to more ambiguous appraisals, such as subtle sexist comments from peers about women's performance in a particular field. Most women felt "shocked" about how to respond to others' evaluations, rarely refuting them for fear of being further rejected, criticized, mocked, or shamed. Negative evaluations left women feeling their contributions were not taken seriously and that they did not belong to the group they were being evaluated by. Still, many of the women expressed a "knowing-feeling-doing gap," where, in spite of overwhelming anxiety, they did not "rationally" expect catastrophic consequences for being assertive. Nonetheless, the potential of negative evaluations stifled women's motivation to be assertive for fear of punishment, such as loss of opportunity or permanent damage to relationships:

> I think a consequence would be in my performance review, [the boss] might say "she's aggressive" or "she can't get along with others." I think that would hurt me. (Vivian)

> I have to continue to work with [colleagues] and I'd be afraid if I did confront them and asserted my *need* from them, they would just be less likely to help in the future. (Teresa)

Costs of belonging. The category of costs of belonging included properties of *self-sacrifice, self-devaluation*, and *disconnection*. Women described sacrificing themselves to avoid negative evaluation and gain belonging. This included compromising their own identity by doing or not doing something they felt was morally right or wrong. Women stayed "quiet" when it

came to their needs, for fear that voicing them might create conflict. Staying quiet was a kind of "secret compromise", as others were unaware of the private relinquishment. Women also talked about feeling "bad" and responsible for others' feelings. This led women to do things that they did not want to do or to deny their own feelings in order to not hurt others. Staying quiet was also often done in the service of managing impressions (i.e., avoiding negative evaluation) and opportunities to contribute were missed as women avoided leadership roles to avert potential for conflict. In tension with managing belonging, women expressed a strong desire to contribute unique aspects of themselves across various situations, and to be recognized for these contributions. The cost of self-sacrifice culminated in emotional struggles, like depression, overwhelm, exhaustion, shame, feeling dehumanized, resentment, anger, and frustration:

> I feel like if I don't say something, don't assert myself, then I may be compromising my values in a sense. Like, if I'm a bystander and I'm not proactive in preventing or stopping something that I think is wrong, then I feel actually quite ashamed of myself. (Morgana)

> I feel if I don't do what they are asking me, they are gonna think I'm lazy or I don't want to contribute to the job. I think, "I should do that" because, if not, they're gonna have a bad impression of me. I used to go to work at eight [am], and sometimes I stayed there for weeks until eight [pm] because I have to finish [work]. Everybody left and I was there. I felt really bad with myself because I was like "I don't have time to do anything else." Then I realized that because my boss saw that I keep saying 'yes,' she kept asking me and not people that will say 'no'. I remember I felt really bad with myself. I thought "this is so unfair to me." But I still couldn't say no. Yeah, it felt bad. (No pseudonym)

> One of my favourite things to do is play piano. It's the thing I do if I'm stressed, playing takes that away. But the thing is I can't always play 'cause there's a lot of the times noise around. And so, sometimes I'd want to ask someone if they can just leave me alone to play or, you know, stop playing that music or stop yelling or whatever. But I didn't. So, instead, I just wouldn't play. And that kind of made me... I just buried that anger. (Chaya)

Self-sacrifice was highly intertwined with self-devaluation. In a cyclical manner, giving up expressing themselves was fueled by doubts about whether they deserved to and vice versa. These doubts manifest in obsessive weighing of the consequences of assertiveness, rehashing previous interactions, and rehearsing future ones. Many women worried about saying something

and not being able to defend it or being proven "wrong." They coped with the lack of confidence in their value by "sandwiching" (i.e., mixing tentative requests or critiques with positive affirmations) or "spitballing" (i.e., using indirect communication strategies to get one's objective met by convincing others it was their own) in order to get opinions and needs across. Several also said they pushed to achieve more in an attempt to enhance their value and counter self-doubt. The cost of valuing others' needs more than their own was the preservation of a sense that they were "not good enough." Not being good enough was also inextricably linked with assertiveness. Although only a few women explicitly mentioned shame, many said they felt they "should" be able to be assertive, implying tacit self-criticism of their difficulties with the behaviour:

> I feel kind of disappointed in myself. Like there is this inner voice that says, "you should have said this." Because, rationally, since I have read [about assertiveness], I know that I'm doing something wrong. So, now if [being unassertive] happens, I feel even worse than before, because I know that I should be doing better. So, there is this voice "oh no, you should have—" it's kind of disappointed. Because I know that I should be doing this and I'm not doing it. (No pseudonym)

> I don't have enough moments where I go "yeah, I did that how I wanted. I said my point of view and defended it." (Hermione)

> I should be able to stick up for myself more and show that I do perform, and I bring value to my place of employment. I think that's somewhere where I really struggle… I imagine in my head trying to stick up for myself, and then the return would be a retort that I can't stick up and can't disprove. So, I'm left feeling stupid and like I lost something. And that, I guess, is scary to me. So, I don't want to start something that I can't—I don't want to say *win*, but I don't know how else to explain it. (Vivian)

Self-sacrifice and -devaluation led to disconnection from others. As women "modulated" their assertiveness by context, who they felt safe to be assertive with varied. Women described disengaging from people they did not trust being assertive around. Not being able to say no, express hurt, or make requests of others led women to feel taken advantage of, devalued, and fueled resentment about being exploited. Disconnection also shrouded the way women coped

with their problems. Many described wanting to solve problems independently to avoid potential for vulnerability and conflict. These coping actions resulted in social isolation for some women. They criticized themselves for not being able to be assertive in the face of devaluation from others, leaving them discouraged about participating in certain social realms:

> I don't know if it's the right word and it sounds really bad to say it, but I almost hate them because of [being devalued at work]. Hate sounds really strong, but just this feeling that "I don't want to work with you, I don't want to be a part of the team, I don't want to do this." It's really discouraging if I'm not taken seriously and if I'm not listened to then what's the point?... It definitely influences the way I feel about myself, because I feel like I am capable of adding more value to the company. I am capable of achieving more. And I feel like "what am I doing here?" I should quit or go somewhere else. (Vivian)

While these experiences might seem bleak, many of the women who reported currently struggling with assertiveness had hope for their future. Several were actively pursuing assertiveness and recognizing change in themselves. Others did not see a lack of assertiveness as a problem and managed their lives in a way they felt was effective for them, which can be perceived as a type of assertive behaviour in itself (Malarchick, 1976).

From the data, it can be hypothesized that women's main concerns centred on being socially accepted. They attempted to live up to socially normative ideals and avoid evaluations that would threaten belonging. This manifested as giving up needs, not advocating for their value, and failing to seek help when needed. Women's relinquishment of self-expression led to feelings of devaluation, resulting in anger, shame, and disconnection from others. It was when these costs of belonging began to outweigh the benefits that women often began to change.

Resolving Main Concerns Related to Assertiveness

Women indicated a variety of processes in resolving concerns related to assertiveness, which are broadly grouped into four main categories, *pursuing change, finding belonging, challenging evaluations,* and *developing an assertive identity*. These categories show how

women developed assertiveness through negotiating tensions between wanting to belong and wanting to express their personal identity. Data for these categories were primarily drawn from interviews with the five women who reported being highly assertive, although many of the women still struggling with assertiveness were dabbling in some of the behaviours.

