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Jaclyn S. Gerstein  
*Northern Illinois University*

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## The Adventure-Based Counselor as a Group Counselor

Jaclyn S. Gerstein  
Northern Illinois University

**Abstract:** Through the use of a group counseling format in conjunction with the adventure activities, participants in the growing number of adventure-based counseling programs are gaining a better understanding of the consequences of their behavior patterns. The purpose of this investigation was to identify those group counseling skills relevant to adventure based counseling. The subjects were the supervisors and counselors from the adventure based programs. Participants were asked to respond to a mailed questionnaire. Through this investigation, those skills relevant to adventure-based counseling were identified. The investigation was designed to take the first steps in examining adventure-based counseling as a form of group counseling. If the practitioners in this field are to establish credibility within the larger counseling field, they need to demonstrate that standards exist and that training can provide established skill competencies.

**Information about the Author:** Dr. Jaclyn S. Gerstein can be contacted through Northern Illinois University, 415 May Street, Rockford, IL 61104.

Adventure-based counseling is a non-traditional, experiential based process for providing therapeutic interventions to serve a variety of clientele involved in a mental health care system (Kimball, 1983). Adventure-based counseling programs have been designed for adult and juvenile criminal offenders (Golins, 1978; Wichmann, 1991), psychiatric patients (Stitch, 1983; Stitch & Senior, 1984; Witman, 1989), emotionally disturbed youth (Bacon & Kimball, 1989; Byers, 1979), victims of sexual abuse and domestic violence (Webb, 1990), individuals with alcohol and drug dependency (Chase, 1981; Gass & McPhee, 1990), and families in crisis (Bandoroff & Scherer, 1990; Creal & Florio, 1986; Clapp & Rudolph, 1990; Gillis & Bonney, 1986).

Stitch and Gaylor (1983) described an adventure-based counseling program as "a series of physical and social tasks, where the presence of stress, uncertainty and the need for problem-solving, communications, and immediate judgment provide situational analogies for problematic areas in the [client's] daily life" (p. 2). During the adventure-based counseling program, participants engage in a series of mentally and physically challenging activities such as trust building activities, group initiative activities, adventure challenge courses, camping, outdoor cookery, camping, extended wilderness trips, rock climbing, canoeing, and wilderness solos (Gass & McPhee, 1990). This form of counseling uses techniques and activities, which often take place in the outdoors, to enhance self-esteem, increase levels of trust in others, and lower recidivism and relapse rates of maladaptive behaviors of the participants served in these programs (Stitch, 1983; Wichmann, 1991). Through involvement in the adventure activities and the accompanying group processing sessions, attitudes such as learned helplessness, poor self-image, mistrust, and lack of self-confidence are replaced with self-confidence, self-efficacy, a trusting of others, and with new, creative methods for solving personal problems (Chase, 1981).

The adventure-based counselor uses small group dynamics to accentuate the therapeutic potential of the activities. Group discussions often become the key to learning and behavioral change during these programs. During and following the activities, discussions or processing sessions led by the adventure-based counselor focus on having the participants identify and understand their intra- and interpersonal behavioral patterns (Stitch, 1983).

To maximize the therapeutic potential for each participant, the adventure-based counselor must have a broad and thorough knowledge of interpersonal and group facilitation techniques (Bankie, 1983). This knowledge may be as important as the knowledge of canoeing, rock

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climbing, or camping skills in determining the overall outcome of the adventure program and to insure the psychological safety of the participants.

A weakness of the leadership of many adventure programs is the lack of skills among adventure-based counselors in the area of human relations (Bankie, 1983). Technical skills are stressed because of the inherent danger of the adventure activities. The technical skills and knowledge needed to manage the physical dangers have been identified, expounded upon, and recognized by general adventure program practitioners (Bankie, 1983).

The "people" skills side of adventure leadership often is neglected (Phipps, 1988). The adventure-based counselor often lacks the skills to effectively manage the interpersonal problems and group process issues that typically face the participating group members (Bankie, 1983).

