New Heights:
Adventure-based groupwork in social work education and practice

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Abstract: *Training in groupwork in social work education is a critical aspect of promoting the continued use of groupwork in social work practice. Groupwork courses in social work education should integrate theory and practice; emphasize the processes that make groups effective; and train group leaders by providing experiential learning opportunities for how to lead groups. Likewise, groupwork in social work education should keep up with practice trends in the field of social work. According to Tucker and Norton's (2009) research, current trends in social work practice with groups in the United States include the use of adventure-based practices with clients to effect positive change. Research also shows the increased use of adventure-based practices in the U.K. and other parts of the world. This practice trend is not new; however, Tucker and Norton found that very few social workers in the United States ever receive hands-on training in challenge and adventure activities while they are in school. The lack of experiential training in challenge and adventure activities in groupwork may lead to professional incompetence and poor programming, or the absence of challenge and adventure programming in social work practice with groups altogether. This study addressed the issue of groupwork training in social work education by providing social work students with an opportunity to participate in adventure-based groupwork. Pre- and post- survey research measured the impact of adventure-based groupwork on student's self-concept and perception of competence in major life skills, group cohesion, and level of knowledge regarding application of challenge and adventure activities with social work clients. Data analysis revealed statistically significant improvements in all areas.*

Key words: *adventure-based groupwork; social work education; groupwork training*

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Introduction

Training in groupwork in social work education is a critical aspect of promoting the continued use of groupwork in social work practice. Groupwork courses in social work education should integrate theory and practice; emphasize the processes that make groups effective; and train group leaders by providing *experiential learning opportunities* for how to lead groups (Gitterman & Salmon, 2008; Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008). Likewise, groupwork in social work education should keep up with practice trends in the field of social work. This is in line with the social work profession's commitment to incorporating both research-informed practice as well as *practice-informed research* (CSWE, 2008).

According to Tucker and Norton's (2009) research, current trends in social work practice with groups in the United States include the use of adventure-based practices with clients to effect positive change. Adventure-based practices are used in the U.K. and other parts of the world, as well (Carpenter & Pryor, 2004; Richards, 2002). However, despite the prevalence of adventure-based practice, Tucker and Norton (2009) found that very few social workers in the United States ever receive hands-on training in challenge and adventure activities while they are in school. Rather, in higher educational settings, student learning is often highly theoretical, and disconnected from practice. Fieldwork in social work education is certainly an ex oception to this, and student learning is highly experiential in this realm; however, few field placements are available that offer students hands-on training in adventure-based practice. Curriculum-driven approaches can sometimes limit the availability of this kind of field placement unless it can be tied back to specific social work education competencies.

This is an important issue to address because the lack of experiential training in challenge and adventure activities in groupwork may lead to professional incompetence and poor programming. Not only should adventure-based groupwork (ABGW) facilitators be proficient in basic groupwork skills, they also require additional training in specific adventure-based practice, leadership and risk management skills in order to be effective (Ringer, 1994). Social workers who engage in ABGW are in a unique position of being responsible for the physical safety of the group members. For example, adventure-based groupwork facilitators who are taking a group out on a low ropes course for the day need

not only to be trained in group facilitation and conflict management skills, be familiar with stages of group development, and create an emotionally safe environment, but also to be able to teach and lead the adventure-based activities, and assess and maintain the emotional and physical safety of group members as they participate in the low ropes course. Fortunately, these are skills that *can* be provided in an educational setting. This paper presents a brief review of the applications and effectiveness of adventure-based practices in groupwork, which supports the inclusion of adventure-based groupwork in social work curriculum. This paper also presents findings from a mixed-methods study in which social work students participated in experiential training in adventure-based groupwork in the context of their traditional groupwork courses.