Pursuing change. The category of pursuing change included properties of *making a decision, personal responsibility,* and *balance.* Most women described a "pivotal moment" where they realized they had to change their current circumstance because it was unsatisfactory. Sometimes this influencing moment was brought on by an emotional struggle around the costs of being unassertive. Other times the decision to change was influenced by their pursuit of careers that required assertiveness. Whatever the trigger, it often resulted in a firm decision to develop a more assertive identity:

> I can think of the pivotal moment, because all these problems would deeply affect me, but I would keep them hidden... And there was one day where I was actually crying, I couldn't handle it. I went home and just burst into tears. It was such a weird moment, because usually I'm not very emotional but I was like, "I have to do something about this, this is not acceptable." That's when I made the decision that I would no longer allow people to act in those ways. (Jacinda)

> That year gave me a lot of time to be like, "going forward, do I want to keep putting myself in this position of constant exhaustion 'cause I can't say no to all these opportunities and helping all these people?" And I was like, "no, I don't want that." That's when I started being like, "I'm gonna say no to one thing a week, just build that up. Then I'm gonna give my opinion on something without holding back every once in a while." You know, make sure I do that, so I don't keep going down the same path. (Oof)

> I wouldn't even say in my first year I was super assertive with people, but it opened up doors where I had to [describes job promotions with increasing responsibility and social interaction]. And in those situations, I felt like I had to step up. I don't try to step up my assertiveness unless I'm in a position of—I don't want to say power—but yeah, in more of an authority position where I have more responsibility than the typical person. (Jane)

A decision to change was followed by taking personal responsibility. Women began actively pursuing assertiveness. They participated in personal development activities, interacted

socially, and took on leadership roles. This required a willingness to be uncomfortable while they "practiced" assertiveness. Personal responsibility also meant taking ownership of emotional experiences. Women described allowing themselves to feel when something was not right and taking action to resolve those feelings, such as expressing hurt to others, taking time to process experiences, or addressing potential conflict early. Responsibility also meant seeking help from others. Women sought advice from supportive others when problems could not be processed alone and solicited feedback about how others were receiving their assertiveness. They also described being more proactive in meeting their needs and actively setting boundaries. This required women to start redefining assertiveness, making it compatible with their desire to be interpersonally responsible. The interdependence between personal and interpersonal responsibility became visible as women began to frame self-care as a vital part of caring for others:

> I became more ok with being with myself and being alone and handling my affairs, and just being like, "I need to deal with this in the moment." And I have to deal with myself before I can lend a hand and deal with anyone else's situation. (Oof)

> If I don't like something and it affects me, then I'll say. Also, being able to say no… Like you realize that you literally can't do everything, so you have to put those limits and be able to say, "I'm sorry I can't do that right now" ... I didn't separate the fact that like not *every* tiny detail is your responsibility towards everyone. It's not gonna end the world if you don't knit a scarf for someone, right. You have to pick where your priorities are at. Sometimes you have to prioritize yourself. Even though that sounds really selfish, if you don't, then you'll spread yourself thin and there's no more of you left to give. (Chaya)

Pursuing change also came with some difficulty. During an awkward transitional period, women worked to find balance between past and new behaviour. Many expressed ambivalence about being more assertive, feeling like they knew it was the right thing to do but that it was uncomfortable to let go of old patterns of behaviour. Some expressed "overcorrecting," feeling they were becoming more aggressive than assertiveness. Others described losing confidence or

reverting to old behaviours in challenging situations. While many of the women identified with being more assertive, the desire to belong and care about social cohesion was still a factor in how they wanted to conduct themselves. For most, pursuing assertiveness was a continual "balancing act" to find a healthy middle ground between passivity and aggression, to be firm yet caring:

> I think the question could almost be flipped, "how do I take hold of my assertiveness instead of letting it go too far?" It's not so much about being able to say things. I think I've gotten past the point of feeling weird about that. It's more about holding my tongue and realizing when it's maybe not so smart to say that. (Chaya)

> My development of assertiveness has come with certain weaknesses that I'm becoming aware of. I can at times be too blunt and not considerate enough of other people's feelings. I'm trying to work on that as well, and I think that's part of my assertiveness. For example, before if someone texted me something that I thought was inappropriate, like a sexist comment or something, I would brush it off. But now if someone does that then I'm likely to react in a very blunt manner. There have been situations where I've hurt other people's feelings and I don't acknowledge that. I don't clue in that they would be feeling bad about that. That's something I need to work on. (Jacinda)

> I had [a conflict] this winter that was horrible. I didn't want to say anything, but this person's saying all these things that are really *offensive* about my boss and [workplace] and I took it really personally. So, I was just trying to put them in their place like, "you shouldn't be saying that." Then they—in front of a *whole* group of people—yelled at me and said I was a fucking cunt and walked away. I haven't had an experience like that before and it really set me back, where I was like, "I don't like being this way." I felt like it may have been partly my fault, maybe I shouldn't have fought it. But at the same time, it was something I was very passionate about and trying to stick up for people and the whole community that I care about and [the other person] was very out of line. (Jane)

Finding belonging. The category of finding belonging included properties of *social support* and *social exits*. Getting social support from likeminded others helped women be more assertive. This included being recognized and valued by people in positions of authority that encouraged the women's personal development. Some women had friends or family that supported their assertiveness. Others came across sources of support when they changed their context or groups they were trying to belong to, such as changing jobs or joining school

organizations that were more supportive of their self-expression. Feeling supported by others often led women to feel safe being more assertive generally:

> I have four or five professors I'm still close with and they were incredibly inspiring. They took me very seriously, as a person, and as an academic. I think that really helped me to be more assertive, to realize that my opinions are valid and everything. (Jacinda)

> Assertiveness is something I need to *practice* to feel more comfortable with. And a good place to practice at is with people who aren't going to *lash* out at you for doing so. I'm lucky that my friends don't lash out at me. But they also tell me if I said something upsetting to them, if I overstepped my boundaries. And that feedback is super helpful. I've also recognized that some people may seem upset, but they won't tell you. So, I have to teach myself to ask people if they're upset or if they're feeling ok. Otherwise, I'm just going to be thinking "oh man, I said something wrong and I shouldn't have said this" but that may not be the case, right. A lot of it is just self-doubt. Doubt that I did something wrong, doubt that my ideas hurt them. And I won't really know for sure unless they tell me. (Morgana)

> When I was younger, I was bullied a lot, so I think that had a big thing to do with it. As I got older, I didn't want to continue being treated that way. I think that's what started it all. Then it wasn't until probably six years ago I decided to go [forestry job] that I *really* opened up and changed. Because you're in this situation where you're in a bush camp with all these very strong people, strong personalities. And it brought me out of my shell, just having people like *compliment* me and hug me and like support me all the time. It didn't matter how shitty of a day I had, it was just, "you're doing a good job" and all this stuff and it just really helped me open up. Because yeah, I definitely don't think I was as assertive until like a handful of years ago. (Jane)

Finding belonging in new groups often facilitated exiting social groups that did not support their assertiveness. As women began seeking the company of pro-assertive others and connecting with people that modelled assertiveness in an effective way, they began to create distance from unsupportive peers or family members. This distance was sometimes self-chosen and was sometimes a product of women's assertiveness development. For example, many described losing friends as they began setting more boundaries:

> It was like a filtration process because I had a lot of friends who were not constructive to my life and I just didn't know how to say no to them. I was way too submissive to have clear boundaries with those people… Then I relied really heavily on my relationships with the grad students and a bunch of older women in the department… And that helped me build more connections with other students who were women. And a graduate student

> and I basically started meeting about the issues and there was kind of a small group of us and we just talked about it and that helped me with my assertiveness and with my feminist consciousness because I realized that there was no reason to doubt myself. Like, all of my views were legitimate, and they were shared by other people. (Jacinda)

> I lost some friends. People who weren't ok with me not giving in to them all the time. Which, I mean, it sucked at first, but now I'm like, that's life... Another realization in becoming more assertive was if me saying no to something that you're asking of me changes the nature of our relationship, that's not really a relationship I want to have. I should be comfortable enough to say no to you, and you should be comfortable enough to request this of me. But you should also be ok with me saying no and vice versa. If you aren't and your immediate thought is, "she's not a good person," like I don't really want that relationship. It's also gotten easier because I've surrounded myself with people who've made it easier to be more assertive. (Oof)

Challenging evaluations. The category of challenging evaluations had properties of *gaining awareness, attention to disconfirming evidence,* and *self-talk*. Women began to challenge self- and other-evaluations through gaining awareness and reflecting on how these evaluations affected them. For some, this included a feminist awareness of social expectations for women to be "nice" and punishment for being assertive. For others, this was challenging self-evaluations of being uncaring if they said no to requests or expressed differences in perspective. As women gained awareness of barriers to assertiveness and began to factor in more positive assessments of themselves, they became less concerned with prospects of being negatively evaluated by others:

> From a young age I didn't view the most powerful people in society as women with very assertive or strong voices. It was more the men. I also didn't have a lot of female role models when I was young, so I think that really interfered with—like, my ideal self when I was young was not an assertive woman. I developed more of a feminist consciousness where I realized that the way I was socialized doesn't have to be correct. (Jacinda)

> I realized my biggest area was that I didn't set limits for myself and allow myself time to just be with myself and be alone. No matter what anyone asks of me I say yes, so, I'm like, "ok, let me try to say no." And at first, I was like, "this is so mean, I'm such a mean person, how could I say no?" But the more I did it, the more I was like, "it doesn't have to be a negative thing." (Oof)

> A big part of it isn't just about being able to say [no]. It's about not feeling shame with saying it. I think that's a really big part of assertiveness. People think that, "oh, why can't

> you just say this." But it's a mental shift, it's not just in your actions. It's not beating yourself up over things like giving your opinion on something. (Chaya)

Attending to disconfirming evidence was another way to challenge self- and other-evaluations. Although women experienced consequences from being assertive, such as losing friends or being negatively evaluated by others, many also experienced successes. Women challenged perceptions of themselves as chronically ineffective when they were assertive with positive results. Although they did not always achieve what they set out to, the catastrophic consequences they often feared did not happen. They began thinking of efficacy in terms of trying rather than outcomes. Fear of evaluation was also challenged when the women saw other women model assertiveness and not get socially ostracized for it:

> There was so much emotional attachment to that, "oh no, something bad's going to happen" feeling. It's interesting, though, I think what kind of started to shift this perspective is when I saw other people be assertive and see that they often didn't meet those consequences. In fact, a lot of times they got what they want. (Morgana)

> Most people wouldn't get mad at me, they'd be like "oh, I understand." They were asking on a limb and I was like, "I can't do this this time, but maybe next time." And I guess with my past of constantly saying yes, they were like, "oh, she's saying no, she really can't do this." (Oof)

Women used their awareness and experiences with disconfirming evidence to reassure themselves they could be assertive. Continuing to practice and exposure to uncomfortable situations led women to realize they could survive such situations, even ones that did not go well. They used self-talk to remind themselves of this fact when faced with new situations and to reduce taking others' evaluations personally, helping them maintain self-confidence. Women also used self-talk to remind themselves of how they had changed, to instill hope, cultivate belief in their own ability to be assertive, and their reasons for pursuing assertiveness and the consequences of unassertiveness. When women were unable to be assertive or being assertive did not work out, they used compassionate self-talk to not blame themselves and resolved to try

again later. In this way, they explicitly acknowledged their own value and built trust in themselves by kindly talking themselves through assertive action:

> Just having accomplished things before and nothing going horribly wrong. The whole feeling of self-efficacy like, "I've done this and this before, so, like I can do this." (Mara)

> I think just reminding myself why I've chosen to allow myself to become more assertive. Just constantly reminding myself, "this is what you wanted, and this is why." And talking to people about it and getting second opinions, and people reassuring me, "no, don't go back, you left this for a good reason, don't go back to that," has made it easier. (Oof)

> I go back to my desk and think "I sort of did the same thing that I usually do," but I've started going easier on myself. I say, "that's ok. I'll just try again tomorrow." (Hermione)

Developing an assertive identity. The category of developing an assertive identity included three properties, *developmental aspirations*, *self-knowledge*, and *deservingness*. Some women described assertiveness developing naturally as they grew into an adult identity and began having aspirations for their future. The transition from adolescent to adult allowed some to feel they had more choices and began viewing themselves as responsible for their own life. Career prospects in young adulthood also prompted many women to improve assertiveness. Pursuing the purpose they envisioned for their life required development of the type of assertive identity associated with their chosen career:

> Transitioning into university, being an adult, and not depending on my parents so much I had to be like, "there's no one here to tell me what to do, so I don't really have to listen to anyone " but I had never experienced being able to be like, "this is what *I* want." (Oof)

> Because I've applied to [legal degree], I would like to really develop my people skills and my ability to be assertive. One way that I want to build more assertiveness is by becoming more confident, because my behaviour can be assertive right now, it can be very assertive, but I don't necessarily feel like… inside, I don't necessarily feel comfortable or confident with the idea. Whereas I think with a lot of [professionals] have developed more confidence about that over the years. (Jacinda)

> I'm improving, as in, I'm getting more assertive. And it's something I've been actively trying to work on. There's actually a bit of a story behind that. Last year I applied for [occupation]. There's a lot of different steps to go through, and after you do all these things, the final step is the psychological assessment. I got through all the other steps and

> I did the psych assessment, and that's when they said "sorry, we're going to have to decline your application." The feedback I got was I need to work on my assertiveness… I'm like "oh, well this actively prevented me from getting a career." One that I pursued quite *vigorously*. So, I've been trying to cultivate assertiveness because I'm reapplying this year and I want to get the job. But I think it would also be great just to be a little more assertive. (Morgana)

Self-knowledge helped women develop an assertive identity by knowing what mattered to them and why. Many described how knowing and being committed to their values helped them behave in alignment with those values, often requiring assertiveness to do so. Where there was doubt before, clear values gave women certainty about what they wanted or thought about a situation. This helped women overcome doubt about making the wrong choice or saying the wrong thing because their actions were based on what mattered to them. Self-knowledge about emotion was also important. Paying attention to feelings alerted women to what mattered to them and helped them make choices about how to take action on those feelings. When women knew who they were, what they wanted, and how they felt about a situation, they were better able to respond in the moment and communicate directly and purposefully:

> Going back to self-confidence, I think a large part of that comes from having a solid identity. Having that solid, "this is who I am," it *grounds* me. I don't know if that has a direct relationship with assertiveness, but—I don't know how to describe it—I just feel like it *does*. Like knowing who you are goes hand in hand with being able to say what you think. Because if you feel comfortable with yourself, you feel comfortable with what you want to say without feeling like other people might look down on you for it. (Chaya)

> I never used to allow myself to experience emotions in their fullness. I think part of that was that I was always so busy that it was like, "I don't really have time to process and deal with this. I have to move onto the next thing. It's fine." It was not fine. Yeah, so I got really bad at knowing how to properly deal with my emotions and like allow myself to just sit there and be like, "ok, this is how you are feeling, you're allowed to feel like this. Like, you can't just brush this off." (Oof)

Women also described developing an identity that was deserving of being assertive. Deservingness was established through a variety of means and unique to each woman. Several justified their deservingness through an improvement in their social status and professional roles.

Knowing they had a "duty" to be assertive made it easier. One woman had a specific purpose to advocate for social justice, which justified being assertive for the respect of others and herself. Another used teaching from her religious tradition to justify being free to ask questions, express herself, and say no to overextending herself. Another used validation from supportive media that promoted self-worth and being congruent with values to feel she deserved to be assertive. Each of these justifications provided a type of purpose and permission for the women to be assertive:

> The role that, "I'm a professional, I have to do certain things," that really made me more proactive about dealing with conflict situations. (Mara)

> I saw in [name of religious text] the premise of that book is just like debates among [religious leaders]. It's always been an inherent part of it, and that's why our traditions are always growing. Not that you have to like *change* everything, it's just that it's, you know, becoming better. I guess seeing that like, "oh, wow, I can have a voice." (Chaya)

> Other resources would be I listen to a lot of podcasts and they always have messages about being yourself and how to be okay with yourself… But a big influence was that I started second guessing myself about how I wanted to keep going forward. Like, if I ever wanted to say no to something but then I was like, "oh, maybe I'll just say yes" then I'd be like "no, no, no, no, no." Then I'd just listen to a podcast and be like "k, just listen to what they just said and just apply it," right. It was mostly just to counteract the doubt that I was having about wanting to be more assertive and wanting to be more ok with myself and my decision. (Oof)

At the theoretical level, women's resolving of their main concerns appeared to be a process of identity development. Each category contributed to this development. A pivotal moment served as a starting point for pursuing an assertive identity, followed by taking action, finding support, and overcoming obstacles to that pursuit. These factors helped women develop a sense of personal power and control in their own lives, but also a sense of belonging, in that assertiveness was a way to contribute and be part of the larger social realm.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary and Discussion of Findings

Findings from this grounded theory provide an empirical foundation for a process model of women's negotiation of an assertive identity. Assertive identity negotiation is complex, involving continual reflection and commitment to becoming assertive while balancing concerns about belonging and interpersonal consideration. Women's main concerns centred on belonging, being evaluated by others as socially acceptable, and the costs of managing evaluations in order to belong. Women resolved these concerns through making a decision to become more assertive, taking responsibility to pursue this commitment, finding likeminded supports, challenging limiting self- and other-evaluations, and finding a purpose in the social world that required developing an assertive identity. Through this process of negotiating intra and interpersonal factors, women were able to move from a view that an assertive identity is one that *does not* belong to a view that an assertive identity *can* belong. This allowed women to become more assertive, while still seeing themselves as deserving of belonging.

