

# Group Counseling with Couples or Families: Adding Adventure Activities

H. Lee Gillis  
Warren C. Bonney

*A rationale is presented for using adventure activities in group counseling. Two case examples are used to describe the adaptation of these activities to group counseling with couples and single-parent-adolescent families.*

Most counseling groups with couples or families face issues involving trust, support, risk, challenge, leadership, problem solving, cooperation, competition, or communication. Many group leaders have developed structured exercises that are useful in confronting these issues. Using structured activities allows arts, crafts, dance, drama, music, writing, story telling, running, exercise, physical challenge, and even board games to provide a primary therapeutic function. Nickerson and O'Laughlin (1982) have indicated that "Action therapies employ nonverbal modes of relationship . . . as the chief therapeutic media in which conflicts are sorted out and resolved and through which intellectual and emotional energies are freed for more adaptive and creative living" (p. 4). Activities involving physical challenge or adventure through leader-designed, structured exercises are the primary focus of this article.

## PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES IN COUNSELING

Winn (1982) reported that physical (kinetic) human communication has been overlooked

---

*H. Lee Gillis is an assistant professor of psychology at Georgia College, Milledgeville, GA. Warren C. Bonney is professor of counseling psychology at the University of Georgia, Athens.*

in the field of counseling. He stated, "The active use of one's body in order to confront a physical problem will generalize to the use of one's psyche to master psychosocial challenges within and beyond the therapeutic environment" (p. 163). Winn surmised, "Since many of our fundamental beliefs . . . have a physical-motor basis, therapeutic attempts to repair a self image or increase interpersonal trust may be very accessible to a physical intervention" (p. 164). Jean Houston's (1982) experiential process for enhancing physical, mental, and creative abilities through psychophysical work is consistent with Winn's assessment of the need for an active, physical basis in counseling. Houston observed that many of "the talking therapies do not work as well as they might since . . . they do not knowledgeably involve the body in the therapeutic process" (p. xix).

Crocker and Wroblewski (1975) cited several helping functions of structured activities in counseling. These authors focused primarily on the usefulness of board games (e.g., Monopoly) and card games (e.g., poker) in counseling. Their list of helpful functions, however, also applies to many of the ways that more physically active exercises benefit group counseling. These functions include (a) generating data for discussion after the activity, including the projective assessment of



behaviors that might go unnoticed in other contexts; (b) setting up situations in which anxiety may be confronted; (c) using the physical activity as a metaphor for issues in a relationship or in the home; (d) creating an atmosphere of childlike playfulness to reduce adult resistances; (e) experimenting with new behaviors in a safe and permissive climate; and (f) modeling coping behaviors from other group members. Thus, depending on the counselor's goals and purposes for the group, activities can serve a variety of helpful functions.

A primary advantage of using physically challenging activities is the variety of issues that can be dealt with in a single activity. Any one physical activity can simultaneously provide the group with issues such as challenge, mastery, empowerment, cooperativeness, competitiveness, trust, risk, communication, problem solving, success, and failure (Kesselheim, 1976). These activities have been shown to have a positive effect on self-concept, although the significance and perseverance of the effect is debatable (Shore, 1977). The usefulness of such adventure activities for group counseling demands a closer look.

## ADVENTURE ACTIVITIES IN COUNSELING

The definition of *adventure* includes such descriptors as dangerous, risky, uncertain, novel, exciting, and remarkable (Gove, 1971). In the context of activities, adventure is used as an adjective to denote elements of actual and perceived risk. Although the actual danger or risk involved in an adventure activity is usually thought to be physical, many activities also involve actual psychological risk. Psychological risk is involved when activities require that group members trust or depend on others. A "good" adventure activity is perceived by the participant as riskier than it actually is. In such an activity, the participant may perceive that he or she is at risk physically or psychologically when, actually, the chance for a successful outcome in the activity is highly probable.