Adventure-based groupwork

The use of activity in groupwork is not a new concept. Groups for children and adolescents have often made use of various types of tasks and activities, such as games, art projects, writing, etc., for promoting social skills, self-confidence and growth (Lee & Li, 2008; Tucker, 2009). According to Tucker, 'Mastery of an activity is not the only purpose in such groups. Promotion of goals to advance personal growth (Wright, 1999) is critical … Put simply, it is the intentional use of activity that is used to promote growth (Northen & Kurland, 2001, p. 316))' . Adventure-based groupwork has its roots in activity-based groupwork, but it is different in that it promotes social skills by engaging clients in experiential activities, often in an outdoor setting. These adventure-based activities provide immediate and observable consequences of behaviors, and rely on problem-solving, while incorporating unfamiliar environments and the use of physical trust (Tucker, 2009).

There is a precedent for the use of adventure in social work with groups. Social groupwork has always had a strong historical link to the therapeutic camping and recreation movements (Mishna, Michalski, & Cummings, 2001). The promotion of well-being through non-traditional groupwork has included camping, experiential learning and teambuilding activities, challenge courses, and outdoor and adventure education combined with group counseling techniques (Fletcher

& Hinkle, 2002; Glass & Benshoff, 2002; Mishna, Michalski, & Cummings, 2002). While there is still no unified definition of adventure-based practice in groups, the term 'adventure-based groupwork' (ABGW) is used in this article to encompass all of the above, and has been previously referred to in the literature as 'adventure-based counseling,' 'adventure-based group therapy,' and 'adventure-based group interventions' (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Tucker, 2009; Voruganti, Whatham, Bard, Parker, Babbey, Ryan, Lee & MacCrimmon, 2006). Borrowing from Tucker's (2009) definition, ABGW:

> can best be described as mix of experiential learning, outdoor education, and group therapy (Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988). Unlike group therapy in an office setting, adventure-based groups involve the physical engagement of their clients and intentional use of cooperative games, problem-solving initiatives, and challenge activities in an outdoor setting to facilitate change in clients (Newes & Bandoroff, 2004). Although the range of activities may vary in adventure-based groups, the purposeful consideration and selection of activities and processing of these experiences across groups are the universal threads of these groups (p. 316).

Alvarez (2002) further clarified the concept of adventure in groupwork. According to Alvarez (2002), adventure-based practice is a type of intervention that has the following common elements: it explores the unknown; is action oriented; explores challenges and difficulty for the purpose of change; offers an active stance for the practitioner; and offers the opportunity for genuine community participation (as cited in Aylward, 2005). When adventure is used intentionally for these purposes, it becomes a shared experience between the social worker and the clients that offers multiple opportunities for personal growth, especially in a group setting.

The adventure model

Though there are many examples of what adventure in a group setting can look like, adventure-based activities usually follow an intentional sequence known as the adventure model. According to Bisson (1998), the following sequence of activities makes up the adventure model and

is used to gradually increase trust as well as the level of challenge. The sequence includes the progression of:

A. Acquaintance activities
B. Deinhibitizors (ice-breakers)
C. Communication activities
D. Goal-setting activities
E. Trust-building exercises
F. Group Problem-Solving activities
G. Low ropes elements
H. High ropes elements
I. Outdoor Pursuits Experiences
J. Debriefing

It is important to note that not all adventure-based groups include the same high challenge activities like the use of ropes course activities (G and H) and other outdoor pursuit experiences (I) like rock climbing, hiking or canoeing; some may have one or the other, which is where much difference lies between adventure-based programs. Despite the variety of high-risk activities, the progression that comes prior to these activities (A-G), as well as the debriefing of these activities (J) are key components to all adventure programs; hence training on this progression is important in order to ethically utilize adventure for therapeutic purposes.

Prior research

While an extensive review of the literature on the use of adventure in groupwork is beyond the scope of this paper, the most current research on ABGW shows a wide range of effective applications in psychosocial and mental health interventions with diverse populations. Although the research reflected here showcases various types of adventure-based programs, all of them have in common the goal of promoting client well-being through the use of adventure-based activities combined with group counseling techniques.

