Adventure Based Counseling and Invitational Theory

J. Scott Glass
East Carolina University
Ashley Kurz
Providence House

Invitational theory offers a framework within which counselors (as well as others) may improve and enrich the physical and psychological environments of their institutions while encouraging the development of the people who live and work there. Adventure based counseling provides a similar framework, focusing on many of the same core tenets of invitational theory. This paper addresses the combination of invitational theory and adventure based counseling, and provides examples of activities that may be implemented in the process.

Adventure Based Counseling and Invitational Theory

Adventure based counseling (ABC), and in particular low-element challenge courses, are group oriented programs that help participants learn to increase self-awareness, accept responsibility for their choices, act in an intentional manner, and emphasize the potential of clients. These outcomes are consistent with the tenets of invitational theory, such that an intentional combination of the two approaches offers a unique opportunity to help clients achieve positive therapeutic outcomes.

While the use of adventure based counseling has increased over the past couple of decades, the counseling profession has not fully accepted such programs as a viable approach for working with clients. One reason for this is likely the lack of comprehensive and indisputable evidence regarding the impacts of these various programs (Bruyere, 2002). Another potential issue keeping ABC programs from experiencing mainstream acceptance is the lack of attachment to counseling theories. Daniels and White (1994) stated that a clearly-defined theoretical perspective is a “hallmark of professionalism” (p. 106). If ABC hopes to experience this level of professionalism, it is important that such programs work to adhere to theories of working with others. Bauman and Waldo (1998) go so far as to state that “theory is what gives full meaning to the practice of and research in counseling” (p. 13).

J. Scott Glass, Department of Counselor and Adult Education, East Carolina University; Ashley Kurz, Providence House, Cleveland, Ohio.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to J. Scott Glass at East Carolina University, 223B Ragsdale Hall, Greenville, North Carolina 27858
Email: glassj@ecu.edu
Efforts have been made to connect ABC with counseling theories, including Adler’s Individual Psychology (Glass & Myers, 2001), and existentialism (Glass & Jackson, 2009). This article seeks to expand and build on that idea, connecting ABC with another theory, invitational theory. The purpose of this paper is to examine the potential use of adventure based counseling, particularly low-element challenge course programs, with invitational theory.

Adventure Based Counseling

Adventure based counseling has emerged as an innovative approach to traditional group counseling. ABC has its history in two well-established programs: Outward Bound and Project Adventure. The tenets of Outward Bound were conceived by Kurt Hahn in 1941 to help develop self-reliance among British seamen during World War II. Now a well-known outdoor experiential program, Outward Bound is comprised of wilderness curriculums, expeditionary learning schools, urban centers, and corporate team building and leadership activities (Outward Bound, 2007).

Project Adventure was pioneered by Jerry Pieh in Massachusetts in 1971 to allow for a broader audience to benefit from the experiential learning that gained momentum in the United States due to Outward Bound (Schoel & Maizell, 2002). Project Adventure sought to awaken students and instill responsibility by working the concepts and values of Outward Bound into the curriculum of physical education in schools. With a focus on reaping the therapeutic benefits inherent in adventure activities and experiential learning, ABC uses the elements of adventure and risk to promote growth and change among participants.

Because ABC has its roots in behavioral, cognitive, experiential, and group theories, it has been implemented successfully with various populations as a primary source of intervention or as an adjunct to more traditional counseling. ABC has been used as an intervention for a variety of populations including adjudicated youth, juvenile sex offenders, and adolescents with borderline personality disorder (Gass, 1993) as well as with families (Burg, 2001), adolescents who abuse substances (Gillis & Simpson, 1991), children in the foster care system (Fischer & Attah, 2001), for leadership development and teambuilding among first year college students (Bradley & Brown, 1989) as well as in corporations (Bronson, Gibson, Kichar, & Priest, 1992).

Participants in ABC programs experience psychological, sociological, educational, and physical benefits that can help improve their self-concepts, self-confidence, and well-being (Ewert, 1989; Kelly & Baer, 1971; William & Chun, 1973). ABC programs have shown a variety of positive results with young people including improved self-concepts, decreased anxiety, increased positive attitudes toward school (Lieberman & DeVos, 1982), increased group cohesion (Glass & Benshoff, 2002), and has produced positive results in identity development (Kaly & Heesacker, 2003) and treatment programs for adjudicated youth (Sakofs & Schuurman, 1991).

