

THE FUNCTIONS AND FACTORS OF HUMOUR IN COUNSELLING

by

DAVID J. ZINGER

A thesis

presented to the University of Manitoba

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this descriptive study was to examine the functions of humour in counselling by categorizing and synthesizing previous literature on the topic. In addition, the specific variables that determine a constructive function for humour were discussed. The constructive functions were humour as: healer, reframer, creativity, relationship builder, fun, and therapy. The destructive functions were humour as: aggression, superiority, defense mechanism, and social distancer. A double-edge sword metaphor was offered to synthesize the different categories of functions and to provide counsellors with an organizing concept for humour.

The factors contributing to a constructive function for humour were counsellor personality, counselling relationship, specific humour conditions, counsellor training, and counsellor self-care. The relationship variables of empathy, acceptance, and genuineness are important for constructive humour. The counsellor also needs playfulness, timing, risk, humour awareness, and tacit knowledge to use humour constructively. Humour was also discussed as a unique core condition. The humour of counselling was discussed to establish the positive effect of counsellors having a sense of humour about their profession.

Twelve recommendations were offered for counselling research, practice, and training.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Background to the Study

Humour is a neglected topic in counselling and even the limited research and speculation has generated disagreement about its function and nature. Kubie (1971) viewed humour as a weapon, a detrimental influence on the counselling process. He stated, "humor has its place in life. Let us keep it there by acknowledging that one place it has a very limited role; if any, is in psychotherapy" (Kubie, 1971, p. 866). Others have argued that humour has rich potential as an agent of therapeutic change (Burbridge, 1978; Mindess, 1976; O'Connell, 1976). They viewed humour as a constructive force capable of freeing clients from limiting self-concepts.

Although researchers have different opinions and perspectives, many of them have referred to humour as a weapon or sword (Fadiman, 1972; Greenwald, 1977; Kubie, 1971; Mikes, 1970). Greenwald (1977) believed humour was a fantastic weapon to be treasured while Kubie (1971) viewed humour as a dangerous destructive weapon. The sword metaphor for humour is important because it indicates the possible functions and nature of humour in counselling.

To understand the functions of a sword you must know the context in which the sword is used, and the characteristics of the person wielding the sword. To understand the functions of humour you have to understand the larger context of counselling and the characteristics of an effective counsellor. For even without humour, counselling can be for

better or worse. Many studies have indicated counsellors can do damage to clients (Martin, 1983). Or as Egan (1975) stated: "There is a crisis in the helping profession: many helpers simply do not help" (p. 14). A detailed study of humour in counselling will need to examine the factors determining a constructive function for counselling in general because humour is only one variable in counselling.

Throughout this thesis, the terms counselling, therapy, and psychotherapy, are used synonymously to indicate a professional helping relationship in which one person (counsellor) helps the other person (client) to understand or change behaviors, thoughts, or emotions. Counselling will be the preferred term for this study.

#### Purpose and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this descriptive study was to synthesize the various theories and conceptions of humour into a broader, more inclusive framework. I outlined ten functions for humour and the factors contributing to a constructive function for humour. The study was directed towards practicing counsellors and was intended to increase their understanding and use of humour. Counsellor trainers should find this study useful in training students to use humour. A double-edge sword metaphor for humour will clarify the counsellor's understanding of humour and the illusion of humour as either constructive or destructive will give way to this more encompassing perspective.

I provided a synthesis of previous discrepant views on humour in counselling. I took both approaches to humour, examined the validity of

each, and stated the factors determining whether humour serves a constructive or destructive function. Humour was viewed as a core condition in counselling acting in conjunction with the already established core conditions of empathy, acceptance, and genuineness. The study was also significant in examining the counselling profession as humorous, emphasizing the importance of counsellors having a sense of humour about themselves.

### Limitations

The explanation of humour in counselling was limited to humour used by the counsellor. Client initiated humour, although important, was beyond the scope of this thesis. The study focused on individual counselling as opposed to group counselling. Ten different functions for humour were discussed in this thesis, others could be listed but these ten captured the main functions of humour in counselling. Due to the complex nature of both humour and counselling this study was more indicative than definitive. Guidelines and suggestions were offered rather than specific rules or procedures that could always be followed. The double-edge sword metaphor used to state the essence of humour in counselling can at times appeared to have oversimplified the complex nature of the topic and was primarily offered as a key term to help counsellors organize their understanding of humour.

### Outline of the Study

A review of the literature related to humour, and humour in counselling was discussed in chapter two. Humour has been studied by many of the greatest thinkers yet remains enigmatic and confusing. Eight categories of humour theories provided a historical overview of the topic. Following the theories of humour, current problems involved in a definition of humour were examined and a general definition was offered to give some basic understanding to humour. The limitations of the anecdotal, theoretical, and empirical studies specific to humour in counselling were discussed with a view to what this descriptive study can contribute to the existing literature.

The constructive and destructive functions of humour in counselling were presented in chapter three. The constructive functions of humour were: healer, reframer, creativity, relationship builder, fun, and therapy. The functions on the destructive edge were humour as: aggression, superiority, defense mechanism, and social distancer. After each specific function was discussed, the organizing metaphor of the double-edge sword was offered to encompass both types of functions into a broader perspective.

Factors contributing to a constructive function for humour in counselling were examined in chapter four. What role does counsellor personality play in constructive humour? What factors in the counselling relationship contribute to constructive humour? How do the core conditions of counselling relate to humour? In addition to answering these questions, the chapter included an examination of the specific

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conditions needed for effective humour: playfulness, timing, risk, humour awareness, and tacit knowledge. Humour was then discussed as a core condition and suggestions concerning counsellor training were provided. The role of counsellor self-care in facilitating constructive humour by the counsellor was the final section of the chapter. Included in this section is counselling as humorous. When we see the humour of ourselves and our own profession we are more likely to contribute constructive humour in our sessions with clients.

A summary statement and specific conclusions of the study were offered in chapter five. Specific recommendations derived from the study were given for counselling research, practice, and training.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Review of Literature Related to Humour and Counselling

Humour is a difficult concept to understand. Humour, in the context of counselling, becomes even more difficult to grasp due to the complex nature of each of these two phenomena. This chapter will provide a brief overview of the study of humour and the literature on humour in counselling. The chapter begins with a historical overview of the literature on humour. There is a discussion of the humoral theory of health, an overview of humour theory, and an analysis of eight categories of humour theories. The historical examination of humour theories is followed by current problems in attempting a definition of humour for counselling. General sources of humour in helping, counselling theorists and humour, and empirical studies of humour in counselling are the three concluding topics discussed in a review of the literature specific to humour in counselling.

### Historical Overview of Humour Literature

#### The Four Humours

The humoral theory of health was the first indication that laughter or humour was related to our state of health and well-being. Ancient Greek physiology had a humoral theory of

disease. According to the theory, a person's health and temperament was a function of the balance of the four humours: yellow bile, black bile, blood, and phlegm. Diseases or changes in temperament were created by a disturbance in the harmony of the four humours. For instance, a person who was quick to anger was thought to have a predominance of yellow bile (Watson, 1978). Cure consisted of a restoration of balance in the four humours. Early philosophers, such as Aristotle and Plato, were the first to give credence to the idea that laughter was the best medicine. They believed that laughter could act as a corrective to the excess and restore the balance in the humours.

### Humour Theories

The topic of humour has intrigued and puzzled many great thinkers through the ages. They have developed a wide assortment of explanations for why we laugh and what constitutes humour. There is no shortage of humour theories, as humour and its many facets have not yielded to a single theory and many of the theories share some elements. Ferris (1972) found over eighty-eight different theories of humour. The early conceptions of humour, and even the current ones, are not conclusive but each theory captured some of the important variables involved in humour. The analysis of humour and its nature resembles the following poem of the six blind men and the elephant:

It was six men of Indostan  
 To learning much inclined,  
 Who went to see the elephant  
 Though all of them were blind  
 That each by observation  
 Might satisfy his mind.

The first approached the elephant  
 And, happening to fall  
 Against the broad and sturdy side,  
 At once began to bawl:  
 "Why, bless me! But the elephant  
 Is very much like a wall!"

The second feeling of the tusk,  
 Cried: "Ho! What have we here  
 So very round and smooth and sharp?  
 To me, 'tis very clear,  
 This wonder of the elephant  
 Is very like a spear!"

The third approached the animal,  
 And happening to take  
 The squirming trunk within his hands  
 Thus boldly up he spake:  
 "I see," quoth he, "the elephant  
 Is very like a snake!"

The fourth reached out his eager hand  
 And felt about the knee:  
 "What most this wondrous beast is like  
 Is very plain," quoth he:  
 "'Tis clear enough the elephant  
 Is very like a tree!"

The fifth who chanced to touch the ear  
 Said: "E'en the blindest man  
 Can tell what this resembles most--  
 Deny the fact who can:  
 This marvel of an elephant  
 Is very like a fan!"

The sixth no sooner had begun  
 About the beast to grope  
 Than, seizing on the swinging tail  
 That fell within his scope,  
 "I see," quoth he, "the elephant  
 Is very like a rope!"

And so these men of Indostan  
 Disputed loud and long,



Each in his own opinion  
Exceeding stiff and strong;  
Though each was partly in the right,  
And all were in the wrong.  
-John G. Saxe

### Eight Humour Categories

The philosophers and theorists were not blind men yet because of the complexity of humour each was blind to various elements and subtle nuances of humour. Many theorists attempted to give a conclusive theory but were limited by the very nature of the topic. It was unfortunate that some would declare they had developed the theory of humour when they were only partly in the right. Before discussing current problems in humour definition and more specific literature concerning humour in counselling, it is important to briefly describe the various historical perspectives on humour. It is from this general backdrop that the functions of humour will be developed.

Keith-Spiegel (1972) has analyzed and categorized the various humour theories to simplify our understanding of this topic. She divided humour theories into eight categories. Her first category consisted of biological, instinct or evolutionary theories of humour. Humour viewed from a physiological base serves an adaptive function. Spencer, Darwin, and McDougall (cited in Keith-Spiegel, 1972) were theorists who believed that laughter was a built-in potential that was good for the body because it could restore homeostasis, relax the system, enrich circulation, and generally help a person feel good. These theorists also tended to view

humour as an adaptive mechanism that could communicate messages ranging from group cohesion to hostility.

Aristotle and Hobbes (cited in Keith-Spiegel, 1972) were two theorists responsible for a superiority theory of humour. According to the superiority view, the origin of laughter was in the triumph of others. Mockery or ridicule was central to a feeling of superiority over the fallible nature of others. The overriding theme of these theorists was that laughter was generally contemptuous or scornful. This theory will be developed in chapter three on the destructive function of superiority in humour and counselling.

Schopenhauer, Kant, Bergson, and Koestler (cited in Keith-Spiegel, 1972) were four thinkers grouped as incongruity theorists. They viewed humour as arising from disjointed, ill-suited pairings of situations or ideas. Humour could be generated by a person behaving in a mechanical manner. Much of Charlie Chaplin's humour, especially in the film, 'Modern Times' consisted of this type of laughable mechanical behavior. Also a conflict between a thought and a perception can lead to laughter. The basic ideas of the incongruity theory of laughter will be developed when examining humour as reframing in chapter three.

A fourth theory, less important than the other categories, consisted of the idea of surprise, shock, or suddenness being necessary but not sufficient for laughter to occur. Descartes (cited in Keith-Spiegel, 1972) believed that laughter occurred from a mixture of joy and shock. This theory accounts for the reason we

might not laugh when we hear a joke the second or third time. We fail to be surprised or shocked by the punch line. Although, sometimes we laugh at the same joke many times which indicates that surprise or shock is not always necessary.

