

THE USE OF HUMOR

IN COUNSELING

by

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## ABSTRACT

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The use of humor in counseling can be seen from three major perspectives. The client and counselor represent unique variables in the effectiveness of counseling.

A client's pattern of humor use can provide a counselor with invaluable information. Humor may be used for self-preservation, personal defamation, as a defense mechanism to hide emotional issues and anxiety. Counselors who can identify the intentions of a client's use of humor can be proactive in counseling.

The use of humor by counselors has payoffs and risks. The counselor may use humor as a tension breaker to overcome resistance in a session. The ideal outcome of humor use is the forward progress of the counseling relationship. The research surrounding humor use in counseling suggests that humor is a powerful tool. The proper interpretation, climate of the session and personality of the client must be considered for successful use of counseling humor.

This study identified the many uses of humor in counseling. The focus of the research also provided insight into the unique perspectives of the counselor and client. Numerous recommendations were made to improve pre-professional training programs and counselor awareness for humor use in counseling.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

The use of humor in counseling is often overlooked as a professional treatment method. The use of humor may be understated in the counseling profession, but the impact of humor can be extensive. Humor can be seen as an effective communication tool for both counselors and clients.

Clients in counseling use humor in many capacities. Often humor is used as a socially adaptive tactic to provide positive comfort, self-preservation, and insight into the client's concerns. Clients may use humor to deliver emotionally charged information that may otherwise be interpreted as unacceptable in conversation (Herring & Meggert, 1994). This type of humor for self preservation and comfort allows a client to take calculated risks while exploring their true emotions. When clients take the risk of using humor to expose emotion, the opportunity for personal insight and perspective develops. Humor can be implemented by the client as a negative tool for communicating as well. Negative uses of humor include personal defamation, building resistance, and redirecting emotional responses.

A professional counselor can use humor as a gauge of client behavior. Counselors may introduce humor to build rapport, explore emotions and to lessen stressful situations. The implementation of humor requires judgment and knowledge concerning the appropriate use of humor with each client. The choice to use humor in counseling is a professional judgment into what is considered appropriate or inappropriate for each client. The counselor must weight the therapeutic cost/benefit for the introduction of humor into the counseling relationship. According to Bordan and Goldin (1999), the use

of humor requires great detail to environment and timing. If humor is introduced inappropriately, the counselor will be considered unprofessional in respect to the client's current needs. The use of humor must be in the best interest of the client and never at their expense. A counselor may use humor for personal stress relief as long as it does not impact the quality of the counseling session or redirect the client negatively. The counseling profession presents stressful situations and requires crisis management for a counselor to be successful. The implementation of humor by counselors is often used as a coping mechanism for stress.

The use of humor by a counselor must be professionally appropriate to be therapeutic in nature. There are cautions for counselors who implement humor into their sessions. Humor can be viewed by the client as inappropriate regardless of the counselor's best therapeutic intentions. A counselor must make sure that the client is not offended, distracted, or put down by the humorous statements (Gladding, 1995). A client may be distracted by inappropriate timing of a joke and confused by the counselor's effort to communicate in such a fashion. Counselors must become knowledgeable about their client's personality and intrinsic motivational themes before using humor in the counseling session. What is deemed appropriate or subtle humor for one client may be viewed as outrageous and inappropriate by another. The disparity of perspectives requires a counselor to be cautious with humor implementation.

The diversity of school populations and ethnic backgrounds are also a challenge to counselors. Humor can be seen as a universal phenomenon, however, without universal generalization. Every culture and ethnic group uses humor differently. A

professional counselor must not assume effectiveness of therapeutic humor across ethnic groups.

### **Statement of the Problem**

There is a limited amount of pre-professional training and resources surrounding the use of humor as a counseling strategy.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the effect of humor usage in counseling. The extensive review of research and literature allows the researcher to gain insight and knowledge of appropriate strategies for implementing humor in a professional setting. In addition, recommendations are made for future guidance programs to explore humor in counseling as a professional method.



## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### **Introduction**

This chapter will focus on the extensive research in the area of counseling humor. The chapter will include humor theories, client use of humor, cultural counseling, counselor use of humor and the impact of humor on health.

#### **Humor Theories**

According to Coleman (1992), humor largely would be categorized into three basic areas. The humor categories included superiority, incongruity, and psychoanalytical theory. The categorization of humor theories could provide insight into the underlying problems a client may be facing. The superiority theory claims that clients would use humor to put down an individual or group. Superiority theory would be one way for a client to draw lines of who was important and accepted within their framework of thought. Superiority humor would be used to separate groups by racial identity, ethnicity or sexual identity. The focus of superiority humor would be to elevate ones-self through put downs and defamation of others. The superiority humor ranges from subtle put-downs to direct and hurtful focused slurs. The use of the superiority humor would identify the client as feeling more valuable and egocentric in comparison to other groups or individuals. The second category of humor theory focused on incongruity. Incongruity theory brings together ideas, events or actions that would be illogical. The humor would be produced when the client pieces together the incongruent events and finds mirth as a release. Incongruity theory would not have a victim focus like superiority theory. Incongruity theory would allow the client to weigh two opposing ideas and to find humor

in the comparison. Incongruity often created a problem solving challenge for the client which would make them an active participant in the discussion at hand. The involvement of the cognitive activity would create the humor response to incongruity. If the client did not have the social context for comparison of the incongruity being presented, the humor of the moment would be lost. The third theory presented by Coleman would be the psychoanalytic theory. The psychoanalytic theory would be a representation of socially acceptable humor as a way to express socially unacceptable or taboo subjects. Humor would be introduced by a client as a transition to a difficult subject area. The psychoanalytical theory was based on the influence of impulse, appropriate or inappropriate, and the humor response as a moderating agent.

