# Group Climate and Development in Adventure Therapy: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the group developmental process of Adventure Therapy (AT) groups conducted with 9th grade students (n = *20*). Researchers measured avoidance, conflict, and cohesion and compared results from this study to the developmental model of traditional counseling groups. Results suggested that AT groups follow a similar developmental process as traditional counseling groups as evidenced by a statistically significant increase in cohesion, an increase then decrease in conflict, and a decrease in avoidance. This study is a response to Gass et al.'s (2012) call for research related to AT group development. Implications for counselors using AT, AT training programs, and future research are discussed.

*Keywords:* Adventure Therapy, Group Climate, Group Development, Adolescence, Time Series Design

# Group Climate and Development in Adventure Therapy: An Exploratory Study

Adventure Therapy (AT) is a mode of group counseling that intentionally utilizes adventure activities to facilitate social-emotional and personal growth as well as behavior change in participants (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Gass, Gillis, & Russell, 2012; Project Adventure, 2007). Adventure therapy is a strength-based mode of counseling (Glass & Myers, 2001; Hill, 2007) that allows natural consequences to facilitate personal insights. Adventure therapists use real and perceived risks inherent in kinesthetic and metaphoric activities, to create disequilibrium in participants that requires new forms of coping (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Gass et al., 2012). Adventure therapy can be tailored to fit outdoor settings such as wilderness, parks, and school play areas as well as indoor settings such as school buildings, gyms, and counseling offices (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Gass et al., 2012, Gillen & Balkin, 2006).

Adventure therapists utilize a combination of foundational counseling skills such as reflecting, empathy, paraphrasing, confrontation, relationship building, goal setting, and verbal processing (Young, 2013) as well as technical skills necessary to safely and effectively facilitate the adventure activities (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). Technical skills include a basic understanding of best practices regarding risk assessment/mitigation and safety, knowledge and skills necessary to facilitate specific initiatives and outdoor adventure type activities, and the ability to match the physical activity with the group's level of development/functioning (Priest & Gass, 2005; Schoel & Maizell, 2002). Metaskills result as the counselor integrates clinical and technical skills in a way that fosters growth in clients (Christian & Perryman, 2017; Priest & Gass, 2005). The goal of AT is to utilize active interventions to produce inter- and intrapersonal growth that participants can transfer to everyday life.

Although an in-depth explanation of AT is beyond the scope of this article and becoming

an adventure therapist requires counselors to gain additional training and experience in adventure programing, it is important for readers to understand some key concepts related to AT implementation. Adventure therapy promotes a therapeutic environment for participants to encounter powerful emotional responses to activities that enhance perceived emotional and mental strength (Cameron-Bandler, 1985; Ringer & Gillis, 1995). Challenge by choice (CBC) is a concept that empowers participants by allowing them to choose their level of participation and practice healthy decision making (Schoel & Maizell, 2002). It also empowers participants by encouraging the group to establish consequences for not adhering to the rules or expectations of an activity. This process creates a supportive, trusting, and caring group environment as well as allows participants to set healthy boundaries. By utilizing CBC, adventure therapists emphasize the value of participants' goals and boundaries over externally imposed standards, thus empowering adolescents to make positive choices (Project Adventure, 2007). Group norms are set by creating a full value contract (FVC) during the first meeting. The FVC is an agreement among participants to value and acknowledge one's ideas and the ideas of others without discounting other opinions (Schoel & Maizell, 2002). Six norms for group behavior are introduced to the group and additional norms can be added (Project Adventure, 2007). The six preset norms are "be here", "be safe", "be honest", "set goals", "care for self and others", and "let go and move on". The FVC is designed to promote growth and change over control and order. All members agree to show respect to each other and the group process by agreeing to abide the FVC.

Another concept pivotal to the implementation of AT is the adventure wave (Project Adventure, 2007; Schoel & Maizell, 2002). The adventure wave follows a modified version of David Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning and consists of three phases: briefing, doing,

and debriefing. Throughout the first phase, briefing, the counselor sets up the activity for the participants. The AT counselor explains the rules, guidelines, and safety procedures and then helps the group members set appropriate goals. In the next phase, the adventure wave and experiential learning cycle converge. In both models, this phase is called the doing phase and entails the group attempting the activity. The final phase of the adventure wave, called debriefing, is what sets AT apart from physical education and recreational programs. As the group moves through the debriefing phase, adventure therapists facilitate discussion related to the final three stages of the experiential learning cycle: reflection, generalization, and transfer (Kolb, 1984). Folan (2012) refers to these three levels of debrief as recreational, educational, and developmental or therapeutic. Many adventure therapists use "what?", "so what?", and "now what?" to refer to the last three stages of the experiential learning cycle. During the reflection or the "what?" stage, the members share concrete experiences. During the generalization or "so what?" stage, members discuss what they can learned from the activity. Finally, during the transfer or "now what?" stage, counselors facilitate discussions that help participants conceptualize ways to transfer their new knowledge and insights to real life.

In recent years there has been an increase in research documenting the therapeutic benefits of AT (Norton et al., 2014). However, there remains a scarcity of information regarding how AT groups develop and how AT effects change in participants (Gass et al., 2012). The small amount of research that exists indicates that there is an influential relationship between AT and group cohesion (Glass & Benshoff, 2002). In more recent research, Glass (2008) found that AT can increase group cohesion amongst participants. However, upon review of the AT literature, it becomes evident that many researchers and practitioners simply assume that AT fosters change in clients through a developmental process similar to traditional group counseling

(Gass et al., 2012; Project Adventure, 2007; Schoel & Maizell, 2002). There is a clear gap in the literature between the assumption that AT follows a similar developmental process as traditional group counseling and evidence to support this claim. The purpose of this study was to explore how AT participants perceived the group developmental process and determine if AT does indeed follow a developmental process similar to traditional group counseling.

**Group Development and Participant Characteristics**

Tuckman's (1965) model of group development consists of five stages: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. Counselors use these stages to conceptualize and promote group development and effectiveness. Specifically, understanding the stages of group development help counselors facilitate the meeting of strangers and subsequent working together to effectively and efficiently accomplish desired outcomes.