The data fits with a variety of empirically supported research and theory. The multidimensional aspect of assertiveness was apparent through women's discussions of being able to be assertive in some contexts, but not necessarily others (Arrindell & Van der Ende, 1985). Women's descriptions of assertiveness also closely align with definitions put forward by a range of authors (Alberti & Emmons, 2017; Bishop, 2010; Jakubowski-Spector, 1973; Pfafman, 2017; Smith, 1989). Deepening these descriptions, however, was the notion that assertiveness is the act of being part of the social world. Women's desire for their personal expressions to be valued and taken seriously was distinctive in that it showed how women were motivated to participate socially, to communicate, to be heard.

Main concerns. The main concerns that hindered women from being assertive were congruent with theories of group behaviour. Belongingness theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowlby, 1988; Hogg, 2001; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Tajfel, 1981), particularly, fits with the urgency women appeared to experience in relation to their need for social approval. Baumeister and Leary (1995) compiled a large body of research on belongingness, where humans have a fundamental need to be accepted as a member of a social group. This need motivates most human activity at some level, including the use of power to create groups and to be recognized as valuable to the group, and the use of cooperation to maintain group harmony. For women, cultural expectations are to be cooperative more than powerful, which includes interpersonal responsibility, care, and accommodation (Connor & Fiske, 2017). While these behaviours occur naturally in all humans to some extent, women who veer from them often experience social fallout (Williams & Tiedens, 2016). Results appeared to echo this prior theory, where prerequisites to belonging required women to conform to gender roles and bear the largest share of responsibility to maintain social cohesion. This compulsory responsibility led women to believe they must act in ways that avoided any potential of upsetting others, creating barriers to asserting their needs and actively contributing their ideas and talents.

Women's concerns around evaluation by others and themselves were highly interrelated with the need to belong. Cultural norms dictate whether a social identity is one that belongs and prescribe acceptable behaviour associated with that identity (Tajfel, 1981). As norm violations are often met with overt or covert social rejection, people develop and internalize cognitive-affective schemas about the norms and ideals of particular social identities in order to conform to the group (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Norms around gender mean women are more likely to develop an identity around and evaluate themselves in terms of whether they are warm,

nurturing, and nice (Connor & Fisk, 2009). From an interpersonal perspective, these norms can be conceptualized as the expectation for women to have diffuse boundaries, which manifest as perpetual emotional availability and putting the needs of others before their own (Minuchin, 1974). The repercussions of diffuse boundaries were seen in women's articulations of the costs of belonging, like self-sacrifice and placing less value on themselves than others.

Because women are expected to be warm and nice, when they assert power by requesting needs and contributing ideas, they are challenging the norm that they must accommodate and care for others. This fits with theories of stereotypes, like Stereotype Content Model, which posits that warm and assertive are not seen as compatible characteristics for women, as women's assertiveness is viewed as cold or aggressive (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2018). As people are socialized from an early age to internalize stereotypes, being assertive not only elicits negative evaluations and backlash from others (Brescoll et al., 2018; Moss-Racusin & Rudman, 2010; Rudman & Phelan, 2008; Williams & Tiedens, 2016), it can also be negatively evaluated by the self (Pfafman & McEwan, 2014). This was seen in the way the women evaluated themselves as being interpersonally ineffective, aggressive, or uncaring if they were assertive. Hypothetically, then, women's self-evaluations and others' evaluations were steeped in gender stereotypes that to be interpersonally effective, they must be accommodating and warm, which is antithetical to assertive (Connor & Fiske, 2009; White & Gardner, 2009). These evaluations had repercussions for their mental health.

Many strategies the women used to achieve or maintain belonging were costly. In trying to avoid negative evaluation, a cycle of powerlessness and disengagement was perpetuated. The external constraints women felt on their self-expression put limits on their autonomy, which has been associated with the development of mental health problems (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010;

Deci & Ryan, 2012; Ryan et al., 2015). Even though women worked hard to bolster their own value and avoid devaluation by others, they could not counter self-doubt and negative evaluations that threatened their sense of belonging. This sense of social exclusion, whether self or other inflicted, can impair people's sense of meaningful existence and purpose (Stillman et al., 2009a). This fits with theories about shame, where shame around negative social evaluation leads to unhealthy coping like self-criticism, anger, and social isolation (Brown, 2006; Ferguson, Eyre, & Ashbaker, 2000; Van Vliet, 2008). Women also expressed shame for both asserting themselves and not asserting themselves. This is akin to what feminist psychotherapist, Heriot (1983), calls a double bind, or no-win situation, that can lead to feelings of frustration, low self-efficacy, anxiety, hopelessness, isolation, depression, and so on. It is also akin to the dynamic linking women's oppression to depression, as a lack of power causes women to suppress aspects of identity in order to belong, which can be psychologically costly (Neitzke, 2016).

Overall, women's main concerns in this study were most congruent with belongingness theory and feminist perspectives on stereotypes and women's social development. From these perspectives, people have a need to belong and this belonging is dictated by whether people conform to their role and the social norms of the group. Women are socialized to develop warm and accommodating behaviours that match their socially constructed, stereotypical role. A role that has historically been outside the realm of social influence. As such, society generally views a socially assertive woman as an identity that does not belong (Amanatullah & Morris, 2010; Amanatullah & Tinsley, 2013; Brescoll et al., 2018; Crawford, 1988; Delamater & McNamara, 1986; Williams & Tiedens, 2016). Internalizing this message, women are fearful of asserting themselves, viewing it as disrupting the social order, and a threat to their belonging status. Conceptualizing women's assertiveness development from a belongingness and feminist lens

adds a unique contribution to assertiveness theory. Although prior assertiveness theory is steeped in developmental perspectives, this lens has often focused on individual pathology (e.g., the inhibited, shy, or developmentally maladjusted person; Arrindell, Sanavio, & Sica, 2002; Lazarus, 1973; Salter, 1950; Wolpe, 1961; Vagos & Pereiera, 2018). By highlighting the importance of belonging and the social constraints women must negotiate, this study expands assertiveness theory by positioning these developmental processes as occurring within a social and historical context. Namely, one where assertiveness is not a welcome behaviour from women.

Resolving main concerns. The processes women employed to resolve main concerns around assertiveness were consistent with various theories of change, like the Transtheoretical Model of Change and the Empowerment Model (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982). Women's experience of the costs, whether physical or emotional, often led them to a pivotal moment where they made a firm decision to change. This relationship between the categories of costs of belonging and pursuing change aligns with the process of weighing pros and cons in models of change (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982). In developing these models, Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy was heavily drawn upon, where a belief in one's ability to change and choice to do so involves taking inherent responsibility for that choice. Women did this by taking responsibility for their own well-being in order to align their identity with who they wanted to be to achieve their career and life pursuits. With alternatives courses of action surrendered, women in the study appeared to gain a concrete direction, leading to a greater sense of personal power to pursue that direction.

Women did, however, experience an awkward transitional period, sometimes struggling to balance assertiveness in ways that were mutually respectful of others. This phenomenon of

overcorrecting, where people become overly assertive, has been noted by authors who facilitate assertiveness interventions (Jakubowski-Spector, 1971; Rosenberg, 2002; Wolfe & Fodor, 1975). Although, women's concerns with being overly assertive might also be explained by the line crossing illusion, where people perceive themselves as too assertive when, objectively, their assertiveness might be appraised as appropriate (Ames & Wazlawek, 2014). Nonetheless, in this study, the continual reflection on how to balance their assertiveness seemed to help women integrate assertive behaviour as an implicit practice of who they were.