This study was designed to address this problem by identifying those group counseling skills that are relevant to adventure-based counseling. More specifically, this investigation sought to answer the following questions:

1. What group counseling skills are relevant to adventure-based counseling programs?
2. What group counseling skills, in addition to those identified by Corey (1981, 1985), are relevant for adventure-based counselors?

### Importance of the Study

At least 137 organizations in the United States, as identified in the Association for Experiential Education's Directory of Alternatives in Mental Health, Corrections, and Special Populations (Gass, 1988), offer adventure-based counseling to special needs populations. "The fastest growing trend in [Project Adventure] adoptions since 1982, has been the Special Needs or Therapeutic area" (Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988, p. 8). As the field continues to grow, an increased need for qualified and competent adventure-based counselors also continues to grow. A lack of consensus exists however, on what the group counseling competencies of the adventure-based counselor are and how they are best obtained (Cosgrove, 1984).

This study is important for a second reason. The field of adventure-based counseling is struggling to gain credibility with the larger counseling field. Anything which is as contrary to the mainstream way of doing things, as is adventure therapy, needs every bit of evidence it can possibly gather if it is to gain recognition and credence (Bankie, 1983). Thus, practitioners in this field need to demonstrate that they possess those skills that are acceptable to the larger counseling field.

At the practical level, the identification of desired group counseling skills and current training needs would assist adventure-based counseling program designers and trainers in developing more effective and appropriate staff development program agendas. The results of this research could help meet the need for developing an adventure counselor education program that provides for comprehensive group skill competency and offers nationally accepted and recognized group counseling skill standards.

### Subjects

The subjects for this study were counselors and their supervisors of organized adventure-based counseling programs in the United States. The sample was drawn from those programs that have been self-identified through the Association of Experiential Education's Directory of Adventure Alternatives in Corrections, Mental Health, and Special Populations (Gass, 1988). This directory was developed by information gathered from a survey distributed in the spring and

summer of 1988 to all known programs that used adventure programming with special needs populations.

### Development of the Survey

The instrument for this study was a survey to identify demographic information and opinions about relevant group counseling skills for adventure-based counseling. A list of 22 group counseling skills was presented to the survey recipients. This list was generated by Gerald Corey (1981, 1985), a leading practitioner and prolific writer in the field of group counseling.

The counselors and their supervisors were asked to rate each of Corey's group counseling skills on their relevancy to adventure-based counseling. The respondents were asked to rate each skill on a 4-point Likert scale continuum with the responses of "absolutely relevant," "relevant in most situations," "relevant in a few situations," and "not relevant" for the adventure-based counselor. Both subject groups were also asked to respond to an open-ended question, "What group counseling skills, in addition to those identified by Gerald Corey, do you believe are relevant for adventure-based counselors?"

### Review of the Survey

After an original draft of the survey was developed, it was submitted to the three members of the Doctoral Dissertation Committee and a faculty member from Northern Illinois University's Public Opinion Lab. This panel made suggestions for improving the technical and content areas of the survey.

Following revisions to the original draft of the survey, it was pilot tested on a panel of four adventure-counseling practitioners. The purpose of the pilot test was to help eliminate any ambiguous items and to improve the format of the survey and accompanying cover letter. Information gathered from the pilot test was used to refine the survey.

### Procedures

Data collection procedures included the use of surveys and telephone contacts. Each of the program directors listed in the Directory of Adventure Alternatives in Corrections, Mental Health, and Special Populations (Gass, 1988) was contacted via telephone. In addition, telephone contacts were conducted to ask permission to send the surveys, inform the directors of the purpose of the survey, elicit their support in completing the survey, and ask them to encourage their staff to complete the surveys. The survey and the cover letter were sent by mail to the adventure-based counselors and their supervisors.

### Data Analysis

The data gathered through the surveys was analyzed by computer using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (S.P.S.S.) computer program. Return rates and demographic data were reported in terms of frequency rates. Marginal tabulations were used to analyze the first research question, "What group counseling skills are relevant to adventure-based counseling programs?" The mean rating for each group counseling skill was reported.