The term “adventure based counseling” is a large umbrella under which many programs are located. ABC 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 (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Schoel & Maizell, 2002). The element of risk inherent in these activities, both actual and perceived, is the catalyst that leads to growth.
ABC has also been used to develop self-esteem, group cohesion, and trust (Glass & Shoffner, 2001). Challenge courses offer the opportunity for teamwork, critical thinking, social interaction, assignment of new and challenging roles, the opportunity for leadership, and the development of problem-solving skills. In addition, ABC programs emphasize diversity as a strength, and seeks to help participants appreciate differences among group members (Glass, 2002). The novel setting and unique activities allow individuals to break patterns of behavior and recognize untapped potential while allowing them to also take on new roles and responsibilities. In most settings, low-element challenge course activities are ideal due to their relative safety and their capacity for large group participation.

While low-element challenge courses are encompassed by the ABC label, there are some unique characteristics which set these programs apart from others. It is possible for some adventure experiences to last weeks or months (Harris, Mealy, Matthews, Lucas, & Moczygemba, 1993); however, low-element challenge courses are typically shorter in duration, at times lasting only a few hours. In addition, Outward Bound as well as other ABC entities may utilize high-element exercises constructed 25 or more feet above the ground (Steinfeld, 1997), whereas LECC programs consist of activities that are constructed closer to the ground, requiring less physical risk of the participants. Finally, a third difference is that low-element challenge courses programs are generally conducted in groups and emphasize group cooperation to a greater extent than do some high-element ABC programs.

It is important to note that low-element challenge course programs attempt to push participants outside of their physical and psychological comfort zones and help them effectively deal with perceived risk and the resulting fears, in an effort to discover previously unrecognized potential. The concept of perceived risk has been an important component of most adventure based counseling programs (Davis-Berman & Berman, 2002). Low-element challenge course programs consist of a series of elements designed to require participants to work together to solve problems or challenges (Steinfeld, 1997). The elements used will differ according to desired outcomes, which will vary according to the clientele being served (Harris et al., 1993).

Invitational Theory

Invitational theory has, at its core, values of trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality (Purkey & Schmidt, 1990), which suggests that human potential is optimally realized by places, policies, programs and processes that are designed with the purpose to invite development, and by persons who are intentionally inviting with themselves as well as with others. Being intentionally inviting refers to people purposefully and intentionally creating an inviting environment by emphasizing mutual respect and human potential in all aspects of an environment (Purkey & Schmidt, 1990). In order to be intentionally inviting the values listed above need to be manifested consistently. When counselors are intentionally inviting they demonstrate effective helping skills and unconditional acceptance for themselves and others (Smith & Mack, 2006). A benefit of invitational theory is its adaptability, making it possible to implement its tenets in a variety of settings.

Central to invitational theory is the development of an individual’s self-esteem (Zeeman, 2006). Self-concept is often recognized as the catalyst for action, interaction and decision-making in the majority of life’s situations. Invitational theory does not focus on analyzing past events as a prerequisite for change. Instead, the theory emphasizes the here-and-now, works to improve the environment and encourages thinking, behaving and acting, which results in better
decision-making, productive behavior and happiness (Zeeman, 2006). Purkey and Schmidt (1990) highlight the importance of respect, trust, optimism and intentionality in invitational theory. Respect in this context suggests that counselors have a relationship with clients based on valuing each other and being treated with dignity.

**ABC & Invitational Theory**

Merging invitational theory in an ABC challenge course setting begins with the program’s goals. While ABC programs aim to alleviate clients’ immediate concerns, like invitational theory, they also encourage professionals to explore the almost limitless potential of clients’ future human development (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996). In addition, invitational theory and ABC programs each strive to create an intentionally inviting atmosphere to participants. Schmidt (2004) stated that invitational theory promotes positive relationships with others, improved physical environments, and systems fostering respect in which all persons, regardless of diverse backgrounds, can thrive. Each of these ideas can be developed in an ABC challenge course setting. Invitational learning is a theory that embraces and honors diversity (Schmidt, 2007), just as ABC programs emphasize diversity among members as strengths rather than weaknesses (Glass, 2002).

Invitational theory advocates programs that encourage beneficial relationships with others. ABC challenge course programs emphasize this connection with others as well. Corey (1985) and Yalom (1995) each view cohesiveness as a necessary, yet insufficient condition for groups to progress to the working stage. Yalom compared the development of cohesiveness in a group to the creation of the relationship between a client and counselor in individual therapy. However, Yalom pointed out that cohesiveness in a group setting is a broader concept than in individual counseling because it encompasses the group member’s relationship, not only to the group leader, but also to the other group members (Griffin & Pennscott, 1991).