Changing their group of identification also seemed integral to women's assertiveness development. Women's descriptions of exiting old social groups and entering new ones suggests they found a collective identity they could belong to. Collective identities play a significant role in reinforcing one's own identity (Hogg, 2001). Involving themselves in communities that endorsed assertiveness (e.g., friend, family, partner, podcasts) seemed to give women the belonging security they needed to fully endorse the behaviour.

Various theories detail the importance of supportive relationships in the process of change. Concepts like secure-base and unconditional positive regard hypothesize that when a person feels accepted and grounded in the safety of their interpersonal relationships they internalize this support. Supported people become more accepting of themselves, leading to greater self-confidence and an ability to persist in personal goals and development (Bowlby, 1988; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982; Rogers, 1958). Baumeister and Leary (1995) also posit that people need stable, affectively positive relationships for optimal development. Simple social interaction is insufficient. People can be part of social groups, but when a bond of caring is absent, it can lead to belonging uncertainty, where a person doubts the quality of the bond (Walton & Cohen, 2007). In contrast, being actively cared about, included,

and valued gives people a sense of purpose (Stillman et al., 2009b; Walton, Cohen, Cwir, & Spencer, 2012), which can instill a sense of agency (Cast & Burke, 2002). It is plausible, then, that finding supportive relationships and exiting unsupportive ones gave women a less conditional source of social support. This meant women could depend on a stable sense of belonging from supports, reducing the fear of being wholesale rejected for assertiveness.

Challenging personal and social evaluations was also consistent with theories of change. Consciousness raising, an integral process of change and a foundational concept in feminist psychotherapies (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982), fits with the property of gaining awareness in this study. Women began to cognitively integrate information about assertiveness and the environmental constraints that worked to hinder them. Women also began challenging black and white thinking about assertiveness, such as assertiveness is not compatible with warmth (Connor & Fiske, 2007) and redefining assertiveness as compatible with care for others. This likely helped women maintain self-confidence in the face of negative evaluations from others. Women also seemed to enhance self-efficacy by shifting their mindset to value practicing over outcome. This is consistent with research that shows focusing on the process rather than the outcome of interpersonal interactions can improve the quality of those interactions (Marijn Poortvliet, Janssen, Van Yperen, & Van de Vliert, 2007), which would, in turn, improve feelings of self-efficacy. Women's use of supportive and compassionate self-talk to challenge evaluations is also consistent with Vagos and Pereira's (2018) cognitive model. In this model, self-compassion and valuing oneself despite imperfections is linked with increased self-worth and assertive behaviour.

Developing assertiveness also became easier with perceived status change, such as becoming an adult or pursuing careers associated with assertiveness. This is consistent with

research demonstrating that actual and perceived status is positively related to assertiveness (Gilbert & Allan, 1994; Pfafman & McEwan, 2014; Twenge, 2001). Various other factors also played a role in developing an assertive identity. Women described an emotional and cognitive revaluation of who they were and what was important to them. As values are thought to be the basis of personal identity (Hitlin, 2003), revaluation of values can be an important factor in change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982). It is likely that perceiving assertiveness as a way to align behaviour with values was important to assuage women's self-doubt and endorse the merit of an assertive identity. It is possible self-doubt was further reduced through the self-verification processes women used to justify changes in assertiveness. By seeking assertiveness-verifying perspectives, women were able to feel deserving of behaviour change, even in the face of obstacles. A final process that helped women was attending to their emotional health, such as slowing down and processing emotions in order to take more purposeful action versus reactive responding. This is consistent with research demonstrating that mindfulness and emotion-regulation are associated with assertive behaviour (Dekeyser, Raes, Leijssen, Leysen, & Dewulf, 2008; Filippello et al., 2014; Vagos & Pereira, 2018; Zerubavel & Messman-Moore, 2013).

Overall, women's accounts of resolving concerns about assertiveness fit with mechanisms outlined in models of change and research on other assertiveness-enhancing strategies. As with most change models, it is likely no single process was responsible for the entire effect of change and that they occurred simultaneously, in a complex multidirectional process. The variety of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural strategies women used to develop assertiveness also indicates the importance of a holistic working model for informing assertiveness interventions. Furthering the holistic focus, a unique aspect of the current theory is the framing of assertiveness development from an identity perspective. While models of change

can specify processes to target in assertiveness development, it is worth considering the overarching process at play in women's negotiation of an assertive identity within their social context. As such, the following discussion positions the current grounded theory of assertive identity negotiation within previously established theories of identity.

Positioning Assertive Identity Negotiation in the Identity Literature

Prior assertiveness theory often focuses on cognitive, emotional, and behavioural processes in developing assertiveness (Speed et al., 2018; Vagos & Pereira, 2018). The present theory expands this focus by highlighting the significance of negotiations between identity and belonging as a developmental process in becoming assertive. As such, assertive identity negotiation is best supported by psychological identity theories that focus on the tension between the self and the social. Guisinger and Blatt (1994) conceptualized this tension as a fundamental dialectic between self-definition and relatedness. Here, development of an integrated identity depends on interpersonal relationships, and in a dialectical progression, development of mature interpersonal relationships depends on an increasingly integrated identity. Successfully negotiating this dialectical tension results in the optimal development of the person. The person's sense of relatedness is characterized by intimacy and mutuality, and individual expression is also more creative and committed to values and life purpose (Blatt & Zuroff, 1992).

This process is corroborated by feminist theories of empowerment, where motivation, freedom, and capacity to act purposefully are established through mutually empowering relationships (Rubenstein & Lawler, 1990). Self-in-relation and empowerment theory, for example, emphasize the importance of the social context in identity development. In these theories, the self cannot be separated from the social, which influences how people think about themselves and behave. This is consistent with the present theory. Without supportive

relationship, women doubted assertiveness and belonging could be compatible. In contrast, supportive relationships helped women develop an assertive identity as one that could belong in the social context. In a dialectical fashion, assertiveness was redefined as integral to achieving social goals, with these contributions giving women a sense of deserving to belong. This conceptualization breaks down the dichotomy between identity and belonging, in what Miller (2012) calls the difference between "agency and community" and "agency *in* community."

The category of evaluating is important in highlighting that the context where identity develops matters. Historical, cultural, and political factors play a role in what identities are acceptable across time and place (Galliher, McLean, & Syed, 2017). In identity negotiation theory, various factors affect individual actors involved in processes of personal and group identity negotiation (Swann, Johnson, & Bosson, 2009). Actors may agree or disagree with the identity a person chooses to express, which has implications for that person. If an interactional partner agrees with the identity presented, the person doing the presenting receives self-verification for who they think they are and what their role is. If the identity presented is disagreed with by an interactional partner and cannot be reconciled, then a person might behave in ways to align with the interactional partner's perception of them to maintain harmony. As previously highlighted, women are expected to inhabit identities that conform to gender norms (Connor & Fiske, 2018). These expectations have consequences for their identity negotiation, often hindering women's ability to negotiate a powerful or assertive identity. Women in this study seemed to overcome this by relying on evaluations from those who viewed assertiveness positively. Belonging to a collective identity that valued assertiveness seemed to help women maintain a sense of self-worth, even when others did not agree with their presented identity.