The second research question, "What group counseling skills, in addition to those identified by Corey, do you believe are relevant for adventure-based counselors?" was asked as an open-ended question. Since this data set was qualitative, it was analyzed through a classification and coding process. The data were reviewed twice. During the first review, categories of responses were identified. Following the development of categories, the responses were reviewed

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a second time and each response was coded into a category. The number of responses per category were then tabulated. The results are reported in categories of response percentages, the number of responses per category, and representative comments for each category.

## Results

### Return Rates

The supervisors and/or counselors from 103 of the 137 organizations were sent surveys. The remaining 34 organizations were excluded from the study because 16 were no longer operating, 5 could not be contacted by telephone, 3 joined with other existing organizations, 3 were larger clearinghouse operations, 3 did not classify themselves as adventure-based counseling, 3 stated they did not have the time nor resources to complete the surveys, and 1 was a Canadian listing.

A total of 786 surveys were distributed. The breakdown between the two subject groups, supervisors and counselors, was 193 and 693 respectively. The overall response rate was 234 usable surveys or 30% of the mailing. Thirty-eight percent ( $n = 73$ ) of the supervisors and 23% ( $n = 161$ ) of the counselors returned the survey.

### Demographic Information

Organizational Demographics. The populations served by the organizations in this survey included psychiatric inpatient, juvenile corrections, adult corrections, mental health (e.g., addictions, sexual victims and perpetrators, and terminal patients), developmental disabled, emotionally disturbed, learning disabled, neurological impaired, physically disabled, and families. The types of adventure activities used by these organizations included rock climbing, ropes courses, New Games and group initiatives, canoeing and rafting, backpacking, caving, orienteering, cross country skiing, horseback riding, urban adventures, residential camping, and community service projects. The average length of program ranged from one day to over a month and the average number of clients served per year ranged from one to over 1000.

Respondent Demographics. The supervisors had a ratio of 64.4% males and 35.6% females, while 54.7% of the counselors were male and 45.3% were females. The mean age of the supervisors was 34 years old, while the mean age of the counselor group was 30. The highest educational degrees of the supervisors were Doctorate (1.4%), Master's (41%), Bachelor's (52%), Associate's (4%), and high school (1.4%). The counselors' highest educational levels were Doctorate (1.9%), Master's (26%), Bachelor's (58%), Associate's (5.6%), and high school (8%). See Table 1.

The supervisors reported they had a mean number of 3.0 years experience in the field of adventure-based counseling and an average of 2.6 years experience as a counselor supervisor. The counselors had an average of 2.3 years of experience in adventure-based counseling.

### Findings About Research Question #1: "What group counseling skills are relevant to adventure-based counseling programs?"

This section presents the findings to the part of this investigation that examined the relevant group counseling skills for the adventure-based counselor. Table 2 presents the results of the survey that asked respondents to rate the 22 group counseling skills on their levels of relevancy for adventure-based counseling. The means ranged from 1.14 to 2.09 on a 4-point Likert Scale. These results demonstrate that the combined supervisor and counselor groups believed that all of the skills are always relevant or relevant in most situations.

Table 1

Percentages of Educational Degrees of the Supervisor and Counselor Respondent Groups

Highest Educational Degree	Supervisors	Counselors
Doctorate Degree	1%	2%
Masters Degree	41%	26%
Bachelors Degree	52%	58%
Associate Degree	4%	6%
High School	1%	8%
N=234		

The responses with the highest mean relevancy ratings were supporting (1.14), facilitating (1.22), active listening (1.27), modeling (1.36), and evaluating (1.39). Disclosing oneself, interpreting, protecting, and dealing with silence had the lowest mean ratings of 2.09, 2.00, 1.99, and 1.97, respectively.

Findings About Research Question #2: "What additional group counseling skills do adventure-based counselors and their supervisors believe are relevant for adventure-based counseling programs?"

Following the coding and categorizing process, additional group counseling skills (with four or more responses) for the adventure-based counselor were identified. These skills along with response rates and representative responses are described in the following paragraphs (see Figures 1,2 and 3).

**Relational Skills.** Relational skills led the list of the most frequently stated responses with 23 or 10% of the total respondents listing it as an important group skill for adventure-based counselors. Responses coded into this category made a direct reference to the counselor/client relationship.