ABGW has often been used with adolescents as a means of significantly increasing social skills and pro-social behavior (Glass

& Benshoff, 2002; Moote & Wodarski, 1997; Walsh & Aubry, 2007). In fact, Gass and Gillis (2010) found that juvenile offenders who participated in adventure-based groups had significantly lower rearrest rates over a three year period than juveniles who did not participate in this type of intervention. The use of ABGW is not limited to youth, it has also been used to treat clinical adult populations. Ragsdale, Cox, Finn, and Eisler's (1996) research showed the effectiveness of adventure-based counseling with inpatient clients experiencing war-related posttraumatic stress disorder. Most recently, Voruganti et al.'s (2006) research demonstrated how adventure-based interventions promoted well-being and weight loss among a group of clients with schizophrenia. In fact, ABGW has been effective for a variety of populations including youth at risk, families, women, college students, victims of abuse, trauma and disease (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002).

Overall, research shows three main areas in which various types of ABGW impact social work clients: the development of life skills and social skills, improved self-concept, and increased group cohesion (Glass, 2008; Glass & Benshoff, 2002; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Moote & Wodarski, 1997; Tucker, 2009). All of these areas are important aspects of personal growth and change that can be developed experientially through adventure-based groupwork.

Ethical and cultural considerations of ABGW

Though the research in the area of ABGW is promising, it is important to consider important ethical and cultural issues related to ABGW. Likewise, it is important to encourage critical thinking about these things in the context of experiential training in ABGW. We have already discussed the importance of intentionally sequencing activities to gradually develop trust and increase the level of challenge through use of the adventure model; however, there are other ethical and cultural considerations to analyze as well.

An important limitation to consider is that participation in ABGW presupposes a certain level of physical capability and may not consider or provide enough opportunities for people with physical disabilities to complete the physical challenges often posed in ABGW. When planning ABGW activities, programs need to be able to adapt programming to

become more inclusive of people with disabilities. Fortunately, more programs are developing to meet the special needs of this population, as well as people with chronic illnesses, (Dillenschneider, 2007; McAvoy, Smith, & Rynders, 2006)

Because ABGW programs usually take place in an outdoor setting and introduce novel and unfamiliar experiences, a high level of disequilibrium is created that may disempower clients to rely too heavily on group leaders for safety and guidance. Mitten (1994) warns that this may be especially disempowering for women by placing them in an oppressive and overly dependent role in which they relinquish some of their personal power over to the group leader as a way of maintaining their own survival. While an optimal level of disequilibrium is important, participants must not be thrust out of their comfort zones in a coercive manner. Along with gender, issues of race, ethnicity and socio-cultural views on nature, living in community, and physical and emotional risk-taking must be considered during ABGW in an outdoor setting. If program goals are not specifically tailored to be culturally sensitive, they may not provide meaningful experiences or positive change in participants (Roberts & Rodriquez, 1999) .

Finally, it should be noted that primary to the ethical implementation of ABGW is the promotion of the physical and emotional safety of all clients and staff. While much of the risk involved in challenge and adventure-based activities is perceived risk, there is real risk inherent in many of the higher level activities on the adventure model, such as low and high ropes elements. For this reason, ABGW facilitators must be properly trained to assess and maintain the appropriateness and safety of each adventure-based activity.

Purpose of research study

Because of the unique skills required for ABGW, the important ethical and cultural considerations of this type of intervention, and the fact that the literature supports the application and efficacy of ABGW in social work practice, we believe it is important to include training in ABGW in social work education. For this reason, the purpose of this study was to provide social work students direct experience with challenge and adventure activities in their groupwork courses. By engaging in

this type of experiential learning opportunity, students were given an opportunity to grow personally and professionally through group problem-solving, communication and challenge group activities in the context of a low and high ropes course. Through their participation, they experienced first-hand the impact that ABGW can have on life skills, self-concept and group cohesion, much like prior research has shown. Most importantly, they were able to experientially assess the merit and application of adventure-based groupwork with social work clients, which may allow them to utilize ABGW from an informed and evidence-based perspective once they are in the social work profession.

This study also addressed the importance of groupwork training in social work education. Challenge and adventure activities can be a valuable addition to efficacious groupwork techniques because they provide experiential opportunities to build group cohesion by fostering a deeper level of physical and emotional trust. By engaging in these activities, students had an opportunity to experience the impact of adventure-based activities as participants, as well as to learn adventure-based groupwork leadership skills and facilitation techniques to complement the skills they were learning in their groupwork courses. From this study, the authors hope that ABGW will become a worthwhile subject of study, inquiry and experiential learning in groupwork training in social work education.