Other concepts considered to be key to traditional group development and outcome are avoidant behavior, conflict, and cohesion (Bakali, Wilberg, Klungsoyr, & Lorentzen, 2013; Budman et al., 1989; MacKenzie, Dies, Coche, Rutan, & Stone, 1987; Burlingame, McClendon, & Alonso, 2011; MacKenzie & Tschuschke, 1993; Steen, Vasserman-Stokes, & Vannatta, 2014; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Avoidant behavior, conflict, and cohesion occur at various times and with varying degrees of frequency and intensity throughout Tuckman's (1965) stages. Avoidant behavior is marked by members' refusal to engage with other group members in constructive interactions that foster therapeutic change (Young, Reysen, Eskridge, & Ohrt, 2013). Conflict is both an internal process that occurs as members struggle to find a level of comfort and their identified role within the group (Ohrt et al., 2014), as well as an external phenomenon where members express hostility towards the group leader and other members (Steen et al., 2014). Group cohesion is "a sense of togetherness, or community, within a group" (Corey, Corey, &

Corey, 2010, p. 153). Yalom and Leszcz (2005) liken group cohesion to the establishment of therapeutic rapport between counselor and client in individual counseling.

In the following section we will briefly describe how these three concepts emerge throughout the group process using Tuckman's (1965) model as a guide. It is important to note that the role of the therapist evolves as the group develops. For example, the adventure therapist's initial role is to introduce important AT concepts and facilitate activities that foster the therapeutic relationship (Schoel & Maizell, 2002). Table 1 offers a detailed description of the adventure therapist's role as well as how to use adventure activities at specific points throughout the group developmental process to affect group members' levels of avoidant behavior, conflict, and cohesion. Activities are divided into those that we used for this study and additional activities that counselors could use in future group work.

*(Insert Table 1 Here)*

**Forming.** The forming stage is marked by participants and leaders becoming acquainted and establishing norms. Due to the lack of trust, members often avoid disclosing too much personal information and engaging with other group members in constructive interactions to foster therapeutic change (Young et al., 2013). Cohesion and conflict are also often low as the group members are just getting to know each other.

**Storming.** Bakali et al., (2013) found that group members avoid therapeutic tasks often into the middle to late stages of group counseling as a protective factor. During the storming stage, conflict is a natural occurrence that typically increases initially and decreases as the group develops (Trotzer, 2006; Yalom & Lesczc, 2005). Successful resolution of the storming stage results in increased cohesion amongst group members (Bakali et al., 2013; Ohrt, Robinson, & Hagedorn, 2013).

**Norming.** Higher levels of conflict and avoidance in the initial stages should reduce in intensity as the group progresses (Gullo et al., 2015). Research indicates a strong relationship between positive group outcomes and decrease in conflict and avoidance (Young et al., 2013). Group cohesion typically does not develop until a sense of trust is established (Burlingame et al., 2001) and "after groups have struggled with conflict, have shared pain, and have committed themselves to taking significant risks" (Corey et al., 2010, p. 153).

**Performing.** During the performing stage, the group is operating effectively and proficiently. Successful resolution of previous stages should result in lower levels of avoidance and conflict (Bakali et al, 2013; Ohrt et al., 2013). As members of the group become more transparent, group cohesion, connection, disclosure, and depth of emotional openness increase (Ohrt et al., 2014). Members in a group with high levels of cohesion work collaboratively, self-disclose appropriately, are understanding, and engage in constructive confrontation (Young et al., 2013). These interactions allow members to feel as though they belong and are able to relate to other group members (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

**Adjourning.** Finally, adjourning, also known as termination, marks the ending of the group. Research indicates that groups with lower levels of avoidance and conflict and higher levels of cohesion are more beneficial for members (Budman et al., 1989; MacKenzie et al., 1987; MacKenzie & Tschuschke, 1993; Yalom & Lesczc, 2005; Young et al., 2013). For example, Brigman, Webb, and Campbell (2007) stated that a sense of cohesion is related to the effectiveness of students improving behavior and academic achievement.

## Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore how participants in an AT group perceived the group developmental process and determine if AT does indeed follow a developmental process

similar to traditional group counseling. The hypothesis suggests that AT participants will perform behaviorally and emotionally similar to those in traditional group counseling. We tested our hypothesis using the Group Climate Questionnaire Short Form(GCQ-S; MacKenzie, 1983) with AT groups conducted in a high school setting. By measuring group climate, we hoped to better understand how AT groups develop and how AT effects change in participants. We sought to answer the following research question:

$RQ_1$: Does the AT group development process follow a similar pattern to traditional group counseling?

Based on the research question, we hypothesized the following:

$H_1$: Avoidant behavior will decrease throughout the duration of the group.

$H_2$: Conflict will initially increase and then decrease throughout the duration of the group.

$H_3$: Engagement will increase throughout the duration of the group.

## Methodology

### Design

To answer the research question, we used a time-series design where participants completed the same measure at multiple points throughout the duration of the group. Initially, 21 participants were randomly assigned to one of three AT groups. All three groups received the same intervention from the same two facilitators. No control/comparison group was utilized.

***Power analysis.*** To determine the sample size, we conducted an *a priori* power analysis using G*Power 3 (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009). To answer our research question by conducting a repeated measures ANOVA where $p = .05$, power equals .80, and a medium effect size of .25 can be detected, a sample size of approximately 28 participants was necessary. We initially recruited 24 students (eight students per group) to participate. A *compromise* power

analysis revealed that our power would equal .76. Because the compromise analysis results were close to Cohen's (1992) suggested power level of .80, we continued with the study. Unfortunately, due to attrition, we ended up with a total sample of 20 students. A *post hoc* power analysis revealed that with a sample size of 20, our power had reduced to .65. This reduction in power due to our small sample size likely impacted the results of our statistical significance testing. We attempted to accommodate for this impact by using an effect size which we will discuss in detail below.

**Participants**

Participants for this study were recruited from a high school in the southwestern United States. In order to participate in the study, students had to be incoming ninth grade males and identified by their middle school counselor as at-risk of struggling with the transition from middle school to high school. A majority of students (70%) were considered to be at-risk due to failing one or more classes during their eighth-grade year. In addition, a majority (52%) of the participants also met the criteria to be considered at-risk as set forth by the state's education code. Other at-risk factors included Special Education or 504 (28%), English as a Second Language (13%), substance abuse (11%), previous diagnosis (11%), problems at home (11%), gang involvement (7%), victim of bullying (7%), and homelessness (2%). Although some students qualified based on more than one at-risk criteria, in order to participate in this study, all students had to meet at least one at-risk factor. Of the 21 participants who began the study, 14 (67%) identified as Caucasian and seven (33%) as Hispanic.