**Empowering Clients.** Empowering, along with the use of humor or fun, tied as the second most frequently cited group counseling skill with 14 responses or 6% of the subjects. Two supervisors (2.8%) and 12 counselors (7.4%) mentioned this skill as being an additional relevant skill.

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Table 2

Total Respondents' Mean Ratings of the Relevancy of Group Counseling Skills

Group Counseling Skill	Mean Relevance
Supporting	1.14
Facilitating	1.22
Active Listening	1.27
Modeling	1.36
Evaluating	1.39
Goal Setting	1.44
Questioning	1.44
Summarizing	1.45
Clarifying	1.47
Terminating	1.49
Giving Feedback	1.49
Reflecting Feelings	1.56
Empathizing	1.63
Confronting	1.63
Initiating	1.77
Blocking	1.82
Suggesting	1.87
Restating	1.89
Dealing with Silence	1.97
Protecting	1.99
Interrupting	2.00
Disclosing Oneself	2.09

Use of Humor and Fun. Use of humor and fun was also second on the list of responses with 6% (n=14) of the total number of subjects mentioning it. Four (5.5%) of the supervisors and 10 (7.4%) of the counselors listed this skill. One or both of these terms were used directly in all of the responses, thus, making coding of these items clear.

Flexibility. Flexibility was mentioned by 5.6% (n=13) of the subjects making it the fourth most listed response. The supervisors mentioned it four times or 5.6% of the subject pool, while nine (5.6%) of the counselors mentioned flexibility. Most of the subjects used the word flexible in their response.

Self-Analysis. The fifth most cited response fell into the self-analysis category with 4.7% (n=11) of the respondents making a response that fit into this category. Seven percent (n=5) of the supervisors and 3.7% (n=6) of the counselors had a response that fit into this category. The types of responses coded into this category made a reference to an awareness of self, as a counselor, and one's thoughts, behaviors, and feelings as a group facilitator.

Tone Setting and Framing. "Framing the activities," "preparing the group for the upcoming activity," "establishing a forum for positive group interaction" and "setting the tone" were the types of responses coded into the tone setting and framing category. This category represented the viewpoints of 4.3% (n=10) of the total number of respondents with 4% (n=4) of the supervisors and 4.3% (n=7) of the counselors making this response.

Tailoring. The category of tailoring included comments such as, "recognizing the needs of the group and setting up programming to meet these needs," and "structuring the activities to meet the needs and purposes of the group." Nine (3.9%) of the survey respondents (4.2% of the supervisors and 3.7% of the counselors) mentioned these types of responses.

Processing and Transferring Learning. The processing and transferring learning category was listed by nine or 3.9% of the respondents. Four (5.6%) of the supervisors and five (3%) of the counselors believed this skill category is an important group counseling skill for the adventure-based counselor. Most of the respondents, listing this response, used these terms making coding of these items clear.

Use of Metaphors. Eight or 3.4% of the respondents (2.8% of the supervisors and 3.7% of the counselors) listed the use of metaphors as an important skill for adventure-based counselors. The exact terminology, use of metaphors, was used by all of the respondents.