Methodology

Research design

This study utilized a one-group pretest-posttest survey research design in order to assess the impact of an adventure-based groupwork experience on a group of social work students. The sample consisted of BSW and MSW students at Texas State University-San Marcos. The research sample did not include all social work students, but rather a subset who were studying groupwork in social work practice. Students in the groupwork courses were given the option of participating in this study, and the total sample included thirty-five students ($N = 35$). The sample included adults over the age of 18, with a median age of 27, and reflected a diverse group of students. Forty three percent of students were

Caucasian, 29% were Hispanic, 14% were African American and 14% identified as 'other.' The sample was 91% female due to the lack of gender diversity in the social work program. All students who participated in this study were considered physically 'abled' as the adventure-based program that was used does not currently provide adaptive outdoor programming for people with disabilities; however, in the case of this research sample, there were no students with disabilities who had to be excluded. All participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the study, signed informed consent forms, and were aware of their rights in this study. Cost of participation in adventure-based activities was covered by a private grant and the University provided insurance to students, since they participated in a University sanctioned program. This study was reviewed and approved by the Internal Review Board at Texas State University-San Marcos.

Program/activity

The BSW and MSW students who participated in this study participated in the Texas State University-San Marcos Outdoor Recreation Department's GOAL Program (Goal Oriented Achievement & Learning). The one-day program was held at the challenge course at University Camp in Wimberley, Texas. The GOAL Program is an experiential learning program designed to facilitate personal growth and group cohesion (team-building). It involves participation in low and high ropes challenges and problem-solving activities that take place in an outdoor setting, and follows the intentional sequencing of the adventure model (Bisson, 1998). Low ropes activities consist of physically challenging games and activities that harness the power of play and problem-solving through imaginative scenarios, such as 'chocolate river crossing,' a mock river crossing in which the whole group has to get from point 'A' to point 'B' using pieces of wood that are supposed to represent floating marshmallows in the chocolate river. While play is most commonly used in groupwork with children (Lee & Li, 2008), ABGW adapts activities to include an element of playfulness, coupled with physical and mental challenges, for participants of all ages. High ropes activities utilize more physically strenuous activities such as climbing and balancing while high off the ground. While participants are always hooked into a safety harness and belay system, the element

of perceived risk and challenge increases during high ropes activities dramatically. All activities are preceded by individual and group goal setting and followed up by processing and debriefing the experience related to those goals.

Instrumentation/data collection

Data were collected from pre- and post- online surveys that assessed the impact of the student's participation in the GOAL Program. On the survey students were asked to respond from 1-5 (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree) to statements about 1) the impact of adventure-based groupwork on the social work student's self-concept and perception of competence in major life skills, 2) the impact of adventure based groupwork on group cohesion, 3) the impact of adventure-based groupwork on students' knowledge base regarding application of challenge and adventure activities with social work clients. The survey also included several open-ended questions in order to obtain a more in-depth understanding of the students' experience. Some of the open-ended questions included were: 'What did you gain from your participation in the GOAL Program?' and 'Do you have any thoughts on the multicultural aspects of adventure-based groupwork, i.e., its application with diverse populations?' Students completed this survey one week before the adventure-based program and within one week after.

Data analysis

Change was measured from pre-program to post utilizing paired sample *t* tests to see if these changes were statistically significant. Pearson's correlation coefficient was also used to analyze any important correlations between the dependent variables. Qualitative data were coded and analyzed via Seidel's (1998) data analysis process of noticing, collecting and thinking.

Results

This study revealed statistically significant gains in the following areas: positive self-perception; group cohesion and mutual aid; increased social work knowledge and skills in adventure-based groupwork. These results matched many of the findings from prior research on ABGW in which participants increased in very similar areas, and also reaffirmed Smith and Davis-Gage's (2008) research in which graduate students who had participated in an experiential group believed they developed both skills and knowledge about groupwork.