**Group Facilitators**

Both facilitators held master's degrees in counseling, were certified school counselors, and completed a master's level group counseling course. In addition, the primary leader had

completed a doctoral level group course, facilitated three master's level experiential groups, taught an undergraduate group counseling course, and facilitated groups with adolescents in a variety of settings. His training in AT consisted of two Project Adventure courses as well as various workshops at a local challenge course. At the time of this study, he had conducted multiple workshops and presentations at local, regional, and national conferences regarding AT. Throughout the duration of this study, he received weekly supervision from a counselor educator at the university where he was completing his doctorate in counselor education.

**Measure**

The Group Climate Questionnaire Short Form (GCQ-S; MacKenzie, 1983) was designed to evaluate how members perceive the climate of counseling groups. It consists of 12 statements related to group functioning that are answered using a 7-point Likert scale. Three scaled scores are derived by calculating the mean of relevant items. The three scores indicate level of engagement, conflict, and avoidance. Higher scores on the engagement scale indicate a positive group atmosphere. Because MacKenzie (1983) equated engagement with group cohesion, one of Yalom and Leszcz's (2005) primary therapeutic factors, we used engagement scores to measure group cohesion. The conflict scale assesses tension and anger within the group whereas the avoiding scale reflects participants' perception that members are avoiding taking personal responsibility in the group. Previous research indicates that higher scores on the engagement scale correlate to more successful group outcomes whereas high scores on the conflict and avoiding scales correlate with poor group outcomes (MacKenzie et al., 1987). Hurley and Brooks (1988) reported a reliability rating of .86. Kivlighan and Goldfine (1991) reported coefficient alphas of .94 for engagement, .88 for conflict, and .92 for avoiding, whereas Johnson and colleagues (2006) reported .70 for engagement, .69 for conflict, and .36 for avoiding. More

recently Young et al. (2013) reported coefficient alphas of .70 for engagement, .55 for conflict, and .48 for avoidance. For this study, coefficient alphas were .81 for engagement, .86 for conflict, and .76 for avoiding. The GCQ-S was administered three times during the course of the study. Participants completed a paper version at the end of the third, sixth, and final sessions.

**Procedures**

After receiving university Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, informed consent procedures were followed and consent was acquired from the school district, campus principal, and guardians of all participants. In addition to consent, in keeping with IRB protocol as well as to promote best practice and honor CBC, all participants were required to provide written assent in order to participate in this study. Participants were informed that there would be no consequence for declining to participate and they could discontinue participation at any time without consequence.

All groups occurred during non-academic elective courses to minimize the impact participation in the study would have on academic achievement. The AT groups consisted of 10 sessions lasting 45 minutes each. In keeping with Durlak and Weissberg's (2007) recommendations, we designed a 10 session, AT group format that was sequential, active, focused, and explicit (S.A.F.E. model). Specifically, activities were intentionally sequenced in order to develop trust and cohesion in the group as well as facilitate change and growth. Adventure therapy is inherently active and the focus of assessment is on group development that will be directly targeted through the selection of specific activities. After each activity, group facilitators led a discussion using the modified version of the experiential learning model (Project Adventure, 2007; Schoel & Maizell, 2002).

**Forming.** During the initial session, the group participated in an introductory activity as well as established norms in the form of a FVC. During the second session, the group completed a name juggle activity (Rohnke, 1989) to help participants learn names and practice setting goals.

**Storming.** The third session consisted of an activity called Chicks and Hens (Ashby et al., 2008) meant to improve communication. During this activity, members split into pairs and the oldest in the pair, who was blindfolded attempted to pick up candy scattered around a marked off area being guided by his partner using a single sound. After processing ways to improve, the activity was repeated using the group's suggestions. In the fourth session, groups completed an activity called Stepping Stones (Aubrey, 2009), where members were given a certain number of paper plates and asked to label each with people or places that support them. The group was then instructed to get from point A to point B by only stepping on the plates. If the students lost physical contact with the plates for longer than a few seconds, one of the facilitators took the plate away. Embracing CBC, group members came up with their own consequence should any part of their body touch the ground.

**Norming.** The fifth session the groups completed Natural Disasters (Aubrey, 2009). During this activity, each member received a piece of rope tied in a circle that represented a safe place. Students placed their circles around the room and then, while standing inside their circle, shared a place or a person that helped them feel safe. Throughout the activity, the facilitators removed circles until eventually the members ended up trying to fit into one circle. Topics of discussion during processing included feeling safe, sharing your safe space, and how the group represented a safe place. During the sixth session, the group completed Balloon Trolley (Aubrey, 2009). Each member was given an inflated balloon that they labeled with an emotion that had inhibited progress in the past. Members stood in a forward-facing line with balloons

between their chest and the back of the person in front of them. Then the group attempted to walk from point A to point B using only body pressure to keep the balloons in place. Each group created their own consequence for dropping a balloon. The members then processed the experience, the emotion written on the balloon, and how emotions can prevent goal attainment.

**Performing.** Groups completed an activity called Keys to Communication (Cain & Smith, 2002) during the seventh session. Equally divided, the two groups stood on opposite sides of a rectangular area, containing two locks and two keys. Each group chose one person to be blindfolded and verbally guided him through the rectangle to the team's lock and key. Groups attempted this activity multiple times in order to give each member a chance at being guided while blindfolded. The goal of this activity was to discuss effective communication, peer pressure, giving and receiving feedback. During the eighth meeting, groups engaged in the TP Shuffle (Rohnke, 1989). Facilitators split each group in two and had them stand at opposite ends of a line of tape. Next, the members had to get from one side to the other without stepping off of the tape. Keeping with CBC, the group members decided consequences for stepping off the tape. The goal of this activity was to discuss overcoming obstacles in life, staying positive, and achieving goals. By the ninth group, the facilitators wanted to challenge the group members to trust each other so the groups engaged in a trust walk (Ashby et al., 2008). The facilitators asked the group to identify who was the most trustworthy person in the group and why. Next, all members except for the person identified as most trustworthy were blindfolded and asked to hold a rope. Neither facilitators were blindfolded for the safety of the members. Each member had an opportunity to lead and the group processed what it was like to be led by each.