Bordan and Goldin (1999) supported Coleman's findings concerning the incongruity theory. Incongruity represented the perceived relationships, ideas and beliefs from a new perspective. The new perspective would allow a client to re-examine their problem or situation from a new angle. Incongruity use by a counselor would be introduced as an option or alternative perspective for a client. The intent of the incongruity humor would need to be therapeutic in nature, not judgmental. A professional counselor would allow incongruity of relationships and belief patterns to naturally unfold for a client's self discovery. The interpretation of incongruity humor by a client would depend heavily on the delivery style of the counselor. A counselor who would rush to judgment and point out a client's lack of ability to recognize their own social situation, would appear to be crass and unprofessional. Incongruity humor would be most successfully used by a counselor with strong client rapport. The relationship would allow the counselor and client to recognize emotional and professional boundaries of self

evaluation and progress. Incongruity humor would be therapeutic for a client for perspective analysis and if used incorrectly the theory of incongruity humor would appear to be a sharp barb of criticism to the client.

Lynch (2002), contended that three main humor theories dominated the choices made by individual clients. Clients would use humor theory to express concerns over superiority, incongruity and tension relief. Superiority humor would be used by a client to either establish or distance themselves from a superior position in society. Superiority humor as a communication tool would allow a counselor to understand a client's viewpoint of belonging within a group. Put downs and harsh criticism of self would indicate the client does not view themselves as part of an influential social group. Self disparaging comments would indicate the client would be using humor as a way of resisting societal norms. The other end of the superiority spectrum would be when a client would use humor to separate and elevate themselves over other groups in society. Superiority humor would allow a client gloat, criticize and ridicule another group. The unhealthy use of superiority humor could easily be identified in racist and discriminatory comments. Superiority humor would be a form of control over a perceived weaker group within society. The second humor theory expressed by Lynch would be incongruity humor.

The conception of humor as incongruity does not exclude the superiority or relief motivations of humor, but suggests that laughter is based on intellectual activity rather than a drive to feel superior or to relieve tension. Hence incongruity humor is a psychologically motivated humor based not in build-up physical need but rather on a

psychological desire for consistency within internal frames and external environment. Humor is cognitively based because it is dependent on the individual's perception of an event, individual, or symbol in comparison to what is considered typical. If there is a discrepancy, the humorist registers the incongruity between the perceived event and the expected norm to find humor in the relationship. (p. 428)

Incongruity theory would create a paradox within the client or counselor that would bring about a humorous response. Incongruity theory would be considered an intellectual activity in finding the discrepancies within the environment. Lynch's third theory, tension relief, contended that humor provided a release of both the emotions and the physical body. Tension would build within the body due to stress and trauma. Humor would provide an outlet for tension by allowing emotion to be expressed. With the expression of emotion the body would find relief through biological responses. The theory contended that the increase of oxygen and release of muscle tension would allow a client relief from stress. The tension relief theory would benefit both a client and counselor provided that the humor would be therapeutic in nature. Lynch believed that the three theories did not occur as individual phenomenon. The combination of incongruity, superiority and tension relief would overlap in humor presentation. The theories would provide an opportunity to identify the psychological underpinnings of motivation behind the humor use.

According to Morreault (1983), the incongruity theory of humor would provide a client with potential real life experiences. The basis of incongruity

humor would lie in the client's perception of expectation. Client expectation of events could border on success or failure. Morreault believed that the exposure to real life impairments and success would allow a client to use humor as a coping mechanism. Humor would be seen as a regulator between emotional extremes and response to stimuli.

Haig (1988), contended that humor theories, such as incongruity, would be a direct indicator for counselors to examine. "Understanding why people laugh and what effects humor has on attitude change, behaviour change and learning processes is of great importance to the therapist" (p. 30). Humor theories would provide a blueprint of client analysis for counselors.

Chafe (1987), theorized that humor would be considered a disabling mechanism. The physical act of laughter would render a client helpless. The communication of laughter could even disable individuals who are surrounded by laughter.

It is commonly believed that laughter is infectious. ... What, then, is disabling about pleasure? The answer should be plain: The key word is 'diversion.' To be in the humor state is in itself so enjoyable that it diverts attention and effort away from any decisive action a person might take. People are content to enjoy the state they are in, and lose track of whatever motivation they might have had to do something. ... While in the humor state you can't act effectively, and you like it. (p. 21)

Humor would provide a diversion from trauma and stress and at the same time disable the client. The diversion would lessen stress and tension and yet the client physical state of humor would keep the client from making immediate behavioral choices.

### **Client use of Humor**

According to Gladding (1995), humor is represented as a natural resource of human communication and expression. A client would use humor as a communication tool for numerous aspects of counseling. A client could be apprehensive about entering into the counseling session. Humor would be used by the client as a barometer for measuring their levels of safety and security with the counselor. A nervous client could approach a sensitive subject using humor as a tension breaker. The client would measure the counselor's empathy through their response to humor in the session. When clients and counselors find common ground in humor, clients would open up and feel more relaxed during counseling. This rapport building technique for clients would provide an opportunity to share real issues and remarks in the safety of the session. A client could use humor in a number of ways: Self-defeating, sarcastic, and derogatory comments that may mask critical issues. Clients who used self defeating humor generally lacked the ability to provide self-esteem building comments. It would be easier to laugh at yourself before everyone else laughs at you. This self defeating humor would be a deflection of the real issues and an avoidance tactic. The flaws of fatalistic and exaggerated humor would need to be discussed with a client to present a more positive reality. Once the client noticed the consistencies in humor use as an avoidance tactic, the client would

begin to focus on the issue at hand. The discussion of realities and new beginnings could develop from the client breaking this personal humor line of defense.

According to Wolfstein (1978), clients would use humor to transform negative emotions and feelings. The emotional response to loss would require a client to focus in on their feelings. Wolfstein believed that clients would want an emotional transition from pain and anxiety to more pleasant emotion. “This retaining of contact with a disappointing reality combined with the urgent demand to continue to feel, but to feel something pleasant, is decisive for joking” (p. 25). Humor would be used to help a client transition from negative to coping emotional strategies. Clients would use humor as a transitional tool to cope and accept their emotional experience.

