

Perception and Assertiveness Practices in the Ewuh Pekewuh Concept: an Indigenous Psychology Approach in Yogyakarta Society

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ABSTRACT

The concept of *ewuh pekewuh* in Javanese culture can be examined through the lens of Indigenous Psychology. It influences how individuals openly express thoughts, feelings, and desires, which form the core of assertive behavior. This study is essential for understanding how local cultural values shape communication patterns and how the people of Yogyakarta interpret and practice assertive communication within the conceptual and cultural framework of *ewuh pekewuh* a social norm that embodies reluctance, respect, and the avoidance of offending others. Using an Indigenous Psychology approach, the focus of this study explores local understandings of assertiveness, which have largely been constructed from a Western perspective. The method employed involves participatory and contextually reflective observation, aiming to bridge modern communication psychology with local wisdom and to reveal the psychological realities of Javanese society that have been underrepresented in global communication theory. The results of this study are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically to understanding the dynamics of assertive communication grounded in local culture, serving as a foundation for developing communication interventions that are more contextual and sensitive to the cultural values of Indonesian society. The study suggests that psychological practices and communication training in Indonesia should integrate local cultural dimensions to be effective and contextually relevant, moving beyond mere translations of Western concepts.

Keywords: *assertive communication, thousand people, indigenous psychology, Yogyakarta society, Javanese culture*

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INTRODUCTION

Assertive communication is a form of interpersonal communication characterized by an individual's ability to express their thoughts, feelings, and opinions honestly and openly while respecting others (Gadioli, 2021). According to Alberti and Emmons (2008), assertiveness reflects a balance between self-confidence and empathy. This type of communication differs from aggressive (harmful to others) and passive (self-sacrificing) behavior, as it aims to achieve constructive and mutually respectful outcomes. Assertive communication involves the ability to convey thoughts, feelings, and needs honestly and firmly while upholding the rights of others.

In the context of Indonesian culture, which is deeply rooted in collectivist values, the practice of assertive communication often faces unique challenges. One of the cultural values integral to Javanese society, particularly in Yogyakarta, is the concept of *ewuh pekewuh*. This value encapsulates feelings of discomfort or hesitation in social interactions, especially toward individuals who are older, hold higher status, or have close social relationships (Suharto, 2021; Santoso & Nugroho, 2022). The concept of *ewuh pekewuh* is a prominent cultural norm in

Javanese society, describing a sense of reluctance or hesitation in interpersonal engagement (Wulandari & Prasetyo, 2020; Suryani & Rahman, 2023). It is rooted in the desire to maintain social harmony and avoid interpersonal conflict (Hidayat & Sari, 2022; Purnama & Setiawan, 2021).

In many cases, *ewuh pekewuh* leads individuals to delay or avoid potentially offensive communication with others, even at the expense of personal discomfort or disadvantage (Geertz, 1961). While *ewuh pekewuh* positively contributes to preserving social harmony and interpersonal relationships, it can also hinder open expression of opinions or refusal of requests. As a result, individuals may avoid conflict through restraint, concealment of disapproval, or self-sacrifice to maintain a harmonious atmosphere. This phenomenon can significantly affect the development of assertive communication, especially in professional, educational, and everyday social contexts.

Indigenous Psychology is an approach emphasizing the importance of understanding human behavior based on cultural context and local values. This perspective emerged as a critique of the dominance of Western psychological theories, which often lack relevance when applied to non-Western societies. Kim and Berry (1993) argue that Indigenous Psychology seeks to produce psychological theories and practices rooted in the lived experiences and value systems of local communities. Within this framework, comprehending psychological behavior and dynamics requires attention to local meanings, values, and lived realities.

In the domain of interpersonal communication, assertive behavior is widely recognized as a cornerstone of psychological well-being and effective social interaction. Defined as the capacity to express thoughts, feelings, and needs honestly and directly while respecting others' rights, assertiveness is typically framed through a Western psychological lens. Alberti and Emmons (2008) describe assertiveness as the balanced midpoint between passive submission and aggressive dominance, emphasizing individual self-expression. However, this universalist perspective may not fully capture communicative realities in collectivist cultures, where the preservation of communal harmony often outweighs individual expression. Consequently, the cross-cultural applicability of such constructs warrants critical examination, especially in societies shaped by deep-seated relational norms.

