

Relational Aggression and Adventure-based Counseling:

A Critical Analysis of the Literature

by

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ABSTRACT

Relational aggression has received a great deal of attention in recent literature. The purpose of this study is to analyze literature in the fields of relational aggression and adventure-based counseling to identify recommendations for the use of adventure-based counseling as a viable treatment for relational aggression. Specifically, this review asks, “What recommendations are presented within the literature for the use of adventure-based counseling as a viable intervention for behaviors associated with relational aggression?”

Research findings provide a definition of relational aggression including a discussion regarding the specific covert acts committed in this form of aggression. Prevalence and intervention and prevention are also discussed. The historical roots of adventure-based counseling are discussed as well as major constructs of this form of counseling. Benefits of adventure-based are also examined. Although no literature under review directly identifies

adventure-based counseling for use with relationally aggressive females, the benefits of adventure-based counseling mirror the recommendations for treatment of relational aggression. Critical analysis and recommendations offer suggestions for future researchers and practitioners utilizing adventure-based counseling as an intervention and prevention method for relational aggression.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Many individuals, when asked to recall a specific detail about the past week, cannot recall what they may have had to eat for lunch yesterday, or what time they received an important phone call on Monday. However, when asked to think about an incident in which they were the target of exclusion, isolation, or gossip as an adolescent, most people will be able to recall the incident with intense commitment to the details surrounding that one experience (McKay, 2003). Relational or indirect aggression is defined as any covert action perpetrated on another that could and many times will compromise the victim's relationships with others and her social standing in the school community (Van Schoiack-Edstrom, Frey, & Beland, 2002).

Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, and Ruan (2000) reported that 29.9% of students in grades six through ten have been the victims of moderate to frequent bullying by peers. Authors Raskauskas and Stoltz (2004) stated that 75% of students reported having experienced some form of bullying while in school. This victimization is associated with increased levels of school failure, depression, and suicidal ideation (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004). What is concerning about these numbers is that they may not be an accurate account of the experiences of students, and female students in particular. While physical aggression is an overt form of bullying that is easy to define and identify, relational aggression is covert and less easy for students to identify. Raskauskas and Stoltz (2004) found that many adolescent girls cannot correctly define relationally aggressive tactics as an act of bullying or aggression, and thus these actions often go unreported to teachers and other school officials. Relational aggression includes acts such as gossip, exclusion, social isolation, writing notes about other students, and stealing friends and romantic partners. Students who perpetrate these tactics also use more direct confrontational

techniques such as threatening to end friendships and withhold social support from others (Crothers, Field, & Kolbert, 2005).

Crothers et al. (2005) reported that, from 1995 to 2005, studies have shown that adolescent females are just as likely to be aggressive in their relationships with others when compared to male counterparts. The difference lies in the ways in which females choose to perpetrate these aggressions. Females are more likely to use their social intelligence to perpetrate covert acts of aggression.

While women and girls of today enjoy many more freedoms than the women at any other time in history, they are still affected by, what Crothers et al. (2005) called, oppression and sexism in the form traditional definitions of what emotions are appropriate for women to display. Females still feel restricted in displaying outward expressions of anger. This restriction pushes female adolescents to attempt covert strategies to release these expressions of anger. Owens, Shute, & Slee (2000) stated that it is common for young girls to utilize relationally aggressive strategies to gain control of friends and increase power over others. Relational aggression may also be an effective way to increase popularity among other students by showing the ability to wield and manage social power (Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004).

Gilligan (2003) proposed that women and young girls base much of their self-identity on the feelings of connectedness with others. This acceptance by other females becomes essential to the development of identity and morality. What then, happens to the identity and morality of students who fall victim to social ostracism and isolation at the hands of fellow female classmates? Crick and Grotpeter (1995) reported that a positive correlation exists between relational aggression and loneliness, rejection, and social isolation.

When considering the social and emotional consequences of relational and indirect aggression it is important to carefully consider an intervention that will work with the social nuances that are present in acts of relational aggression. Adventure-based counseling offers a treatment methodology that addresses the issues present with relational aggression. It offers an intervention that has been utilized to counter ostracism and isolation. Adventure-based counseling interventions have also shown to improve interaction and group cohesion of participants. When considering a treatment modality for relational aggression, it is important to critically consider adventure-based counseling as a viable treatment option for use with relationally aggressive females

Adventure-based counseling originally began with educator Kurt Hahn in the private schools of Europe. Hahn wanted to format a curriculum that would allow for the education of the total individual. Eventually Hahn's model developed into the Outward Bound system and was adapted to the traditional school setting by Jerry Peih, the founder of Project Adventure (Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988).