Allport (1968), contended that clients would use humor as an expression of rebellion and dissatisfaction with life. Humor would bring attention to the individual client’s perspective on life issues. “So many tangles in life are ultimately hopeless that we have no appropriate sword other than laughter” (p. 134). The balancing act of emotional control would allow a client to express their feelings while remaining protected through the use of humor. A client would use humor as an opportunity for reaching out to a counselor. The communication and dialogue created by a client’s humor would indicate a counseling topic is ready to be addressed. A client could use humor to mask or deflect emotion but Allport believes that humor is a transition to healing.

According to Lynch (2002), humor is used by clients in three major areas of classification. Clients used humor for stress relief, expressing a feeling of superiority and to understand incongruity in their lives. Clients who displayed these coping skills would offer insight into the issues of their lives. If stress relief would be the main goal of a

client's humor use then it would become apparent in the client's apathetic reactions to the counselor. Lynch considered "... humor as an expression of superiority can be either a mechanism of control or a form of resistance" (p. 426). Clients who lacked influence in social settings would use humor as a way to dissipate the negative feelings of inferiority. The incongruity use of humor would allow a client to recognize the inconsistencies in their environment. The client would take their perception of a crisis and reframes the situation with incongruent information. This new focus would allow clients to discover the flaw in fatalistic or dichotomous thinking.

Grotjahn (1957), suggested that the use of humor by a client would allow for tension release. The emotional turmoil that a client would be experiencing could be seen as both tragic and humorous simultaneously. Grotjahn stated, "The situation need not be a comic one. Laughter and tears may be interchanged and may appear in the same person simultaneously" (p. 198). Grotjahn believed that humor would be an expression that often followed danger, or perceived danger for the client. The dangerous situation created emotional energy that the client released as humor or laughter. The response of crying and laughing was the emotional release to understanding the perceived danger had past. A counselor who could identify the seriousness of the joy and tears response would have an empathetic understanding of the perceived danger and the impact on the client.

According to Haig (1988), humor would be in the eye of the beholder. Some clients would like to be perceived as humorous providing outlandish nonsensical behavior in a group setting. The ability to draw attention and create a diversion would allow a client a sense of control in counseling, especially when emotions and fears would be overwhelming. On the other end of the client spectrum Haig believed "The dry wit



may never laugh but creates mirth in those around” (p. 79). This quiet protest and attention seeking from a dry presentation of humor would allow a client to assess, through laughter response, who was actively listening to their concern.

Bordan and Goldin (1999), suggested that a lack of humor in a client represents a plethora of information to a counselor. The client who would be void of humor could be experiencing great trauma or loss in their life. A lack of humor could be an indicator of potential depressive episodes or personality disorders. A client would control a humor response for fear of emotional upheaval. Stress, trauma and depression could render a client humorless and unable to cope with the aspects of daily life. A professional counselor would note and act on the lack of humor response with a client as a potential area of concern. The inability to find happiness, joy and humor in life would be a red flag indicator of a client’s therapeutic need level. “It should also be noted that a client might not find what the counselor thinks is funny to be so” (¶ 7). Interpretation of humor and a lack of humor response could suggest that that the client and counselor are not communicating well. Humor would not be the only assessment tool used to assist a client. The individual response to humor and interpretation of what is humorous would vary for every client. Not all clients or counselors would consider humor to be an appropriate response to trauma or stress. It would be unprofessional of a counselor to consider a lack of humor response to point directly at major counseling issues for a client without considering the communication and appreciation link.

Piddington (1933), suggested that the function of humor was primarily as a communication tool. A client would react to unpleasant stimuli with humor, communicating the social adjustment from concern to content. Clients would use humor

to communicate the inconsistency of environment and their personal reaction to stress. A counselor would recognize the adjustment of humor to indicate either a positive or negative reaction from the client. The client response would indicate defensive humor, coping humor, or even superiority humor. The response would allow a counselor follow up directional questions to explore the humor response and its relevancy to the session.

According to Lefcourt, Sordoni and Sordoni (1974), clients who used humor in counseling would fall in two categories. Clients would be categorized as either exhibiting internal or external locus of control. Clients who displayed internal locus of control used humor quite differently than external clients. Internal clients responded to stress by using distancing humor as a coping mechanism. The distancing response of internal's humor use could be correlated to their central belief that they are in control of all situations. Externals used humor quite differently. External locus of control would allow a client to view themselves as a reactionary figure in a situation rather than the controller. External humor would be identified as being more social and friendly compared to internal's distancing superiority humor. Externals would take set backs and failures as emotional backpedaling that would lead to anxiety. The external locus of control would allow clients to be influenced by their environment and they may not be able to use humor defensively, which could lead to depression. The ability of the internals to distance themselves from stressful stimuli through humor created a deflection of the personal attack. Externals would use humor as a networking tool to repair damaged relationships rather than distancing themselves.

According to Paton (1988), humor would serve a purpose of exploration, boundary function and as a coping device. Humor would allow a client to explore new

social situations. A client who would be new to a setting could use humor to gain access into a new social group. Humor would provide a communication tool to measure a group's response level to the client. If the humor communication would fall short of group acceptance, the client would use humor to negate previous comments. " 'I was only joking' is a typical response when a gesture has run into difficulties on a serious level" (p. 125). Humor would provide a client with both an entrance and exit in social settings. Humor would also provide boundary functions for clients. Boundaries would be formed by a client's use of humor to identify or separate themselves in a social setting. Identification with a group would allow a client generalized social traits. Undesired social traits would be represented through separatist humor. Often separatist humor would be seen as discriminatory in nature. A client would select a group to identify with according to the social needs in which they were trying to meet. Paton also believed that humor would provide a coping mechanism for clients. "Humour can function as a coping device to release tension, allay fear, forestall threat, defuse aggression or distance the unpleasant" (p. 142). Humor would be used to recognize failure and yet allow the individual to maintain social status. Humor would allow the client to move forward and make progress in their lives without dwelling on the temporary failure. The coping mechanism of humor would allow a client to redirect their energy with new commitments for the future.

White (2001), studied the use of humor perception in the classroom of university students. The study was completed by 206 students and 128 university instructors.