**Adjourning.** During the final session, the group engaged in an activity called Knot My Problem (Folan, 2012). One of the facilitators coiled a rope that was tied together at the ends

and placed it in the middle of the group circle. Each member then shared one way they had grown as a result of the group and then reached across and grabbed part of the rope. After everyone had shared, the group stood up and stepped back while holding the rope resulting in a tangled knot. The members then worked together to untangle the knot. Keeping with challenge by choice and goal setting, the group set a time goal for how long it should take to complete.

**Data Analysis**

Data was screened to ensure it met normal distribution and homogeneity of variance. Initial review of the histograms for each variable indicated that the data was normally distributed. However, because the sample size for all analyses was relatively small, we also utilized non-graphical tests to assess for normal distribution (Stevens, 2009). Skewness and kurtosis coefficients were in the acceptable range of +/- 3 except for the second time conflict was measured (skewness = 2.74, kurtosis = 8.31). However, because previous research indicates that skewness and kurtosis have only a slight effect on statistical significance or power (Glass, Peckham, & Sanders, 1972) and the leptokurtic distribution of scores was consistent with theories of conflict within group development (Trotzer, 2006; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), we proceeded with the analyses. Using the Levene statistic, we ensured that all GCQ-S data met the assumption for homogeneity of variance.

We conducted three independent repeated measures ANOVA procedures, to evaluate the group members' perception of group climate. For the first ANOVA, we used the engaged scale scores to assess how engagement and cohesion in an AT group changed over time. In the second ANOVA, we used scores on the conflict scale to assess how conflict in an AT group changed over time. In the third ANOVA, we conducted an analysis that assessed how avoidant behavior changed over time for participants in an AT group.

Although statistical significance tests are necessary to inform researchers on the likelihood that a result occurred by chance, little else can be gleaned from them (Armstrong & Henson, 2005). In order to determine replicability, practical significance, and account for our small sample size, we calculated effect size estimates (Henson, 2006). More specifically, we computed and reported R squared type effect sizes in the form of partial eta squared ($\eta^2_p$) that indicates the percent of variance in avoidance, conflict, and engagement that can be explained by participation in AT groups. Cohen (1988) and Henson (2006) hesitantly suggested that .01 could be considered a small effect size, .06 could be considered a moderate effect size, and .14 could be considered a large effect size. In addition to statistical significance, we will discuss the practical significance of the results in regard to how closely they follow the expected developmental process of traditional counseling groups.

## Results

The research team hypothesized AT group development would follow a similar pattern to traditional group development. Specifically, we believed that avoidant behavior would decrease, conflict would initially increase and then decrease, and engagement would increase throughout the duration of the group. In order to test this hypothesis, we conducted three repeated measures ANOVAs using time as the independent variable and the three scaled scores produced by the GCQ-S as dependent variables. Table 2 contains the means, standard deviations, and sample size for each time the members completed the GCQ-S. What follows is a detailed account of each analysis presented in the order the variables appear in the hypothesis.

*(Insert Table 2 Here)*

### Avoidance

There was no statistically significant effect for time, $F(2, 38) = .295$, $p = .746$, and a small effect size (partial $\eta^2 = .02$). Although not statistically significant, based on the small effect size and review of the means, it appears that students who participated in an AT group did report a decrease in avoidant behavior as the group progressed. Table 3 contains the full results from the repeated measures ANOVA and Figure 1 represents the group means at each point of data collection. Regarding practical significance, the AT group development pattern as observed in Figure 1 is similar to that of traditional counseling groups in that there is an overall decrease in avoidant behavior over time.

*(Insert Table 3 Here)*

*(Insert Figure 1 Here)*

**Conflict**

There was no statistically significant effect for time, $F(2, 38) = .012$, $p = .99$, and an extremely small effect size (partial $\eta^2 < .01$). Based on these results and reviewing the means across time, it is clear that conflict actually increased at Time 2, but then decreased at Time 3 back to the same level of Time 1. Table 3 contains the full results from the repeated measures ANOVA and Figure 2 represents the group means at each point of data collection. Regarding practical significance, the AT group development pattern as observed in Figure 2 is similar to that of traditional counseling groups in that there is initially an increase but then a decrease in conflict as the group progresses.

*(Insert Figure 2 Here)*

**Engagement**

There was a statistically significant increase in engagement over time, $F(2, 38) = 4.067$, $p = .025$, and a large effect size (partial $\eta^2 = .18$). Based on these results, students who participated

in an AT group did report a statistically significant increase in engagement as the group progressed. Table 3 contains the full results from the repeated measures ANOVA and Figure 3 represents the group means at each point of data collection. Regarding practical significance, the AT group development pattern as observed in Figure 3 is similar to that of traditional counseling groups in that engagement increased over time.

*(Insert Figure 3 Here)*

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the group development process of AT compared to traditional group counseling. Results suggest that AT groups do follow a similar developmental process as traditional counseling groups as evidenced by a decrease in avoidance, an increase then decrease in conflict, and a statistically significant increase in cohesion. Although not statistically significant, the data points for avoidance trended in the anticipated direction. Specifically, as the group progressed, members reported decreasing levels of avoidant behavior. These findings are consistent with previous literature and group theory that would expect members to be more willing to take responsibility for the group and address difficult subjects as trust and cohesion increase (Trotzer, 2006).

Regarding conflict, the pattern presented in Figure 2 is consistent with group theory. In group counseling, conflict is a natural occurrence that typically increases as the group forms and decreases as the group settles into the working phase (Trotzer, 2006; Yalom & Lesczc, 2005). Based on Yalom and Lesczc's (2005) statement that "cohesiveness is the primary prerequisite for the successful management of conflict" (p. 368), it is likely that the significant development of cohesion allowed members to manage the initial increase in conflict typical of group formation.