Origins of the adventure approach can be traced to the Outward Bound schools. Kurt Hahn, founder of the schools, believed that exposure to self-discipline, teamwork, adventure, physical hardship, and risk might provide participants with the opportunity to "discover themselves, experience success and defeat, forget themselves in the pursuit of a common cause, train the imagination, and develop the ability to participate and plan" (Kesselheim, 1976, p. 30). A broad categorization of critical elements in the Outward Bound experience would include individual and group-building adventure activities during the initial phase. The purpose of these activities is to foster group cohesion and individual self-confidence. An outdoor expedition involving rock climbing, white water rafting, sailing, hiking, cross country skiing, or mountaineering is traditionally the second phase of the Outward Bound experience. An individual solo experience, a final expedition, and graduation ceremonies make up the remainder of a standard Outward Bound course (Bacon, 1984). Although these outdoor wilderness experiences are indeed powerful, they are not always appropriate for use in traditional, indoor counseling groups.

Project Adventure, Inc. has translated many Outward Bound wilderness adventure concepts into viable activities for educational and counseling programs. The most visible impact of Project Adventure has been through workshops and manuals (Rohnke, 1977, 1984) that demonstrate and document the construction and implementation of group and individual adventure activities.

Traditionally, the activities of Project Adventure and Outward Bound have been used with physically able adolescent or adult populations. In the past several years, adventure programs also have been successfully adapted for physically impaired and other "special need" populations (Roland, 1985). Adapting adventure activities to the traditional group counseling setting can allow many group leaders access to an exciting collection of challenge and risk activities. The role of the

group leader in adventure activities, however, presents some special considerations.

## Role of the Group Leader in Adventure Activities

Many group counselors use structured activities as an adjunct to the discussion and process associated with traditional group counseling. Others use structured physical activities as the primary mode of treatment, choosing to let the experience of the activity "do the talking." Bacon (1984) has advocated a method of introducing structured adventure activities as physical metaphors. His model preserves the richness of the experiential process by emphasizing how the participant perceives his or her experience of the activity while still acknowledging the importance of post-activity discussion. Bacon's model might be considered *strategic*, in that the counselor initiates what happens during the session and designs an approach for each problem (Haley, 1973).

We have struggled with finding an appropriate balance between activities and discussion, choosing to weight initial group sessions with more activities and later sessions with more discussion. Experience has shown that activities foster group cohesion early in the initial group session. A sequence of adventure activities that gradually requires more risk and problem-solving skill also seems to increase the level of interpersonal trust within the group. This trust, in turn, leads to more productive post-activity discussion sessions, although no research has been conducted that firmly establishes this observation.

The group leader's level of involvement in presenting adventure activities is an area of disagreement. Traditionally, the leader of adventure activities is passive. The role involves only the introduction of rules and safety considerations for each activity. The leader observes the group's problem-solving process and watches for any potential physical accident that may occur during the experience. The leader becomes active while

leading the discussion that follows the completion of the activity (Rohnke, 1984).

An alternative to the passive, traditional group leader role is an active, *strategic* approach. Here the leader directs group members to notice certain aspects of the adventure activity as it is being experienced. Bacon (1984) advocates this directive role of the leader, which emphasizes the *strategic* introduction of adventure activities to the group. These introductions serve to reframe the experience of a physical activity to become much like a psychological issue with which the group might be confronted. Paradoxical intention may be included within a *strategic* introduction to focus group members' attention on specific thoughts, feelings, or behaviors that may occur while participating in the activity. The post-activity discussion sessions are not the focus in the *strategic* style. For the *strategic* leader, the "work" takes place in the beginning, in assessing and introducing the activity, much as the hypnotist might work to induce a hypnotic trance. After the activity, participants seem to volunteer "what it was like" information more freely, and the leader can then be more passive and observe, comment, or structure the discussion as it fits his or her style.

This *strategic* approach to working with activities is similar to the work of Haley (1973, 1976) and Madanes (1981), who are most closely associated with the label *strategic*. Milton H. Erickson (cited in Rossi, 1980) is perhaps considered the father of strategies in therapy, primarily through his work in hypnosis, metaphors, and paradox (Haley, 1973). Although Erickson worked primarily with individuals, Haley and Madanes have focused primarily on relationships between couples and within families. Their approach is characterized by a focus on changing dysfunctional behavior patterns with specific behavioral goals targeted and treated. The past is not as important as changing the presenting problem. The counselor takes the primary responsibility for intervening into the couple's system and promoting change. When direct techniques are not successful, indirect techniques such



as paradoxical approaches are often used. A *strategic* style of group counseling would thus be active, directive, and problem focused, with little emphasis on insight (Haley, 1976).