The professors and students had similar opinions on the use of humor to relieve stress, to gain attention, and to create a healthy learning

environment; over 80 percent of both groups agreed that these uses of humor were appropriate. In addition, both groups did not believe humor should be used to embarrass students, to intimidate students or to retaliate against students; all three items received a minimum of 70 percent disapproval by both groups. (p. 337)

Students responded that humor use was appreciated as long as the student was not a target of malicious ridicule. The White survey provided insight to student, and potential client, perspective on humor.

### **Cultural Counseling Humor**

According to Dupey, Garrett, Maples, Phan, Torres-Rivera, and Vereen (2001), the implementation of humor in counseling would provide great insight to a client's culture and expectations. The generalization that all clients would respond the same to humor in counseling is grossly negligent. Client perspective on counseling humor would vary with ethnic identity and minority groups. Asian Americans, Native Americans, African Americans and Latinos all have unique counseling perspectives and expectations for counselors.

Native American clients perceived humor as a tool for storytelling and welcoming people into the family group. Humor would be used to reaffirm the position of family and clan belonging to identify family groupings. Traditionally, communication was used to preserve an oral history for Native Americans to pass down for generations. It would be extremely important for a counselor to recognize the unique and important quality of story telling to Native American clients. The flow of communication and humor would rely on the rapport of the client and counselor. A counselor would need to respect the

foundations of story telling and humor in order to participate or interpret the client's behavior correctly. Native American communication and humor would involve story telling, exaggeration and archetypes to teach life lessons. Most Native American clients would be familiar with the oral traditions of story telling life lessons and the relationship to nature. The characters in story telling often are reflected as "know it alls" and represented by the coyote, raven or rabbit. The animal in the story often would learn a life lesson of humility because of their manipulative or deceitful choices. Native American clients can relate to the oral history and story telling not only as tradition but as a collective learning experience. A counselor who could identify the traditions and importance of humor in story telling would be able to carry over to counseling a tremendous link of insight into the client's communication style.

Asian Americans have been stereotyped as emotionally restrained during counseling. Asian clients have cultural responsibilities to present respect to the counselor. The Asian culture would influence a client to honor the counselor with respect for silence. Humor is often viewed as inappropriate or rude by the Asian cultures in counseling settings. The cultural influence of respect for authority would keep some Asian clients from fully expressing their emotions or using humor in counseling. The lack of emotional response through humor would not indicate a lack of humor appreciation by clients from Asian cultures. Similar to Native Americans, Asian cultures used humor as an introduction to trust in a relationship. A counselor would need to build rapport and understanding with an Asian client before introducing humor. It would be best served for counseling purposes to let the client introduce humor use in the sessions. Asian humor would be focused on a very familial group and a counselor would need to be brought in

or invited to the group for humor exchanges. Asian cultures believed that close family and friends are able to laugh and joke with one another. It however, would be disrespectful and unjust to use humor or laughter with a person that is not family. The cultural boundaries of fair play and teasing are limited to family and friends.

Counselors should avoid any direct teasing with Asian Americans because this action goes beyond the boundary of respect. In addition, because many Asian Americans place a great value on the counselor's expertness, the counselor should be wary of sharing too many stories that make fun of himself or herself. Self-disclosing an excess of the counselor's imperfections may lower the level of respect the client has for the counselor's credibility and knowledge. (p. 59)

A competent and culturally astute counselor would allow Asian clients to pick the pace of humor introduction. Rapport building and professionalism would lead to comfort levels in communication reaching humor as a mile stone in the counseling process. It would also be important to remember the gross generalizations and stereotypes of the "humor-less Asian culture" would be unprofessional and inept. Patience and professionalism would bring about proper introduction of humor into Asian counseling.

Latinos also considered humor as a tool to display cultural and familial acceptance. Patterns of humor use by Latino clients would create rapport and involve the counselor into a family based experience of trust. Three concepts of familiarismo, respecto and machismo must be attained by a counselor before introducing humor with Latino clients. Familiarismo is the concept of rapport building and being brought into a

family circle as a trusted individual. Respecto would be earned by a counselor through personal interest and time spent attending cultural and community celebrations.

“Respecto is gained by demonstrating knowledge and wisdom. Counselors working with Latino clients need to be knowledgeable about cultural matters without being seen as pendants, that is ostentatiously displaying book knowledge rather than knowledge gained from experience” (p. 60). Real life experience and professionalism would be necessary requirements for Latino clients. Machismo is the third concept counselors would need to be aware of to help their Latino clients. The concept of machismo had been wrongly defined as male dominance. A counselor would be incorrect to assume that machismo is a negative quality that degrades women. Machismo is correctly defined as a representation of an honorable and courageous personality trait within the Latino culture.

African Americans represent the blending of numerous cultures and the humor used among every group is different. Humor is often used to defuse the anxiety, prejudice and stereotyping. An African American client would use humorous putdowns and self-defeating mockery as a form of basic expression between friends. This same type of humor use in a counseling setting would be viewed as inappropriate and unprofessional if being applied by someone outside of the family structure. Humor used among culturally diverse populations requires counselors and clients to find common ground in appropriate counseling communication.

Ziv (1984), believed that humor would be used by minority culture groups to assimilate to the main stream cultural environment. The use of self-defeating humor by minorities would indicate to the majority that cultural differences are not only recognized but exaggerated. Humor originating from ones own culture, would be far more acceptable

than cultural humor from a majority group perspective. Ziv contended that the main function of humor would be to provide a social structure for minority cultures. Cultural humor would then be a sociological phenomenon that would represent solidarity within the group.

Apte (1987), stated ethnic humor is “a type of humor in which fun is made of the perceived behavior, customs, personality, or any other traits of a group or its members by virtue of their specific socio-cultural identity” (p. 27). The use of ethnic humor would have a base in superiority theory and therefore rendering the ethnic group in a powerless and downtrodden position. Superiority based cultural humor would be scrutinized by professional counseling standards as unethical and defamatory in nature. The appropriate use of counseling strategies would require cultural and ethnic research so that the client would not perceive humor use as derogatory.