One curious finding was the overall low level of conflict scores, leading the researchers to question why conflict scores were not higher at time two of data collection. At no point of collection did the mean for conflict enter single digits; instead, it remained a decimal at all three points. Based on these low means and observations while facilitating the group, it appears that the groups avoided conflict during a majority of the meetings, even as it followed a theoretically consistent trend. This low level of conflict makes sense when viewed through a developmental lens. Adolescents look to peers for feedback on how they should behave in order to be accepted by the group (Bandura, 1977). Additionally, LaVoie, Spenceri, and Mahoney-Wernli (2001) found that adolescents avoid conflict in order to preserve friendships and avoid punishment from others. Thus, in order to avoid rejection, members likely avoided high levels of conflict. In addition, this low level of conflict is also consistent with previous research indicating that adolescents are likely to avoid conflict related to activities (e.g. cheating, group decisions, and rules) in a school setting (LaVoie et al., 2001). However, it is also possible that the nature of the AT groups allowed conflict to remain low. Specifically, Hartup (1992) found that conflict between boys typically involves autonomy or power issues. By emphasizing CBC and FVC, members learned to work together instead of struggling for dominance.

Finally, the statistically significant improvement in engagement across the three collection points provides evidence that participants felt a greater sense of cohesion and peer support as the group progressed. This finding is consistent with previous research and theory that stipulates that cohesion should increase over time in group counseling (Trotzer, 2006; Yalom & Lesczc, 2005). Further, group counseling research indicates that groups with high levels of cohesion have better outcomes for members than groups low in cohesion (Budman et al., 1989; MacKenzie et al., 1987; MacKenzie & Tschuschke, 1993; Yalom & Lesczc, 2005).

Based on the aforementioned results of GCQ-S scores that revealed an increase in engagement, decrease in avoidance, and increase then decrease in conflict, AT appears to follow the same patterns of development and process as other traditional modes of group counseling.

**Limitations**

Limitations include issues regarding sample, duration of the group, and the treatment protocol. First, the sample was relatively small and only representative of males in a specific location: southwest high schools. Also, the sample lacked diversity because it was a sample of convenience comprised of students from a single school location. Due to restrictions associated with the school setting, each meeting only lasted 45 minutes instead of the typical 90 minutes. This shortened format might have restricted the group from engaging in additional processing. Another limitation is that AT research finding transferability is often limited due to the lack of a common theoretical model to guide practice (Norton et al., 2014). We attempted to mitigate this by creating a treatment protocol using Durlak and Weissberg's (2007) S.A.F.E. model as a theoretical foundation for all of the activities, but further research should be conducted using this protocol to assess its effectiveness.

**Implications for Practice and Future Research**

This study has implications specific to school counselors as well as for counseling practice in general. Specific to school counseling, results of this study support school counselors using AT in schools to increase student engagement. Previous research indicates that student engagement is associated with decreased academic achievement, delinquency, substance abuse, and likelihood of graduating (Lo & Learner, 2011; Wang & Fredricks, 2014). Although the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2012) recommends a student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1, the national average is 491:1 (ASCA , n.d.). School counselors can use AT to increase

the number of students they are able to serve. Recommendations for implementation AT in schools based on this study include the following. First, when working with students transitioning grades, counselors can use information from previous school counselor(s) to ensures students' needs are met. Second, because AT emphasizes personal responsibility and responsible choices, school counselors should invite students to join and secure student assent, remembering that forcing a student to participate violates CBC. We also suggest getting written consent from parents, although some schools have blanket consent to counseling services in their student/parent handbooks. Third, because academics take priority in a school setting, school counselors should be mindful of what subjects students miss to participate. For this study, students were pulled for group during an elective implemented to help all 9th grade students transition to high school, thus limiting interruption of academic instruction. Fourth, the term "at-risk" has inherent connotations related to social inequality and power, yet is frequently used to describe adolescents struggling with academic, career, and personal/social development. School counselors can use a strength-based approach like AT to empower participants through CBC, FVC, and successful completion of adventure activities. Finally, in keeping with the call for more evidence-based practices (Dimmitt, Carey, & Hatch, 2007), school counselors should track progress using some form of assessment related to anticipated group outcomes such as social-emotional learning assessments listed in *"Are You Ready to Assess Social and Emotional Development?: Stop, Think, Act"* (American Institutes for Research, 2015).

Regarding general counseling practice, this study is an answer to the call for additional research regarding how AT groups develop and how AT effects change in participants (Gass et al., 2012). The results of this study help adventure therapists better understand how AT impacts participants knowing that AT and traditional group counseling share similar developmental

processes. These results suggest that adventure therapists can use traditional theoretical models of counseling to guide them when facilitating AT groups. This implication is supported by previous literature that has outlined the use of traditional theoretical models of counseling to guide the application of AT (Christian, Perryman, & Portrie-Bethke, 2017; Gass et al., 2012; Glass & Myers, 2001). Also, adventure therapists should use established models of group development, such as Tuckman's (1965) model, to assess group development and sequence activities in a manner that fosters cohesion and engagement while providing opportunity for the group to engage in and resolve conflict. Adventure therapists should not plan on engaging participants in an activity that requires a high level of trust in the initial meeting. Instead, results of this study emphasize the importance for adventure therapists to facilitate activities with the understanding that members will likely manifest avoidant behavior most intensely in the initial sessions but, with appropriate sequencing of activities, will develop trust and engage in the group development and personal growth. To sequence activities appropriately, adventure therapists will need to be trained in AT by enrolling in university courses, attending conference presentations, or taking workshops provided by groups such as Project Adventure or High 5 Adventure Learning. Adventure therapists can use books like *The Hundredth Monkey: Activities That Inspire Playful Learning* (Folan, 2012) and *Adventure Therapy: Theory, Research, and Practice* (Gass et al., 2012) for continued learning and activity sequencing.

Although intentional sequencing of AT activities is essential for fostering group cohesion and person growth (Christian et al., 2017; Gass et al., 2012; Glass & Myers, 2001), it is only part of the formula for creating trust and engagement. Another aspect of establishing trust and engagement is adventure therapists' ability to use personal characteristics and interpersonal dynamics to establish therapeutic rapport (Glenn, Leppma, & Thorne, 2015; Norcross, 2002;

Westen, Novotny, & Thompson-Brenner, 2004). Therapists' efficacy is dependent on their ability to demonstrate therapeutic attributes of warmth, empathy, open-mindeness, social-emotional maturity and well-being, self-care, flexibility, intra- and interpersonal awareness, and cognitive organization ( Glenn, et al., 2015; Hauser & Hays, 2010; Norcross, 2002; Okiishi, Lambert, Nielsen, & Ogles, 2003). Glenn et al. (2015) discovered that social-emotional, cognitive structuring, self-awareness, flexibility, and physical, facial, and emotional expressions also contributed to clients' reporting a stronger therapeutic alliance and outcome to the clinical experience. Based on the current findings and the aforementioned research, it is reasonable to conclude that adventure therapists' ability to purposefully sequencing activities along with personal disposition, self-awareness, and inter/intra-personal characteristics likely play a role in participants' perceived therapeutic value and sense of trust when engaging in AT. Therefore, adventure therapists must not only gain necessary knowledge and skills related to activity sequencing and counseling, but also demonstrate personal and professional attributes that enhance the therapeutic relationship.