Adventure-based counseling (ABC) utilizes techniques from various education theory perspectives. What is unique to ABC is the setting in which it is used, the use of metaphor to generalize learned skills to real life, and the presence of some sort of risk on the part of the participant (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). This risk may be real risk or risk that is just perceived by the client. Students participate in adventure-based counseling where they experience new situations that challenge old ways of thinking. Students become involved in activities in which they need to face fears and rely on others for support and guidance. ABC curricula often include activities such as trust falls, team building initiatives, low and high ropes courses, and can also include wilderness expeditions and solo camping experiences.

Rosol (2000) stated that the goal of these programs is to encourage empowerment, responsibility, confidence, and group cohesion between participants. Students are able to work together in new and challenging situations to process thoughts and feelings and make connections between how their behaviors affect relationships with others (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). The majority of ABC activities rely on the work of the group as a whole. This provides the opportunity for students to learn new interpersonal skills, to build trust with others, and gain a sense of belonging (Hill, 2007).

Statement of the Problem

The benefits of adventure-based activities appear to directly counter the isolation that is caused by acts of relational aggression. This study, through a qualitative literature review will examine the definition, prevalence, and treatment of relational aggression. It will also examine adventure-based counseling including historical foundations, theoretical constructs, major concepts and empirical outcomes. This researcher will analyze the literature to identify an intersection between adventure-based counseling and relational aggression.

Research Questions

This study will critically analyze the available literature to provide answers to the following question: what recommendations are presented within the literature for the use of adventure-based counseling as a viable intervention for behaviors associated with relational aggression?

Assumptions and Limitations

This researcher assumed that the articles that are included in this study have been either peer reviewed or publisher reviewed. It is also assumed that websites cited may not have been

reviewed; however, these sites were originally cited within peer reviewed articles. The rigor of the studies included in this critical analysis may vary.

The research for this study looked at the school aged populations. Therefore, the research on college age or adult populations has not been considered. The sources presented in this study represent a small portion of the published information regarding the topics under consideration.

Definition of Terms

A few terms should be identified in relation to this study. They are as follows:

Adventure-based counseling - (ABC) The counseling process through which participants are placed in an unknown situation that has some perceived risk.

Debriefing – The act of verbally and emotionally processing the psychological outcomes of an intervention or element in ABC. Generalization occurs during debriefing.

Generalizing - The act of applying knowledge acquired during the adventure activity to a real life situation.

Relational aggression - Any covert act of aggression that is harmful to another person including, but not limited to: gossip, acts of exclusion or isolation, and scape-goating. Relational aggression can also be labeled as indirect aggression and social aggression.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This chapter will begin with a discussion of relational aggression and its defining characteristics. It will continue with brief discussion of prevalence and treatment or prevention options. The second half of this literature review will include research on the evolution of adventure-based counseling (ABC), the important components of ABC, and finally the benefits of adventure-based counseling programs.

Relational Aggression

Research in the past three decades regarding the issue of relational aggression has used different terms. The terms indirect aggression, social aggression, and relational aggression have all been used. For the purpose of this study the term relational aggression will be used as it appeared the most in recent literature.

Archer and Coyne (2005) argued that the three kinds of aggression (social, indirect, and relational) all have a commonality. Indirect, social and relational aggressions share a common goal in that they center on more covert tactics to meet the end result. Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, and Kaukianen (1992) described indirect aggression as “a type of behavior in which the perpetrator attempts to inflict pain in such a manner that makes it seem as though there is no intention to hurt at all” (p. 118). The authors explain that the goal of the perpetrator in committing the aggressive act is to remain anonymous to the victim, thus avoiding counter-aggression. It is this covert nature that defines relational and indirect aggression.

Crick and Grotpeter (1995) proposed that aggression is the intent to harm the respected goals of the specific gender of the intended target. This means that when the intended target is male the goal to be harmed is that of physical superiority; when the target is female the goal that is harmed is that of relational harmony. Bjorkqvist et al. (1992) found that by the age of middle

school, girls have developed twosomes and have increases their verbal social skills, relying less on physical control to meet needs. Bjorkqvist et al. (1992) hypothesized that this reliance on verbal and social interaction facilitates the use of covert tactics to manipulate relationships.

Past research has often ignored the type of aggression that is relevant to the relationships of females. Archer and Coyne (2005) concur, reporting that the majority of research until the late 1980's, ignored the subtleties involved in relational aggression. The degree of aggressiveness in females has been largely underestimated when we only consider overt and more physical acts of aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

What then, are the covert tactics used in relational aggression? Relational aggression encompasses the damage or threat of damage to relationships from one individual to another. It includes retaliation through the withdrawal of interaction, and ignoring of the victim (McKay, 2003). Van Shoiack-Edstrom et al. (2002) defined relational aggression as any behavior that damages or compromises the victim's peer relationships or social standing by means of covert action. More specifically, they stated that relational aggression can include: gossiping, social exclusion, and isolation. It was also reported that relational aggression included stealing friends or romantic partners, threatening to withdraw support or friendship, and purposeful ignoring (Crothers et al., 2005).