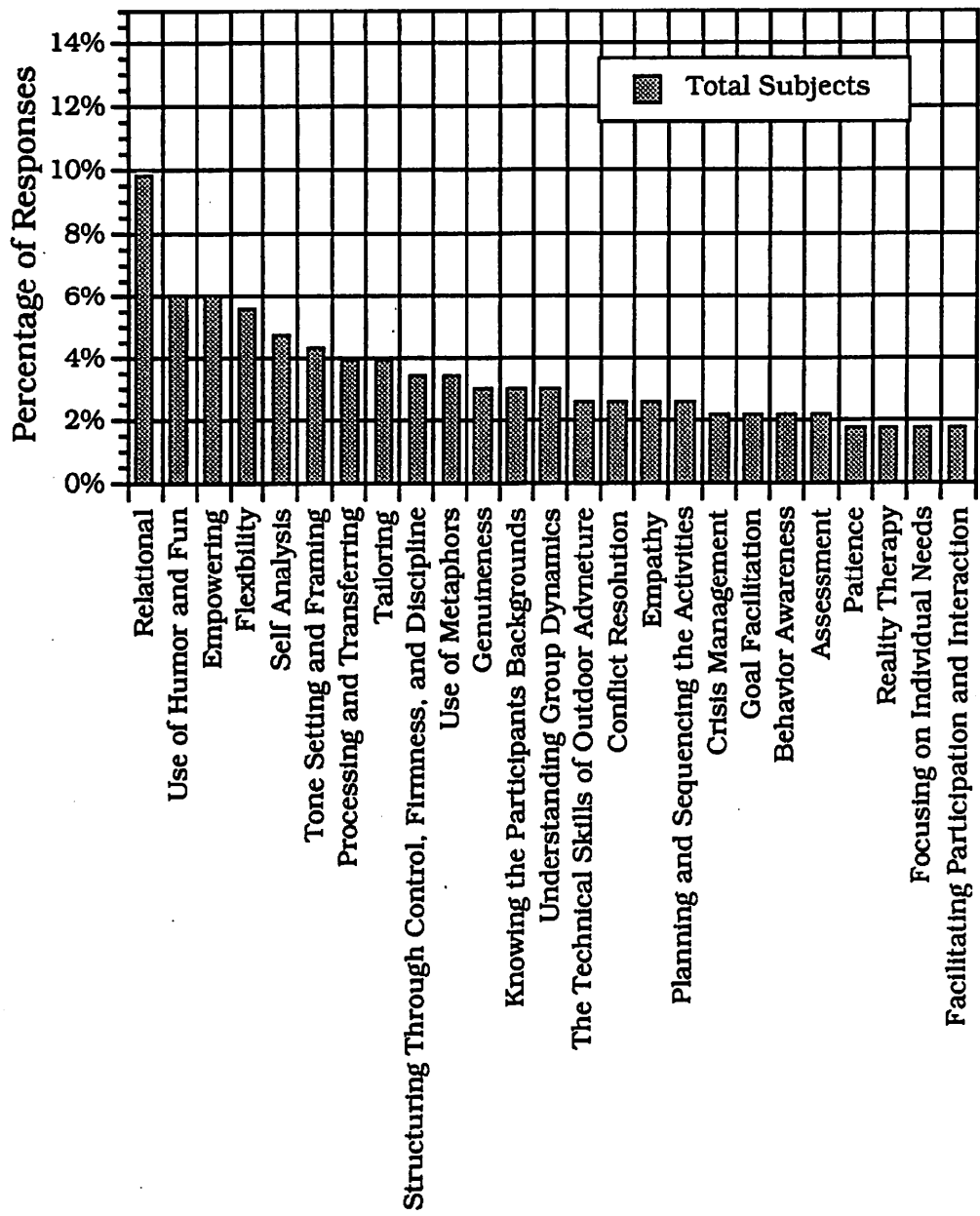
Structuring Through Control, Firmness, and Discipline. Responses coded into this category made a reference to structuring the group and setting standards through the use of control, firmness, and discipline. The structuring category of responses was listed by 3.4% (n=8) of the total number of respondents with 5.6% (n=4) of the supervisors and 2.5% (n=4) of the counselors listing it.

Understanding Group Dynamics. This category was best exemplified by the respondent comment, "understanding the mechanics of group dynamics." It was perceived by 3% (n=7) of the respondents (2.8% of the supervisors and 3.2% of the counselors) as a group skill that is relevant for the adventure-based counselor.