Ambivalence theories were the fifth category of humour that Keith-Spiegel outlined. This category was very similar to the incongruity theories except the ambivalence theories stressed emotions or feelings whereas the incongruity theories rested more on ideas or perceptions. Plato (cited in Keith-Spiegel, 1972) developed the idea that laughter occurs with the simultaneous experience of pleasure and pain. Perhaps this is the reason we sometimes cry after laughing or laugh after crying. The two emotions are closer connected than we tend to think. There is a time to laugh and a time to cry and sometimes that time is the same time.

The sixth category of humour theories were release and relief theories. Nervous energy is in search of an outlet and laughter often provides that outlet. An example of this is the seemingly inappropriate laughter that might occur at the scene of an accident or during a skyjacking. Included in the category is the conception that laughter can provide relief from stress, a way to release excess tension. This theory may account for some of the healing potential of humour--humour as a stress reducer. It may also be important in counselling to reduce client tension and assist in building the relationship between counsellor and client.

The sudden insight or falling into place of some previous

conflict is the source of the configuration theories of laughter. This theory was closely aligned with the model of Gestalt psychology. Bateson (1972) compared appreciation of a joke to a figure-ground shift in perception. The ridiculous becomes the logical. The child who achieves a sense of mastery over a task, such as toilet training, will often find humour in things associated with the task. The task originally did not make sense but when the child finally mastered toilet training and gained insight, it could then be a source of humour because the conflict was reduced.

Freud (1905) was the first proponent of the psychoanalytic theory of humour, Keith-Spiegel's final category of humour theories. The ludicrous was a saving in the expenditure of psychic energy. Humour was the triumph of the ego, changing suffering into a matter of less significance. Freud viewed humour as a mechanism of defense against things that might threaten the ego, and he also believed wit could express inhibited tendencies. This led the way to later psychoanalysts' studies of character analysis through humour preference.

The eight broad categories of humour theories demonstrate just some of the complexity of humour. One specific theory cannot answer the multitude of questions that can be posed about the phenomenon. Keith-Spiegel organized the theories into eight broad categories while admitting there is overlap between the theories as one theorist may fit into two or three categories. Her work is useful in providing a historical base for outlining the constructive and destructive functions of humour. All the various theories and

conceptions of humour indicate why humour is a difficult term to define. The theories set the stage for discussing the current problems of defining humour for study in counselling.

### Definition of Humour

Despite the widespread enthusiasm for humor and the general indulgence in the pleasure of it, despite humor's being one of the fundamental behavior patterns of the human organism - despite these signs of its importance, many basic controversies still rage over it. Many of the most elementary questions concerning humour, smiling, and laughter remain unanswered (Fry, 1963, p.26).

Although there have been volumes written on humour, researchers are still faced with the basic conundrum of how to define this elusive phenomenon. Some of the confounding questions that create so much difficulty in precisely defining humour are: Is laughter humour or a symptom of humour? How do we measure humour? What is the difference between humour appreciation and creation? What is the relationship between laughter and tickling? And the most fundamental question, what is humour?

Many of the definitions of humour are only descriptions of the conditions under which humour is experienced. A lot of the definitions of humour involve assumptions that cannot be tested. It seems we know a great deal about humour without knowing what it is. In fact, many authors on humour have simply avoided this problem by not defining what they meant by humour.

Some of the definitions of humour are circular. Humour is what we laugh at and what we laugh at is humour. Robinson (1977) defined humour as "any communication which is perceived by any of the interacting parties as humorous and leads to laughing, smiling, or a feeling of amusement" (p. 10). Although, this might facilitate the recording of humour it ends up being circular; humour is a communication that is perceived as humorous.

Kaneko (1971) utilized a psychoanalytic framework to provide one of the most comprehensive definitions of humour in therapy:

Humor, as it appears in psychotherapy, is a vehicle for the pleasurable handling of material which is or was in reality or fantasy potentially painful or dangerous to the psyche or social circumstances of the person displaying it either via expression or appreciation. It is a form of play, primarily cognitive and affective, in the service of pleasure, growth, maturation, adaptation and defense. It always masks, disguises or substitutes for another potentially more intense or distressing affect (p. 132-133).

This is an ambivalent definition in that it involves both growth and disguise or repression. It draws upon psychoanalytic theory too much to be used here for a general definition of humour, although many of the elements will be incorporated into the functional analysis of humour in the next chapter.

Foster (1978) concluded his study of humour definitions by stating "anyone searching for an abiding, precise definition of humour will probably be disappointed" (p. 46). In addition to a psychoanalytic definition of humour, Kaneko (1971) used a

conceptual definition of humour derived from a dictionary. This definition was broad enough to encompass most cases of humour. In this thesis humour will be defined as "the mental faculty of discovering, expressing, or appreciating ludicrous or absurdly incongruous elements" (Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 1983, p. 587). Although this is still not a precise definition, it does provide some basis of understanding for what humour is. It is preferable to not defining the term at all yet the analysis of the functions of humour in counselling will provide the most comprehensive indication of what humour, in the context of counselling, is.

#### Literature on Humour in Counselling

There has been an increased interest in humour in helping over the past seven years. A few of the general sources of information on humour in helping will be mentioned before providing a more detailed analysis of the literature specific to humour in counselling.

#### General Sources of Humour in Helping

Robinson (1977), a nurse-educator, wrote a book on humour in the health professions; and Moody (1978), a doctor, wrote a book on the healing power of humour. Long and Knight (1979) wrote a book that claims laughter can break through depression and

increase self-esteem. Norman Cousins (1980) wrote a book in which he stated a belief that humour was an integral part of his cure from a potentially fatal disease. Peter and Dana (1982) have a self-help book that attempted to show how to achieve health, happiness, and peace of mind through humour. The Institute for the Advancement of Human Behavior has offered conferences across North America on the healing power of laughter and play. The institute had ten objectives for the two day workshops that encompassed such goals as the participant will use humour in treating the critical care patient, use humour to reduce burn-out, use humour to help patients cope with chronic pain, understand the relationship between humour and the endorphin system, and even recognize diagnostic cues manifested as changes in a person's pattern of laughter (Personal attendance, Toronto conference, May 18-20, 1984).

If nothing else, these books and workshops indicate that there is almost nothing that humour cannot help you with! The general discussion of humour in these sources is often fascinating but too general or lacking in temperance to be useful to a counsellor trying to understand the nature and function of humour in counselling.

#### Counselling Theorists and Humour

Kaneko (1971) gave a comprehensive review of humour in therapy. She indicated the pervasiveness of humour in therapy:



In summary, among patients and therapists surveyed and the data sources reviewed, humour in psychotherapy occurred across disciplines, ages, sexes, diagnostic and characterological configurations, psychotherapeutic methodologies, treatment modalities and phases of treatment (p.42).

Yet an ERIC search using the terms humor and (counseling, counseling effectiveness, counseling techniques, counselor characteristics, counselor client relationship, counselor role, counselors, and counselor training) listed only fifteen journal entries and one document. The search went back to 1972. Most of the research for this thesis was from a search of the Psychological Abstracts.

One of the first therapists, Sigmund Freud, was intrigued by the humour phenomenon. He studied the relationship of jokes to the unconscious (Freud, 1905). Freud viewed humour as a basic mechanism of defense, a releasing of energies, and the most social of the mental phenomena. He did not explicitly make connections between humour and therapy but he was the forerunner of the later psychanalytic writers.

"Men show their characters in nothing more clearly than what they find laughable" (Goethe, cited in Greenburg, 1963, p.50). The psychoanalytic writers have taken a similar perspective to that of Goethe. They have examined humour as a diagnostic instrument in therapy. They examined the patient's jokes to discern the hidden psychological meaning. Zwerling (1955) examined the favorite joke of his patients to gain insights into areas of obscure conflict. Grossman (1977) would often use the patient's jokes as information

about possible manifestations of deeper conflicts.

Many counselling practitioners have written about humour. Some of them have given examples of how they used humour in counselling, some have relied on anecdotal or case studies to support their claims, and others have simply expressed their ideas about humour in counselling. Chapman and Foot (1977) edited a collection of papers presented at the Second International Conference on Humour and Laughter. A major section of their book focused on humour in counselling. Voices (1983), a journal on ideas and issues in therapy, devoted an entire issue to the topic of humour in therapy. All of the articles were speculative or gave examples of how one therapist used humour in his or her practice. As Kaneko stated above, humour occurs across disciplines, ages, and psychotherapeutic methodologies and treatment modalities. Indeed, therapists from a wide range of schools and disciplines have addressed themselves to the role and nature of humour in counselling. A partial listing includes: Boorstein (1980), Transpersonal Therapy; Donald and Carlisle (1983), Career Counselling; Ellis (1977), Rational Emotive Therapy; Farrelly and Brandsma (1974), Provocative Therapy; Foster (1978), Counselling; Frankl (1975), Logotherapy; Greenwald (1977), Direct Decision Therapy; Grotjahn (1957), Psychoanalysis; Harman (1981), Gestalt Therapy; Huber (1971), School Counselling; O'Connell (1981), Adlerian Therapy; and Whitaker (1975), Family Therapy.

A sample of three different types of articles will be presented to highlight the general features and limitations of

articles available on humour in counselling. Foster (1978) wrote an article that represented a general overview on the subject. The basic premise of his article was that humour has a place in counselling. The four page article covered the topics of theoretical explanations of humour, assumptions about humour, reasons humour has been overlooked, uses and abuses of humour, and implications of using humour. Due to the large number of topics covered, Foster did little more than touch upon some of the main ideas. No scientific or experimental support was given for any of his claims. Foster's article represented a typical article on humour in counselling, many claims are made, there is much speculation, but there is little evidence beyond anecdotal material or previous writer's thoughts to support his claims. Foster proposed a method to rate humour and encouraged further research on this topic. A later article that Foster coauthored with Reid (1983) will be discussed in the empirical studies of humour in counselling.

The second type of article is one that advances the notion of humour from a specific theoretical viewpoint. Boorstein (1980) discussed the use of humour in transpersonal psychotherapy. There is little or no theoretical background discussion of humour theory and there is no definition of humour. Boorstein described six techniques of "lightheartedness" in psychotherapy but he did not even define the term. He provided personal evidence and anecdotes to support his claim about the usefulness of humour. He concluded with a testimonial that lightheartedness is therapeutic and makes

psychotherapy more effective. This type of article was written for practitioners of a certain discipline and encouraged counsellors to use humour.

The third category of nonempirical studies of humour in counselling are similar to Frankl's (1975) article on paradoxical intention and dereflection. The main focus of the article is on another topic and humour is given as a way to accomplish a certain goal. Much of the understanding of humour is taken for granted by the author and a few cases are presented where humour was effective in helping the client to dereflect, reframe, or accomplish change.

The articles cited above and the other descriptive articles on humour in counselling are effective in providing ideas and suggestions. They cause the reader to think about humour and speculate on its use in counselling. The problems with the articles is that they are sketchy, they do not provide the reader with enough background information, concepts or terms are used and not defined, often there is no attempt to present a balanced view of humour in counselling, and the support generally consists of the belief system of the particular author.