The Ophelia Project included the building of alliances against a victim and cyber bullying among the acts defined as relationally aggressive (Ophelia Project, n.d.). According to The Ophelia Project, relational and indirect aggression may also be separated into two categories; the first being proactive in which the behaviors achieve a goal. For example, a goal oriented aggressive behavior may include spreading rumors to have others form an affinity towards the perpetrator and increase social status. The second category is reactive in that it includes

behaviors that are protective, defensive and retaliatory responses to another's behaviors (Ophelia Project, n.d.). The author, Conway (2005) defined relational aggression as behaviors that are intended to hurt the social goals of others by means such as rumors, gossip and promoting rejection by peers.

A complete definition of the problem of relational aggression needs to include an analysis of why aggression of this type is chosen. Crothers et al. (2005) outlined a systemic approach to considering the etiology of relational aggression. The authors suggested that this form of aggression may be a by-product of a system that oppresses women. Traditional gender typing narrows the range of acceptable behaviors for girls who need to express anger but wish to remain "nice." The use of indirect aggression tactics seems to allow girls to gain power and control in relationships, and at the same time these covert tactics also allow girls to stick to the traditional definition of female roles in regards to anger expression. The girls are able to be aggressive without causing overt conflict within their relationships (Crothers et al., 2005). According to Conway (2005) gender norms within our society support the suppression of certain emotions such as anger. This suppression of anger may limit young girls' emotional regulation and lead to more covert, relationally aggressive acts (Conway, 2005).

Crothers et al. (2005) reported on a study of 52 ninth and tenth grade students. Through focus group interviews, three major themes were identified by participants when asked to respond to relationally aggressive situations. The first major theme was that of social abandonment. The authors proposed that, due to this fear, girls feel the need to be hyper-vigilant in maintaining relationships. In the study by Crothers et al. (2005) participants were asked why friends would start and spread rumors. The girls identified fun, social status gains, deflection, and jealousy as motivators for using rumors against friends. Girls reported a motivation to start

rumors in order to deflect criticism and isolation away from themselves. The actions also served to knock another girl down a few pegs, thus reducing her social status, while at the same time securing their own status by avoiding becoming a target themselves.

The Crothers et al. (2005) study also identified a second major theme to the relationally aggressive interactions. These actions many times included a third party. The participants of the study reported that the addition of another individual to the situation served as an ally to the perpetrator. Having an ally served to lessen the intensity of the interaction, as perceived by the perpetrator, and also allowed for the perpetrator to clarify and discuss with a perceived more objective partner.

In another study by Culotta and Goldstein (2008), results showed that students who reported being more relationally aggressive also showed a propensity for greater jealousy. Students reporting higher levels of jealousy likewise showed higher levels of relational aggression. The authors explained that jealous adolescents may misinterpret social cues due to envy and thus respond with relationally aggressive tactics.

Other research has suggested that while relationally aggressive behaviors may lead to the child or adolescent being disliked, it is also possible that rejection by peers may be a precursor to relationally aggressive tendencies (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). According to Culotta and Goldstein (2008) social anxiety may explain the propensity to develop these same tendencies. Children who have social anxiety may have attributed hostile intent to another's innocuous social interactions. This anxiety and the response to the perceived hostile intent could have resulted in actions that are relationally aggressive. The authors stated that for this reason, social anxiety could be a predictor for relational aggression (Culotta & Goldstein, 2008).

The significance of relational aggression can be understood in terms of consequences for those involved in relationally aggressive patterns. Relational aggression has been linked to higher levels of depression, loneliness and social isolation (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). According to the Ophelia Project website, relational aggression has also been linked to increased levels of suicidal ideation, anxiety, and lowered academic performance. Aggressors reported feeling unhappy; and experiencing social psychological distress in regards to current relationships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). McKay (2003) stated that both victims and aggressors are at risk for a variety of problems including: loneliness, depression, substance abuse, and lowered levels of connectedness to school communities.

Prevalence. Relational aggression and the covert nature of its tactics may not be subject to the normal rules of aggression and consequence in various settings. Although school may have rules that consequence overt physical violence, when aggression was behind the scenes or indirect, the perpetrator remained unknown and went unpunished (Culotta & Goldstein, 2008). Results of a pilot study by Raskauskas and Stoltz (2004) showed that with middle school females, acts of indirect aggression were more difficult for them to identify thus making the reporting of these events lessened.

Relational aggression has been evident in preschool age populations and may peak during the middle school years (McKay, 2003). A study by Crick and Grotpeter (1995) reported that of 491 participants, 15.6% of males were found to be overtly aggressive, while 17.4% of girls were found to be relationally aggressive. The authors reported that when relational aggression was considered a separate and distinct form of aggression, gender differences in perpetration were diminished.