In addition, being able to connect the AT process to the more thoroughly understood and investigated field of group counseling supports the potential of AT to be an evidenced based intervention (Gass et al., 2012). The results of this study emphasize the importance of adventure therapists being proficient in technical skills, but also have sufficient therapeutic skills. Programs training adventure therapists must ensure students understand traditional group counseling theories, skills, and techniques they can apply to AT facilitation.

This study also has a number of implications concerning future quantitative and qualitative research. First, future researchers should recruit larger sample sizes in order to increase power as well as attain results that can be generalized to a larger portion of the

population. Second, by using the GCQ-S, an instrument that is both brief and widely used, as well as ANOVAs, an analysis simple both to run and interpret, we hoped to encourage replication of this study in a variety of settings. Finally, we hope that replication of this study will elucidate how AT affects change in participants as well as support AT as an effective intervention school counselors can implement with at-risk youth.

Regarding qualitative research, grounded theory methodology might prove fruitful as it allows researchers to use their knowledge of AT to guide the creation of research questions and interview/survey content (Buckley, 2010) to better understand current beliefs about AT conceptual framework. To employ grounded theory researchers must have adequate knowledge of the AT process, participant selection, and be skilled at collecting, organizing and coding data. They also must be able to triangulate the uncovered theory with existing research and other adventure therapists' experiences. Through grounded theory research, AT researchers will be better able to describe the essential elements of an adventure therapists' role in the AT process and how AT effects change in participants.

## Conclusion

Results of this study indicate that AT groups follow a similar developmental process as traditional counseling groups. By measuring group climate through the duration of the AT groups, we found a statistically significant increase in cohesions, an initial increase then decrease in conflict, and a decrease in avoidance as reported by participants using the GCQ-S. These results support the use of traditional group counseling models such as Tuckman's (1965) model to describe the developmental process of AT groups. They also support the use of AT in schools and underscore the importance of adventure therapists receiving training in group work during graduate level mental health training. Finally, the results of this study emphasize the necessity

for adventure therapists to sequence activities in a way that fosters cohesion, provides ample opportunity for navigating conflict in the early stages, and allows participants to be successful while exhibiting higher levels of avoidance initially, with decreasing levels over time. Although these results addressed Gass et al.'s (2012) call to investigate AT group development process, future research should explore AT group development with a variety of age groups and in a variety of settings. Furthermore, combining outcome measures with the GCQ-S will provide valuable insight into the relationship between AT group process and outcome.

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Table 1

*Characteristics of Group Development and Climate, Adventure Therapist's Role, and Corresponding Activities*