Burbridge's (1978) dissertation on the nature and potential of therapeutic humour stated that the studies utilizing subject populations and statistical designs failed to communicate a conceptual grasp of humour and were of little use to the counsellor. Analyzing the research on humour, Burbridge made a strong case for the benefits to be gained by using humour in

therapy. He believed that humour was a door to psychological freedom and that it opens clients to new experience and change. Humour helps the client to reframe the situation and assist the client in becoming aware of the variety to choices available. Burbridge felt that humour helped clients to separate themselves from limiting self-concepts and that humour could bypass the defenses by working through paradox and indirection. Burbridge cites many examples and provides a more comprehensive examination of humour in counselling. However, he does not provide empirical evidence for his claims and he seems to go too far in advocating the wholesale use of humour in counselling. He concluded:

It is hoped that the case has been made for humor as a vital part of the process of intellectual and spiritual growth, one which no therapist can afford to reject or treat timidly if he wished to grow as a helper and as a person (Burbridge, 1978, p.121).

#### Empirical Studies of Humour in Counselling

Another type of study appears in the literature on humour in counselling. These are studies based on a scientific approach to the topic. Key variables are isolated and studied, and some degree of objectivity is achieved by the author. These articles may be of limited assistance to the practicing counsellor but they attempt to accomplish a better understanding of some key concept or idea. There is a definite lack of controlled research on the topic because of so many problems inherent in its nature. Some of the

problems of the researcher are to operationalize terms, to control for other variables, and even to simply attempt research in the elusive topics of counselling and humour. For instance, how do you simulate a counselling session and how do you devise appropriate humour?

Kutzman (1974) studied the effects of insight-oriented humour on the initial client-counsellor relationship. He manipulated the humour variable before the subjects, first year English students, had a fifty minute initial counselling interview. The humour consisted of either a twenty three minute excerpt from a record album on "How to Live with Yourself...Or...What to do Until the Psychiatrist Comes" (insight-oriented humour), or Flip Wilson's "The Devil Made Me Buy This Dress" (noninsight-oriented humour). Subjects in the control group received no humour prior to the counselling sessions. After the session the subjects completed a relationship questionnaire to assess their view of the counselling relationship. The different types of humour had no effect on the subject's rating and it appeared that neither humour condition effectively enhanced the client-counsellor situation. This does not resemble humour in the typical counselling situation as how many counsellors supply comedy records before the session? Although it was interesting to manipulate the humour variable in counselling, the implications of this study for the counsellor are minimal.

Hickson (1977) measured the relationship between humour preferences and facilitative skills of counsellor trainees. Pencil and paper tests were used to measure the two variables. She found

a relationship between personality characteristics based on humour preferences and facilitative ability. High facilitative scores related to counsellor trainee humour measures which tended to be more intelligent, anti-establishment, anxious, flirtatious, and introverted. There does seem to be a link between humour appreciation and the helping process. More work is needed to specify what is involved. The humour test that Hickson used was only a research publication that suffered from lack of validity. The study is important in attempting a more empirical study of humour and counselling. A limitation of this paper is that it does not discuss anything about humour actually occurring in the counselling session.

Kaneko (1971) attempted to develop a research model to investigate the role of humour in therapy. She believed that the functions and meanings of humour were poorly conceptualized and controversial. Using tapes and transcripts of actual therapy sessions she devised a method to assess humorous incidents in therapy. Kaneko provided a research model for others interested in studying humorous incidents in counselling. She encountered difficulties in having an operational definition of humour based only on overt behavior. At one point in her dissertation, while discussing the difficulties of studying humour in psychotherapy, she stated that it is:

...analogous to the study of one dynamic, changeling nebulously defined process, within the context of another, that of dynamic psychotherapy; an equally nebulous process evolving from the interaction

between two human beings with the aim of aiding one in his intrapsychic and interpersonal functions (Kaneko, 1971, p.47-48).

Killinger (1977) used Kaneko's model to analyze the place of humour in adult psychotherapy. She found that previous studies of humour in psychotherapy were often imaginative and interesting but were anecdotal, lacked methodological rigour, and some even failed to provide a sound theoretical base. Killinger analyzed humour incidents from audio-tapes of therapy. Independent raters judged humorous incidents for the facilitative effect on the counselling process. Humorous incidents were judged as having very high positive intent, the therapist attempted to use constructive humour. She found that therapists using humour focused on the client's problems, stayed with the topic of interaction, and communicated in a nondefensive manner. She found no difference in humour frequency between therapists with differing therapeutic experience and there was also no difference in frequency of humour in early or later sessions with the same client.

Foster and Reid (1983) studied humour's relationship to students' assessments of the counsellor. They used a videotaped simulated counselling session with three conditions: no humour, facilitative humour, and non-facilitative humour. They found it very difficult to create two examples of facilitative and non-facilitative humour. Perhaps this was partly due to the need for spontaneity and play to have effective humour. They found that non-facilitative humour was less desirable than facilitative



humour or no humour, in terms of counsellor likableness, approachability, or ability to create rapport. This did not involve actual clients in a counselling situation. Still, the researchers are to be commended for trying to clarify terms and make the study of humour in counselling more objective. This study, probably the most rigorous research on humour in counselling, demonstrated that we are a long way from understanding humour in counselling from a strictly scientific viewpoint.

#### Summary

Humour and humour in counselling have been studied from many different perspectives. The trouble with most theories is they lack empirical support and testing of hypotheses. The anecdotal studies of humour in counselling are interesting and provide many implications for the counsellor but the counsellor needs to be aware that these studies are more opinion than fact. All the empirical studies of humour in counselling confront the difficulty of trying to study these two elusive phenomenon from a scientific viewpoint. It is difficult, almost impossible, to define terms and measure outcomes. The implications of these studies are of very limited use to the practicing counsellor wondering about using humour in counselling. I emphasized in the review of the literature the need for a descriptive study that utilizes the various research on humour in counselling. To be of use to counsellors the descriptive study must present a balanced view on the constructive

and destructive functions of humour in counselling.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Functions of Humour in Counselling

In the last chapter, Keith-Speigel (1972) provided eight categories of humour theories. This scheme was useful in making sense of the vast range of theories on humour. In this chapter, I will provide a categorization scheme based on the functions of humour in counselling. The two broad divisions will be the constructive and the destructive functions of humour. This categorization scheme is somewhat arbitrary, as is any categorization scheme, yet it describes the main functions of humour in counselling. After the functions have been discussed an organizational metaphor for humour in counselling, the double-edge sword, will be offered. A rationale and description of this organizing metaphor will be given.

### The Constructive Functions

The constructive functions of humour in counselling are humour as: healer, reframer, creativity, relationship builder, fun, and therapy. In these instances, humour is used in counselling in positive way. The intentional or unintentional use of humour is beneficial to both the client and the counselling process.

### Humour as Healer

One possible function of humour in counselling is humour as healer. Although clients visit counsellors to resolve issues that are primarily psychological, there is usually a connection between body and mind, what is good for the body may be good for the mind. Only psychiatrists are authorized to prescribe drugs in treatment, these drugs operate on the body yet have an affect on the mind. The biological and release theories of humour indicated that humour can affect the body. If laughter, humour's byproduct, can act as a physical healer, can we as counsellors overlook the use of this powerful function in our counselling practise? Admittedly, the analysis of the physical healing properties of humour is in its infancy but there are enough kernels of information to suggest it has potential as a healer.

Is laughter the best medicine? The evidence is still very tenuous but there is mounting research to indicate that humour may function as a healer. Norman Cousins (1979) had a potentially fatal disease, ankylosing spondylitis, in which the connective tissue in the spine was disintegrating. He was not being cured by traditional medical procedures. He checked out of the hospital, took personal responsibility for his disease and incorporated humour into his treatment. He found that periods of laughter induced by watching videotapes of 'Candid Camera' and Marx Brothers films would aid in painless sleep. The evidence is anecdotal, but Cousins felt that laughter was the best medicine in his recovery. The humour acted to mobilize his own mechanisms of resistance to disease and assisted in the full exercise of the affirmative emotions to enhance body

chemistry. Cousins found that his sedimentation rate, the body's ability to fight the inflammation, dropped at least five points after each laughter episode. We are now beginning to witness an updated humoral theory of cure as some hospitals have started to incorporate the use of laughter in caring for patients. The DeKalb General Hospital in Decatur, Georgia opened a laughing place to assist patients (Winnipeg Free Press, June 9, 1982, p. 27).

The research on the physiological effects of humour and laughter is scant. Evidence suggests a decrease in muscle tone (Moody, 1978) and an enhanced respiration process (Fry, 1977). Laughter also supplies six times as much oxygen to the system as a deep breath (Dewane, 1978). Increased oxygen and decreased muscle tone correlate with relaxation. This might account for the role of humour in reducing tension or anxiety. Nitrous oxide, commonly referred to as laughing gas because of its affect on patients, is used as a pain-killer. There is also some indication that laughter can release endorphins in the brain. These endorphins are assumed to be the body's natural pain killer, giving people who experience it a euphoric state. It appears that this mental phenomenon of laughter has some strong physiological effects. Research is needed to specify the precise working of laughter on the body, but for now, counsellors need to be aware of its possible healing function.

### Humour as Reframer

Reframing is perhaps the most powerful technique that counsellors can utilize in working with clients. Not all counsellors use this label to

describe their technique but many of the varied counselling strategies use some form of reframing. Ellis' Rational Emotive Therapy (RET) reframes clients' irrational and absolute thinking with a more rational self-talk. He encourages and sometimes cajoles clients into reframing their experience from a rational base. The RET counsellor's function is to "help clients rid themselves of illogical, irrational ideas and replace them with logical, rational ideas (Shilling, 1984, p. 99). Carl Whitaker (1975), a family therapist, continually reframes families symptoms as accomplishments and craziness as sanity. Minuchin and Fishman (1981) believe therapy is a clash between two frames of reality, the family's frame and the therapist's frame. The therapist reframes the families experience by "moving the family toward a more differentiated and competent dealing with their dysfunctional reality" (p. 74). Bandler and Grinder (1982) used the term reframing for the title of one of their books. They believe that reframing is central to the process of change in counselling. In fact, most forms of counselling could be described from the perspective of reframing, and one possible method of reframing is using humour.

Humour can function as a very powerful reframer. Goffman stated that frames are "built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events - at least social ones - and our subjective involvement in them" (Goffman, 1974, p. 10-11). The meaning of an event depends upon the frame. Changing the frame (reframing) by which a client perceives an event also changes the meaning. When the meaning changes, the client's response and behaviors may also change. Humour is one way to influence our subjective involvement in the situation.

To reframe, then means to change the conceptual and/or emotional setting or viewpoint in relation to which a situation is experienced and to place it in another frame which fits the "facts" of the same concrete situation equally well or even better, and thereby changes its entire meaning (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974, p. 95).

Humour, as reframer, can act as an agent of change. It can produce a meta change when the original meaning attached to an event is no longer seen as the only frame for that event. It can stimulate the client to think about things differently or to take other factors that were overlooked into consideration. Humour can enable the client to put a new frame of reference around previously discouraging events and perceive new choices or alternatives. Humour allows us to see the ludicrous or absurd and to take a comic or cosmic perspective on our difficulties. As one writer stated, humour can provide a God's eye view (Mindess, 1976).

A common method of reframing is the use of paradox or exaggeration. Frankl (1975) thought humour was an essential element in the practice of paradoxical intention. He would exaggerate a client's problem to the point where it would provoke laughter. Humour was a coping devise that facilitated self-detachment and change. Whitaker (1975) used absurd instructions to alter a family's ineffective ways of relating. This would often produce humour and change. Laughter can be the seed of change, liberating clients from previously limited self-concepts and modes of being. It demonstrates the absurdity of the limited frame.