Intervention and prevention. Most of past research on the treatment of aggression has focused on physical violence. Culotta and Goldstein (2008) offered suggestions for treatment of relational aggression. The authors maintained that perpetrators of relational aggression process social information differently when compared with peers. They recommended that these girls may benefit from an intervention/prevention program that helps them to understand and explore their own perceived threats in social relationships.

Van Schoiack-Edstrom et al. (2002) have studied one such treatment program. The Second Step Program is a commercially available program. The program helps to teach and foster pro-social behaviors and reduce impulsive and aggressive acts. Students in the second year of the program were less tolerant of verbal aggression and social exclusion. They were also more likely to view pro-social skills as easier to perform when compared to control group peers.

The Ophelia Project, reported by McKay (2003) and located in Erie, Pennsylvania, included a two day awareness program for middle school girls. The How Girls Hurt Each Other program helped students to understand their role in aggression. The girls participated in group discussion and role plays led by trained high school female mentors. The Ophelia Project website explained that relational aggression is a learned behavior and what children learn and tolerate in their younger years will affect future relationships. The website suggested that kids and adolescents need to be taught healthy behaviors (Ophelia Project, n.d.). Programs like these have shown promising effects especially when they include social competence programming and social interaction skills along with coping skills and stress management (Van Schoiack-Edstrom et. al., 2002).

Crick and Dodge (1994) took a more cognitive approach to the treatment of relational aggression. The authors proposed that an understanding of social information processing may be

helpful to those who seek to provide intervention for children that are socially maladjusted. The authors elaborated, explaining that there is a reciprocal relationship between social maladjustment and information processing. This means that poor adjustment to social situations leads to poor information processing regarding the instances. This inadequate processing allows children to make poor behavioral choices that elicit negative reactions from peers. This cycle leaves the individual with a negative understanding of social interactions. The authors expressed the need to consider the impact that these social experiences have on the way that an individual processes information. Conway (2005) suggested that emotional regulation and its relationship to relational aggression may be an arena for future research in regards to the treatment of this problem.

Few articles were found that discussed the treatment of relational aggression. None of these specifically addressed the use of adventure-based counseling as an intervention for use with relational aggression. A critical analysis of adventure-based counseling will allow for an evaluation of this form of counseling as a possible intervention method for relational aggression.

Adventure-based Counseling

Adventure-based counseling holds its roots in the work of Kurt Hahn's Outward Bound program. As an educator headmaster working in the private school system in Europe, Hahn believed that this traditional system and curriculum design was not adequate for the development of the "whole" child (Schoel, Prouty & Radcliffe, 1988). It was Hahn who laid the original foundations for the initial Outward Bound curriculum during World War I in Wales (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002).

The original concept of Outward Bound began as training for young men who were in need of survival training. The first course concentrated on training for the sea and the practical

application of the skills learned. Outward Bound programs began as response to continuing these training programs (Schoel et al., 1988).

Kurt Hahn's concept and original plan was always to utilize his curriculum in the traditional school settings. However, it was not until the late sixties and early seventies that programs were actually put into place. During this time, some schools had configured aspects of the Outward Bound curriculum and integrated them into the school programming. At first these schools offered programs that used Outward Bound instructors. Other places throughout the United States were incorporating aspects such as rock climbing and expeditions, which were led by the school's regular teaching staff. These programs were not fully integrated into the everyday student curriculum, and Jerry Peih sought to change this fact (Schoel et al., 1988).

Peih's concept of allowing the Outward Bound process to become an integrated part of the traditional school curriculum came to be called Project Adventure, which began in 1971. Through a grant from the Federal Office of Education, Peih was able to hire Outward Bound staff, and together with school educators, they began the task of organizing new curriculum that would allow adventure activities to be integrated with traditional curriculum subjects like physical education, English, history, and science (Schoel et al., 1988). In the mid eighties, it was estimated that 500 schools and institutions had adopted the Project Adventure model, and more than 5,000 education professionals had taken part in the trainings offered by Project Adventure staff (Schoel et al., 1988).

Components. What then is involved in the curriculum of programs such as Outward Bound and Project Adventure? These diverse experiential programs and learning approaches have many titles including: adventure education, adventure-based counseling, wilderness adventure, outdoor education, and therapeutic camping (Brentro & Strother, 2007).

All of these programs offer learning through experience. In the book, *Islands of Healing: A Guide to Adventure Based Counseling*, Schoel et al. (1988) stated that key elements to ABC curriculum include: “trust building, goal setting, challenge and stress, peak experiences, humor and fun, and problem solving” (p. 12). Students are challenged to experience activities such as rock climbing, trust falls, extended expeditions into the wilderness, and problem-solving group initiatives. Many of these activities can be used with individuals, but a large part of the activities emphasize an individual’s work within a group (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). It is this group orientation that provides an environment for youth to learn and practice interpersonal skills, to experience trust, team building, and to gain a sense of belonging (Hill, 2007). Corey (2009) told us that the group environment is a safe for adolescents to test their own limits. The authors continued to state that the group construct let the adolescents help each other toward self-understanding. The group members become instrumental and essential to one another’s growth.