In particular, participating in adventure-based groupwork elevated students' self-concepts and their perception of competence in various life skills. Of note, were the gains made in confidence, resilience and the ability to ask for help. Table 1 shows the full results of this part of the study.

Table 1
Self-perception mean scores for social work students before and after adventure-based groupwork (ABGW) experience (*N* = 35)

Construct	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Mean Difference	*t*
Confidence	3.6286	4.6286	1.00	-7.04***
Problem-solving skills	3.7429	4.5143	.7714	-6.62***
Ability to handle conflict	3.8571	4.7714	.9143	-8.21***
Empathy	4.1714	4.6286	.4572	-4.12***
Communication skills	3.9143	4.5429	.6286	-5.39***
Self-efficacy	3.6571	4.5429	.8858	-7.75***
Sense of purpose	3.8571	4.4571	.6000	5.88***
Ability to express feelings	3.7714	4.4286	.6571	-4.29***
Leadership skills	3.6857	4.5714	.8857	-7.30***
Resilience	3.6286	4.6000	.9714	-6.99***
Awareness of strengths	3.7714	4.6571	.8857	-8.99***
Awareness of areas for growth	3.8000	4.6286	.8286	-8.63***
Ability to ask for help	3.3714	4.4286	1.06	-7.46***

***$p < .001$

Adventure-based groupwork also increased levels of group cohesion and mutual aid, especially in the areas of respect for diversity and the level of engagement in the group process. Table 2 shows these results.

Table 2|
Group development mean scores for social work students before and after ABGW Experience (*N* = 35)

Construct	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Mean Difference	*t*
Group cohesion	3.6857	4.7143	1.03	-10.71***
Conflict resolution	3.6857	4.6571	.9714	-8.66***
Respect for diversity in group	3.6000	4.8571	1.26	-12.18***
Positive group communication	3.6571	4.6000	.9427	-8.16***
Level of mutual aid	3.6857	4.5714	.8857	-7.75***
Level of emotional safety	3.6571	4.7143	1.06	-9.79***
Support from group	3.6577	4.7143	1.05	-9.78***
Level of empathy in group	3.7429	4.5714	.8286	-7.94***
Ability to challenge one another	3.6857	4.4857	.8000	-7.48***
Level of vulnerability in group	3.7143	4.5714	.8571	-8.44***
Common ground	3.7143	4.6000	.8857	-7.75***
Focus on strengths	3.6286	4.6286	1.00	-8.13***
Level of engagement in the group	3.6571	4.8000	1.14	-10.43***

***$p < .001$

Lastly, quantitative data analysis showed that by engaging in adventure-based groupwork as participants, social work students increased their knowledge regarding application of challenge and adventure activities with social work clients. Students who had little knowledge of ABGW were now familiar with the methods and possible applications of ABGW through first hand participation in the intervention. Table 3 overleaf shows these findings.

In order to see if there was a relationship between student learning and their perceptions of the group process, Pearson's correlations were conducted (*N* = 35). Three significant correlations were found. A positive relationship was found between students' perceptions of their problem-solving abilities and their level of professional confidence (*Pearson's r* = .607, *p* < .001). In addition, students' perceptions of the

Table 3

Knowledge and attitudes about ABGW mean scores for social work students before and after ABGW experience (*N* = 35)

Construct	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Mean Difference	*T*	
Familiarity with ABGW	2.9714	4.6286	1.66	-13.52	***
Effectiveness of ABGW	3.3143	4.5714	1.26	-13.27	***
Importance of optimal stress in ABGW	3.5143	4.4857	.971	-9.304	***
Importance of challenge and adventure in ABGW	3.6000	4.8571	1.26	-12.18	***
Applicability of ABGW with various populations	3.6571	4.6000	.9427	-8.16	***

group cohesion were positively correlated with a respect for diversity in the group (*Pearson's r* = .645, *p* < .001). Finally, students' familiarity with ABGW was positively correlated with their perceptions that it could be an effective intervention in social work practice (*Pearson's r* = .768, *p* < .001).