Most jokes are self-contained examples of reframing. The initial part of the joke sets a certain frame around the anecdote. We follow a train

of thought until the punch line destroys or changes that frame. For instance this joke: Sex in the eighties is great, but it improves if you pull over to the side of the road. We may respond with laughter as the previous frame no longer fits. What was seen as one frame, age or decade, is now seen from another frame, the speed of an automobile. Of course if there was humour in the statement, it dies in the explanation of it. One more example from Freud (1905):

A doctor, as he came away from a lady's bedside, said to her husband with a shake of his head: "I don't like her looks." "I've not liked her looks for a long time," the husband hastened to agree (p.71).

The doctor was referring to the lady's condition but expressed his judgement in words the husband could interpret as a confirmation of his own marital aversion. These two jokes illustrate how quickly we start to frame a situation, how limited our frame is, and how humour can reframe a situation so we rise above the limited frame.

### Humour as Creativity

Many therapists have advocated the role of creativity in therapy (Peavy, 1979; Rogers, 1980; and Saranoff and Cole, 1983). Creativity in the context of counselling is defined as the "ability to make and/or express something that, at least partially, originated from oneself" (Peavy, 1978, p. 61). Rogers (1980) felt that caring was an attitude that fosters creativity. The therapist could help the client be creative in a nurturing climate in which new thoughts and productive processes could emerge. The need for creativity in therapy is to assist the client in the



generation of new applicable responses to daily challenges and to assist in personal growth and effective coping (Saranoff and Cole, 1983). It is believed that creativity can greatly enhance the therapeutic outcomes of counselling and assist clients in general adaptation after counselling is over. Alfred Adler believed that the creative self was the first cause of everything, it gives meaning to life and provides the yeast that acts upon the facts of the world (Hall and Lindzey, 1978). Rollo May (1975) believed that it took courage to create and the creative individual was more successful in adapting to life in this complex world. By encouraging the client to be creative the therapist is mobilizing a number of parallel therapeutic goals including increased self-reliance, problem-solving, self-understanding, self-acceptance, and flexibility.

If creativity is so highly valued in counselling, how does a counsellor encourage or foster creativity? Koestler (1964) believed that humour was one of the three domains of creativity. He used three different roles to represent creativity: jester, sage, and artist. He believed that creativity was bisociative thinking, the ability to simultaneously associate an event in two very separate and different contexts. We connect previously unconnected frames of reference and allow ourselves to experience reality on several planes at once. The creative act is "an act of liberation - the defeat of habit by originality" (Koestler, 1964, p. 96). Reframing is a subset of creativity as the creative function of humour can allow us to perceive a situation in two self-consistent yet habitually incompatible frames of reference.

Humour has often been allied with creativity. One of the tests for creativity has been humour construction and appreciation (Karlins, 1972).

Humorous people, especially those who create humour, are viewed as being creative. Creative therapists are effective because they can draw upon an infinite number of possibilities or ways of being to work with a client. The therapist using humour provides a creative model for clients and indicates ways in which clients can respond to their own behavior. The humorous remark, or the playful moment in counselling, demonstrates to the client the range of alternative behaviors that can be used in any situation and allows for a greater freedom of expression between counsellor and client.

#### Humour as Relationship Builder

The relationship between counsellor and client is important in counselling theory. Although different theorists stress various elements of the therapeutic relationship, most believe it is a very important component of effective counselling (Egan, 1975; Martin, 1983; Minuchin and Fishman, 1981; Rogers, 1980). Various core conditions have been identified as important in establishing and maintaining an effective counselling relationship. Such conditions as acceptance, genuineness, warmth, and respect have been isolated for study. Humour is another possible condition that has not been studied as much but might be effective in building the counselling relationship.

Humour can be used as a tool by the counsellor to build the relationship with a client. It might be used to diffuse some of the initial anxiety a client may experience in a counselling setting. Humour is a great leveller, bringing the client and counsellor together at their

common human level. Counsellors who can share some humour might be perceived as more human by the client, especially if counsellors can laugh at themselves. Levine (1977) relates a funny story that indicates probably better than any explanation the importance of relationship involved in humour appreciation:

The president of a lodge was telling the members a very funny story, so funny that they all broke into great laughter. All but one. He didn't laugh or even crack a smile. They asked him, "Don't you think it's a funny story?" "Yes," he said, "but I'm not a member of the lodge" (p. 135).

Humour can also function as a masked message of caring and affection. Many close relationships seem to be built around joking, teasing, and insulting. Prasinos and Tittler (1981) in a study of humour and family dynamics concluded that humour was often an attempt to relate from a distance. The expression of intimacy can provoke anxiety and avoidance. One method of expressing intimacy without the risk, anxiety or avoidance is to use humour. A more open expression of caring or intimacy may be preferable but in the initial stages of counselling, humour might be used to build the intimate therapeutic relationship. Humour can function as the cement that binds a healing relationship and puts the two partners on equal footing.

### Humour as Fun

"It is often hard for us to remember that humour, like sex, is pleasurable without serving any other purpose" (Levine, 1977, p. 134). The

idea that counselling should be fun is seldom discussed in the counselling literature and the very idea might seem absurd to many counsellors. There is almost a taboo against the topic---counselling is supposed to be a serious endeavour to help people in difficult situations. Introductory counselling textbooks seldom mention the topic of humour and when it is mentioned it is not promoted as a way of having fun (Egan, 1975; Martin, 1983; and Shilling, 1984).

Albert Ellis and William Glasser are two counselling theorists who have discussed the importance of fun. William Glasser developed reality therapy as a counselling theory. Lately, Glasser has given increased importance to the concept of fun in counselling. He now maintains that fun is a basic human need (Glasser, 1984). Glasser believes that our need for fun is too often neglected and we forget that fun is a way of learning. Humour is an aspect of fun and can have the function in counselling of providing fun to client and counsellor. Ellis believed that fun should be a part of counselling. He believed that emotional disturbance largely consists of taking life too seriously, and part of the counsellors function was to provide fun in the relationship. He assumed clients desire to get more fun and less misery in life and concluded an article on fun as psychotherapy:

Psychotherapy can indeed prove fun; and fun can lead to good psychotherapy. A good sense of humor, in itself, will not cure all emotional problems. But the refusal to take any of the grim facts of life too seriously largely will (Ellis, 1977, p. 6).

Freud (1905) stated that the aim of humour is pleasure. Does all our counselling behavior have to be purposive? Humour can be fun, not a

means to an end but rather an end in itself. We can share in our play. All this trying to make sense of the human predicament is not without its moments of pure nonsense. Children play a great deal and learn much through their play. As adults, play can be a way of being in the world and coping with the absurdities and paradoxes of the human condition. We need to have our moments of playful humour in the hard work of counselling.

### Humour as The Therapy

Counselling has been subjected to a vast array of theories and counselling schools. Each school or theory offers different assumptions and views on the client, providing the practitioner with various ways of working with the client. Therapies range from classic psychoanalysis to dance therapy and jogging therapy. Primarily, I examined humour as a tool in counselling. A number of practitioners and theorists have raised humour to the form of therapy. Humour is the therapy as they cajole, tease, ridicule, kid, and play with their clients. The primary goal of the therapy is to get the client to laugh and see life from a humorous perspective.

Farrelly and Brandsma (1974) have developed provocative therapy. They use humour, especially ridicule, exaggeration, mimicking, sarcasm, and irony to provoke a response from their clients. They felt that humour was an essential condition of therapy. If the client is not laughing then provocative therapy is not occurring. Farrelly and Brandsma place few limits on their use of humour, believing it should even be used "to place the client in an uncomfortable inferior position, thereby motivating coping

responses in the relationship" (Farrelly and Brandsma, 1974, p.115). Few counsellors would go to the extreme of provocative therapy in advocating the wholesale use of humour.

O'Connell (1981) uses a softer form of humour in advocating that the goal of therapy is to develop a sense of humour in the client. He viewed the therapist as a humourist. The humourist-therapist is not stuck like most therapists. This therapist sees all life as child's play with no idolatry or persons, role or things. O'Connell's use of humour is more benevolent in action than the humour used by Farrelly and Brandsma.

Levine (1977) also viewed humour as a form of therapy. He felt that a humorous attitude makes us more capable of mastering our fears and tolerating our distress. He used a number of jokes and humorous stories in therapy in order to illustrate important points.

#### The Destructive Functions

Viewpoints on humour in counselling range from the extreme position of humour as the therapy to humour as a destructive force in counselling. Kubie (1971) is the most cited source on the detrimental affects of humour in therapy. In all of Kubie's experience in supervising and conducting psychotherapy he could not, "point to a single patient in whose treatment humour proved to be a safe, valuable, and necessary aid" (Kubie, 1971, p. 865). He stated sixteen ways that humour can be detrimental to the therapeutic process, such as: a confusing type of communication, masked aggression, an exhibitionist display, a defense against anxiety, and a dangerous weapon. Fadiman (1972), in discussing

the destructive edge of humour, stated that "we use it as a weapon to beat someone over the head, or to defend our point of view, or to produce an effect in the audience that will lead to some kind of action or arouse an emotion" (p. 90). The destructive functions of humour examined in this section include humour as: aggression, superiority, defense mechanism, and social distancer.

### Humour as Aggression

Grotjahn (1970) believed that laughter is based on sudden hostility in a well disguised form. Bloomfield (1980) thought that humour could be viewed as hostility successfully disguised in a socially acceptable form. Most humour has an aggressive element. For instance, many of our jokes are based on sexual acts and minority groups. Humour has a target to which aggression is directed. Joan Rivers and Don Rickels, two very successful comedians, use very aggressive humour in their acts.

The court jester could say things to the king that nobody else could because he used humour to convey and mask his message. We often use humour intentionally or unconsciously to release and express aggressive impulses. For instance, you can insult or attack someone with humour. If the person reacts with resentment, anger, or hurt the aggressive humourist can respond: "I was only kidding." "Don't you have a sense of humour?" or "Can't you take a joke?" The use of humour can be a way to make aggressive attacks without having to take responsibility for them.

Tickling can evoke laughter. According to Fry (1963) tickling is "an attack of one person upon another. A flesh and bone dagger is jabbed into

various vulnerable parts of the victim's body" (p. 110). Koestler (1964) put the aggressive element of tickling into perspective when he stated that a person will only laugh if the tickling is perceived "as a mock attack, a caress in a mildly aggressive disguise" (p. 80). There is an element of aggression to tickling but it is mediated by other relationship variables between the two parties. There is some choice involved in the victim to respond with laughter and frame the event as play or to respond with irritation and frame the event as an aggressive attack.

Many of the terms used to describe humour indicate the possible aggressive or detrimental elements involved in humour. The following phrases are used to describe the affects of humour: "split-a-gut," "slapstick," "convulsed with laughter," "you'll die when you hear this one," "poke fun at someone," "that one breaks me up," "side-splitting laughter," "helpless with laughter," and "I'm just ribbing you". It is not accidental that these phrases are used and all of them refer to aggression or vulnerability. Each joke has a punch line that produces the laughter. The term 'punch line' is fairly recent in usage but it seems to relate to the punch of fighting or boxing. Fry (1963) speculated that punch line is a good fitting unconscious conception of what joking is, "a natural choice to connote the part of the joke that represents the peak of aggression of one person against another, wherefore a punch line is, then, a blow, a sock, a punch" (p. 110). The Greek origin of the term sarcasm, sarkasmos, means to tear flesh. Derision, mocking, ridicule, snicker, and slap stick are other words associated with humour that have possible negative connotations.

One final point about the language for humour. There is a



relationship between words to describe humour and words to describe mental instability. Funny, mad, crazy, wild, hysterical, absurd, ludicrous, lunacy, and nonsensical could be words used to describe either state. Perhaps humour is not the healthy state that it is often assume to be, and counsellors need to be very careful when attempting humour with their clients. Sometimes, aggressive expressions, inappropriate for counselling, may be masked in the counsellor's humour.