In addition to Apte’s findings, Lynch (2002), identified two types of humor used to determine perceptions of societal belonging. Lynch called the two types of humor identification and differentiation. Identification humor would be based in the commonalities within a cultural group. The identifying use of humor “... creates an internal perception that increases an in-group cohesiveness and validates commonly held perceptions” (p. 434). Identification humor would allow individuals to group commonalities and at the same time segregated individuals with out the shared value system. The separation of social groups would lead to differentiation humor use. Differentiation humor separates individuals through differences in race, religious beliefs, sex or even occupation. Differentiation humor could be interpreted as a power play in communication. Cultural counseling would be an area for caution and professional



judgment when working with identification and differentiation humor. In group and out group identification would be interpreted as a form of discrimination to a client. Cultural grouping, whether through identification or differentiation, would need to be met with professional discussion and communication.

Native American communication styles and humor were studied by Garrett (1994), to offer insight into ethnic counseling. Non-verbal communication, such as moderated speech and minimal eye contact, indicated a sign of respect from the client not avoidance. Native American clients required counselors to be patient in the communication process. Counselors were given the recommendation to allow the client to introduce humor into the counseling setting. The Native American client would use exaggeration and teasing to develop a relationship with the counselor. Traditionally humor had been used by Native Americans to indicate belonging and purpose within a group. In the counseling relationship, Native American clients would try to build confidence and respect with counselors through humor. Garrett also made suggestions for counselors which included: Modeling self disclosure, using imagery when possible, asking the client for permission to get information, allow ample response time and always to be patient.

Herring and Meggert (1994), believed that Native Americans used humor as a communication tool. Humor served as a tension release and focus of incongruity in the world. Native Americans used humorous story telling, imagery, and clown puppets to educate and entertain. Story telling and imagery would be familiar concepts to Native American clients. A counselor could use moral tales and stories to express understanding of the client's concern. Story telling would allow the client to communicate with the

counselor by using cultural character representations, such as a villain or hero. Native Americans also used clown puppets and kachinas, face masks, to express cultural traditions. A Native American client would be able to communicate to the counselor from behind the safety of a façade. The puppets and masks would represent the client's issues without directly personalizing the sensitivity to the situation. Native American traditions for communication would involve humor as a significant piece of cultural bonding for a group.

Another cultural bond of humor tradition was explained by Jones (as cited in Chapman & Foot, 1976), in his study of the culture of Trinidad. The main humor influence could be seen in the calypso, or culture, of Trinidad. Through the slave traditions, music and performance arts of Trinidad the use of humor would be apparent not only as a focus but a major influence. According to Jones ...

Humor in Trinidad is a way of life. It is the currency of social exchange and the vehicle of psychological and cultural organization. There is no idea, event emotion or person who can rise above the common denominator – humour. In some ways it makes Trinidad one of the most egalitarian of societies. Not power, education, prestige or good looks can elevate you above the equalizer – humour. It can brutalize you if you are weak, and humble you if you are strong. It can ease the tension of a confrontation, or heighten the enjoyment o a happy time. It educates the masses and keeps the few in power educated to the prevailing mood of the people. (p.259)

The importance of humor as a cultural guidepost would allow a counselor to identify the need to use humor as a communication tool with a client. A counselor would recognize that each individual would embrace and reflect humor differently from one another, thereby it would be unprofessional to assume humor would be the only focus of communication. The emphasis of humor importance in Trinidad would allow a counselor a starting point in which to build client rapport.

### **Counselor use of Humor**

According to Gladding (1995), the professional counselor would determine the appropriate nature and intention of humor use in counseling. The use of humor is a developed skill requiring judgment, timing and sensitivity. The impact of positive humor use would create great insight into a client's world.

Humorous intentions could also be misinterpreted and overused. This misuse of humor creates a negative counseling environment effecting counseling progress. Inappropriate humor use by a counselor would build a defensive wall for the client. The humor introduction may be interpreted as a personal slight or a dismissal of a client's validity to an issue.

Not all clients would find value in the incorporation of humor in counseling. Some clients would be offended by the use of humor and view it as unprofessional. A counselor must accurately assess the counseling relationship to find the value and limitations of humor for each client. Only professional and empathetic humor would provide positive counseling sessions for both clients and counselors. Counselors should be aware of professionalism and delivery implications with humor in their sessions.

There is a lack of pre-professional skill development surrounding humor use in counseling. Due to this lack of training, humor use should be regulated by individual counselor's personal judgment.

According to Sluder (1986), the role of an elementary school counselor would be to provide a model of humor use to clients. The clients would interpret and assess the counselor's use of humor as a coping strategy for conflict. The modeling of humor behavior would allow students to develop their own coping strategies.

... an elementary school counselor can use humor to develop rapport, to model for children how they themselves can use humor as a coping mechanism, and as a self-disclosure technique in which the counselor can show that imperfection is an acceptable human condition by sharing his or her own human foibles. (p. 126)

The modeling of humor use for clients would allow an observable form of coping skill building techniques. Clients who would be consumed and paralyzed by perfectionist fears would use humor techniques to identify the universal flaws of being human. Perfectionist tendencies would be moderated through the use of humor as a coping mechanism to present an alternate perspective for a client. Modeling humor use as a coping skill would need to be met with tremendous professional responsibility. Modeling humor would require client interpretation of a counselor's behavior. The professional counselor would need to make sure that clients were not negatively affected by their modeling of responses to stress. To minimize or mock a client's trauma as a joke would be completely unethical.

Humor appreciation and positive coping skills would be built through effective and empathetic communication between counselor and client.

According to Goldstein and McGhee (1972), humor needs to be recognized on a group level to be truly effective or appreciated. Group counseling would allow a counselor to reach many clients at one time. The introduction of humor would need to be carefully assessed as not to disrupt the group. This common ground of humor identity and recognition is the base for a strong counseling relationship. "A lack of consensus in humor judgment, however, would be labeled as disloyalty to either the membership or identification group" (p. 118).

According to Dupey et al. (2001), humor is used as a therapeutic tool to develop coping skills for clients. Humor could diffuse stressful and emotional sessions. The interjection of appropriate humor could help the client relax and refocus. This diffusion would allow a counselor to present a new perspective to the topic. The reorganization of perspective provides a client the opportunity to develop new coping skills.