Analysis of Qualitative Data

The social work student survey used in this study included open-ended questions aimed at eliciting qualitative responses from the students about their experiences during the adventure-based activities. Qualitative data analysis supported the quantitative findings previously discussed. Three main themes emerged from the qualitative findings including ABGW's impact on 1) students' self-concept, 2) group cohesion and diversity, 3) students' knowledge and attitudes about ABGW. Table 4 overleaf provides examples of student comments in these three areas.

Table 4
Samples of Qualitative Data

Impact on Self-Concept

'I learned so much about myself. I learned that maybe I do have leadership skills that I never thought I had. I learned that if I try, I find strength to overcome my fears.'

Perception of Competence in Life-skills

'Participating in the GOAL program pushed me out of my comfort zone in a way that made me do a lot of reflection about my strengths and weaknesses. My participation prompted me to reflect on how I handle challenges in my life.'

'I gained self-confidence by challenging myself physically, mentally and emotionally. I remembered it is important to ask others for help and that expressing my feelings to others is ok.'

'I gained confidence about my own social work skills and abilities.'

Impact on Group Cohesion and Diversity Issues

'I got to see how a group comes together and uses this sense of togetherness to solve the challenges that we faced.'

'The group showed me that with help from others the solutions might be easier to achieve.'

'This experience helped me feel closer to the members in my group, and I could feel their support.'

'In adventure-based challenges, everyone in the group was equally important. Racial biases or other stereotypes didn't exist in this type of equal environment.'

'ABGW helps bring diverse populations together. In this kind of groupwork everyone is on the same playing field. Ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc. doesn't matter when you are hanging 12 feet off the ground and it is up to the group to give you support to get over the wall!'

Impact on Knowledge and Attitudes about ABGW

'I think ABGW can challenge people to think about situations in their lives in a new way. Many of the activities are similar to the challenges in life and the learning can be applied to real life.'

'I think ABGW would be an amazing experience for families to do together.'

'I think this type of experience can be used with a variety of different people. I think ABGW can be modified to work with all populations regardless of physical abilities.'

'I think you have to be careful when using this type of intervention because of boundary issues, safety concerns and accessibility, but I think that a lot of people can get something out of it.

'I can see using ABGW with adolescents or with anyone who wants to work on self-esteem, trust and relationship issues.'

Discussion

The results of this mixed-methods study showed that experiential training in adventure-based groupwork had a personal and professional impact on social work students. Students increased their perceptions of competence in life-skills, which is similar to the impact that ABGW has been shown to have on social work clients (Moote & Woodarski, 1997). Students were able to increase their overall sense of confidence and self-efficacy, and grew to see themselves as more able to face and solve problems. In fact, correlation analysis showed increased confidence and increased perception of problem-solving skills to be related. Students increased their awareness of their personal strengths and areas for growth, and left the program feeling stronger as individuals and as future social work professionals.

Along with an increase in students' self-concept, the findings from this study reaffirmed the research that ABGW increases group cohesion and mutual aid (Glass, 2008; Glass & Benshoff, 2002). Both the quantitative and qualitative data showed the impact of ABGW on the group process. Students reported that they were more engaged in the group, communicated better, developed more empathy for one another, and felt much closer at the end of the GOAL program. While we do not know exactly why this occurred, based on prior research, we can speculate that the intensity of the experience derived from active physical and emotional risk-taking in the context of a novel environment may have played a role (Gass, 1993). In order to better understand why these changes occurred, future research on ABGW should include process research that examines the actual elements of ABGW and correlates them with important outcomes like those identified in this study.

Interestingly, an important correlation between group cohesion and respect for diversity in the group was revealed in this study. The qualitative data triangulated this finding as students reported that the adventure-based activities can help 'bring diverse groups of people together.' This is not to say that diversity issues ceased to exist in the context of the ABGW program, but it does speak to the ability for ABGW to help people of diverse backgrounds find common ground through what Shulman (2006, p.272) referred to as the 'all in the same boat phenomenon.' Given the powerful impact of this phenomenon, more

thought can and should be given for heterogeneous group composition in the context of ABGW, and more research should be done in this area.

