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Finding Common Ground Through Adventure Based Counseling: Race and Perceptions of Group Cohesion

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Over the past three decades, there has been a dramatic increase in the use of adventure based counseling (ABC) programs (Nassar-McMillan & Cashwell, 1997) as interventions among adolescents with behavioral and social problems (Johnson, 1992) and as a method of building teams (Springett, 1987). ABC has emerged as an innovative approach to traditional group counseling, and uses the elements of adventure and risk to promote growth and change among participants. Facilitators of these outdoor challenge course programs often testify that these experiences bring about positive change, however, research findings to substantiate these claims remain rare (Braverman, Brenner, Fretz, & Desmond, 1990; Gillis, Bendoroff, Clapp, Gass, Rudolph & Nadler, 1991; Johnson, 1992). Therefore, there is a need for researchers to examine potential uses of challenge course programs and determine possible outcomes of their implementation (Davis, Ray, & Sayles, 1995). In addition, with an increased emphasis on diversity issues within the

counseling profession, it is critical that the role and usage of low-element challenge course programs in multicultural counseling be addressed.

Springett (1987) acknowledged that one of the potential benefits for participants in challenge course programs is increased perception of group cohesion. Cohesiveness has been identified as one of the key factors in the development of a group (Griffin & Pennscott, 1991) and an important variable for a variety of groups and different types of group processes (Evans & Jarvis, 1980). Furthermore, the usefulness of cohesion as a mediator of group formation, maintenance, and productivity (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990) has led some social scientists to deem it the most important small group variable (Golembiewski, 1962; Lott & Lott, 1965).

This paper examines the effect of participation in a low-element challenge course on the perceived level of group cohesion among various participants. Race was included as an independent variable in each study to determine if various racial groups perceive the group's level of group cohesion differently.

Low-Element Challenge Courses

Adventure based counseling uses a progression of activities including icebreakers, group initiatives, trust building exercises, low-element challenge courses, ropes courses, service projects, and peak experiences as a way to encourage change (Schoel & Maizell, 2002; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). The label "challenge course" has been used to include a wide range of challenge programs used with diverse populations. The element of risk inherent in these activities, both actual and perceived, is the catalyst that leads to growth. While the term "adventure based counseling" is a large umbrella under which many programs are located, for the purposes of this paper, the author will focus specifically on ABC low-element challenge course programs which work with groups and implement activities which are built low to the ground (not high ropes courses). While some elements typically focus on leadership abilities and others focus on communication skills, all activities emphasize group cohesion. These elements are designed to make few physical demands on the participants, however, they require participants to share responsibility and solve problems as a team.

There are several significant aspects to tasks typically employed in adventure based approaches with low-element challenge courses. They occur in a group setting using novel, noncompetitive tasks and are designed and implemented so that individual success is not possible (Wick, Wick, & Peterson, 1997). The sequence of activities typically progresses from easier exercises through tasks that are more physically and mentally challenging (Alexander & Carlson, 1999). The activities build upon one another and increase in difficulty so that the group is consistently challenged. This requires participants to improve their social and problem-solving skills as well as their ability to work together in order to successfully complete the activities.

While ropes courses tend to focus on individual accomplishments and are built high off the ground, low-element challenge courses are constructed low to the ground and require group members to utilize teamwork and display cooperation and communication skills (Harris, Mealy, Matthews, Lucas, & Moczygemba, 1993). Successful outcomes to challenges depend upon the extent to which group members cooperate, trust, and communicate with each another. In addition, these group exercises impart lessons that participants may apply to issues in their personal lives outside of the group (Harris et al., 1993).

Multicultural Counseling and Group Work

In today's society, it is likely that counselors will be called on to assist in dealing with cultural diversity issues within groups (Johnson, Torres, Coleman & Smith, 1995). As DeLucia-Waack (1996) stated, "All group work is multicultural" (p. 218). Within any of the groups (e.g., committees, peer groups) to which people belong, members bring their unique cultural identity, which is developed through cultural background, race, gender and socioeconomic status (Conyne, 1998). Therefore, an important task for counselors is to develop the ability to help members learn about themselves and each other, which requires attention to multicultural factors (McRae & Johnson, 1991).

The belief that people who help each other and work together toward a common goal typically begin to feel more positively about each other and interact constructively when performing collective tasks (Sherif & Sherif, 1956), is a foundation of low-element challenge courses. Furthermore, research has suggested that cooperative learning, such as experienced in low-element challenge courses, contributes to improved intergroup and interpersonal relationships in multicultural situations and promotes culturally diverse learners' self-esteem (Manning & Lucking, 1993).

Cooperative learning, such as challenge course programs, improves multicultural relationships for a variety of reasons. First, participants in these settings work toward the same goals and must communicate effectively, have an understanding of the advantages associated with positive group dynamics, and recognize the differences among group members as a form of enrichment rather than as a deficit (Manning & Lucking, 1993). Each member is viewed as an important component of the group and members experience success or disappointment as a whole rather than as individuals. This focuses on each member's strengths and incorporates those characteristics into the group. Therefore, the differences of each member are viewed as positives rather than negatives.

In addition, the goals of cooperative learning, as related to low-element challenge courses, significantly contribute to the processes that build, promote and sustain positive interpersonal relationships among various cultures assembled in the group (Manning & Lucking, 1993). Manning and Lucking (1993) stated that although little is known as to how racial attitudes develop and change, positive human interaction among individuals of various races or cultures tends to facilitate feelings of harmony among involved

members. The low-element challenge course program attempts to facilitate this type of experience for each member of the group.

ABC and Group Cohesion

Glass and Benshoff (2002) conducted a study related to group cohesion and participation in a one-day low element challenge course program. Their results suggested that an increased perception of group cohesion by participants (adolescents ages 11-14) could be achieved through participation in a one-day low-element challenge course program. In addition, similar results were experienced with a group of college students (Glass, 2002). While these studies revealed that participation in adventure based counseling programming could cause an increase in participants' perceptions of group cohesion, they also revealed issues related to perceptions of group cohesion and race.

These studies revealed that various races (White, African-American, and Hispanic) perceived group cohesion in a similar manner as a result of participating in the low-element challenge course program. This information is powerful and can prove very useful for counselors. In order to become effective multicultural counselors, it is critical for the counseling profession to research and identify counseling programs that may aid in the lessening of racial effects without diminishing the importance, or ignoring the relevance, of each person's background. Low-element challenge course programs require participants from various racial backgrounds to work together to help their group be successful on the challenges that are presented. It is possible that the processes used in these types of programs aid in the reduction of race-based discrimination and help each member of the group feel connected to and a part of the group.

These results suggest low-element challenge course programs can be a valid method for helping diverse groups to experience higher levels of perceived group cohesion, while perhaps minimizing the effects of race. The implications for group work are powerful, in that all counseling groups may benefit from higher perceptions of group cohesion. Feeling connected to the other group members helps to facilitate self-disclosure which, in turn, helps to facilitate personal growth, the basic premise of counseling.

In today's world, so much emphasis is placed on the differences among people, and how our racial lenses through which we see the world, cause us to experience and view events differently. However, research suggests that ABC, and more specifically, low-element challenge course programs, facilitate an environment in which persons of various races experience group cohesion on a similar scale, regardless of racial backgrounds. It is possible that regardless of the reasons for a group's origination, the use of a low-element challenge course program could help group leaders facilitate the cohesion needed to move the group along in its development to deeper stages of interaction.

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