### Humour as Superiority

One of the early theories of humour was that we laugh because we feel superior. Hobbes proposed that humour was "a sudden glory arising in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, as with our own formerly" (Hobbes, cited in Fry, 1963, p. 106). Fry (1963) believed that laughter was a human form of peck order battles to establish dominance and submission. Laughter can serve as messages about surrender, victory, weapons of offense, weapon of defense, signals of avoidance of battle, and signals of personal attack. Fry (1963) framed joke telling as:

The joke teller is the dominant one; the joke is his weapon; his laughter is the sign of his victory. The audience is submissive; their laughter is the sign of their acceptance of defeat" (p. 108).

The orgies of joke telling can be likened to vigorous competitions where one person tries to defeat the minds of others with the punch line.

Counsellors need to be aware if their humour creation has undertones of superiority. This could be detrimental to the helping

process if the client feels put down or in an inferior position. It might be less healthy than the humour that is shared among equals. If a counsellor uses humour to establish a superior position then the counsellor needs to be very aware of this and have therapeutic reasons for such a ploy. This could be used by a strategic therapist like Haley to manage client resistance or to provoke a response. There is an old saying that men joke and woman laugh. The counsellors role is not to entertain and get the client to think how great the counsellor is. Humour could be used by the counsellor to maintain a one upmanship position, possible interfering with the client developing into his/her own expert. Humour becomes destructive when counsellors use it to meet their own needs to feel superior to a client.

#### Humour as Defense Mechanism

"Humour is often used as a defensive strategy against one's own anxieties, and by reinforcing the use of humor the therapist encourages the maintenance of the client's neurotic defense system" (Hickson, 1977, p 65). As Hickson stated, humour can function as a defense mechanism. The counsellor or client may use humour to avoid feeling or examining an issue in the counselling session. At times it may be very appropriate to "laugh it off" but continually laughing it off can prevent the client from confronting the issue. Laughter and constant joking may be a defense against pain and an attempt to hide hurt from ourselves and others. Humour could be used as a defense to allow the person to carry on doing exactly as they were doing in an avoidance of the hard work of change.

In the long run humour may become an ineffective way to deal with fears or anxieties either on the part of the counsellor or the client. Kaneko (1971) provided a patient's comment on her use of humour "...I know that one way that I really used greatly to handle my own feelings about it is to just make light of everything. Not to complain or even mention it if I've been up or uncomfortable..." (p. 148).

### Humour as Social Distancer

Humour is a paradoxical phenomenon even at the best of times. Humour was examined as a relationship builder in the constructive functions of humour yet it can also function as a social distancer, interfering with the establishment of the counselling relationship. Humour can be a way to keep other people at a distance, just as humour may be used as a defense mechanism against internal feelings or emotions. Clients or counsellors may put up a barrier of humour to protect themselves from one another. The classic distinction is laughing with or laughing at someone. It would appear that laughing at someone is a way to create distance from that other person while laughing with someone is embracing that other person as a fellow human being. A counsellor's humour could function as a social distancing mechanism that interferes with the establishment or maintenance of an effective therapeutic relationship.

### Constructive Plus Destructive Humour: The Double-Edge Sword

Most theorists on humour in counselling tend to view humour as

either constructive or destructive. They might briefly acknowledge the other viewpoint but pay little attention to it. These two divided camps have limited our understanding of humour by taking a one dimensional view of the phenomenon. A balanced view of humour in counselling is needed and the double-edge sword metaphor for humour's function in counselling can be useful for this purpose. Before being more specific with this metaphor a rationale for complementary descriptions is developed.

#### Aristotle, Complementarity, and Visual Illusion

Aristotle viewed humour from a negative perspective. His general thinking and view of logic is partly responsible for the current dispute involving humour researchers. One group of theorists argue that humour is destructive in counselling while the other group argues that it is constructive, often there is no middle ground. Aristotle formulated three laws that have shaped the way we think about almost everything. The three laws were law of identity, law of excluded middle, and law of non-contradiction (Johnson, 1946). The law of identity stated that A is A; the law of the excluded middle represents a two-valued system, anything is either A or non-A; and the law of non-contradiction is that something cannot be both A and non-A. If we extend this line of reasoning to humour we see the muddle researchers and theorists are in when they argue that humour is either constructive or destructive. If we let A = (the constructive power of humour), then according to Aristotle's three laws: humour is constructive, it can only be constructive or not

constructive, and it cannot be both constructive and destructive. It seems too many theorists have locked themselves into Aristotle's legacy when they argue from a one-sided viewpoint and limit their understanding of humour in counselling.

If Aristotle has left us with slightly muddled reasoning, what is the way out? Two lines of thought indicate a broader approach, the physicist's principle of complementarity and popular visual illusions. During the dawn of quantum physics, physicists were puzzled that light-waves were particle-like and particles like electrons were known to behave like waves. The physicists were puzzled because according to their line of reasoning something could not be both a wave and a particle. Niels Bohr, one of the fathers of the new physics, advanced the notion of complementarity to explain the mass of paradoxes that were involved in the new physics as compared to the old Newtonian physics. Complementarity, a philosophical outlook, asserted that the reality of nature required complementary descriptions, more than one point of view. At times it was important to view the electron as a particle while at other times it was important that the electron be viewed as a wave. The two views were both correct and exclusive, it was important to know when each view was appropriate. This is contrary to the either/or laws of Aristotle.

Visual analogies for complementarity are the works of Escher and popular visual illusions. In many of these figures the object can be seen as different things. Two figures used for illustration are the Wife-Mother-In-Law illusion (Figure 1) and the Face-Vase illusion (Figure 2).

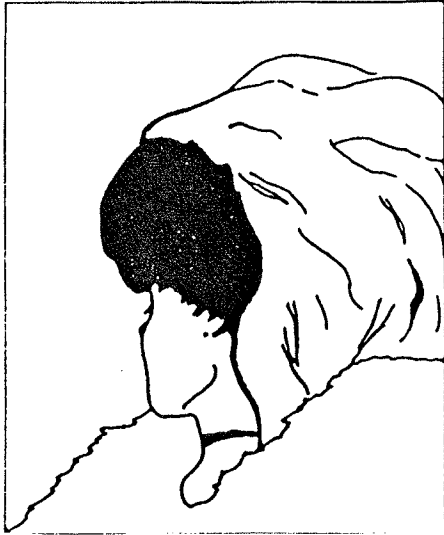


Figure 1

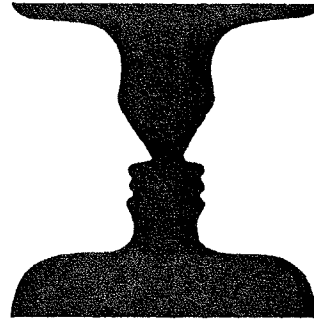


Figure 2

Some people view Figure 1 as a young woman (wife) while others view her as an old woman (mother-in-law). The illusion in Figure 2 appears as a vase or two faces looking at one another. It would be futile to argue that the first figure is either a wife or a mother-in-law or that the second figure is either a face or a vase. Both perspectives or meanings attached to the figure have equal validity.

### The Double-Edged Sword

It is time to cease the illusion that humour in counselling is constructive or destructive. The double-edge sword metaphor can embrace both aspects of humour and the complementary descriptions of humour are equally valid and important in improving our understanding and use of humour in counselling.

A sword metaphor for humour in counselling allows us to treat an elusive psychological phenomenon as a concrete object. It gives us a tool

to grasp the infinite nature of humour. Black (1962) stated:

A memorable metaphor has the power to bring two separate domains into cognitive and emotional relation by using language directly appropriate for one as a lens for seeing the other; the implications, suggestions, and supporting values entwined with the literal use of the metaphorical expression enable us to see a new subject matter in a new way (p. 236-237).

Various authors have referred to humour as a weapon or a sword.

For example:

Humour, because it is aggressive is a weapon, indeed a very effective weapon. If it serves a good cause, if it is aimed at the right target, it can be an admirable corrective or a great benefactor (Mikes, 1970, p. 21).

Humor is a fantastic weapon, let's treasure it and not overuse it (Greenwald, 1977, p. 164).

...humor has a high potential destructiveness, that it is a dangerous weapon (Kubie, 1971, p. 37).

They have used the term as a descriptive metaphor but they have not elaborated on this description. Humour as a double-edged sword is suggestive of the strength and force of humour in counselling. The sword is a possible aggressive weapon that can wound. It is also a symbol used in medicine to be suggestive of its healing capacity. The double-edge is an important adjective to the sword metaphor, it gives indication that the sword can have more than one function. The constructive edge can slice and heal while the destructive edge can cut and wound. The function of the sword is very dependent upon the person using it, as the function of humour in counselling is very dependent upon the people involved with it. This begins to account for the reason humour has so many different,

sometimes opposite, functions.

There are various types of swords: broadsword, cutlass, saber, foil, and rapier. Likewise, there are various types of humour. As a swordsman might prefer one kind of weapon, the counsellor may prefer one type of humour. In the age of thermonuclear war, the sword is an old weapon that requires intimate contact between swordsmen. Today, the sword is used more for ritual and sport than for true aggression.

A double-edged sword metaphor is used in this study to illustrate the implicit and explicit functions of humour in counselling. This metaphor illuminates some of the complexity and paradox that is involved with humour in a helping relationship, humour can sometimes be constructive and sometimes be destructive. When humour is used in counselling a number of different variables may be operating at the same time. For instance, by using humour the counsellor may express masked aggression while at the same time building the relationship between counsellor and client, and opening the client to some of the curative potential of humour.

The sword metaphor is not used to suggest that counselling is a constant battle between counsellor and client. The sword is only one tool and humour is only one facet of counselling. Humour can be used to make certain statements that otherwise might be unacceptable or it can be used to assist a client in stripping away defenses. Humour can be used by the counsellor to move the client in the counselling process or humour can be used as a means of achieving a worthwhile objective. Humour has the potential to wound and heal. If the counsellor or client do not want to use the humour-sword they are always free to use another tool in



counselling. The main benefit of the double-edge sword metaphor is that it provides a concrete term that counsellors can use to remember the complexity and multiple functions of humour. From this organizing principle they can become conscious of the specific constructive and destructive functions of humour in counselling.

### Summary

I have examined the various functions of humour in counselling. There was a division between the constructive functions, those that are beneficial to counselling; and the destructive functions, those incidents where humour might be detrimental to counselling. After the functions were examined an organizational metaphor, the double-edge sword, was proposed. The reason for this metaphor was given along with the benefit of having a metaphor represent humour in counselling. The question now becomes: what are the factors that determine the function humour will have in a counselling session?

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Factors Contributing to a Constructive Function for Humour

I will examine the factors contributing to a constructive function of humour in counselling. Counsellor personality, counselling relationship, counsellor training, and counsellor self-care are the four main components embedding humour in the larger context of counselling. Certain ideal counsellor characteristics, the core conditions, specific humour conditions in the counselling relationship, counsellor training, and counsellor self-care can facilitate a constructive function of humour in counselling.

The sword metaphor is applicable here. To understand the sword you must understand the person using it and the context in which the sword is used - to understand the counsellor's use of humour you must understand some characteristics of the counsellor and the context of counselling. You will have a very limited understanding of humour if you do not examine the larger picture which includes training and self-care. Humour is not a precise, totally knowable phenomenon so the four factors discussed in this chapter will act as a basic framework or general guideline to understanding.