The *strategic* group leader of activities would attempt to ascertain a problem for the group through assessment of common problems, failures, or developmental issues faced by members. The leader would then introduce activities having components similar to the psychological problem or issue. This introduction would reframe each group participant's experience of the physical activity, much like a *strategic* intervention that reframes a couple's or family's experience of a presenting problem.

The *strategic* approach may be uncomfortable for group leaders who wish to let the experience "speak for itself." Such leaders may wish to focus the post-activity discussion only on what happened during the adventure activity, without the "interference" of focusing participants' attention through *strategic* instructions. Again, the leader's objectives and goals for the activities, along with his or her style of leadership, will govern which approach is taken. We have found the directive, *strategic* style to be very useful when working with couples and families. Several advantages of using adventure activities with couples or families are explored below.

### Adventure Activities with a Couple or Family System

The helping functions that adventure activities provide for group counseling are extremely useful when working with a couple or family system. Assessment, playfulness, experimentation, modeling, and metaphor seem to serve an even greater helping function when working with a group of persons who also share a significant relationship (a system) outside the counseling experience. Multiple family groups (Laqueur, 1973) or couples' enrichment groups (L'Abate & McHenry, 1983) have been shown to be viable settings for using group counseling skills

and techniques with couples or family systems. Observing how a couple or family can work together on a common problem that requires, for example, touching and holding one other, provides useful data for the counselor about how that relationship system functions. How a couple or family can have fun (or not have fun) while playing together also may be an indication of salient issues in their relationship (Satir, 1972). While working with couples and family systems in groups, we have observed, through discussions after the activities, that significant benefit can be gained from children observing children, parents observing parents, men observing men, and women observing women interacting with parents, children, or partners. The conscious and unconscious modeling that naturally occurs in group counseling with unrelated individuals seems to be especially great when relationships are the unit of focus. Likewise, the couple or family experimenting with a new activity within the counseling session may provide a good metaphor for experimenting with new behaviors outside the counseling session relationship. It is this final function, the emergence of metaphor, that seems to be the most powerful function of adventure activities. Common or specific "real life" problems of couples or families can be brought into focus and *strategically* reframed with adventure activities.

As noted above, Bacon (1984) has described a rationale for using adventure activities as metaphors for living. We have adapted Bacon's model for group counseling with couples and families. The following case examples demonstrate one way that adventure activities borrowed from Rohnke (1977, 1984) have been observed as metaphors in group counseling with families and couples.

## CASE EXAMPLES

### Family Groups

Four single-parent families (four mothers) with adolescent children (one daughter and

three sons) participated in four 90-minute group sessions offered through a child and family center at a large southeastern university. We served as counselor and supervisor. The group experience was advertised throughout the university community, using posters and radio announcements, as "an adventure counseling experience."

Many of the adolescent family members were hesitant to participate during the initial session, not knowing what to expect from the group. The goals of the group were presented to the families as an opportunity to explore common concerns and problems of single-parent-adolescent families while learning from one another. The group was led through several warmup activities, described in Rohnke (1977, 1984), to foster group cohesion. By design, most of the first session was spent doing activities instead of debriefing and discussing. As the activities became more difficult and required more risk and trust, it became apparent that parents would allow the adolescents an initial chance to solve problems that came up in the physical activities, but would assume more leadership as these problems became more difficult. During the debriefing after several of the activities, the issue of power and control arose, both within the group and within each family. As a way to confront indirectly the issue of power and control, one particular adventure activity was introduced: an indoor variation of "goldline jousting," mentioned in Rohnke (1977, p. 103), named "gotcha."

Gotcha was played by giving each parent and adolescent pair a 12-foot rope. Both parent and adolescent put the rope around their waist and faced each other, standing with feet at shoulder width and parallel. The rope was drawn taut between them. Both members of the pair then held their respective ends of the rope in only one hand without wrapping the rope around their wrists. The object of the activity was to manipulate the rope, without letting it go, in such a way that the other partner fell off balance. The group members were asked to be aware of how they used their power as they partici-

pated in the activity. Some played a best three out of five series; others decided not to keep a score.