| | Forming | Storming | Norming | Performing | Adjourning |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Characteristics** | **Participants** (Corey et al., 2010; Steen et al., 2014)**:**<br>● identify group task<br>● struggle to identify role in group<br>● hesitant to engage fully with group<br>● elevated politeness in order to avoid conflict<br>● anxiety related to group acceptance and expectations<br>● excitement about possibility of growth and group progress<br><br>**Stage** (Tuckman, 1965; Young et al., 2013)**:**<br>● Initial contact between members and leaders<br>● Foundation for group climate<br>● General ground rules or group norms established<br>● Reduced disclosure<br>● Lack of established trust | **Participants** (Bakali et al., 2013; Steen et al., 2014; Young et al., 2013)**:**<br>● move against and test the norms created in the forming stage.<br>● challenge the leader<br>● test norms<br>● engage in conflicts regarding opinions and group roles<br>● engage in elevated level of avoidant behavior as a protective factor.<br>● stay engaged in activities based on member choice<br>● experience anger, distrust, and strife<br><br>**Stage** (Johnson, 2013; Tuckman, 1965)**:**<br>● Often the time of most intense conflict during the group's development<br>● Natural coping skills no longer accessible as participants are forced from their comfort zone<br>● Risk-taking creates discomfort and unbalance/disequilibrium | **Participants** (Corey et al., 2010; Kivlighan, Paquin, & Hsu, 2014)**:**<br>● adopt specific roles<br>● take initiative engaging in positive interactions with members and self-disclosure<br>● generate new understandings of personal strengths<br>● identify new areas for growth<br>● provide/receive constructive feedback.<br><br>**Stage** (Burlingame, Fuhriman, & Johnson, 2001; Tuckman, 1965)**:**<br>● A rotation of norming and storming guided by the AT group process.<br>● Conflict typically continues to decrease<br>● Higher levels of trust<br>● Avoidant behavior decreases | **Participants** (Ohrt et al., 2014; Schnur & Montgomery, 2010)**:**<br>● believe being part of group is desirable and productive<br>● achieve goals with minimal friction.<br>● gain insight into own behavior and make necessary changes<br>● reduced emotional stress and increase in physical activity<br><br>**Stage** (Schnur & Montgomery, 2010; Tuckman, 1965)**:**<br>● Known as the working stage<br>● Majority of group process is spent in this stage<br>● Group members are operating effectively and proficiently | **Participants** (Ohrt et al., 2014; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005)**:**<br>● feel a sense of accomplishment in the group and personally<br>● identify new ways of being and how these behaviors are transferred to other relationships and settings.<br><br>**Stage** (Tuckman, 1965; Young et al., 2013)**:**<br>● Characterized by either reaching the end of an allotted timeframe for the groups engagement or is marked by an emotional and mental experience |
| **Group Climate** | Avoidance: High<br>Conflict: Low<br>Cohesion: Low | Avoidance: Decreasing<br>Conflict: High<br>Cohesion: Increasing | Avoidance: Decreasing<br>Conflict: Decreasing<br>Cohesion: Moderate | Avoidance: Low<br>Conflict: Low<br>Cohesion: High | Avoidance: Low<br>Conflict: Low<br>Cohesion: High |
| **Adventure Therapist's Role** | ● Introduces full value contract (FVC) and challenge by choice (CBC).<br>● Facilitates activities that foster engagement | ● Facilitates activities to employ real and perceived physical and psychological risks.<br>● Instills a sense of accomplishment, personal achievement, and cohesion | ● Views action as novel and useful for fostering growth<br>● Utilizes activities as instruments of change as well as forms of assessment to promote group development | ● Becomes less directive<br>● Assumes role of active observer as members cooperate to complete activities while implementing | ● Encourages reflection of the group process through carefully selected activities |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | and member-to-member and member-to-leader relationships | through the use of specifically sequenced adventure activities<br>● Processes group member intra- and interpersonal experiences | ● Reflects on member dynamics impacting group development and outcome | newly developed beliefs and behaviors | ● Recognizes group and individual achievements |
| **Activity** | **From the Study:**<br>● Categories (Rohnke & Butler, 1995)<br>● Creating a Full Value Contract<br>● Cross Town Connection (Folan, 2012)<br>● Name Juggle (Rohnke, 1989)<br><br>**Additional:**<br>● Traffic Signs (Folan, 2012)<br>● Full Value Stock Market (Folan, 2012)<br>● Yurt Rope (Rohnke & Butler, 1995) | **From the Study:**<br>● Gotcha (Aubrey, 2009)<br>● Chicks & Hens (Ashby, Kottman, & DeGraaf, 2008)<br>● Hi-Lo-Yo (Aubrey, 2009)<br>● Stepping Stones (Aubrey, 2009)<br><br>**Additional:**<br>● From My Perspective (Folan, 2012)<br>● Sneak Attack (Folan, 2012)<br>● Playing with Poppers (Folan, 2012)<br>● Jump In, Jump Out (Folan, 2012) | **From the Study:**<br>● Alphabet Check In<br>● Natural Disasters (Aubrey, 2009)<br>● Knot or Not (Cain & Smith, 2002)<br>● Balloon Trolleys (Aubrey, 2009)<br><br>**Additional:**<br>● Pairs Walk (Rohnke & Butler, 1995)<br>● Trust Circle (Rohnke & Butler, 1995) | **From the Study:**<br>● Strengths Bombardment (Aubrey, 2009)<br>● Keys to Communication (Cain & Smith, 2002)<br>● Silver Lining (Ashby et al., 2008)<br>● TP Shuffle (Rohnke & Butler, 1995)<br>● Trust Walk (Ashby et al., 2008)<br><br>**Additional:**<br>● Trust Line (Folan, 2012)<br>● Toll Booth Boogie (Folan, 2012) | **From the Study:**<br>● Knot My Problem (Folan, 2012)<br>● Full Value Contract Discussion/Division<br><br>**Additional:**<br>● Step Into the Circle (Cain & Smith, 2002)<br>● A Knot for Every Teachable Moment (Cain & Smith, 2002)<br>● Closings (Rohnke & Butler, 1995)<br>● Experiential Learning Cycle: 3 Levels of Debrief (Folan, 2012) |

Table 2

*Mean Scores for the Avoidance, Conflict, and Engagement Scales*

| | | N | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Avoidance | | | | |
| | Time 1 | 20 | 3.6 | 1.27 |
| | Time 2 | 20 | 3.45 | 1.76 |
| | Time 3 | 20 | 3.25 | 1.07 |
| Conflict | | | | |
| | Time 1 | 20 | .70 | 0.86 |
| | Time 2 | 20 | .75 | 1.48 |
| | Time 3 | 20 | .70 | 0.86 |
| Engagement | | | | |
| | Time 1 | 20 | 3.15 | 1.09 |
| | Time 2 | 20 | 3.35 | 1.18 |
| | Time 3 | 20 | 4.05 | 0.94 |

Table 3

*ANOVA Summary Table for Avoidance, Conflict, and Engaged Scales on GCQ-S*

| | Sum of Squares | *df* | *MS* | *F* | *p* | Partial $\eta^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Avoidance | | | | | | |
| Time | 1.23 | 1 | .617 | .295 | .746 | .02 |
| Error | 79.43 | 38 | 2.09 | | | |
| Conflict | | | | | | |
| Time | .03 | 2 | .017 | .012 | .99 | .001 |
| Error | 51.30 | 38 | 1.350 | | | |
| Engaged | | | | | | |
| Time | 8.93 | 2 | 4.467 | 4.067 | .025 | .18 |
| Error | 41.73 | 38 | 1.098 | | | |