Gender norms also have implications for negotiating identity when women are prescribed to protect the relationship first. This means if an interactional partner disagrees with a woman's presented identity, the woman is often expected to downplay themselves to preserve the relationship. In order to exist in the professional realm, women have been found to exert tremendous energy strategizing ways to appear warm and friendly while attempting to get their point across (Pfafman & McEwan, 2014). Indeed, assertiveness researchers recommend a host of strategies to make women's assertiveness more palatable in the social realm. This includes adhering to gender norms, signaling the relationship is of primary concern, framing assertiveness as on behalf of others instead the self, and continually monitoring the situation for cues about how much is "too much" or "not enough" assertiveness (Ames et al., 2017). While there is value in encouraging balanced and respectful behaviour, the continuous monitoring and wrestling with what constitutes the *perfect* amount of assertiveness in a given context requires a great deal of emotional labour (Lease, 2017; Pfafman & McEwan, 2014), which is linked to exhaustion and depersonalization (Andela, Truchot, & Borteyrou, 2015). While women in this study did not discuss this kind of monitoring in detail, their struggle to balance assertiveness with a perceived over-assertiveness suggests they experienced pressure to find a perfect level of behaviour. This was also apparent in the strong orientation women who struggled with assertiveness had toward maintaining social cohesion.

As individual women cannot force sweeping structural changes to the social context, Pfafman and McEwan (2014) note that it is important to recognize a lack of assertiveness not as a deficiency, but as a strategic choice to maintain belonging. It is crucial to also note, however, the nuanced difference between empowerment that is relationally oriented (i.e., self-in-relation theory) and reinforcing strategic use of gender norms as a form of empowerment. Prescribing

women to strategically employ gender norms that make women's assertiveness more palatable, unfortunately, maintains the status quo that assertiveness in women is unacceptable. It is true, women currently make strategic choices in negotiating assertiveness. The complacency of society, however, to place primary responsibility on women for maintaining relationships can reinforce beliefs that women are to blame when they are negatively evaluated for assertive behaviour (Kim, Fitzsimons, & Kay, 2018). This is especially unfortunate, given that evaluations are, unavoidably, subjective attitudes—attitudes likely influenced by a broader culture that finds warmth and assertiveness to be incompatible in women (Connor & Fiske, 2018).

This dynamic where women's autonomy needs are placed in conflict with relatedness needs often results in women caring for others more than themselves (Rubenstein & Lawler, 1990). Yet, as demonstrated in this study, the sacrifice of relationship is not necessary for assertive identity development. Women were able to redefine identity needs as interdependent with their relational context. They came to view self-care as integral to having caring relationships with others, social supports provided a sense of belonging, challenging evaluations led to recognition that prerequisites to belonging were unrealistic, and their desire to meaningfully contribute required identification with assertiveness. This formulation of assertiveness gave women a sense of purpose and helped them cope with negative evaluations as they developed identities that aligned with their values. They were able to discursively formulate a way for both autonomy and relatedness needs to coexist in a continual balance with each other.

This theory adds nuance to early identity formulation theories. For example, in Erikson's (1994) theory of psychosocial development, he describes passivity and avoidance as a process of identity confusion, where people fail to commit to goals, values, and establish future life directions. Many women in the low assertiveness group, however, expressed having strong goals,

values, and life plans. What they seemed not to have, however, was a belief system linking those goals, values, and life plans with the need for an assertiveness identity. Women in the high assertive group appeared to have woven assertiveness as a necessary component into each of these domains. This is similar to assertions from feminist authors, Wolfe and Fodor (1975) and Jakubowski-Spector (1973), who indicate women must develop a belief system that will support and justify assertive behaviour.

In revisiting grounded theory quality criteria (Glaser, 1998), drawing on classical identity theories gives the current theory of assertive identity development an enduring quality that transcends people, place, and time. It is imaginable that framing assertiveness as a dialectic between the self and the social is applicable across various demographics, locations, and age groups. Noting how assertiveness development occurs on a continuum allows the theory to work, by accounting for variations in women's experiences developing assertiveness. With identity taking a central role in various scholarly and political conversations (e.g., third wave feminism), the theory also has relevance to the current social context. Finally, the theory is modifiable, in that there is room to change and continue expanding the theory.

Counselling Implications

There are several counselling practice implications of this study. As counselling psychologists strive to incorporate clients' social context (Bedi et al., 2011), this model of women's assertiveness development can provide a contextualized foundation for working with women struggling with assertiveness. Where assertiveness has often been dealt with in psychological literature as individual behaviour, this model provides a framework for understanding the complexity of negotiating an assertive identity within the social context. This

moves beyond teaching cognitive, emotional, and behavioural assertiveness strategies to facilitating a process of identity development.

The significance of belonging as a concept driving resistance to assertiveness also deserves consideration in the therapeutic setting. Asking clients to be assertive in their context without first empathizing with and addressing fears around belonging and negative evaluations might make it difficult for clients to endorse behaviour change. This is understandable and it is important to provide gender sensitive psychoeducation. While discussions can encourage and promote the immense benefits of assertiveness to clients, it is important to do so in an informed way. This includes helping clients understand what can realistically be expected with behaviour change within the constraints of their social context. For example, no matter how sophisticated interpersonal skills become, women's assertive behaviour will likely still be scrutinized by those with internalized gender stereotypes. Helping clients understand systemic bias in the way women's assertiveness is evaluated can also set clients up to curtail self-blame if they choose to pursue the behaviour (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). Considering the congruence between the current theory and the Transtheoretical Model of Change, motivational interviewing might be a good therapeutic technique to help clients decide if pursuing assertiveness is for them (DiClemente & Velasquez, 2002). This can help clients weigh costs and benefits of belonging and assertiveness in a way that helps them set practical goals to meet their personal and relational needs.

How assertiveness is framed in the therapeutic context might also be important for clients concerned with belonging and interpersonal care. Framing assertiveness as a way to care for interpersonal relationships without being solely responsible for them will likely be beneficial. This is in contrast to assertiveness training that encourages women to act in more competitive

ways, which can perpetuate harmful cultural beliefs that more socially oriented ways of relating are wrong (Kim et al., 2018). Approaches like the Empowerment Model and Non-Violent Communication can be helpful, where assertiveness is taught as cooperative, emphasizing advocacy for one's own needs while considering the needs of all parties involved (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Rosenberg, 1992). These approaches have a relational focus, however, there is further need for cultural sensitivity in approaching assertiveness training with diverse clients. It is important to understand what kinds of assertions are appropriate or compatible in a client's cultural setting (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). As assertiveness is primarily associated with Western individualism, the concept might be less appealing to those enculturated in more collectivist worldviews (Wood & Mallinckrodt, 1990). The current theory, however, might be useful to promote the value of assertiveness as a way to enrich relationships for clients who are steeped in more relational traditions.

As seen in the present study, women who were valued and seen for who they were gained more self-confidence across various contexts. This aligns with research that shows when people feel validated in important relationships, they experience increased self-esteem and self-efficacy, which buffers against negative evaluations in other contexts (Cast & Burke, 2002). From a therapeutic standpoint, helping women find and develop supportive relationships with others might be a formative goal in working toward assertive behaviour change. Therapeutic group sessions might be useful in establishing these supportive connections with likeminded others.

Finally, in the debriefing section of the interview, nearly all women found talking about their assertiveness to be beneficial. Women expressed that the interview helped them see their problems more clearly and reflect on where they were doing well. The therapeutic effect of qualitative interviews is a common phenomenon (Rossetto, 2014). The nature of interviews in

getting participants to reflect on the overarching narrative of their assertiveness can be extrapolated to the therapeutic context. Therapeutic interviews could be used to develop a narrative around assertiveness, leading to greater identification with the behaviour.

Limitations and Future Study

There are several limitations to this study. The self-selection of participants might contribute to a biased sample in the possibility that women who chose to participate had different experiences than those who chose not to. Another limitation is the near homogeneity of the sample as college educated. As increased education has been associated with increased assertiveness (Sigler, Burnett, & Child, 2008), it is important to note that experiences of developing assertiveness might differ for women who are not college educated. Additionally, analysis of the retrospective appraisal of complex, dynamic, and enduring developmental processes provides a limited construction of actual processes involved. As such, this theory is limited to providing a general overview of the topic. Time constraints of this project also limit it to a somewhat rudimentary theory, perhaps raising more questions than answers. For example, there was a variety of heterogeneity in the sample, and although these cases were incorporated into the theory as best as possible, further theoretical sampling in these areas is needed to fully saturate the categories and theory. The theory does, however, provide a guiding map for further detailed investigation in the area.