While some elements of a low-element challenge course program focus on leadership abilities and others stress communication skills, all activities emphasize group cohesion. Engaging in activities that facilitate group cohesion typically requires few physical demands and encourages participants to share responsibility and solve problems as a team. While ropes courses may highlight individual accomplishments, low-element challenge courses require participants to display cooperation and utilize teamwork, and communication skills (Harris et al., 1993).

Successful solutions to challenges depend upon the extent to which group members cooperate, trust, and communicate with one another. Just as invitational theory emphasizes trust, ABC programs work to build strong relationships between group members and the group leader. In order to participate successfully in some of the unique and demanding challenges, it is important that participants learn to rely on one another to complete the tasks.

In addition, participants’ unique perceptions of events are important to the utilization of ABC programs, as well as invitational theory. William Purkey states that a person’s behavior is based on his or her perceptions, and people behave in ways that are the most logical to them in any given situation (Purkey & Schmidt, 1990). In ABC programs, group members become aware of the perceptions of other members through debriefing, or processing, which takes place during and at the conclusion of each challenge. Programs using adventure based counseling allow group members to become aware of the perspectives of others and incorporate this information into the
decision-making process by working as a team on a common goal. In addition, these group exercises impart lessons that participants later can apply to challenges in their personal lives.

Intentionality is also crucial for both invitational theory and ABC programs. While invitational theory suggests that people should act in purposeful ways to create a safe and welcoming atmosphere, ABC programs also require counselors to be intentional as they lead groups. It is critical that counselors intentionally lead groups through a series of challenges that have been purposefully selected. Groups are by nature different from one another, therefore it is important that they are not all led through the same order of activities. Instead, it is expected that group leaders intentionally choose activities that will challenge group members, while asking them to complete tasks matching their level of ability.

The expectation is that participants will experience a sense of trust and grow closer as a team (Wolfe & Samdahl, 2005). Since the goals of adventure based counseling activities are to improve self-esteem and promote group cohesion and interpersonal skills, group members are taught ways to facilitate growth toward these goals regardless of the outcome of the challenges. Using the PARS (Processing: Activity, Relationships, and Self) model for processing (Glass & Benshoff, 1999) after each activity, individuals learn how to focus more on promoting the positive aspects of the group and on illuminating strengths of the members rather than focusing on task completion (Glass & Shoffner, 2001). The result is an inviting atmosphere built more upon strong relationships and mutual respect, than on successful challenges.

While studies on adventure based counseling are limited, research does suggest that participants perceived increased group cohesion as a result of engaging in a challenge course program (Glass & Benshoff, 2002). In addition, Glass and Benshoff (2002) discovered that race was not a significant variable in the development of cohesion. This aligns with the invitational belief that systems, such as challenge courses, should foster environments in which all persons, regardless of diverse backgrounds, can flourish, and positive relationships can be formed. One study (Holman & McAvoy, 2003) which examined the linkages between the means (the service) and the ends (the consequences and values important to the individual) found that the strongest links were between teamwork and relationships with others. The group is emphasized throughout the ABC challenge course program. It is hoped and expected that group cohesion and beneficial human relationships will be a product of the experience.

Optimism is another of the core tenets of invitational theory (Purkey & Schmidt, 1990). ABC programs use optimism as well. While leading groups through challenges, it is not uncommon for group members to become frustrated with a lack of success, or difficulty completing certain tasks. Through processing, counselors of ABC programs use this as an opportunity to highlight strengths and focus on positives. Counselors ask group members to address problems they are having as a group, and to develop a common plan for successful completion of the challenge. At the same time, members are asked to identify strengths of the group, and things that they are doing well, regardless of the success currently being experienced. Positives are highlighted and strengths are discussed. Once a plan has been identified and agreed upon, the group then attempts again to implement the plan and successfully complete the task. Another important aspect of invitational theory is an improved physical environment. The physical environment also plays an integral role in adventure based programs (Baker, 2005). In an ABC low-element challenge course program, participants are intentionally removed from their normal social contexts to engage in a number of physical activities that are not often related directly to the group's primary purpose but seek to support the objective of attaining new goals, both as individuals and as a group (Martin & Davids, 1995). The therapeutic power of the
environment is the vital driving force that underpins all outdoor therapy (Ibott, 1999) and should be recognized as a catalyst for the complete development of one’s self.

Although adventure based counseling does not specifically address the physical environment of the educational structure, engaging in challenge courses offers group members the opportunity to improve their social and emotional environments. Through immersion in a challenge course, the group not only has the chance to positively engage with one another and build relationships, but they will also interact with the environment, reaping the benefits of the outdoors. One study (Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997) suggested, “In adventure programs, the highest ranking of importance for participants is the enjoyment of nature” (p. 76).