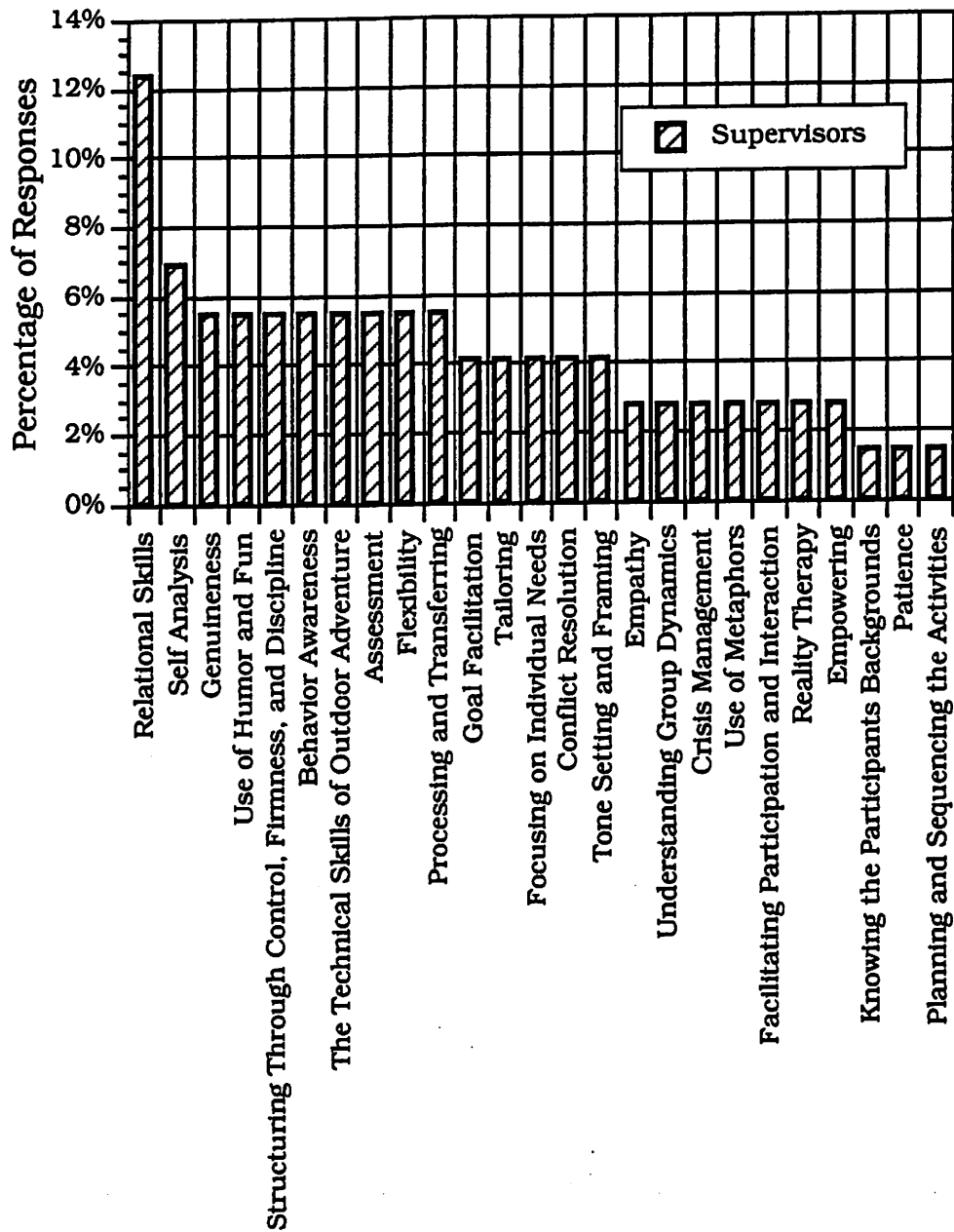
Genuineness. All responses in this category except one ("the ability to be real") were identified by the term, genuineness. Three percent (n=7) of the respondents listed genuineness with 2.8% (n=2) of the supervisors and 2.5% (n=4) of the counselors mentioning it.