While prior models of change can account for many of the processes outlined by the current study, there are a variety of hypotheses that cannot be confirmed with the current data. For example, while women appeared to fall on a continuum of assertiveness, it is uncertain if these were discrete stages of change or if the processes involved in developing assertiveness were linear or interdependent on certain processes forming the foundation for others. It is also

unclear if mechanisms or functions of mechanisms change over time, such that what initially helped a person change might not be the same as what helps them sustain change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984). A component analysis of assertiveness interventions that included these various processes of change could help determine how and when these processes interact. A randomized control trial with several intervention groups and a waitlist group is one viable option for determining this. This would require matching participants on a battery of measures, including assertiveness, prior to the intervention. Therapeutic components associated with change would be introduced separately (e.g., motivational interviewing, psychoeducation on women's issues, values identification), with a battery of outcome measures administered prior to introducing each therapeutic component. Each intervention group would receive the components in varying order. Such a design can help identify the contribution of each new component (Papa & Follette, 2014).

Another limitation is the somewhat unanticipated results of the quantitative data. It was predictable that women who reported high assertiveness would report less tension and more assertive behaviours. The nearly equal means on scores of shame, positive and negative affect, and locus of control, however, are more difficult to explain. This could be due to inflation from high shame scores for two of the high assertiveness women. These women gave accounts in the interview where they sometimes perceived themselves as overly assertive, which might have led to increased feelings of shame. Likewise, similarities on the internal locus of control subscale might be due to several women in the low group reporting recent increases in assertiveness. It is also possible that while some of the women chose not to pursue assertiveness, this was not necessarily indicative that they lacked a sense of agency. Reasons for choosing not to be assertive can include power imbalances or time and effort involved, and people often weigh the

consequences based on their needs and situational conditions (Ames, 2008a). As research on the correlation between shame, locus of control, and assertiveness is limited to a handful of studies, larger quantitative studies using structural equation modelling could shed light on individual differences that mediate these relations.

Finally, with classical assertiveness interventions focusing on cognitive and behavioural techniques, this research demonstrates there are further avenues for enhancing understandings of assertiveness. For example, the focus on meaning, personal responsibility, identity development, and navigating gender norms means there is room for existential, developmental, and critical approaches to assertiveness interventions. Further research into these avenues can create a rich repertoire of knowledge about assertiveness development for clinicians to draw upon.

Conclusion

Assertiveness is a complex developmental process. Prior research has not examined this process in detail from women's perspectives. Given the difficulties women experience in being assertive, it is important to understand how women experience the barriers to assertiveness and underlying processes involved in how they overcome them. This research adds several unique contributions to the field. First, it integrates processes of assertiveness development into existing models of change. This has potential practical implications, in that a person's stage of change might guide the focus of interventions (e.g., helping clients weigh pros and cons at earlier stages of change versus a focus on attending to disconfirming evidence at later stages of change). Second, it delineates underlying developmental identity processes in becoming assertive. This moves interventions beyond the simple teaching and rehearsal of communication skills to working with conceptualizations of the self. This can include interventions focused on identifying the relationships between one's values and assertiveness, and goals that require a

more assertive identity. Finally, it sheds light on how women negotiate the dialectical tension of developing an assertive identity with their needs for belonging. Understanding this tension can help frame interventions in ways that are compatible with a relational worldview (i.e., in contrast to more individual framing based on competition and independence).

This theory provides a foundation for understanding how women redefine assertiveness from an identity that does not belong to an identity that can belong. It is compatible with existing social identity and feminist literature and indicates a variety of avenues for further exploration and expansion. Understanding what women need to overcome barriers to assertiveness and embrace personal power is crucial to cultivating a social climate where women can thrive.

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Appendix A

Table 2

Women's Mean Scores on Quantitative Measures by Group

Scale and Subscales	High Assertiveness		Low Assertiveness	
s-SIB	Tense	Behave	Tense	Behave
Negative Assertion	18.2	19.2	26.3	14.7
Positive Assertion	15.6	15.8	17.5	15.5
Personal Limits	10.0	22.2	12.5	24.7
Social Initiative	10.8	15.0	16.5	12.7
Total	56.2	74.6	75.7	69.0
PANAS		High Assertiveness		Low Assertiveness
Positive Affect		30.2		33.3
Negative Affect		20.8		23.0
ESS		High Assertiveness		Low Assertiveness
Characterological		26.4		27.8
Behavioural		22.4		20.5
Bodily		10.0		9.5
Total		58.8		57.8
LLOC		High Assertiveness		Low Assertiveness
Chance		21.4		20.3
Powerful Others		20.4		19.5
Internal Locus		29.8		32.3

Note. s-SIB = Scale for Interpersonal Behaviour; PANAS = Positive and Negative Affect Scale; ESS = Experience of Shame Scale; LLOC = Levenson Locus of Control Scale

Appendix B

Sample Items of Measures

Scale for Interpersonal Behaviour (s-SIB)
Instructions: In a social situation, many people find it difficult to react in the way they really want to. For instance, they may find it hard to refuse a request. to ask for help, or to show approval or disapproval. Below you will find a list of such social situations. For each situation, please indicate how tense the situation makes you (e.g., if you feel tense when you start a conversation with a stranger) and how often you behave the way described in the situation (e.g., how often you start a conversation with a stranger). We would like you to record the first response that comes to mind and complete the questionnaire as quickly as you can.

Tense response scale:
1 = Not at all
2 = Somewhat
3 = Rather
4 = Very
5 = Extremely

Behaviour response scale:
1 = I never do
2 = I rarely do
3 = I sometimes do
4 = I usually do
5 = I always do

1. Starting a conversation with a stranger.
2. Telling a group of people about something you have experienced.
3. Asking someone to explain something you have not understood.
4. Acknowledging a compliment about your personal appearance.
5. Telling someone that you like him/her.
6. Refusing a request made by a person in authority.

Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS)
This scale consists of a number of words that describe different feelings and emotions. Read each item and then mark the appropriate answer in the space next to that word. Indicate to what extent you generally feel this way, that is, how you feel on the average. Use the following scale to record your answers.

1 = Very slightly or not at all
2 = A little
3 = Moderately
4 = Quite a bit
5 = Extremely

interested
distressed
excited
upset
strong
guilty

Experience of Shame Scale (ESS)
Everybody at times can feel embarrassed, self-conscious or ashamed. These questions are about such feelings if they have occurred at any time in the past year. There are no 'right or 'wrong answers. Please indicate the response which applies to you.

Response scale:
1 = Not at all
2 = A little
3 = Moderately
4 = Very much

1. Have you felt ashamed of any of your personal habits?
2. Have you worried about what other people think of any of your personal habits?
3. Have you tried to cover up or conceal any of your personal habits?
4. Have you felt ashamed of your manner with others?
5. Have you worried about what other people think of your manner with others?
6. Have you avoided people because of your manner?

Levenson Locus of Control Scales (LLOC)
Please confirm to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements.

1 = Strongly disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Somewhat disagree
4 = Somewhat agree
5 = Agree
6 = Strongly agree

1. Whether or not I get to be a leader depends mostly on my ability.
2. To a great extent my life is controlled by accidental happenings.
3. I feel like what happens in my life is mostly determined by powerful people.
4. Whether or not I get in to a car accident depends mostly on how good of a driver I am
5. When I make plans, I am almost certain to make them work.
6. Often there is no chance of protecting my personal interests from bad luck happenings.

Appendix C

High Assertiveness Interview Schedule

In own words, no right or wrong answers, what does assertiveness mean to you?

You underwent a change from being less assertive to more assertive and I want you to tell me whatever you can about how that was for you. Starting anywhere you like.

Additional Questions (Clarifying/elaborating probes)
When you realized you had difficulties with assertiveness, what was that like for you? Barriers?
What was it about these situations that created difficulty in being assertive?
What went through your mind in situations where you wanted to be assertive? How did it feel?
Did you do anything in particular to cope with this experience?
Were there times you wanted to be assertive, but weren't? What did the situation look like?
Were there times being assertive was easier/harder?
What did the change look like? How do you maintain it (during challenges)?
What resources or supports were helpful or unhelpful during this experience?
How has your view of yourself changed as a result of this experience?
Tell me about your assertiveness before and after developing assertive skills.
Are there times you still struggle with assertiveness?
What do you think you need to keep growing in this direction of assertiveness?"
Is there anything we haven't touched upon that you think would be relevant for me to know?
Debriefing (Start with reflection and grounding if necessary)
Thank you for sharing your story. How was it for you to be talking to me in this way?