Adventure-based counseling utilizes some traditional theories of counseling such as cognitive, behavioral, reality and rational emotive. ABC also uses some of the traditional theories of education, although it departs from these traditional theories through its setting and the use of metaphors for transferring learned skills to real life circumstances. Adventure-based counseling also differs because it relies on the use of both real and perceived risk by the participants. These theoretical concepts work to allow ABC clients to process thoughts, assess risk, hold themselves accountable, and make the connection that thinking and behavior affect relationships with others (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002).

Challenge and risk are important concepts to the foundation of adventure-based counseling. Brentro and Strother (2007) defined challenge as a stressful activity that works to promote strength, resiliency, and problem solving. Adventure is described as any unusual,

exciting, and remarkable experience in which the outcome is uncertain and the perception of risk is present (Brentro & Strother, 2007). Gillis (as cited in Hill, 2007) purported that when participants encounter challenge and risk in a new environment, a new experience is created that has no connection to preconceived thoughts of failure or success.

Wilderness therapy programs that utilize this risk or perceived risk, encourage feelings of responsibility to one's self and the group, and also encourage feelings of confidence and empowerment (Rosol, 2000). Effective adventure programs engage students in activities with well managed risk, that is, a balance between the perceived risk by the client and the real safety of the supportive environment. A clear distinction needs to be made between distress, which may cause fear and anxiety, and eustress, which can bring about excitement. This distinction calls for effective programs to understand the difference between forced challenge, in which participants are forced into challenges that make them anxious and fearful, and challenge by choice, which allows participants to choose participation based on comfort level (Brentro & Strother, 2007).

Schoel et al. (1988) stated that activity sequencing is important to the success of an adventure curriculum. It is this sequencing that ensures that certain activities are appropriate for the group. This ordering of activities allows for group members to learn skills and engage in risk that is within the ability of the individuals and allows for the group as a whole to feel successful in building trust among participants. As an adventure counselor for adjudicated female adolescents, this writer would sequence adventure activities such as: trust falls, low ropes initiatives, therapeutic rock climbs, shelter building, and overnight expeditions, to help the group meet objectives safely, while learning skills that would reduce the perceived risk of participating in the final challenge, a seventeen day wilderness trip.

Benefits. Ewert (as cited in Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002) stated that the benefits that arise from participation in outdoor adventure activities and counseling include increased psychological and spiritual ideas surrounding self-concept, confidence and well being. Outdoor adventure education programs have also been reputed as helping to develop specific personality characteristics in those who participate. The characteristics, as reported by Kimbrough (2007) include: perseverance, determination, cooperation, resourcefulness, and self-restraint.

Gillis, Lee and Thomsen (1996) reported positive benefits of adventure-based counseling programs in a meta-analysis study of research in the field. The authors reported the increase interpersonal behavior amongst participants in group, activity-based interventions. The authors continued, stating that participation in adventure-based intervention programs is effective in changing the behaviors and attitudes of adolescents. Gillis et al. (1996) reported numerous benefits of both short-term and long-term adventure-based intervention programs. These benefits include a positive change in attitudes surrounding responsibility and close friendships. Short-term wilderness ABC programs were reported to be effective in diminishing problem behavior and intensity and increasing self-perception amongst adolescent participants (Gillis et al, 1996).

One study by Glass (as cited in Conley, Caldarella, & Young, 2007), showed an increase in group cohesion. This study followed students, ages 11 to 14, as they participated in a one day low ropes course. Group cohesion was defined as how well a group was able to get along, complete tasks appropriately, care for one another, and include each other as part of the group.

Brento and Strother (2007) stated that the brains of the young participants often seek out stimulation through new experiences. Experiential learning and adventure activities offer supervised opportunities for this new stimulation, and also offer an alternative to the everyday

classroom learning. By participating in these new experiences, students are able to disrupt old patterns of behavior and develop new and changing ideas of behavior.

Generalization is an important process within the ABC culture. Through generalization and debriefing, leaders and students are able to emphasize the psychological, spiritual, and educational growth that has occurred during an activity, rather than emphasize the direct outcomes of the actual activity (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). For example, a therapeutic wall climb is not always about reaching the physical top of the wall. During the process of the wall climb a student may learn to deal with feelings of anxiety, or ask help from others, admitting that they need help. During the debriefing session with a client, the emphasis is placed on what the student learned about asking for help or dealing with anxiety. The generalization happens when the client is asked to transfer the new learned skills or cognitions to a familiar situation in his/her own real life. Fletcher and Hinkle (2002) reported that through the generalization process, there is an increase in reasoning, leadership skills, reflective thinking, conflict resolution, problem solving, and communication. Brentro and Strother (2007) continued to say that successful experiential learning allows students to utilize problem-solving skills, thus strengthening coping mechanisms for use in future adverse situations. These same authors went on to state that appropriately managed adventure activities foster positive bonds with adults and peers. This supportive environment allows for a perceived “failure” to become a learning experience, and a success to motivate participants toward mastery of a skill. Empathy and generosity are developed when students must rely on each other’s help (Brentro & Strother, 2007).