The Javanese cultural concept of *ewuh pekewuh* presents a compelling case for examining this cultural divergence. Anthropological and sociological scholars have long identified *ewuh pekewuh* as a central regulator of social interaction in Java. As explored by Geertz (1961) and later by Wikan (1990), *ewuh pekewuh* embodies feelings of reluctance, hesitation, or the aversion to causing offence—particularly toward authority figures or within close relationships. This cultural script places a premium on maintaining social harmony (*rukun*), often leading individuals to suppress personal desires or dissent. Previous research has documented the concrete manifestations of this value, such as its effects on bureaucratic accountability (Fatmawati, 2016) and supervisory reprimands in organizational contexts (Wibowo et al., 2016), underscoring its influential role in shaping social behavior.

Within Indigenous Psychology, scholars have consistently critiqued the hegemony of Western psychological paradigms and advocated for the development of knowledge systems grounded in local contexts. Kim and Berry (1993) and Enriquez (1992) powerfully argue that understanding human psychology necessitates an *emic* approach that privileges local values, meanings, and experiences. In Indonesia, scholars such as Widyatmoko (2011) have built upon

this foundation by exploring how local wisdom functions as an informal mental health support system. These contributions highlight the importance of examining psychological phenomena like assertiveness not as universal constants but as culturally contingent practices shaped by specific sociohistorical frameworks.

Despite these scholarly advances, a significant research gap remains. Although earlier studies have described the *ewuh pekewuh* construct and its general social impact, few have empirically investigated how it specifically shapes the perception and practice of assertive communication from an Indigenous Psychological perspective. Existing literature often frames *ewuh pekewuh* as a barrier to Western-style assertiveness, neglecting to explore whether it fosters a distinct, culturally sanctioned form of assertiveness—one that is implicit, strategic, and relationally oriented. This gap leaves a critical void in understanding the full spectrum of assertive behaviors in Javanese society.

The novelty of this research lies in its deliberate effort to decouple the concept of assertiveness from its Western individualistic origins and recontextualize it within the collectivist ethos of Javanese culture. Moving beyond a deficit model that frames *ewuh pekewuh* as an impediment, the study investigates it as a potential framework for an alternative communicative competence. In doing so, it aims not merely to apply existing theories to a new context but to generate a nuanced, culturally grounded understanding of assertiveness—contributing to the broader endeavor of indigenizing psychological science and challenging the assumed universality of its constructs.

Accordingly, the primary purpose of this study is to explore deeply the perceptions and lived experiences of assertiveness among the people of Yogyakarta, as shaped and mediated by the cultural value of *ewuh pekewuh*. It seeks to identify the implicit rules, strategies, and meanings that constitute “being assertive” in this cultural milieu, examining how individuals balance self-expression with social conformity. The study ultimately articulates a culturally informed model of assertiveness that reflects the communicative realities of Javanese society.

The benefits of this research are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it enriches the discourse of Indigenous Psychology by offering empirical insights from a Javanese perspective and advancing a more pluralistic understanding of communication. Practically, the findings can inform the design of culturally sensitive communication training, conflict resolution models, and psychosocial interventions in Indonesia. By validating local wisdom, this study contributes to developing psychological practices that are not merely adapted from Western frameworks but resonate authentically with the cultural essence of the society they aim to serve.

METHOD

The process of this study and article writing used an Indigenous Psychology approach as the theoretical and methodological framework to understand psychological phenomena within the local cultural context. This approach was chosen as a critique of the dominance of Western psychological paradigms, which were often irrelevant in explaining the psychological dynamics of non-Western societies, including Indonesia. In this context, the research sought to understand the concept and practice of assertiveness within the culture of *ewuh pekewuh*, a value deeply embedded in Javanese society and reflected in interpersonal communication.

Using the Indigenous Psychology approach, the study focused on exploring local understandings of assertiveness, which had previously been constructed mainly from a Western perspective. The method employed was participatory and contextually reflective observation, aimed at connecting modern communication psychology with local wisdom and uncovering the psychological realities of Javanese society that had been underrepresented in global communication theory. This method enabled the researcher to capture the complexity, meaning, and values embedded in Javanese communication practices, which are often implicit and symbolic.