#### Counsellor Personality

The attributes or characteristics of the counsellor will effect the function of humour. Communication and relationship skills can be

developed to enhance a counsellor's functioning yet much will be determined before any formal training in counselling. Rogers thought the process of therapy was highly dependent upon the kind of person the counsellor was and Martin (1983) believed relationship skills depend, "on the kind of person you are and on the needs and distortions that you bring to doing therapy" (p. 93). While this is not to suggest counsellors are born and not made, it indicates there is a significant interaction between the characteristics of a counsellor and training.

Egan (1975) developed a training model for the skilled helper. In the beginning of the book he listed various traits and characteristics of an ideal helper. A counsellor who has many of Egan's ideal characteristics is more likely to facilitate constructive humour. The characteristics to be examined from Egan's model are: caring, nondefensiveness, resourcefulness, respect for myth and metaphor, and good common sense.

An ideal helper cares for the person who comes for help. If the counsellor does not care for the client, counselling may be ineffective. This lack of caring could manifest itself in destructive or aggressive humour because the counsellor may not act in the best interests of the client. The counsellor who cares will be genuinely concerned with the client and attempt to use humour that is constructive and helpful.

Egan believed helpers should be nondefensive and willing to share themselves. Defensiveness may lead to destructive humour as the counsellor may use humour to keep things from getting personal or to avoid certain topics. The counsellor who continually jokes about a client's behavior may be avoiding a more direct open encounter with the client. Counsellors who joke or play with clients share a piece of

themselves, especially if the humour is about the counsellor. Humour directed at the self shows clients that counsellors are human too, they can make mistakes, but still get on with the process of living. The effective counsellor is also not afraid to deal openly with the immediate relationship.

Egan thought the ideal helper draws upon all possible helping resources. He thought the counsellor should have a wide response repertory, offering a range of vantage points to the helpee. Humour can have constructive functions in Egan's ideal model of helping because it is a possible helping resource the counsellor can draw upon.

Egan felt good helpers respect the world of myth and metaphor. A humorous parable or allegory may facilitate change in the client. A joke or anecdote can function as another way to explain an issue or resolve a conflict. For instance, many couples in relationship counselling get stuck around the issue of right or wrong. The husband thinks he is right and his wife is wrong while the wife has just the reverse attitude. Often each person is only partially right or partially wrong. Right and wrong cloud the issue. The counsellor who respects myth and metaphor could use humour as a metaphor to examine the issue at hand. The story of the blind men and the elephant could be used or the following joke might illustrate the point:

A couple consulted a psychologist about their marriage.  
Listening to the husband's version, he nodded in agreement. 'You're right. Absolutely right!'  
When the wife gave her side, he vigorously assented, 'Of course, you're right. Certainly you're right!'

His assistant took him to task. 'How could you tell the husband he's right then turn around and tell the wife she's right?'

The psychologist thought a while. 'You know something. You're right too!' (Hershkowitz, 1977, p.142)

A key trait of Egan's (1975) ideal helper is "he has good common sense and good social intelligence" (p. 23). Beyond all strategies and training good common sense, a sound and prudent judgement, can function as an admirable warning device to a counsellor. A counsellor could quickly see whether the humour used is constructive or destructive. Hopefully this common sense is second nature to the counsellor and would filter out most destructive humour before it would have a chance to occur. Common sense combined with the more specific counselling relationship skills of empathy, understanding, and genuineness can greatly assist in the constructive function of humour in counselling.

#### Counselling Relationship and Core Conditions

The counselling relationship is a key factor in determining whether humour will be constructive or destructive. Counselling, with or without humour, can be for better or worse. Counselling for a positive outcome depends on the important relationship conditions of empathy, acceptance, and genuineness. Martin (1983) reviewed the research evidence on counselling and found that some therapists clearly do damage. Shilling stated counselling can be, "for better or for worse and that these effects can be accounted for - at least in part - by the therapists level of functioning on certain emotional and interpersonal dimensions"

(Shilling, 1984, p. 192). The understanding of humour cannot be isolated from the counselling relationship and its function will depend a lot on the counsellor's level of functioning.

Carl Rogers was instrumental in identifying the core conditions of counselling. His conditions for successful counselling were empathic understanding, unconditional positive regard, and congruence (Gilmore, 1973). Since Rogers, various counsellors have examined the conditions necessary for effective counselling. They have used various terms or created extra categories but empathy, acceptance, and genuineness are important in almost every model (Martin, 1983; Shilling, 1984). Some of the other core conditions that have been examined include: self-disclosure, concreteness, confrontation, immediacy, and respect (Carkhuff & Berenson, 1967).

The counsellor's high level functioning on the core conditions leads to positive change in clients while low level functioning leads to no change or deteriorated change (Shilling, 1984). If humour occurs in counselling combined with low level functioning on the core conditions humour may contribute to client damage. If humour occurs in counselling with high level functioning then humour may be constructive and contribute to positive change. Empathy, acceptance, and genuineness will be discussed separately to examine how humour relates to them and how they relate to humour.

### Empathy

A high level of empathy provides the counsellor with a guideline to

the effective use of humour in counselling. Empathy is the ability of a counsellor to understand a client's point of view and to communicate that understanding to the client. Empathy is viewed as the primary or cardinal skill of counselling (Egan 1975). An empathic counsellor would have a good idea before using humour how a humorous interaction might affect the client. With a high level of empathy the counsellor would have an indication if humour could be used in the first minute or if humour should be avoided with a particular client. What is funny to one person is not funny to the next and empathy would assist the counsellor in being aware of the individual differences and appropriate humour for any given client. The underlying rule would be to use humour only if the counsellor feels it would benefit the client. Also humour with empathy would communicate the counsellor's understanding to the client.

Egan (1975) viewed confrontation as an extension of empathy. Confrontation is often needed in effective helping to increase client awareness and lead to action. Confrontation includes the unmasking of discrepancies and distortions a client uses to hide from self-understanding and change. Effective humour can be viewed as an element of confrontation. Humour was used by the court jester to confront the king with certain things. In counselling, humour can provide a gentle confrontation, it also tests the water to see if the client is ready to deal with an issue. For instance, Frankl's (1975) paradoxical intention can confront a client's fears with absurdity. This can create laughter, reframing, and possibly lead to healthy adjustment.

### Acceptance

Acceptance is a core condition of counselling closely allied with empathy. The counsellor's positive feelings are not conditional on the client thinking, feeling, or talking in certain ways. Martin (1983) would use the words acceptance and understanding if he had only two words to describe a good relationship. For humour to be constructive the counsellor must demonstrate an acceptance of the client even if the counsellor's use of humour does not accept a client's maladaptive behavior. The common expression indicating acceptance is when the counsellor laughs with, not at the client. The humour embraces and respects the client while also providing a broader perspective on being a fallible human being. The target of the humour is not the client, it is directed at an ineffective or possibly humorous way of functioning.

### Genuineness

Genuiness plays a major role in promoting constructive humour in counselling. Egan (1975) in discussing genuiness stated:

Genuiness must be communicated to the client through certain behaviors: refusing to play the role of counselor, being spontaneous, being oneself, being nondefensive, and being ready to share oneself if it helps (p. 73).

If the counsellor communicates genuiness this can facilitate constructive humour interactions. The humour itself needs to be genuine,



there is no place for forced humour or laughtracks in counselling. The counsellor is not there to entertain the client, instead the counsellor may use a genuine expression of humour to assist the client in viewing life from a new perspective. Humour breaks the counsellor out of a prescribed role allowing the counsellor to be oneself. Genuineness includes the readiness to share oneself if it helps. Humour is a form of self-disclosure, "in that the mere sharing of a joke, laughter, wit or humor discloses knowledge of specified content and the motivation to select and share this content with a specified person within a given situation" (Warner, 1984, p. 19).

Humour needs spontaneity. Empathy and understanding can appear cold, impersonal, and stereotyped when not accompanied by spontaneity. If a humorous attitude is part of the counsellor's everyday functioning then it is genuine to bring that humour to the counselling setting, in an effort to avoid playing the stereotyped role of counsellor. Minuchin and Fishman's (1981) first chapter on family therapy dealt with spontaneity. They felt spontaneity was important because:

...a spontaneous therapist is a therapist who has been trained to use different aspects of self in response to different social contexts. The therapist can react, move, and probe with freedom, but only within the range that is tolerable in a given context (p. 2).

The counsellor needs to be aware of the tolerable limit of humour in the context of counselling. Once again, the counsellor is not there to entertain the client or to assist the client in humorously avoiding serious issues.

### Conditions Specific to Humour in Counselling Relationships

In addition to the traditional core conditions of counselling there are some additional conditions that are important for understanding and using humour. Playfulness, timing and risk, humour awareness, and tacit knowledge are needed if a counsellor is to facilitate constructive humour.

#### Playfulness

Humour in counselling is best viewed as an attitude insisting on flexibility, spontaneity, unconventionality, and playfulness as opposed to a collection of jokes or comedy techniques. There are no specific rules for humour and the counsellor needs to view counselling as both serious and playful, with room for both attitudes in a counselling session. For humour to be successful in counselling the counsellor needs to adopt a playful attitude. As one of the early humour researchers stated when describing humour, "in order to explain a thing you have to take it seriously; in order to feel humor you have to be playful" (Eastman, 1936, p. 42). Effective humour involves play and an openness to the spontaneous moment. Children learn a great deal through play and many adults have lost or forgotten this wisdom. If humour is taken too seriously it loses its richness and dynamic vitality. It becomes like the dissected frog, what you find is interesting but no longer full of life.

### Timing and Risk

A keen sense of timing and the willingness to take a risk are two important variables for effective humour. Humour requires an exquisite sense of timing. At an inappropriate moment humour can flop or be detrimental to counselling while at the appropriate moment it can be a cogent decisive comment of a client's experience. Many good jokes have been ruined by the teller lacking the proper timing. There is a time for humour and a time for sorrow and the effective counsellor knows, based on empathy, when each is appropriate.

A sense of timing comes from good common sense and practice. Sometimes it is not acceptable to use humour. For instance, it is not acceptable to joke about skyjacking a plane to a security guard in an airport. These joketellers have been arrested and charged. Timing of humour in counselling does not have this rigid kind of guideline but would include humour relevant to the situation based on sensitivity to the client's needs.

The use of humour always involves risks. The client may not get the joke or see the humour of a counsellor's actions. Unintentional yet aggressive impulses might be masked by humour when an open expression is more appropriate. The client may interpret humour differently than the counsellor intended or it may slow down the counselling process. Or the counsellor may even be halfway through a joke and forget the punchline. Yet, effective living involves risk and counsellors encourage clients to take risks in counselling, even if just sharing their concerns and problems with the counsellor. When counsellors risk using humour

they model risk-taking behavior for their clients. They also show clients humour can be an appropriate response or coping mechanism to a situation. So effective humour relies on the necessary but not sufficient conditions of counsellors' willingness to take some risks and having a sense of timing.

### Humour Awareness

If humour is to be used effectively in counselling then the counsellor must have some understanding of the humour phenomenon. Counsellors should be aware of the constructive and destructive functions of humour; the double-edge sword nature of humour. Awareness of humour can be achieved through an examination of the counsellors previous use of humour. After a session the counsellor can ask the following nine questions:

Did I use any humour in the session?

When did I use humour?

Why did I use humour?

What type of humour did I use? (jokes, absurdity, etc.)

How did the client respond to the humour?

What function did the humour serve?

Was there a masked message in the humour?

Did I use any nonverbal qualifiers with humour?(smile, wink)

Could there have been a more appropriate way to respond to the client?