Simply being in a different environment gives group members in adventure based counseling the opportunity to experience dissonance which leads to growth. By removing individuals from stagnant and even harmful and destructive environments, they can be given the opportunity to experience both behavioral and affective change. This supports the theory of the restorative environment which posits that the location of an adventure based counseling group is a powerful therapeutic element when the setting represents a change from one’s usual environmental context, is able to sustain the group’s interest and fascination with the changed environment, and is compatible with the purpose of the group’s mission (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). The group cohesion and personal gains made on a challenge course do not need to dissipate after the completion of the tasks. With successful debriefing, the facilitator of an adventure based counseling group can help participants transfer their learning and growth back into their larger social context with lasting benefits (Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997).

**Examples of ABC Elements**

While adventure based counseling was originally developed for wilderness settings, the activities often can easily be adapted to any number of environments (Glass & Shoffner, 2001). These challenges must also occur sequentially within an invitational framework. As an illustration of an adventure based counseling group, a list of activities (Rohnke, 1984) along with brief descriptions is explained. The activities can be used with a variety of groups, and ages of participants, although typically participants have been in third grade to adulthood. The activities may be used to highlight any number of issues, based on the needs of the group. The counselor determines the focus on the activity by leading the discussion around a particular theme (i.e., self-esteem, problem-solving, etc.).

**Activity 1 – Moon Ball**

Moon Ball is an appropriate first activity for a group since it is both fun and non-threatening, helping to foster an inviting atmosphere. Group members must keep an inflated beach ball in the air for as long as possible. The rules are few, but require that the same person may not hit the ball twice in a row, while the entire group counts out loud each time the ball is hit. The count returns to zero if the same person hits the ball twice in a row, or if the ball makes contact with the ground.

The participants are given a few minutes to practice, and then called together to decide on a goal that they may be able to reach in three attempts. They are encouraged to discuss strategies and when they state they are ready, they attempt to reach their goal. The purpose of this activity is for the group members to work together to determine and reach their goals. It is a non-
threatening exercise which is geared towards getting them used to the idea of working with others in a group. The counselor is to be encouraging throughout the process, even when the group experiences difficulty is achieving its goal. If the counselor becomes aware of the group having problems working together, or reaching its goals, it is then appropriate to stop the group, have them sit down close to one another and discuss possible reasons for the difficulty.

During this discussion, the counselor facilitates group discussion to identify potential solutions to their problems and ways of correcting them. After such discussion, it would be appropriate for the counselor to let the group attempt to reach their goals once again. The emphasis for the counselor here would be to identify positive ways of problem solving, rather than focusing heavily on the accomplishment of the chosen goal (e.g., number of hits reached). Before moving on to another element, it is important to once again have the group sit down and identify ways this activity might relate to their everyday lives (e.g., having trouble working with others, problem solving effectively, letting people down). This allows for a transfer of meaning, so that the participants are able to gain some personal learning from the experience.

**Activity 2 – Telephone Pole Shuffle**

The Telephone Pole shuffle is an appropriate second activity because it continues the process of challenging students to deal with tougher situations and issues, while still providing risk that is appropriate for their group stage. For this activity, participants are asked to stand shoulder-to-shoulder in a random order on a log, or telephone pole, which is suspended just a few inches off the ground. The counselor then asks the group to line up in order of their birthdays (or their height). To get in order, the group must follow a few directions: (a) no one in the group is allowed to touch the ground, doing so would cause the group to start over in their original order; (b) the group members are allowed and encouraged to touch and hold onto one another; and (c) when in order, they must notify the counselor. The element is completed when the group is correctly in order. This activity emphasizes the concept of looking out for other people and illuminates the issue of personal space.

Even though the log is only a few inches off the ground, it is possible for participants to lose their balance and fall to the ground. Therefore, group members are encouraged to hold on to one another and protect the other participants from potential injury or embarrassment. The necessity of touching one another in order to be successful forces participants to deal with issues related to personal space. How group members react to the loss of personal space, and how they perceive the reactions of others will affect the dynamics of the group. Invitational theory views behavior as a function of how individuals perceive the world (Purkey & Schmidt, 1990). Therefore, it is important for group leaders to create an environment that is built on trust, so that group members will perceive a real sense of cohesion among the group.