Although it may seem obvious that the physically stronger individuals might have been able to "overpower" their partners, more indirect forms of power emerged. Some players found they were able to "give in" to their partners' power causing their partners to fall off balance by their own power.

During this activity two of the parent-adolescent pairs were viewed as having fun with gotcha. The competition and cooperation were healthy, with little concern evident about who would win. The other two pairs were observed to be involved in a serious struggle for control. In one particular pair a son was determined to "beat" his mother at any cost. He was very concerned about scoring each "win" and protested any loss, while laughing loudly each time he overpowered his mother.

In the debriefing session immediately after gotcha, the group members were asked how that game might be similar to what was happening in their interactions at home. The leader speculated on ways that the physical power metaphor (gotcha) could be translated and perhaps generalized into the psychological issue of power within the home life of each family. The mother of the "win at any cost" pair quickly responded, "This is *exactly* what's going on at our house. He [her son] has to win all the time and we never get anywhere." Her comment served as an excellent vehicle to discuss power and control further in relation to each of the parent-adolescent interactions. The 12-year-old son was able to use the activity as a focus for his need to always win against his mother. He seemed to become aware of his need to be in charge around the house. Later in the sessions, when activities were presented in which he was unable to win alone but needed to cooperate with his mother, the adolescent seemed to become aware that working together with his mother or with the group made problem solving easier.

Gotcha served the leader's purpose of indirectly confronting a psychological issue



assessed as salient to the group and to generate data for discussion after the activity. The counselor was allowed to become aware of behavior that might have gone unnoticed in a traditional parent-adolescent group. The activity also provided an opportunity both to experience and to "play with" power as used in the relationship and in the home. There was also an opportunity for both parents and adolescents to learn new behaviors from other group members.

This example demonstrates how a group counselor can use an adventure activity as a metaphor for a common issue within a family and simultaneously use many helping functions provided by activities. During the post-activity discussion, the group reported that the activity was advantageous because the focus could be on what everyone had witnessed instead of on reports by family members regarding how power and control issues developed outside of the group. In addition, both parents and adolescents seemed able to translate the metaphor of the activity into relevant situations in their own lives. A similar translation of physical experience into a psychological concept was experienced by couples involved in an enrichment experience conducted by the senior author.

### Couples Groups

Five couples participated in an 8-hour group session offered at the same university. This group also was advertised in the university community, through posters and radio announcements, as "an adventure-based enrichment experience."

The group was designed as a 1-day, outdoor couples enrichment experience centered around adventure activities. As with the family group, the initial hours of the couples group were spent doing warmup activities designed to bring the group together.

The goals and purposes of this group centered around issues of communication, problem solving, trust, and risk. Adventure activities were designed to focus specifically on these issues, and discussion sessions centered on translating the physical activities

into psychological concepts related to each couple's unique relationship.

To focus indirectly on communication styles in a nonthreatening and nondirective way, we used a blind-mute walk. Each couple was asked to decide which partner would be blindfolded first and led by the other partner. Adapted from the familiar trust walk, this activity added an additional handicap: prohibiting the sighted partner from speaking. During the introduction both partners were asked to be aware of their ability to communicate with the other in ways that were similar to or different from their usual ones.

During the blind-mute walk, each couple was led along a "hazardous" trail designed by the counselor. The outdoor trail involved crossing streams and gulleys, crawling under branches, and climbing up low walls. (Indoor "trails," which went over and under tables and chairs, through homemade "tunnels," and up and down staircases, also have been designed.) Couples switched roles during the middle of the exercise so that each had an opportunity to both lead and follow.