We know more than we say and we say more than we know so an honest

analysis of a humorous incident along with some feedback from a supervisor or peer might assist in the understanding of humour. For instance, humour statements can be qualified by a counsellor's nonverbal behavior. A friendly tone of voice combined with a smile and a wink may change the meaning of the same statement delivered with an angry tone of voice and a scowl. Counsellors need to take their nonverbal behavior into consideration when becoming aware of their use of humour.

### Tacit Integration

A paradox to effective humour usage is that counsellors cannot use humour and be fully aware of it at the same time because this destroys any spontaneous or playful action intended by the humour. Polanyi and Prosch (1975) believed that much of our knowledge and understanding was based on tacit awareness. We cannot both act and understand all our actions at the same time, we need to shift from the focal target to the subsidiary particulars. The focal target is humour used in the situation and the subsidiary particulars include all the other meanings and implications of humour usage. Counsellors must learn to trust their tacit awareness if they are to feel comfortable with humour and use it constructively with clients.

We play with humour in the session. Later we can analyze the incident to make the tacit more explicit and increase our awareness and future effectiveness with humour. Counsellors need to trust themselves, believing they can facilitate constructive humour by taking risks and being involved with an indwelling in the humorous attitude. Burbridge

(1978) stated in a major review of humour in therapy, "humor is at its best when fixed ideas as to its use and nature are forgotten" (p. 3). Or as Minuchin and Fishman (1981) stated in reference to training in family therapy, "only a person who has mastered technique and then contrived to forget it can become an expert therapist" (p. 1).

### Humour as a Core Conditon

Humour has been discussed as it relates to counsellor personality and the counselling relationship. A slightly different perspective is to view humour as a unique core conditon. As humour can have positive or negative effects on counselling outcome, and as it is related to the other core conditions, it might be useful to think of humour as a core condition. This would assist in a greater understanding of humour by counsellors and would provide a method for understanding the constructiveness or destructiveness of specific humour interactions.

Foster (1978) developed a five point scale for humour similar to the five point scales for the other core facilitative conditions. The model is not as developed as the other assessment scales. It needs further research to be refined and to increase its validity and reliability. The five point scale was outlined as follows:

Level 1. The therapist's attempt at humor is patently hostile, derisive, or sexual in nature and noticeably retards the therapeutic relationship by causing the client to withdraw, become silent, or to respond in a manner suggesting he or she has been hurt or strongly resents the therapist's remarks.

Level 2. The counselor's remarks, while concealing no malice, nevertheless detract from the relationship by masking the therapist's anxiety or the client's, or by appearing to be irrelevant or ill-timed when delivered so that they pass unnoticed by the client or actually interfere with the client's train of thought. There is no sense at all of the client "getting the joke."

Level 3. The counselor's remarks are humorous enough to elicit a mild sense of appreciation on the part of the client but do not lead appreciably to greater client self-understanding. The client might in such cases, grin and agree, "Yeah, I guess so, I guess that's what it's like." There is no evidence however, that he or she experiences the problem in a new way or is lead to greater self-awareness.

Level 4. The counselor's humor is deeply appreciated by the client. The client responds spontaneously to the remarks and there is a sense that the relationship has been strengthened by them. The temper of the interview becomes noticeably more relaxed with the client showing greater willingness to explore fully his or her predicament.

Level 5. The counselor's humor allows the client to transcend, so to speak, the laughter and to see his or her problem in an altogether different and more helpful way. As a result of the humor the client gives new meaning to his or her situation or behavior, and there appears to be evidence that the client has a richer awareness of himself or herself. (Foster, 1978, p. 48-49).

The five point scale represents a useful model for examining the counsellor's use of humour with clients. Having humour on this facilitative continuum was a more encompassing approach than most previous humour researchers have utilized and it bridges the gap between humour as a constructive and destructive force in counselling. This five point scale, or a more refined version, could operationalize the double-edge sword of humour in counselling. So far, Foster and some of his graduate students are the only ones using this model (Foster & Reid,

1983). Foster and Reid (1983) used the model to construct humour for an experimental study. The model is ineffective for constructing humour responses in counselling because humour becomes stilted when it loses the necessary conditions of spontaneity and appropriate timing.

### Humour Training for Counsellors

Humour is often a forgotten or ignored element in counsellor training. Counsellor training that models humour, discusses its functions, and gives students an opportunity to practice humour can contribute to humour having a constructive function in counselling. The subject of humour in counsellor training would supplement rather than supplant traditional training in basic counselling skills.

At a conference on effective methods of training clinical psychologists one anonymous participant quipped, "psychotherapy is an undefined technique applied to unspecified problems with unpredictable outcome. For this we recommend rigorous training" (Rainy, 1950, p. 93). Training becomes even more complex when you add humour to the training curriculum. Specific rules and guidelines for effective humour usage cannot be given. Much of the effectiveness of humour is based on relevant humour used in a situation specific mode. A useful analogy can be drawn between learning to use humour and learning to balance a bicycle:

...we cannot learn to keep our balance on a bicycle by trying to follow the explicit rule that, to compensate for an imbalance, we must force our



bicycle into a curve -- away from the direction of the imbalance -- whose radius is proportional to the square of the bicycle's velocity over the angle of imbalance. Such knowledge is totally ineffectual unless it is known tacitly, that is, unless it is known subsidiarily -- unless it is simply dwelt in (Polanyi & Prosch, 1975, p. 41).

Has anyone ever learned to balance a bicycle with the above formula? Most of us get on the bicycle, sometimes fall a number of times, but get back on the bicycle until we master the task or develop a phobia of bicycles. Counselling students need to take the risk of trying humour and being prepared to fall a few times before they learn how to use humour effectively. With this limitation in mind, there are a number of things that counselling instructors can do to facilitate the constructive use of humour by their students.

Counsellor trainers need to educate students by drawing humour out of them and indicating that humour is a valid response in counselling. One important way to do this is for counselling instructors to model constructive humour in their teaching and interactions with students. Instructors also need to take account of individual differences. Humour is not for every student and students will have different styles in humour usage.

A minimum requirement in humour training is to make students aware of the constructive and destructive functions of humour in counselling. Students need to know that humour can convey both explicit and implicit messages. For instance, an explicitly shared joke might also function as a masked message of aggression. Students should also be acquainted with various humour strategies, such as: paradox,

exaggeration, overstatement, understatement, word play, puns, wit, surprise, role reversals, humorous reframing, cartoons, jokes, humorous anecdotes, tickling, and play. They should learn what types of humour they feel most comfortable with. Some people tell great jokes while other are quick with a witty remark.

Humour can be taught as a core condition. This could be a two step process. The first step would have students create possible humour responses to typical client statements. At this step, students would not judge the constructiveness or destructiveness of their humorous attempts, but simply brainstorm as many possible responses as they can. This step has been conducted with graduate students in counselling courses at the University of Manitoba. Working in groups of three or four, students were able to generate a number of responses to client statements. One sample client statement was: "Why don't you tell me what to do? You are a counsellor. All you ever do is nod your head and go mm-hmm. I want to know what you think." One response from a student was, the counsellor nods her head and says, "mm-hmm." Another sample client statement was: "I can't stop eating. I gained three pounds last week and six the week before that. I've tried everything and nothing seems to work." Responses to the second statement included, "Have you tried Exlax?" and "How about a cork?"

The students' humour responses may be detrimental or constructive so a needed second step in this process would have students evaluate their humour statements. This evaluation stage would consist of students imagining the client statements were real and answering the nine questions proposed in the humour awareness sections of this chapter and

judging the humour responses according to Foster's (1978) five point scale. Students should also be encouraged to evaluate the humour they used in actual or practice sessions according to the humour awareness questions and the five point scale.

If humour is to have a constructive function in counselling, counselling students need to be aware of humour and have a chance to practice humour. Introductory counselling textbooks also need to discuss humour as a topic in counselling. Students can begin the process of developing a tacit awareness of humour if they are exposed to it and given an opportunity to practise it in training. Proper training can set the stage so graduates in counselling can use constructive humour with a spontaneous playful attitude.

#### Counsellor Self-Care and Humour

Counsellor self-care, especially self-care that utilizes humour, can enhance the possible constructive functions of humour. Care begins with the self and before good quality care can be given to a client, counsellors must care for themselves. Counselling is not the place for counsellors to meet their own needs or realize their own agenda. If counsellors are suffering from exhaustion, stress, burnout, or severe problems of their own they may be unable to meet the needs of their clients.

Lately there have been volumes of research and workshops devoted to counsellor stress and burnout. Maslach (1982), after doing extensive research on burnout in the caring professions, stated that detached

concern was a key to reducing counsellor stress and facilitating effective counselling. Detached concern is a blend of objective detachment and sensitive concern vital to effective counselling practise.

One very effective method of detached concern is to utilize humour in examining the practise of counselling. Humour can be an effective antidote against burnout, not just a tool to be used in the counselling session. Humour can assist counsellors in reframing the situations they are in and seeing them from a humorous, perhaps more objective viewpoint. Humour, especially humour about counselling, can help a counsellor in not taking the serious professional practise of counselling too seriously. Counsellors who laugh will probably last in the counselling profession.

An indication of a healthy sense of humour is the willingness to laugh at oneself. If counsellors use humour with clients they should also see the humour of their own profession. There is extensive knowledge about counselling yet also much ignorance. Counselling is not too serious for laughter because counselling embracing humour shows a high level of maturity, an ability to embrace paradox, and an openness to alternative perspectives. Mindess (1976) asked an important question about the humour of counselling: "Are satirical views of psychotherapy and psychotherapists mere expressions of ill-will, or do they contain nuggets of truth whose possession could enrich our understanding of ourselves?" (Mindess, 1976, p. 331) In an effort to enhance counsellor self-care and assist in humour having a constructive function in counselling the humour of counselling will be discussed with many humorous examples and jokes.

### Humour of Counselling

Counsellors are not immune from the comedy of error and pretense. Many of the jokes that satirize our profession make a point that can allow us another viewpoint on ourselves. We need to see counselling not as one part of the illusion but to see it as both extremely serious and extremely funny. It is time to turn the sword of humour on to counselling, not to commit hari kari, but to increase counsellor understanding, self-care, and lead to the constructive use of humour in counselling sessions.

One form of humour is to notice paradoxes in the profession. For instance, a school counsellor organization in Manitoba had the acronym SCAM, School Counsellors Association of Manitoba. This is a profession devoted to helping people that used an acronym that denoted a dishonest scheme or a swindle. In fact our field is a mess of acronyms. Steinhauser(1983) was able to publish an article that had forty-one acronyms embedded in a puzzle. His use of humour about the acronyms was probably a more effective statement than a serious article devoted to reducing the number of acronyms for counselling.

Much of the writing and research in counselling is deadly serious. Humour can expose some of the artificial sounding ways that counsellors report on issues and findings. This is even true of thesis writing as the following guideline by Scherr (1983) indicates:

Don't say: Because the original data did not give us the expected answer, we threw out data until we got the answer we wanted.  
Instead say: Exploratory estimates yielded

wrong signs on some of the structural coefficients. However, closer scrutiny of the original data suggested that, in all probability, some of the data came from a different population. After discarding these data, logically consistent and statistically significant estimates were obtained" (p. 152).

Some counselling research can be statistical nightmares and the statistics and operational definitions can be played with until something significant is found. Kazrin, Durac, and Agteros (1979) wrote a facetious meta-meta analysis for evaluating therapy outcomes. This article in Behaviour, Research and Therapy gave a definition of therapy as anything that works. The procedure was carried out by a short computer technician who was given a nautical compass, Swiss francs, and a deadline of three weeks. They also discovered that with the removal of bald patients out of a sample of 2,000,000 clients there was something important taking place during treatment. They just did not know what it was.