The research was conducted through direct observation of community interactions in Yogyakarta, particularly in interpersonal communication situations that revealed potential value conflicts between self-expression and social norms. These observations were participatory but non-interventional, allowing the documentation of natural patterns of verbal and nonverbal communication within cultural contexts. The data were then reviewed through reflective analysis, linking the observed behaviors to local values and communication theory. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with purposively selected key informants—such as community leaders, teachers, and members of the younger Javanese generation—to explore their perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of assertiveness within the framework of *ewuh pekewuh*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are based on reflection and a personal approach carried out by the author when reflecting on the experience of a friend named "R", a woman from Sleman, Yogyakarta. He often experiences dilemmas when facing interpersonal conflicts, especially with authority figures. When he experienced a discrepancy in the thesis guidance schedule, he did not immediately express his objection because he felt hesitant. *Taste Thousands of Screams* (reluctance) because of fear of ruining the relationship or being considered disrespectful is very strong in him.

As a result, he experiences mild psychological distress such as anxiety, *Overthinking*, and feel guilty. However, after consulting with parents and local community leaders, he was directed to use communication *Good*: convey aspirations gradually and non-confrontationally. This approach allows him to continue to express his opinion without hurting the lecturer's feelings.

This reflection shows that cultural values such as social harmony, collectivism, and polite interpersonal relations shape the way individuals act in conflict situations. This is in accordance with the principles of Indigenous Psychology which sees human beings as inseparable from their social and cultural context (Kim, Yang, & Hwang, 2006).

In addition to findings based on a personal approach, the study process was carried out through observations made on the Karang Taruna group in Kotagede. In a brief interview, the youth said that they often had difficulty expressing criticism to the village apparatus for fear of being considered disrespectful. *Value Thousands of Screams* becomes an obstacle to direct expression.

However, they were assisted by village elders who facilitated discussion forums using a deliberation approach. In this forum, all criticisms are delivered in polite language and full of

parables. The community refers to this as "*Speak softly, so you don't get embarrassed.*" (speak subtly so as not to embarrass).

From this study, it can be seen that assertiveness remains, but is packaged in implicit communication strategies, community leaders play the role of mediators and facilitators of communication, and conflict resolution approaches prioritize social relations balance rather than argument wins.

This shows that local psychology functions as a social system to maintain collective mental health, which is carried out without professional intervention but is very effective because it is in accordance with local cultural values (Widyatmoko, 2011).

Theoretical Analysis

In the literature of Indigenous Psychology, it is believed that human behavior is inseparable from the values, norms, and cultural structures in which individuals are located (Enriquez, 1992; Kim & Berry, 1993). Concept *Thousands of Screams* reflects a hierarchical form of social relations and the avoidance of open conflict, which is in fact contrary to Western psychological approaches that emphasize direct and explicit assertiveness (Lange & Jakubowski, 1976).

The main difference between Western Psychology and Javanese Indigenous Psychology is that Western Psychology uses direct, assertive, individualistic communication, emphasis on *self-expression*, and interpreting assertiveness as an effort to voice oneself frontally. While Javanese Indigenous Psychology uses an implicit way of communication, *Good.*, prioritizes the common interest (collectivism), emphasizes more on social relations and harmony, and interprets assertiveness as an effort to convey opinions politely. So in the context of Javanese society, assertiveness is not interpreted as a frontal expression, but rather the ability to express opinions politely and strategically, in order to maintain good social relations.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that Indigenous Psychology offered a more contextual and relevant framework for understanding Indonesian behavioral patterns, particularly among the people of Yogyakarta. The value of *ewuh pekewuh*, though often viewed as limiting openness, also emphasized social sensitivity and empathy, indicating that assertiveness must be interpreted within its cultural context. Consequently, professional psychological practices in Indonesia should integrate local cultural dimensions into assessment, intervention, and communication training programs, ensuring these are grounded in local values rather than adaptations of Western models. Future research could further explore how indigenous values and community-based traditions can be systematically incorporated into psychological education, practice, and policy development to enhance culturally resonant mental health interventions.

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