The blind-mute walk was one of the most talked about activities during the 1-day counseling experience. Couples experienced the difficulty of trusting their nonspeaking, sighted partner. Sometimes one member of a couple was more trusting than the other. On many occasions, miscommunications led to real consequences, such as bumping a head or stepping into the middle of a shallow stream. Some couples moved along their path quickly and confidently, but others would stop and smell the flowers and still others would bumble slowly along the trail, having difficulty with each "hazard." Again, couples most functional in their relationships were the most adept at this experience. This assessment is based on observations, but these observations became "grist for the therapeutic mill" when couples were allowed to share their perceptions of trust as well as old and new communication patterns. Both functional and dysfunctional couples modeled positive and negative verbal and nonverbal communication for the group.

The blind-mute walk was scheduled as a transition activity, moving from a series of warmup experiences with the entire group and activities focused directly on each couple to riskier activities involving more trust between partners and within the group. Throughout the day couples continued to relate their success or failure with other activities to their experiences during the blind-mute walk. This activity provided a significant experience for the couples as a way of dealing directly with trust issues, while indirectly assessing verbal and nonverbal communication styles.

### SUMMARY

The activities mentioned above are two of numerous possibilities for adaptation of adventure activities into counseling groups with couples or families. The selection and sequencing of activities are at the discretion of the group counselor, according to his or her style. We have found it important to ask ourselves why a particular activity is being used and to project what the likely outcomes of that activity will be.

Using adventure activities just to have something to do during a counseling group seems not to have the same effect as introducing activities that have been put in a systematic sequence for success. Activities thrown together randomly and followed by a discussion of what was learned and how it might be applied does not seem to be as powerful an experience as *strategically* introducing leader-designed activities in a sequence that seems to fit together for the group.

Caution must be exercised by the inexperienced counselor who wants only to add activities to his or her bag of therapeutic tricks. Some of the adventure activities explained by Rohnke (1977, 1984) are potentially dangerous if not properly administered. Training, experience, and experimentation are necessary before implementing a new activity with couples or families. The trained group counselor is also probably more aware of the many issues involving liability and litigation when using potentially risky phys-

ical activities. He or she may be more likely to have potential group members sign an informed consent waiver, acknowledging the possibility of physical injury inherent in such activities. The novice user of adventure activities must be reminded of the possible physical and professional injury that might result from negligence on his or her part. Professional liability insurance policies may need to be checked to ensure that the counselor is covered while employing indoor and outdoor adventure activities.

### REFERENCES

- Bacon, S. (1984). *The conscious use of metaphor in Outward Bound*. Denver: Colorado Outward Bound School.
- Crocker, J.W., & Wroblewski, M. (1975). Using recreational games in counseling. *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 53, 453-458.
- Gove, P.B. (Ed.). (1971). *Webster's third new international dictionary of the English language unabridged* (Vol. 1). Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica.
- Haley, J. (1973). *Uncommon therapy: The psychiatric techniques of Milton H. Erickson*. New York: Norton.
- Haley, J. (1976). *Problem-solving therapy*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Houston, J. (1982). *The possible human*. Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher.
- Kesselheim, A.D. (1976, August). *A rationale for outdoor activities as experiential education: The reason for freezin*. Paper presented to the Conference on Outdoor Pursuits: A primer in Higher Education, Boone, NC. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 148 530)
- L'Abate, L., & McHenry, S. (1983). *Handbook of marital interventions*. New York: Grune & Stratton.
- Laqueur, P. (1973). Multiple family therapy: Questions and answers. In D. Bloch (Ed.), *Techniques in family psychotherapy: A primer* (pp. 75-85). New York: Grune & Stratton.
- Madanes, C. (1981). *Strategic family therapy*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Nickerson, E. T., & O'Laughlin, K.S. (1982). *Helping through action: Action-oriented therapies*. Amherst, MA: Human Resource Development Press.
- Rohnke, K. (1977). *Cowstail and cobras*. Hamilton, MA: Project Adventure.



Rohrke, K. (1984). *Silver bullets*. Hamilton, MA: Project Adventure.  
 Roland, C.C. (1985). *The Roland report: Developments in adapted outdoor education programming*. Hancock, NH: Roland & Associates.  
 Rossi, E.L. (Ed.). (1980). *The collected papers of Milton H. Erickson on hypnosis: Vol. 1. The nature of hypnosis and suggestion; Vol. 2. Innovative hypnotherapy*. New York: Irvington.