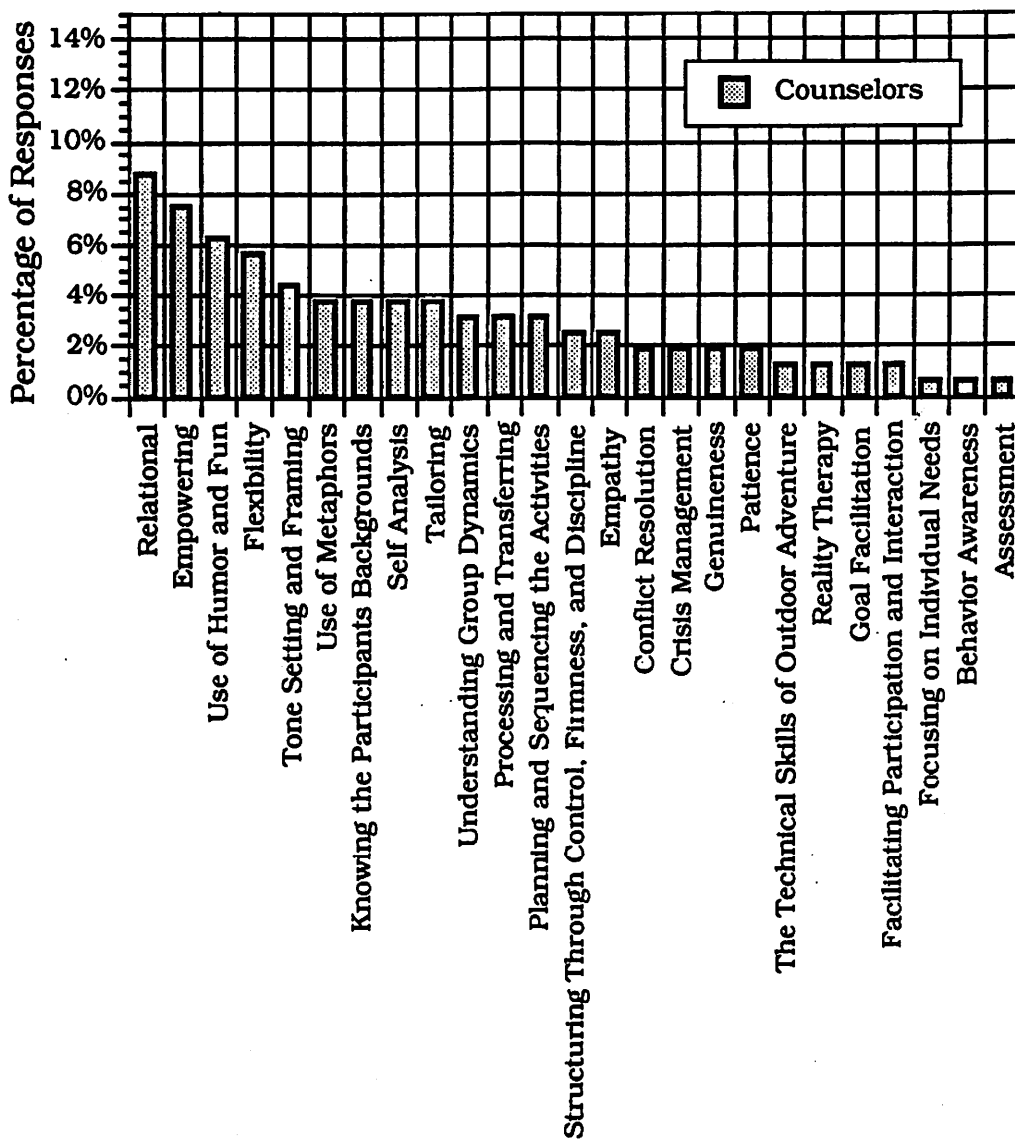
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**Figure 1. Additional Group Counseling Skills of the Adventure- Based Counselor as Identified by All Respondents (n=234)**



**Figure 2.** Additional Group Counseling Skills of the Adventure-Based Counselor as Identified by Supervisors (n=73)



**Figure 3. Additional Group Counseling Skills of the Adventure-Based Counselor as Identified by Counselors (n=161)**

**Empathy.** When the respondents listed empathy or compassion as part of their comments, it was coded into this category. Six respondents listed an empathy response. Two (2.8%) supervisors and four (2.5%) counselors had this type of response.

**Conflict Management and Resolution.** Conflict management and resolution skills, which were identified by similar terminology, were viewed as relevant by 2.6% (n=6) of the respondents. It was perceived as relevant by 4% (n=3) of the supervisors and 1.9% (n=3) of the counselors.

**Knowing the Participants' Backgrounds.** Comments such as "knowledge of the participants' backgrounds," and "comfort with a particular population" were coded into this category resulting in a total of seven responses (3%). One supervisor and six counselors believed that knowing the participants' backgrounds is a relevant group counseling skill for the adventure-based counselor.