Low Assertiveness Interview Schedule

In own words, no right or wrong answers, what does assertiveness mean to you?

I know that you have some difficulties with assertiveness, and I want you to tell me whatever you can about how that is like for you. Starting anywhere you like.

Additional Questions (Clarifying/elaborating probes)
When you realized you had difficulties with assertiveness, what was that like for you? Barriers?
How do these barriers affect your daily life?
Are there times you have tried to be assertive? Can you tell me what that experience was like?
What is it about these situations that create difficulty in being assertive?
What goes through your mind in situations where you want to be assertive? How does it feel?
Do you do anything in particular to cope with this experience?
Are there times you want to be assertive, but aren't? What do these situations look like?
Are there times when being assertive is easier/harder?
How do you view yourself based on your experiences with assertiveness?
What do you think will help you develop more assertive behaviour in the future?
Is there anything we haven't touched upon that you think would be relevant for me to know?
Debriefing (Start with reflection and grounding if necessary)
Thank you for sharing your story. How was it for you to be talking to me in this way?

Appendix D

Recruitment Posters

Are you highly assertive?

Did you previously struggle with assertiveness?

We are looking for **women** to take part in a qualitative study of assertiveness

If eligible, your participation would involve **completing a questionnaire** and **1-2 interviews** (approximately 1 hour each) at the University of Alberta campus

Interested in participating? Want more information?

Email me with this poster title: mmclean2@ualberta.ca

This study is being conducted in the Department of Education and has received approval from the Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta on November 26, 2018 (REB Pro00086368)

Do you struggle with assertiveness?

We are looking for **women** to take part in a qualitative study of assertiveness

If eligible, your participation would involve **completing a questionnaire** and **1-2 interviews** (approximately 1 hour each) at the University of Alberta campus

Interested in participating? Want more information?

Email me with this poster title: mmclean2@ualberta.ca

This study is being conducted in the Department of Education and has received approval from the Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta on November 26, 2018 (REB Pro00086368)

Appendix E

Demographic Questions

Please write or tick the appropriate circle for each question:

Age:

Ethnicity:

Occupation/Student status:

Education:

- ○ Primary school
- ○ Some high school, but no diploma
- ○ High school diploma (or GED)
- ○ Some college, but no degree
- ○ 2-year college degree
- ○ 4-year college degree
- ○ Graduate-level degree
- ○ None of the above

How did you hear about the study?

- ○ Campus poster
- ○ Organizational newsletter
- ○ Word of mouth
- ○ Other_________

Appendix F

INFORMATION LETTER and CONSENT FORM
Study Title: A Grounded Theory of How Women Develop Assertiveness

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Background

- You are invited to be in this study to share your experiences with assertiveness.
- Results of this study will be used in support of my thesis for the MEd Counselling Psychology program. Research findings may also be published in an academic journal.

Purpose

- The purpose of this study is to understand women's experiences developing assertiveness. We are collecting stories about this experience from women who are currently struggling with assertiveness and women who went from struggling with assertiveness in the past to becoming more assertive in the present. Results of this study will be used to develop a model of how women become more assertive, adding to scientific knowledge about the topic.

Study Procedures

- This study consists of an online survey and an in-person (or phone) interview, with the potential of a follow up interview. Time commitment for the study is about 1.5 to 2 hours.
- You will be sent an initial email with a link to an online survey and a scheduling app to book an interview. You will be given a unique ID code in the initial email to use with the online survey and scheduling app to ensure your confidentiality.
- The online survey will ask demographic questions so we can describe characteristics of the sample, along with questions about your assertiveness, self-concept, emotions, and personal history. The survey should take about 30 minutes.
- Interviews will be in-person at the university campus or by phone and ask questions about your experiences with assertiveness. Interviews will be about 60-90 minutes and be audio-recorded for later transcription and analysis. You can ask for the audio-recorder to be turned off at any time. Sometimes we will want to do a follow up interview. We will ask your permission at the end of the first interview to contact you again for a second interview. You are free to decline.
- Feel free to ask questions any time regarding procedures and goals of the study or your role.

Benefits

- You might not directly benefit from being in this study. We hope results from this project will help us better understand how women become more assertive and potentially be used to inform interventions that help women become more assertive.
- There are no known costs involved in being in the research.

Risk

- There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this study. If we learn anything during the research that may affect your willingness to continue being in the study, we will tell you right away. However, talking about personal experiences might be distressing for some individuals. Please feel to discuss any

distress with the researcher at any time. If you feel so distressed that you are worried about your safety, you may contact Student Counseling & Clinical Services at 780-492-5205, the Mental Health Helpline at 1-877-303-2642, or go to your nearest Emergency Room.

Voluntary Participation

- You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your participation is voluntary, and you can answer only those questions you are comfortable with.
- If you agree to be in the study, you can change your mind and withdraw at any time without penalty. If you withdraw, we can delete any or all of your data if you would like. You can withdraw your full data up until 2 months after the final interview.

Confidentiality & Anonymity

- This research will be used in support of my thesis and may be published in a research journal. All data from you will be combined with others, with no identifying material reported. Any quotes from you will not contain anything that could identify you.
- The only exception to confidentiality is that we are legally obligated to report evidence of child abuse or neglect or potential harm to someone else.
- All data is kept confidential with only the primary researcher and supervisor having access. You should know that the survey portion of this study is collected on software housed in the United States. This means under US privacy laws, the government has the right to access all information held in electronic databases like the one used to collect this survey data. However, no identifying information will be attached to your survey data, as you will input a unique ID number when completing the survey and not your real name.
- Data is stored for a minimum of 5 years following completion of the research project, at which point it will be destroyed through electronic file deletion. All data will be stored in electronic form in password protected files on an encrypted computer. Your name and any identifying information will be removed from all stored data and replaced with a unique ID number. A list of participant names, emails, and IDs will be stored in a password protected file separately from the data.
- If you would like a copy of the results you can email the primary researcher, Michelle McLean, at the contact information above about 1 year after your participation.
- We may use the data we get from this study in future research, but if we do this it will have to be approved by a Research Ethics Board.

Further Information

If you have further questions about this study, please contact the primary researcher, Michelle McLean, or Dr. Whelton at the contact information above. The plan for this study has been reviewed by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. The REB number is Pro00086368. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, call 780-492-0459 or email reoffice@ualberta.ca. This office is independent of the researchers.

Consent Statement

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form. I will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

____   ______________

Participant's Name (printed) and Signature   Date

____   ______________

Name (printed) and Signature of Person Obtaining Consent   Date

CONSENT TO BE CONTACTED FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

What is the purpose of this consent?
We are conducting research on how women develop assertiveness. Sometimes more information is needed after data analysis is started. We would like to know if you would be interested in doing a second interview if more information is needed.

Please note that this consent is only to contact you in the future. You have no obligation to participate in future research until you consent at that time.

Right to Withdraw and Confidentiality

- You may withdraw permission to be contacted at any time by contacting the researcher at mmclean2@ualberta.ca
- Declining consent to be contacted in the future will not affect your relationship with the researchers and/or the University of Alberta.
- If you decide to consent to be contacted for future research, this data will be kept separate from your previous information.

Questions or Concerns:

- If you have any questions or concerns after signing this form, please contact the researcher at mmclean2@ualberta.ca
- If you have concerns about your rights as a participant, you may contact the Research Ethics Office: 780-492-0459 or reoffice@ualberta.ca REB number is Pro00086368.

By signing this form, you give permission for the researchers to contact you in the future. If you agree to be contacted in the future, please indicate how we can contact you and sign below.

Preferred contact method (please check one):

☐ Phone: ______________________________

Is it okay to leave you a voice message?

Yes ☐ No ☐

☐ Email address: ______________________________

______________________________ _______________

Signature Date

______________________________ _______________

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date