In addition, this activity creates a forum to discuss the difference between encouragement and criticism, as it is likely the group will have to start over a number of times before completing the challenge. The counselor can teach students to offer encouragement to other group members rather than making negative comments (e.g., “Why can’t you stay on the log?”). The hope is that positive talk will increase members’ feelings of belonging and will cause students to appreciate the other members of the group. Strengths of the group are emphasized, and positives are discussed in addition to the development of a new plan. A sense of optimism is created to keep individuals engaged in the process and to see the good in what has been accomplished, unrelated to the successful completion of the element.
Again, it is appropriate for the counselor to stop the activity at any time to discuss problems the group is experiencing, or to develop new strategies they might implement. As with the previous activity, it is important to have the group discuss what might have been learned, and how this activity might relate to their everyday lives.

**Activity 3 – Shipwreck**

Leaders select activities that provide an appropriate level of challenge for a group. After completing the first two activities, Shipwreck is introduced to increase the risk level if the counselor determines the group is ready to safely participate in this activity. A small wooden platform, approximately three feet by three feet and a few inches tall is placed on the ground. The group is then given the task of getting as many participants as possible to stand on the platform at one time and for them to remain off the ground for at least 5 seconds. The group members must: (a) have all of their feet off the ground, with each person having at least one foot on the platform; and (b) not stand on each other’s shoulders or lift people off the ground. When the group begins to fall off of the platform, participants are encouraged to let go of each other so they do not pull the group down on top of them. Issues of safety and protection become important with this exercise. Once again, personal space is invaded and the exercise demands that participants be close to one another in order to be successful.

As with the earlier activities, it is important for the counselor to help facilitate this process. For example, arguments are monitored so they do not get out of hand, and time is given to discuss problems and potential solutions. While counselors need to be careful not to rescue participants too quickly from these conflicts, they must be monitored appropriately, and processing is encouraged when this becomes the case. The goal here would be for the group to eventually resolve its own issues without relying on the counselor’s leadership to problem solve, and for the group to recognize the varying perspectives and plans for success generated by different members in the group. Again, the counselor is expected to be encouraging, making the activity challenging but all-the-while being supportive, continuing to create an inviting atmosphere.

**Wrap Up of Activities**

After completing the activities chosen by the counselor, groups should always be given the opportunity to sit together and process what has taken place. Corey (2000) stated that one of the most important group leadership skills is, “assisting group members in transferring what they have learned in the group to their outside environments” (p. 128). Group members examine their experiences and are challenged to apply what they have learned through the adventure based experience to their relationships and activities outside the group. Students are asked to recognize and discuss strengths they witnessed in the group, as well as in themselves. The emphasis is placed on what has been learned through the process, not on the completion of the challenges.

**Discussion**

Adventure based counseling and invitational theory compliment each other due to their similarities. Both emphasize the importance of the environment and the importance of relationships. Invitational theory suggests that the beliefs a person generates impact how other
life experiences are interpreted. ABC understands the importance of individual perceptions, allowing group members to share varying interpretations of what has taken place.

Adventure based counseling utilizes the environment as a catalyst for changing group members’ attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions. Adventure based counseling facilitates structured adventure activities that progressively intensify in the level of participation required, the risk involved, and the opportunity for growth and change. The interactions between group members encourage participants to send each other uplifting, positive messages that can enhance their self-concept. Likewise, invitational theory also posits that beliefs and perceptions can be altered by sending positive, self-affirming messages (Purkey, 2000). Furthermore, both adventure based counseling and invitational theory have similar underlying assumptions, including the importance of trust, respect, reciprocity, and the capacity to change. These concepts emphasize the dynamics between individuals and the opportunity people have to positively influence others.

Adventure based counseling fully supports the goals of invitational theory by allowing participants to recognize their own potential and to become intentionally inviting to others. Coupling these two concepts promotes engagement in new experiences, fosters the development of an internal locus of control, and builds a sense of responsibility within the participants. Both adventure based counseling and invitational theory adhere to the notion that education should be a collaborative and cooperative activity. In addition, both believe that individuals possess untapped potential and that this potential can best be discovered by people who are intentionally inviting.

In summary, both adventure based counseling and invitational theory recognize that people have the desire to be accepted and supported. Both also emphasize trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality. These concepts can be adapted to work with a myriad of individuals to achieve both personal and group goals that support the dignity and worth of all participants. The therapeutic benefits of an adventure based group experience is not limited to the group members; participants transfer lessons to their daily lives, thereby inviting the people in their primary environment to also benefit from the adventure experience.
References


Bauman, S., & Waldo, M. (1998). Existential theory and mental health counseling: If it were a snake, it would have bitten! *Journal of Mental Health Counseling, 20*, 13-17.