Lastly, experiential groupwork training in ABGW increased students' knowledge and skills in adventure-based groupwork. By engaging in an ABGW intervention as participants, a parallel process occurred between students' experiences and social work clients' experiences in this type of treatment modality and an important correlation between students' familiarity with ABGW and their belief in its efficacy and potential application with various groups of clients was found.

Limitations

The first major limitation of this study is that students self-selected into the study and voluntarily participated in the GOAL program. This means that the students who participated may have had a higher level of motivation which may have skewed the overall results of the pre-to-post test study by elevating survey scores both before and after the program. This 'ceiling effect' is a common occurrence in research and may be addressed in future studies by the use of a control group. Along with limitations due to the sampling, the research methodology also had several limitations. The one-group pretest-posttest design is subject to threats to internal validity, and the non-experimental design does not allow for the generalizability of the results. Likewise, the study does not measure actual behavioral change, but rather relies on student self-report to measure changes in self-perceptions, attitudes and awareness. While there are weaknesses inherent in the methodology of the study, the outcomes are relevant, especially when viewed in an exploratory context, and merit further use of ABGW in social work education. Future research that utilizes an experimental design may be more able to truly test the effectiveness of this type of experience for social work students.

Implications for groupwork in social work education and social work practice with groups

This study presents implications for groupwork in social work education *and* social work practice with groups. This study showed that ABGW can have a positive impact on students' perception of themselves, both personally and professionally. By engaging in experiential problem-solving activities, students' problem-solving abilities and professional confidence increased. Notably, students' reported an increased ability to ask for help, which is a critical skill to possess as a social worker in order to effectively utilize supervision and make good decisions. As students took on the participant role in ABGW, they were able to challenge themselves and take important steps towards becoming competent social workers.

This study also showed the profound impact that ABGW can have on group cohesion, which is an important therapeutic factor in groupwork. In particular, students reported an increased respect for diversity that came from participating in challenge and adventure activities. Data analysis showed a strong relationship between this respect for diversity and group cohesion. This important finding reaffirms Glass's (2008, p. 3) belief that ABGW:

> 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 deficit.

As such, ABGW can be considered a useful modality of groupwork for facilitating respect for diversity and promoting cultural competence of social work students. This alone is an important finding of this study, as it is critical to help groupwork 'trainees' to become more sensitive to multicultural issues (Conyne, 1998). Likewise, ABGW may be used in promoting intergroup dialogue and lessening the racial effect on group cohesion in social work practice (Glass, 2002). Citing Manning and Lucking (1993), Glass (2008, pp.3-4) also wrote:

> 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 challenge course program attempts to facilitate this type of experience for each member of the group.'

Finally, students increased their level of theoretical and experiential knowledge of ABGW and began to understand how ABGW might be applied effectively in a variety of social work settings. In this case, experiential education proved to be an effective means of facilitating student learning in this important content area of clinical practice, again reaffirming prior research in this area (Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008). This was especially true as shown by the qualitative data in which students not only reflected on the viability of the intervention, but also reflected on the need to 'be careful when using this type of intervention because of boundary issues, safety concerns and accessibility.' This level of thoughtfulness regarding the ethical issues surrounding ABGW might never have been attained without direct participation in the intervention.

Conclusion

Adventure-based groupwork has become an increasingly common intervention in social work practice. There is mounting research that it is an effective intervention for the development of life skills and social skills, improved self-concept, and increased group cohesion. As such, social work students need experiential training in ABGW in order to develop awareness of the application of this type of intervention, as well as improve their skills in this area.

This study gave social work students a chance to do just that, and in doing so *increased students' positive self-perception; group cohesion and mutual aid; and increased social work students' knowledge and skills in adventure-based groupwork.* These important findings merit the use of further experiential training in ABGW in social work education.

Most notably, the findings related to the relationship between respect for diversity and group cohesion merit the application of ABGW to be used in social work practice to foster tolerance, acceptance and appreciation among diverse groups. After all, as De-Lucia-Waack (1996, p.218) stated, 'All groupwork is multicultural,' and therefore requires

groupwork interventions that promote positive intergroup dialogue and functioning. Based on the findings of this and other studies, ABGW may be just the type of groupwork intervention needed for this kind of task.

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