Cross cultural counseling would provide counselors with challenges and opportunities. Counselors would need to be aware of cultural nuances before introducing humor in a session. The actual introduction of humor should be at the pace of the client. This client-centered approach to humor introduction would create rapport within the counseling relationship. Using humor too early in a counseling relationship could actually cause a client such discomfort they may choose to terminate counseling. It is important that counselors understand the motivation, implication and effects of humor use with diverse populations. Counselors must also remember to be cautious of over-generalizing and stereotyping individuals during counseling. Every client is a unique individual, not

just a generalized part of a population. Kruger (1996), contended that there are universal humor traits across all cultures. These traits include incongruity forms of humor, teasing and humor used to establish relationships. These universal traits allow for a base or starting point for implementing humor in counseling across cultures. The belief that each culture has humor norms and expectations should be respected by the counselor.

Weaver and Wilson (1997), studied the effect of humor, or lack of humor, on a counselor in the workplace environment. Humor is believed to support the physical health, mental well being and career satisfaction for counselors. The tremendous stress and anxiety involved with a career in counseling could be regulated with humor. Humor would be developed with in the environment with simple cues. The cues would include smiles, story telling, and cartoons. The environment would be influenced by a simple nonverbal cue such as smiling. The positive attitude of a counselor could influence a client to gain a new perspective on a situation. The effect of contented counselors would carry over into professional longevity. Story telling in a counseling workplace could lead to staff cohesiveness. Shared experiences through story telling would allow an outlet of conversation and discussion to relieve stress in the workplace. Stories concerning clients would be unethical and unprofessional conversation therefore a breach in confidentiality. The workplace would also be influence by the visual cues of cartoons. The quick momentary restructuring of focus on a humorous cartoon would allow a counselor a temporary reprieve from stress. Weaver and Wilson contend that creativity in humor use would allow a counselor to provide more productive counseling sessions for clients. The environment of the counseling profession is filled with anxiety, frustration, stress and success. The effects of uncertainty would be counter acted with humor implementation.

“After all is said and done, as counselors, we have to take our work seriously. We cannot, however, take ourselves too seriously” (p. 113). The balance of work place professionalism and humor would provide a counselor with optimal career enjoyment.

Kush (1997), conducted a study of 45 Caucasian counselors concerning self reporting humor use. The study participants, 32 males and 13 females, responded to the survey by answering questions concerning their self assessment of humor, appropriate humor and inappropriate humor use in counseling. All of the counselors rated themselves as having a good to excellent sense of humor. In addition, the personality traits of the counselors were identified as outgoing and confident. The study found that counselors would use humor to develop rapport with clients, provide emotional encouragement, and that humor use required proper timing. Inappropriate humor would be deemed as defensive communication or superiority comments. Kush’s study also identified a correlation between education and humor. The more advanced the educational level of the counselor, the lower the self reporting score would be for humor use. The lack of humor use does not however indicate a lack of humor appreciation.

Foster (1978), contended that humor would provide a counselor with a tremendous amount of information concerning their client. Foster believed that humor was a universal phenomenon that needed to be addressed by counselors as individual client needs would arise. Humor would prove useful in the recognition of promoting healthy personal client growth and potential. The counselor use of humor would also be problematic if humor were to be abused. Humor would be abusive to a client if the client would feel mocked, unable to express their true emotions or confused by the humor presentation. Counselors would need to safeguard against inappropriate humor use.

Foster deemed inappropriate humor use as, humor which would cause a client to withdraw from the counseling relationship, comments or remarks that would stifle the client's progress, or humor which would serve only to entertain but would not focus on the client's goals. A professional counselor would need to promote healthy client progress through humor, not delay the transition.

Consider it this way: Professionalism is just the opposite of activity done for fun or amusement. It implies an involvement of a serious kind, so serious in fact that conduct breaching the code of behavior prescribed by the profession can lead to exclusion from it. (p. 47)

Foster believed the professional counselor would provide serious and healthy information for the client's progress. At the same time, appropriate humor would become a catalyst of progress which would outweigh the potential negative effects. A professional counselor would be able to distinguish healthy, positive humor use for the advancement of their client's well being.

Haig (1988), contended that counselor humor would both positively and negatively impact the client dependant upon the delivery in counseling. Positive outcomes from counselor uses of humor included developing a therapeutic relationship or rapport building, overcoming resistance, reduced anxiety, and humor as an outlet for emotions. Counselors would use humor as a rapport building tool. Humor would display to the client that a counselor truly could understand the issue at hand, through humor communication and identification. The humor response would be considered a connection of ideas and a foundation of rapport. Humor would also have a positive impact on overcoming client



resistance to counseling. Humor would be used to redirect client's resistance to develop incongruity dynamics. The client would view the humor in counseling as a redirection of their perspective being either black or white. Humor would offer a client potential hope for future problem solving while diluting dichotomous thinking. Haig also believed humor relieved anxiety for clients. It would be important for counselors to note the discrepancy between humor as a mask for anxiety, versus humor as a healing tool. It would require professional counselors to identify healthy humor use for their clients and positive outcomes. Humor would also be used to provide emotional release for clients. Emotions that would otherwise be repressed due to trauma may actually be expressed through a client's use of humor. A professional counselor would identify the painful emotions and respond empathetically to the client. According to Haig, "In therapy, progress may be made for the first time after humorously introducing a painful topic which the patient initially laughs about, but then [realistically] cries about" (p. 171). The client's emotional trauma would present a counselor with humor as an adaptation and introduction to a deeper level of counseling topics.

Haig also contended that inappropriate humor use by a counselor would cause negative outcomes for a client. A counselor who inappropriately used humor would suppress the client and display narcissistic tendencies. Client suppression would be viewed as using humor to deflate a client's concern as being foolish or ridiculous in nature. Humor used incorrectly in counseling would communicate to a client that the counselor is not invested in the client's

progress. Haig included narcissistic counselors as negative influences for clients. A narcissistic counselor would “... utilize humor to ‘show off’ his ability and cleverness, without addressing the patient’s needs” (p. 174). The lack of respect for the client’s personal issue would be compounded by the inappropriate use of humor by the counselor. The communication breakdown would tend to lead into early termination of counselor services.