What recommendations are presented within the literature for the use of adventure-based counseling as a viable intervention for behaviors associated with relational aggression?

Relational aggression continues to be a focus of concern in recent literature. The covert nature of this form of aggression does not lend to a full understanding of prevalence among female adolescents, the most common perpetrator of relational aggression. The study of interventions for aggression has focused primarily on physical violence. Studies that have considered interventions for relational aggression discussed the benefits of programs that develop awareness regarding social perceptions and teach pro-social and stress management skills, decrease impulsivity and concentrate on social information processing. Adventure-based counseling has been shown to be effective in changing attitudes and behaviors among participants in this experiential and activity driven group intervention format. Although there are no studies that specify ABC as an intervention for relational aggression, the positive benefits of an ABC program mirror many of the needs of female adolescents who perpetrate this covert form of aggression. ABC has been effective in decreasing impulsivity, and increasing self-confidence, cooperation and group cohesion. Through the debriefing process, ABC participants are able to generalize newly acquired skills, cognitions and behaviors to other real life circumstances.

Chapter III: Summary, Critical Analysis and Recommendations

This chapter opens with a summary of the literature review. Critical analysis of the literature will provide implications for the use of adventure-based counseling in the treatment of relational aggression. This section will conclude with recommendations for researchers in the areas of relational aggression and adventure-based counseling as well as recommendations for practitioners.

Summary

Relational aggression continues to be a focus of concern in recent literature. The covert nature of the tactics involved in this form of aggression do not lend to a full understanding of prevalence among female adolescents, the most common perpetrator of relational aggression. Acts of relational violence are often not identified and therefore under reported (Culotta & Goldstein, 2008; Raskauskas & Stolz, 2004). These covert tactics include, but are not limited to: retaliation, ignoring the victim, social isolation and the threat of withdrawal of support or friendship (McKay, 2003; Van Schoiack-Edstrom et al., 2002; Crothers et al., 2005).

The goals of perpetrating an act of relational aggression are social in definition. Goals can include the acquisition of affinity from other non-victimized peers, the defense against another's aggressive actions, or the manipulation and disruption of the victim's intended social goals (Ophelia Project, n.d.; Conway, 2005; Bjorkqvist et al., 1992). The study of interventions for aggression has focused primarily on physical violence. Studies that have considered interventions for relational aggression discussed the benefits of programs that develop awareness regarding social perceptions and teach pro-social and stress management skills, decrease impulsivity and concentrate on social information processing (Ophelia Project, n.d.; Van Schoiack-Edstrom et al., 2002; Crick & Dodge, 1994).

Adventure-based counseling has been shown to be effective in changing attitudes and behaviors among participants in this experiential and activity driven group intervention format. Adventure-based counseling utilizes risk and perceived risk in a new, primarily outdoor setting; along with a group counseling model to promote positive growth amongst participants (Brentro & Strother, 2007; Rosol, 2000; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). Although no studies specify ABC as an intervention for relational aggression; the positive benefits of an ABC program mirror many of the needs of female adolescents who perpetrate this covert form of aggression. ABC has been effective in increasing self-concept, confidence, well being and promoting perseverance, determination, cooperation and self-restraint (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Kimbrough, 2007). In a meta-analysis of adventure-based field research Gillis et al. (1996) reported numerous benefits including an increase in pro-social interaction, positive behavior and attitudinal change, a decrease in intensity of problem behavior, and an increase in self-perception. Group Cohesion, as defined by how well a group is able to complete tasks and care for one another has also been shown to improve (Glass as cited in Conley, Caldarella & Young, 2007). Most often ABC utilizes situations and settings that are unknown to the client thus creating the perceived risk needed to promote new learning. Although these new settings may not mimic the exact experiences that clients may encounter in everyday life, through the debriefing process, ABC participants are able to generalize newly acquired skills, cognitions and behaviors to other real life circumstances.

This review researched the answer to the question, “What recommendations are presented within the literature for the use of adventure-based counseling as a viable intervention for behaviors associated with relational aggression?” There was little evidence for the use of ABC as an intervention for relationally aggressive attitudes and behaviors; furthermore, there were no

recommendations within the literature to suggest ABC's use as such. The literature reviewed in this study represents a small sample of the literature available on the topics of relational aggression adventure-based counseling. Conclusions and recommendations are based on the literature considered in this study.