Satir, V. (1972). *Peoplemaking*. Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behavior Books.  
 Shore, A. (1977). *Outward Bound: A research volume*. Greenwich, CT: Outward Bound.  
 Winn, W. (1982). Physical challenge approaches to psychotherapy. In E.T. Nickerson & K. O'Laughlin (Eds.), *Helping through action: Action-oriented therapies* (pp. 163-168). Amherst, MA: Human Resource Development Press.

U.S. Postal Service STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION <small>Required by 39 U.S.C. 3685</small>		
1A. TITLE OF PUBLICATION Journal for Specialists in Group Work		1B. PUBLICATION NO. 0 1 9 3 3 9 2 2
3. FREQUENCY OF ISSUE March, May, September, November		2. DATE OF FILING 9-20-86
4. COMPLETE MAILING ADDRESS OF KNOWN OFFICE OF PUBLICATION (Street, City, County, State and ZIP+4 Code) (Not printers)		5A. NO. OF ISSUES PUBLISHED ANNUALLY 4
5. COMPLETE MAILING ADDRESS OF THE HEADQUARTERS OF GENERAL BUSINESS OFFICES OF THE PUBLISHER (Not printers)		5B. ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION PRICE \$12.00
6. FULL NAMES AND COMPLETE MAILING ADDRESS OF PUBLISHER, EDITOR, AND MANAGING EDITOR (This item MUST NOT be blank)		
PUBLISHER (Name and Complete Mailing Address) Maribeth Rose, Director of Professional Publications, American Association for Counseling and Development, 5999 Stevenson Avenue, Alexandria VA 22304		
EDITOR (Name and Complete Mailing Address) Dr. Barbara Fuhrmann, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1048 Oliver Hall, Richmond VA 23284		
MANAGING EDITOR (Name and Complete Mailing Address)		
7. OWNER (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a partnership or other unincorporated firm, its name and address, as well as that of each individual must be given. If the publication is published by a nonprofit organization, its name and address must be stated.) (This must be completed.)		
FULL NAME		COMPLETE MAILING ADDRESS
None		
8. KNOWN BONDHOLDERS, MORTGAGEES, AND OTHER SECURITY HOLDERS OWNING OR HOLDING 1 PERCENT OR MORE OF TOTAL AMOUNT OF BONDS, MORTGAGES OR OTHER SECURITIES (If none are named, so state)		
FULL NAME		COMPLETE MAILING ADDRESS
None		
9. FOR COMPLETION BY NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS AUTHORIZED TO MAIL AT SPECIAL RATES (Section 432.12 (DMG) only) <small>The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for Federal income tax purposes (Check one)</small>		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> (1) HAS NOT CHANGED DURING PRECEDING 12 MONTHS <input type="checkbox"/> (2) HAS CHANGED DURING PRECEDING 12 MONTHS <small>(If changed, publisher must submit explanation of change with this statement.)</small>		
10. EXTENT AND NATURE OF CIRCULATION <small>(See instructions on reverse side)</small>		AVERAGE NO. COPIES EACH ISSUE DURING PRECEDING 12 MONTHS
A. TOTAL NO. COPIES (Net Press Run)		4075
B. PAID AND/OR REQUESTED CIRCULATION 1. Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors and counter sales		0
2. Mail Subscriptions <small>(Paid and/or requested)</small>		3870
C. TOTAL PAID AND/OR REQUESTED CIRCULATION <small>(Sum of B1 and B2)</small>		3870
D. FREE DISTRIBUTION BY MAIL, CARRIER OR OTHER MEANS SAMPLES, COMPLIMENTARY, AND OTHER FREE COPIES		0
E. TOTAL DISTRIBUTION (Sum of C and D)		3870
F. COPIES NOT DISTRIBUTED 1. Office use, left-overs, unaccounted, spoiled after printing		205
2. Return from News Agents		0
G. TOTAL (Sum of E, F1 and F2—should equal net press run shown in A)		4075
11. I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete		SIGNATURE AND TITLE OF EDITOR, PUBLISHER, BUSINESS MANAGER, OR OWNER Maribeth Rose, Director of Professional Publications

PS Form 3526, Dec. 1985

(See instruction on reverse)