### **Humor and Health**

According to Felible and Metcalf (1992), counselors also used humor as a form of personal tension release within a stressful career. Humor could be the key to staying healthy and effective on a daily basis. Implementing humor skills would allow counselors to cope with change and adjust to the random work environment. Allport (1968), stated “Humor requires the perspective of tentativeness, but also an underlying system of values that prevents laughter from souring into cynicism” (p. 76). The stress of counseling crisis management could lead to burn out. Counselors who used humor as a stress reliever and a positive influence with clients would endure the rigors of the counseling profession. Cynicism and defeatist humor would be a negative spiral unbecoming to either counselor or client.

Coleman (1992), contended that humor represents psychological and physiological aide to counselors and clients. The release of tension would be amplified by the physiological response of the body. Laughter requires the body to take in more oxygen and that surplus oxygen provides energy to muscles and would produce chemical releases in the brain. The brain would release endorphins during laughter and the endorphins would provide a natural pain inhibitor to the body. The use of humor in

counseling could provide the psychological stress relief required for a client to feel understood and “cognitively lighter”. The physiological results of humor use could keep a counselor active and physically able bodied to avoid fatigue and potential burn-out.

Silberman (1987), conducted a study concerning the health implications of humor use. Silverman contended that the body and brain create a biological response to humor. The flow of hormones, or peptides, were released when laughter would take place.

These peptides are involved in regulating the homeostatic system in many ways: as those involved with pain and pleasure, learning and memory, and stress and coping. Therefore, much humor is in part biologically determined, and then modified by social, cultural, political, and change factors. (p. 100)

Health studies determined that peptides were the catalyst for change in the body and brain. The flow of peptides would work as the communication and response system for the body. The response to stimuli, such as stress or happiness, would cause the peptides to signal the brain to respond accordingly biologically. The stimuli would be perceived as safe or threatening and then create emotional responses with the peptides. The biological change would create emotions that would either help or hinder the counseling process. The perception of stressful stimuli would create a release of toxins into the body. The lack of adaptive response to stress would leave the body prone to illness and infection.

Psychosomatic illnesses from stress disable a client with increased heart rates, sweating, nausea, and anxiety attacks. The body perceived a threat, whether real or imagined, with a biological response. The client would not have the proper

peptide communication to fight off disease. Silberman contended that disease is actually a mal-adaptation of the body to a stimulus. The biological stress response would create havoc within the body when a coping mechanism would be unavailable. Humor would provide an outlet for stress by providing additional oxygen and calming peptides for the brain. The health of a client or counselor would be greatly influenced by humor. Humor would diffuse the stress and anxiety of the body by creating a diversion of biological information and hence a safety net of security from the proposed threat. The ability to gain control over emotions and respond to stress accordingly with the use of humor could improve the quality of life for many people. "If unable to deal with certain stresses – both internal and external (as perceived by them) many people will either develop a series of physical problems or they may express their anger towards themselves" (p. 107). Humor would provide an emotional outlet for the client and counselor so that anger, stress and frustration would not build to dangerous levels. Humor as an adaptive coping mechanism could keep a client safe from self harm or dangerous choices. The biological response to stress could not be completely thwarted by the use of simple humor, however developing a healthy sense of humor could allow clients the perspective and time they may need to receive professional help.

Freiheit, Lehnert and Overholser (1998), conducted a study to find out the correlation between humor and adolescent depression. Humor was defined as "... the ability to appreciate humor and the ability to create humor" (p. 33). The study found that humor used as a coping mechanism would lessen the effects of depression in adolescents. The study used a control group of 85 high school

students and a comparison group of 55 psychiatric inpatients. The groups were predominantly Caucasian, over 90% in each group, and the average age of the participants was 15 years old. The gender of the groups also reflected a close split of males and females near the 50% mark. The study required the participants to participate in four areas of testing. The groups completed assessments of depressive symptoms, coping humor scale, humor appreciation scale and a humor creativity scale. The humor creativity portion of the assessment was a cartoon caption in which the participant would complete a humorous caption. The cartoon responses were rated by a panel of six professional comedians for humor creativity scoring. The other three assessments were likert scale reporting concerning humor and depression.

The results indicated that humor appreciation and humor creativity were related positively to self-esteem and were related negatively to depression and hopelessness. ... Thus, although a sense of humor may be important to overall emotional adjustment, the deliberate use of humor to deal with stressful problems may be effective particularly in ameliorating symptoms of depression. Given the association between humor coping and symptoms of depression in adolescents, the lack of differences between adolescent inpatients and the high school student group on the humor measures was unexpected. (p. 44-45)

The study contended that the use of humor as a coping strategy could lessen the effects of depressive episodes for adolescents. Improvement in mental health would also reflect an improvement in physical well being.

**Summary**

The use of humor in counseling would greatly effect the potential personal growth for both client and counselor. Humor used as a communication tool could provide insight, build rapport, establish commonalities and boundaries with the counseling relationship. A professional counselor would need to understand the impact of cultural humor, inappropriate humor, and defensive humor used by a client in the counseling process. The benefits of humor use in the counseling profession would greatly out weigh the potential risk of unprofessional humor use.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Summary, Critical Analysis and Discussion

#### **Introduction**

This chapter represents the summary of the extensive literature review on the subject of humor and counseling. In addition, a critical analysis of the literature included covering the five core areas of Chapter Two. The analysis considers the impact of humor in counseling pertaining to humor theories, client humor use, cultural humor, counselor humor and the impact of humor on health. Finally, recommendations can be made to improve the pre-professional training programs for counseling humor awareness.

#### **Summary**

The use of humor in counseling has been an integral part of the communication process between a counselor and client. The advantages of humor use in counseling are numerous. Humor is used to gauge rapport, release tension, and provide the physical body with health benefits.