Critical Analysis

What recommendations are presented within the literature for the use of adventure-based counseling as a viable prevention or treatment for behaviors associated with relational aggression? There is a gap in the literature that links the use of ABC for the treatment of relational aggression. No studies were uncovered that suggested any form of adventure-based counseling as treatment for this form of aggression.

The majority of the literature regarding the treatment of aggression focused on physical aggression rather than the more covert relational aggression. The literature that did discuss interventions of relational aggression, more often than not gave suggestions for what is needed in the course of treatment for aggression of this type (Culotta & Goldstein, 2008; Crick & Dodge, 1994; Conway, 2005).

One study was found that offered a measured decrease in relationally aggressive attitudes or tactics after a treatment program. The Second Step program study reported a decrease in the tolerance of relationally aggressive tactics and an increase in capability of performing pro-social skills. This program is one that focused on teaching new behaviors and reducing impulsivity and aggression (Van Schoiack-Edstrom et al., 2002). This study showed positive results from a large sample (n=714) over a period of two years of participation in this school-based intervention/prevention program. The study was performed using a control group, although the randomization of assignment to either group was compromised by teachers who

participated only if they were permitted to instruct their own classroom students. Although the validity of the outcomes was strengthened by the use of a control group, the study had variables outside the control of the researchers. Teachers reported that intervals between intervention lessons varied thus compromising the consistency across experimental groups. The study included outcomes for male and female participants and disaggregated the data to highlight the attitudinal changes based on gender. The disaggregated data helped to pinpoint the use of the Second Step Program to specifically address female attitudes around relationally aggressive acts. Although this study was one of the few that showed positive results, it did not include adventure-based counseling approaches.

The literature within this study focused on relational aggression, linking common attitudes, beliefs and deficits to identify etiology (Crothers et al., 2005; Conway, 2005; Culotta & Goldstein, 2008; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). It is viable to argue that with the suggested factors related to relational aggression as outlined by the above authors, an adequate treatment and prevention model could be found or created that would address the common attitudes, beliefs and deficits that are related to relationally aggressive acts. Following the recommendations of the literature would require interventions to address systemic, behavioral and cognitive issues. Systemically, treatment should address strict societal gender norms that limit the anger expression of females. Behaviorally, treatment would work to teach new skills in anger and stress management, social interaction and group cohesion (Van Schoiack-Edstrom et al., 2002; Ophelia Project, n.d.). Cognitive treatment approaches would address information processing as it is related to the perception of threat in social relationships. It is this perceived threat that leads to relationally aggressive acts (Culotta & Goldstein, 2008; Crick & Dodge, 1994).

Studies discussing the benefits of adventure-based counseling have not specifically addressed the use of ABC with the treatment for relational aggression. However, behavior change and new cognitive recognition are benefits of ABC that were also identified as positive treatment options for relational aggression (Gillis et al., 1996). Two of the adventure-based studies reviewed for this investigation report outcomes consistent with those recommended for intervention with relational aggression.

The Gillis et al. (1996) study provides a positive report on the benefits of adventure-based counseling. The researchers performed a meta-analysis of research on adventure-based counseling programs. This study provided a comprehensive view of outcomes within the field of adventure-based counseling. Although the Gillis et al. (1996) article did include populations outside the concern of this researcher, only those studies pertaining to an adolescent population were considered here. The authors reported benefits including an increase in pro-social interaction, positive behavior and attitudinal change, a decrease in intensity of problem behavior, and an increase in self-perception, all of which were identified as needed for relationally aggressive youth. The findings of the meta-analysis should be used with caution as specific information regarding the design of each study was not accessed by this researcher.

The study by Glass (as cited in Conley, Caldarella, & Young, 2007) reported an increase in group cohesion during a one day low ropes course. The Glass study is an unpublished doctoral dissertation, and further examination of the study design and methods was not conducted for this investigation. Participants were adolescents ages 11 to 14, similar to the population typically needing interventions for relational aggression. Although the Glass study does suggest that adventure elements such as low-ropes courses could be used to increase

cohesion amongst relationally aggressive females, close examination of the Glass study would be necessary to determine whether the findings connect to relationally aggressive populations.

The majority of the literature touting the benefits of adventure-based counseling has been qualitative. Studies such as these are valuable in that they report on common themes and understandings found in previous literature, however; methodological study and experimental design is needed. Despite the lack of experimental research regarding the use of adventure-based counseling as an intervention for relational aggression, the literature in this research does suggest the use of adventure-based counseling as intervention. The following are recommendations for researchers and practitioners.

Recommendations

Recommendations for future research include a focus on the prevalence of relational aggression, and further study on prevention and intervention with this form of aggression. Further study is needed to identify the elements and methods of adventure-based counseling interventions that are working to promote change within participants. Finally it is recommended that future research should focus on the use of adventure-based counseling for the treatment of relational aggression.