**The Technical Skills of Outdoor Adventure.** Those skills that directly related to facilitating the technical aspects of adventure activities were coded into this category. Responses fitting into this category were mentioned by six (2.6%) of the respondents (5.5% of the supervisors and 1.2% of the counselors).

**Planning and Sequencing.** Six respondents listed planning and /or sequencing of the program activities as a relevant group counseling skill for the adventure-based counselor. The supervisor/counselor breakdown for this listing was 1 and 5 respectively.

**Other Group Counseling Skills Identified as Being Relevant to Adventure-Based Counseling.** Many categories were established that had response rates of five or four responses per category. They are described briefly without any discussion of representative comments or supervisor/counselor breakdowns because of their low response rate.

Four group counseling skills had a response rate of 2.1% (n=5) each. They were crisis management, behavioral awareness, assessment, goal facilitation. Four categories had a total of four responses each. Each category represented 1.7% of the subjects. These categories were the use of reality therapy, facilitating interaction among the participants, focusing on individual needs in a group setting, and patience. Use of "I-messages," active participation by the adventure-based counselor, problem solving skills, and open-mindedness had three responses. Each represented 1.3% of the total sample.

## Discussion

The mean ratings of both the supervisor and counselor groups demonstrated that all 22 group counseling skills presented in the survey were considered either always relevant or relevant in most situations. These findings confirm that those group counseling skills recommended for use in the more traditional group counseling settings are also perceived as relevant to the field of adventure-based counseling. Kimball (1986) has stated that adventure-based counselors need to have the knowledge and skills of basic psychotherapy. These results support Kimball's (1986) position.

When asked to list additional group counseling skills relevant to adventure-based counseling, 25 additional skills, each with a response rate of four or more, were suggested. Relational skills, those skills that assisted the counselor in developing a positive relationship with their clients, had the highest response rate. Other high frequency responses listed by both the counselor and supervisor groups included flexibility and the use of humor and fun. Given the nature of adventure programming it is not surprising to find that these three skills were listed by the

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respondents. The relationship between the counselor and participants is important in order to help them process their emotional responses. The use of humor and fun is an inherent part of the adventure activities. Finally, flexibility is important in that activities often produce unexpected individual and group responses.

### Conclusions

This study examined if and to what extent adventure-based counseling practitioners perceived and used the adventure experience as a therapeutic one rather than a recreational or educational one. More specifically, this investigation sought to examine if and how adventure-based counseling was being used as a form of group counseling.

This section briefly addresses some the conclusions drawn from this investigation and are based upon this general purpose.

1. Based on the results of this investigation, it appeared that adventure-based practitioners believed strongly in the therapeutic component, specifically the group counseling component, of the adventure-based counseling programs. This conclusion was supported by the results that demonstrated that all of the 22 group counseling skills identified by Gerald Corey were rated as either always relevant or relevant in most situations within an adventure-based counseling setting. This conclusion was also supported by the fact that almost all of the responses to the open-ended question addressing those additional group counseling skills relevant to adventure-based counseling were of a therapeutic nature rather than a recreational or educational one. Of the additional 25 skills, only one, the category of "The Technical Skills of Outdoor Adventure" did not directly relate to the therapeutic aspects of the adventure program.

2. As previously stated, all 22 group counseling skills, as identified by Corey, were seen as always relevant or relevant in most adventure-based counseling situations. Given these results, it seems important that these skills are consistently used by the adventure-based counselor. Adventure-based counseling program administrators need to insure that their counselors demonstrate competence in using these skills. Training experiences should be designed to help counselors become proficient at using these skills.

This investigation was designed to examine adventure-based counseling as a form of group counseling. If the practitioners in this field are to establish credibility to the larger counseling field, they need to demonstrate that standards exist as to the skills required of the adventure-based counselor and that there are educational and training guidelines recommended for the adventure-based counselor.

In conclusion, this investigation addressed the following question "What group counseling skills that are relevant for adventure-based counseling?" This investigation took some important first steps in perceiving and establishing adventure-based counseling as a legitimate discipline that utilizes group counseling theories and practices.

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