The rapport building quality of appropriate humor creates a gate way of information between counselor and client. Humor provides feedback that the counselor and client are “on the same page” and understand the shared experience through humor. According to Dupey et al. (2001), humor provides a rapport building technique with cross cultural counseling. The importance of building trust, respect and understanding with a client of another culture is often influenced by humor. Humor use by the client can often identify the acceptance of the counselor by the Native Americans, African Americans and Latinos. The rapport building process with clients of diverse cultures needs to be on both the individual and community level for professional influence.

Humor may also be used to release tension for both the client and counselor. The positive and professional use of humor can provide opportunities for counselors to probe difficult and emotional topics the client may be dealing with in the session. According to Bordan and Goldin (1999), humor is often used for crisis management of emotional release. The incongruity of the topic at hand may create a catharsis of emotion which could be released as humor or tears. The release of emotion and tension through humor use could enable a client to introduce a difficult or painful experience to a counselor. The release of tension could provide positive personal growth for the client.

Humor use in counseling also provides the physical body with health benefits. According to Silberman (1987), the body responds to humor with the release of hormones called peptides. Peptides influence the sensations of happiness, pain, stress and the body's ability to communicate. Humor in counseling could allow for a release of positive stress fighting peptides which could stimulate the brain to make behavioral changes for coping. Silberman believes that the use of humor in counseling could provide both the client and counselor with a stress relieving moment. Humor releases the peptides that could influence the client to create awareness to a new perspective. The health benefits of humor use in counseling could be seen in the body's ability to handle stressful situations with less anxiety and more competence in the client's personal coping skills. Felible and Metalf (1992), believe that counselors who use humor in their daily lives will deal with stress and burn out more effectively. The lack of humor in the counseling profession could create cynicism and anxiety which will be counterproductive for counseling.

### **Critical Analysis**



There are five main topic areas in the literature review of humor. The topics include humor theories, client humor use, cultural humor, counselor humor and the impact of humor on health. The following is a critical analysis of the original research.

1. Why will pre-professional programs need to study humor theories?

The study of humor theories will provide a base in which a professional counselor can start to understand the motivation behind a client's humor use. A client may use humor as a deflection of traumatic events, as a stress reliever and a coping mechanism. The study of humor theories will allow a counselor to "unmask" the client's humor use and work cooperatively at forward healthy progress. Understanding and being able to identify humor patterns according to developmental theories, would allow a counselor to be the most effective professional possible, while learning more about the client.

2. What can be learned from the humor use of a client?

A client's humor use in counseling will reflect a number of personal issues. A client may use self defeating humor to indicate their lack of personal self esteem. A client may use superiority humor to signal to the counselor their need to be viewed as powerful by others. Humor is often used as a coping mechanism for clients to adjust to changing life events. Trauma, stress and happiness can all be conveyed through the use of humor by a client.

3. How is cultural counseling different from "regular" counseling?

Cultural counseling requires an awareness and appreciation of traditional cultural values. Providing counseling services to culturally diverse clients will require the counselor to build rapport and often earn respect through professional presentation. Humor may need to be introduced first by a client before a counselor assumes humor is

the appropriate form of communication. The cultural influence of humor as a communication tool may only be open to close knit and trusted members of a community. A counselor working with diverse populations needs to be proactive in developing community respect and rapport to become an effective counselor and communicator.

4. What are the advantages and concerns with counselor humor use?

The advantage of using humor in counseling is to build rapport, release stress and to re-energize the body. A counselor can use humor to build rapport with a resistant client by challenging their dichotomous thinking with a new perspective. The rapport building quality of humor can identify when both the client and counselor finally understand the shared experience by the laughter response. Humor is also used to release stress and reduce anxiety. A counselor can use humor to refocus a serious or draining topic in order to keep a client from shutting down forward progress. The release of stress is also an advantage of humor in a biological sense. The re-energizing of laughter and humor provides the body with extra oxygen and peptides, which produce feelings of happiness and comfort.

The concern for using humor in counseling is limited. The judgment of the counselor is crucial in the appropriate delivery of humor. The concern for humor use is when the counselor uses humor to stifle, embarrass or minimize a client's concerns. The use of inappropriate or racial humor would not only be a concern but unethical in practice. The inappropriate use of humor can lead to early termination and a resistant client. The reliance upon professional judgment in humor choices remains the challenge to providing appropriate and healthy humor in counseling sessions.

5. How does humor impact health?

Humor has a profound impact on the health of both the client and counselor. The body will release hormones called peptides to signal that humor and laughter have altered the biochemistry of the body. The release of hormones and the additional oxygen intake allow a client or counselor to feel more comfortable and less anxious. Laughter and humor may be the key ingredients in a counselor's success career in a high stress and burn out prone industry. Physiologically the peptides signal the brain to release endorphins, pain reducers, as a response to humor and laughter. In short, humor makes the body feel relaxed, calm and yet re-energized.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are made in response to the literature review of humor and counseling. The recommendations include pre-professional humor training for the development of humor as a counseling tool.

1. It is recommended that pre-professional course work be required at the undergraduate and graduate level for counseling humor theories. The course work could help identify the client's humor patterns and the motivation behind the humor use.
2. It is recommended that pre-professional course work be required at the undergraduate and graduate level to enable counselors to identify cultural patterns of humor. The course work could raise awareness to cultural identity and professional rapport with clients from various cultures.
3. It is recommended that pre-professional course work be required at the undergraduate and graduate level to identify the advantages and concerns for

counselors introducing humor in their sessions. The course work could offer guidelines of appropriate and inappropriate humor use in counseling.

4. It is recommended that pre-professional course work be required at the undergraduate and graduate level concerning the physiological response to humor. It is important that counselors understand that humor is preventative medicine to professional burn out. Counselors need to be aware of what stress does to the physical body and how to manage that stress.
5. It is recommended that further research be conducted concerning humor use in counseling.
6. It is recommended that long term studies be conducted on counselor's response to humor influence and job satisfaction.
7. It is recommended that humor be considered a communication tool in which pre-professional courses need to be developed around. The stronger the understanding of humor the stronger the counseling connection between client and counselor.
8. It is recommended that current counseling professionals seek in-service training about humor use in counseling. The updated information could allow for more quality professional services.

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