The prevalence of relational aggression is an area for future research. Due to the covert nature of relational aggression its tactics have been difficult for girls to define. Thus, it goes unreported to authority figures or may be difficult to measure during a study. A well defined measurement of relational aggression needs to be developed. Having a measurement will enable researchers to measure a baseline frequency of relationally aggressive acts. Having a measure of the prevalence of relational aggression will quantify the problem and emphasize the need for intervention development. This measurement tool will assist in providing evidence of specific

behaviors to target for treatment and prevention. Once specific behaviors are defined we may be able to develop a more efficient treatment option that will help to teach replacement skills.

Further research is needed on treatment plans that are currently in place to measure what components or techniques are working to extinguish inappropriate behaviors. Research should focus on the specifics of what works within programs like The Second Step Program. Research needs to be focused on specific methodologies like adventure-based elements and settings. These techniques can then be generalized to newly crafted programs.

Further research is also needed that identifies specific techniques and elements of adventure-based counseling that are working. Which elements of ABC promote change? Is it the presence of risk in unknown settings, or the debriefing and generalizing process that is most essential to the learning process during ABC? Using experimental design to legitimize ABC elements and techniques as a change agent will lend more credence to practitioners of adventure-based counseling.

Finally, research is needed that specifically measures adventure-based counseling as an intervention for relational aggression. Studies should be rigorous in experimental design utilizing a control group to ensure that changes in attitude and behavior can be attributed to the adventure-based interventions.

Practitioners wishing to utilize an intensive adventure-based counseling program should have a strong understanding of the constructs inherent to ABC. An intensive program could be defined as having high risk activities such as: high-ropes elements or wilderness overnight and solo camping elements. The program should utilize the group construct. Facilitators must have training in group facilitation, as many of the positive outcomes develop from the interactions

between members. Adventure activities need to be well framed and sequenced as to allow clients to work toward success as the activities increase in perceived risk.

When clients are challenged by safe risk, a learning environment is created. Students learn to practice new skills that will allow success and must learn to rely on others for assistance. This interpersonal connection helps individuals to practice new coping, anger management, and communications skills that they may generalize to other populations. When risk becomes danger, students are unable to feel safe enough to try new skills. Female adolescent participants with relational aggression issues, who are learning to express anger with peers in assertive and appropriate ways, need to have a sense of security in order to practice these skills. If the individual senses danger she may not be able to retrieve newly processed information and may revert to habitual expressions of anger. It is essential to balance this perceived risk with knowledge and supervision on the part of the facilitator.

Practitioners must remember that challenge by choice should be the rule. Students should be encouraged to take risks and be supported in facing fears with new skills, however forcing students to participate in adventure-based activities can be counterproductive to growth. The group orientation of adventure-based counseling lends itself to an increase in insight for participants; who through supervised interactions, learn to empathize with group members and gain awareness as to how their behavior affects others within the group. This increased insight and awareness, when generalized to everyday interactions may help to prevent relationally aggressive tendencies. When participants are placed in a new situation that has some risk, or at least some perceived risk, members are unable to utilize poor skills effectively. The group involved in the “risky” situation must quickly work to hone new skills to survive in a new situation. The use of metaphor in ABC activities also assists with generalizing newly learned

skills to everyday situations. Consider the use of a therapeutic wall climb with two adolescent females who have been relationally aggressive with each other. In an ABC program these girls would be challenged to climb the wall while one is blindfolded. In this risky situation, the blindfolded participant must use the new communication skills that she has learned to ask for help from her partner. If the girls are tethered together, they must both learn to communicate their feelings and needs and understand the needs of their partner. During the debriefing session these participants would be asked to consider how the communication skills that helped them in completing the wall climb could be used in a school or home setting.

Although the use of an intensive adventure-based counseling program will require training and extensive planning, the use of individual ABC elements are much easier to integrate into existing counseling repertoire. Elements such as trust and team-building initiatives can easily be used with groups of students in school through the school counseling curriculum. These initiatives, when used with relationally aggressive girls, may teach them how to voice feelings of anger and frustration to peers. Girls will also learn to listen to the feelings of others and accept feedback without internalizing their peer's feelings as a personal attack.

For practitioners wanting to try more intensive elements of ABC, ropes courses are viable options for day-long counseling adventures. Many universities, camps, and recreation facilities have low and high-ropes courses as well as climbing walls that can be accessed by the public. These facilities are ideal in that they are fully staffed with well trained leaders and facilitators who work with groups of students to identify needs and process group interactions.

This research study has reviewed the literature on relational aggression and adventure-based counseling. An answer was sought to the question, "What recommendations are presented within the literature for the use of adventure-based counseling as a viable intervention for

behaviors associated with relational aggression?” It was concluded that there is a distinct gap in the literature linking adventure-based counseling and relational aggression. Critical analysis of the literature presented evidence that outcomes of adventure-based interventions mirror the needs of relationally aggressive females. Recommendations for researchers and practitioners were also presented.

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