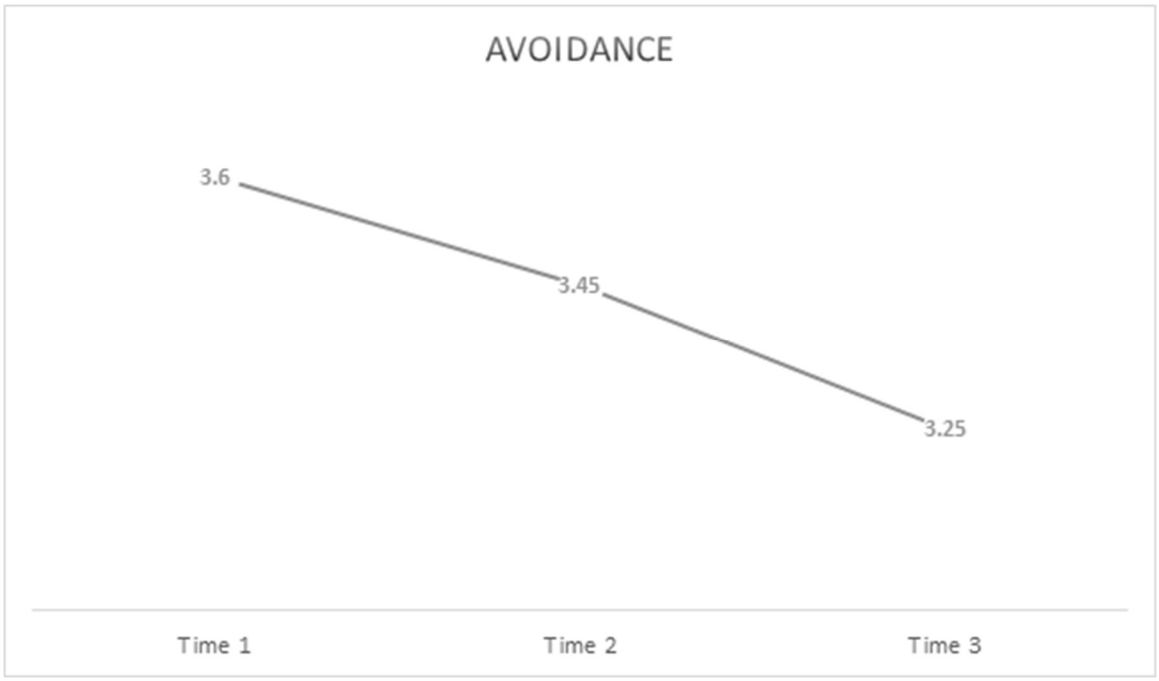



*Figure 1.* Plotted means for scores on GCQ-S Avoidance Scale

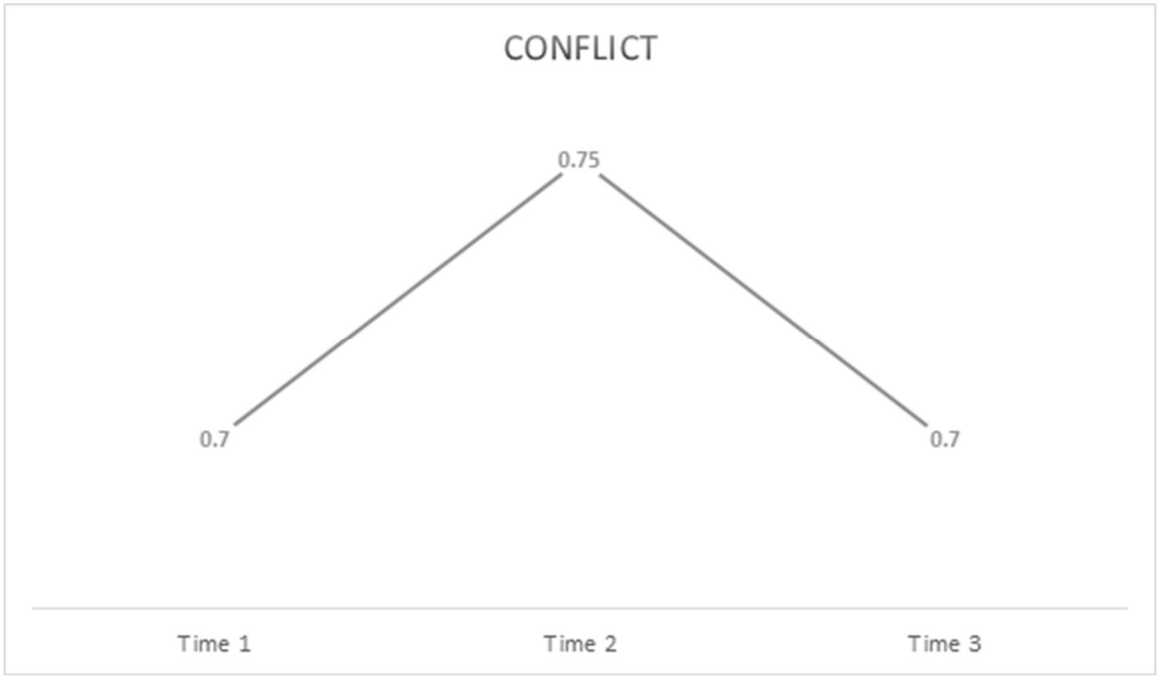



*Figure 2.* Plotted means for scores on GCQ-S Conflict Scale

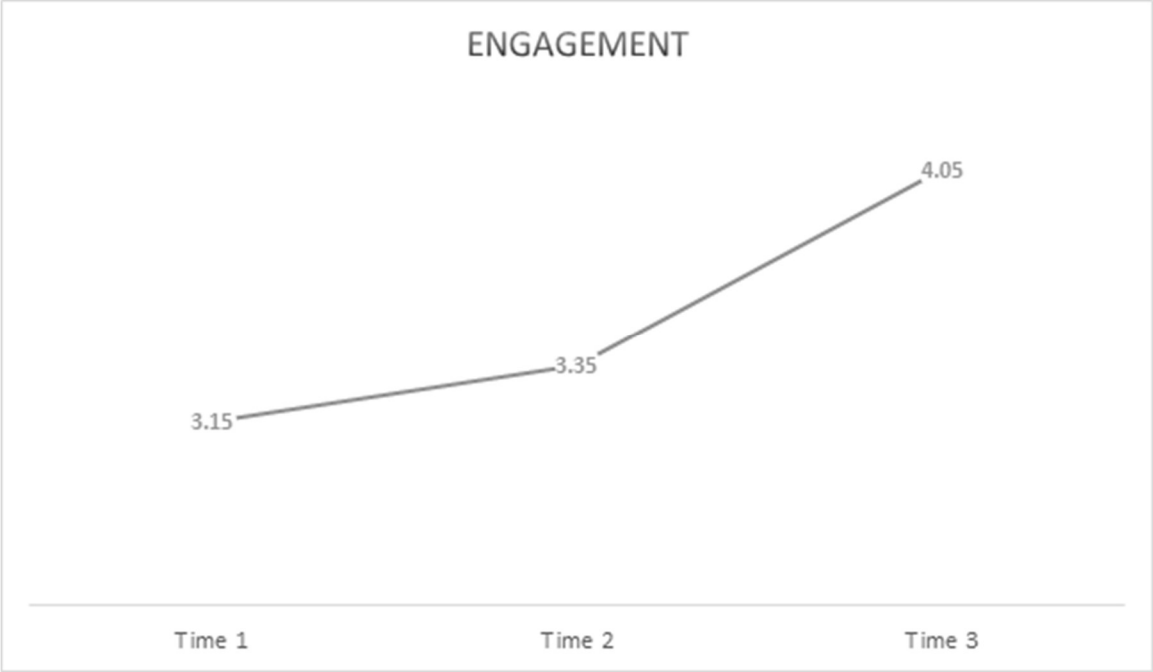



*Figure 3.* Plotted means for scores on GCQ-S Engagement Scale