There are a number of articles that satirize counselling. The Journal of Irreproducible Results is a journal devoted to the humour of science. Scherr's (1983) collection of the best articles of the journal has such titles as: 'The inheritance pattern of death,' 'Prenatal psychoanalysis,' 'A proposed study of rubber band therapy' and 'Therapeutic effects of forceful goosing on major affective illness'.

The most effective use of humour is the humour that occurs in the serious literature as opposed to a journal that is devoted to humorous articles. These journal articles (Gladding, 1983; Gladding & Hageman, 1984; Nisenholz, 1983; Pratt, 1982; and Steinhauser, 1983) demonstrated counsellors can laugh at themselves yet also feel serious about their

work. The Personnel and Guidance Journal of the American Association of Counselling and Development expressed this attitude. The articles ranged from "How to speak 'counselnese'" (Gladding, 1983) to "Murphy's law and counseling" (Pratt, 1982). For example, Pratt (1982) outlined three laws of research for counselling:

- 1st Law of Research: If you think of something new, it's been done.
- 2nd Law of Research: If you think something is important, no one else will.
- 3rd Law of Research: If you throw it away, someone else will publish it in Counseling Psychology, obtain a grant, write a book, and go on the Donahue show (p. 218).

The final example from the research was a study on writer's block. Upper (1974) wrote an excellent understatement on the unsuccessful self-treatment of a case of "writer's block" in the Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis. It had the standard title but it was followed by a blank page!

### Counselling and Therapy Jokes

An offering of eleven jokes related to counselling follow. Each joke was given a title to assist in the later discussion of a few of the jokes. Some of the jokes have no specific source and are passed on from counsellor to counsellor. A reference is provided for the jokes used from a specific source.

#### Questions

Conversation at a cocktail party:  
'Are you a psychologist?'

'Why do you ask?'  
 'You're a psychologist.'  
 (Mindess, 1976, p. 338)

Help, Help, Help!

I am a psychotherapist. Since I still have certain hang-ups, however, I go to another therapist for help.

I don't feel badly about it, because my therapist also goes to another therapist.

And his therapist goes to a therapist.

And his therapist's therapist comes to me.

(Mindess, 1976, p. 332)

Responsibility & Lightbulbs

How many counsellors does it take to change a lightbulb?

Only one, but then the lightbulb must want to change.

Responsibility & Spit

A counsellor and a client were riding down an elevator together. When the client got off the elevator he turned around and spat in the counsellors face. The elevator operator asked the counsellor, "How can you just stand there and let that guy spit in your face?" The counsellor replied, "Why shouldn't I? It's his problem."

Dependence & Vacation

Postcard to a counsellor from a client on vacation:

'Having a good time, wish you were here to tell me why.'

Dependence & Coffee

A counsellor had a very dependent client. After years of counselling the counsellor finally achieved termination with the client by suggesting if the client had any further problems he could always phone the counsellor. The next morning the telephone rang. It was the client

'I phoned you because I had a problem.'

'Go on.'



'Well, I had a dream and I got out of bed'  
 'Mm-hmm'  
 'I sat down and started to analyze the dream.'  
 'Yes'  
 'Then I started to make breakfast.'  
 'What did you fix for breakfast?'  
 'Oh, just a cup of coffee.'  
 'A cup of coffee, you call that a breakfast!'

#### Dependence on Eggs

'Our son thinks he's a chicken.'  
 'Why don't you take him to a psychiatrist?'  
 'We would but we need the eggs.'  
 (Peter & Dana, 1982, p. 79).

#### Roger's Splat

There is a one page cartoon of Carl Rogers doing counselling. Frame by frame Rogers verbalizes his empathy with a suicidal client. The client jumps up to the window and then jumps out. Carl Rogers watches the client fall and then gives the empathic response, "Splat!"

#### Reframing & Enuresis

Green meets his friend Brown, who asks how he is.  
 'Terrible. Desperate,' replies Green, and he goes on to tell Brown that he wets his bed - a nasty habit he cannot get rid of, and which is ruining his marriage, his extra-marital sex-life and his nerves.  
 'But why don't you go to a psychoanalyst?' Brown asks him. Green is rather reluctant but Brown talks him into it.  
 Six months later they meet again and a glance at Green is enough to show that he is now a happy man.  
 'So you went to the psychoanalyst?' Says Brown.  
 'Yes I did.'  
 'Did he help you?'  
 'Very much so.'  
 'You don't wet the bed anymore, then?'  
 'Yes, I still do. But now I am proud of it.'  
 (Mikes, 1970, p.76)

### In the Dark

One night a counsellor came across a drunken man stumbling on the ground. The counsellor asked if he could help.

'Yup,' the man mumbled, 'I've lost my car keys on the ground.'

After looking with no luck for ten minutes the counsellor asked, 'are you sure you've lost them here?'

The drunk replied, 'No, I lost them over there in the dark but I couldn't see a thing so I thought I'd better come over here because the light was better.'

### A Number of Jokes

A group of counsellors shared jokes for so long that they decided to number each joke. Each would call out a number and get a big laugh. A new counsellor joined the group and told a joke. Nobody laughed and they told the counsellor that the group numbers their jokes. The new counsellor heard a counsellor call out "23" and "48" and everyone laughed.

The new counsellor caught on and instead of telling a joke he called out, "86".

Nobody laughed.

"What is up," he asked?

An old counsellor pulled him aside and said, "It isn't the number that gets the laugh, it is the way you say it!"

Jokes about counselling can help counsellors to reframe the seriousness of their profession. Counsellors who have a sense of humour can appreciate the jokes yet hold to the complementary view of the serious nature of counselling. The jokes provide an opportunity to reframe some of the main concepts of counselling: responsibility, reframing, and dependence-independence. Each of the jokes has a nugget of truth that could be made as a serious statement or criticism of counselling but in the form of a joke they embrace the profession while also making an effective statement. If counsellors can laugh at

themselves they are more likely to provide constructive humour to clients because counsellors are then aware of how humour functions in relationship to their own profession.

Whenever you try to explain a joke the humour is usually lost and the joke loses some of its richness so only a few jokes will be discussed in more detail. The jokes entitled: 'Responsibility and Spit'; 'Dependence on Eggs'; 'Reframing and Enuresis'; and 'A Number of Jokes' will be discussed to indicate the nuggets of truth they contain that can enrich a counsellor's self and professional understanding. The other jokes will be left for the reader to see the humour and ponder the meaning.

A key concept in many counselling theories is personal responsibility. Much of counselling may be directed towards the client accepting personal responsibility. It naturally follows that the counsellor also acts in a personally responsible way. The client owns the problem. The client ownership of the problem is exaggerated in the joke on responsibility and spit. With a slight shift we can see the humour of personal responsibility carried to an extreme when the counsellor does nothing about being spit on and replies, "Why should I? It's his problem." Some counsellors can take the notion of personal responsibility too far when they suggest that a woman is responsible for being raped, a baby is responsible for a birth deformity, or people are always responsible for their physical diseases. Personal responsibility can be a valuable concept and a useful counselling perspective but the joke shows that the notion can be taken too far, and counsellors can look ridiculous when they cling to this belief in every situation.

'Dependence on Eggs' is a three line joke examining the issue of

problem ownership from a larger perspective. Counselling has been concerned with this issue for many years. Does the problem rest with the identified client or does the problem reside in the larger system? This short joke shows how the parents contribute to their son believing he is a chicken. There is a payoff, in eggs, for their son to remain a chicken. This short joke would be a good story for those who support a systems theory approach to counselling. It also suggests counsellors look at the larger picture when treating an individual.

A key concept in counselling, and this thesis, is the importance and benefits of reframing. The joke on reframing and enuresis puts this concept in perspective when the client goes to a psychoanalyst. The psychoanalyst was unsuccessful in treating the client's enuresis, but the client learned to reframe, feeling proud of his bed-wetting. This raises questions about the nature of help counsellors can offer and the changes made in counselling. Is a change in attitude all that is important or would it have been more successful if Green had gone to a urologist and been cured of enuresis? This joke indicates that we need to be humble and aware of the limitations of counselling. The thesis of Zilbergeld's (1983), The Shrinking of America, is captured in this short joke. Counselling can be misused, change is not always that significant, and there are limitations to the roles and functions of counselling.

Finally, the joke concerned with numbers demonstrates how difficult it is to be successful with humour. First you have to know the group or person you are being humorous with. The counsellor became aware of the group and how it operated but his humour still failed because he did not say the numbers just right. This joke could function as a warning of how

difficult it is to use humour in counselling or to use humour with other counsellors.

These short jokes and the seven others can make powerful statements to a receptive counsellor. They confront the counsellor with new twists on old ideas. We can laugh about what they say about our profession or personal practice and that laughter might plant the seeds of needed change or at least make us aware of our limitations. Not every counsellor would find every joke humorous. These jokes were chosen because they were meaningful to my understanding and awareness of counselling. Hopefully all counsellors will be able to see at least some humour in themselves or their profession and this humour will contribute both to counsellors' self-care and their constructive use of humour with clients.

### Summary

This chapter examined the factors contributing to a constructive function of humour in counselling. Although many different factors can influence the function of humour the main factors are counsellor personality, counselling relationship, counsellor training, and counsellor self-care.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

#### Summary

Winston Churchill once described Russia as a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. Humour researchers can claim the same for humour. There are so many factors involved that at best we clarify only a few selected aspects of it, while much of it remains a mystery. This thesis has clarified the functions of humour in counselling and the factors which determine whether humour will have a constructive or destructive function. This study began with a review of the literature related to both humour, and humour in counselling. Keith-Speigel's (1972) eight categories of humour were presented to show the range of humour theories and provide a historical overview on the topic.

Even current attempts to define humour are troublesome. The problems of defining humour were presented and a general definition of humour was provided. The thesis stated that much of the understanding of humour would be derived from an analysis of the functions of humour. The literature specific to humour in counselling was examined and the difficulties of both anecdotal and empirical studies were presented with a view to what this thesis can provide through the analysis and synthesis of the wide range of views on humour in counselling.

The constructive and destructive functions of humour were examined in chapter three. The functions on the constructive edge were

humour as: healer, reframer, creativity, relationship builder, fun, and therapy. The destructive edge of humour included humour as: aggression, superiority, defense mechanism, and social distancer. The study bridged the gap between humour as a constructive or destructive function and argued that humour should be viewed as a double-edge sword. This metaphor simplified the understanding of humour's functions by having the two edges represent the positive and negative functions of humour.

Chapter four examined the main factors determining the functions humour has in counselling. The four factors were personality, relationship, training, and self-care. The personality of the counsellor and the unique relationship between counsellor and client play major parts in determining how humour is constructed and perceived. Counsellor training and self-care can influence the functions humour will have in counselling. Due to the nature of the topic guidelines were offered instead of specific rules that can always be followed. In addition, the humour of counselling was utilized in chapter four to demonstrate how humour in training and self-care can contribute to humour having a constructive function in the counselling session.

### Conclusions

On the basis of the research on humour in counselling, the following conclusions appear warranted:

1. Humour, a very difficult topic to grasp, is even more elusive in the context of counselling. The topic contains so many paradoxes that it

is difficult to define and study. Therefore, a descriptive study is needed that incorporates and synthesizes many of the different conceptions of humour.

2. A double-edge sword metaphor to represent humour in counselling can symbolize the broader perspective of humour, encompassing both the constructive and destructive functions of humour. Counsellor humour can function constructively. Humour as a healer can have physiological benefits for clients. Humour as reframer can provide alternative viewpoints and humour as creativity can also demonstrate a range of behaviors clients can use. Humour can be used to express intimacy and build the important therapeutic relationship between counsellor and client. Humour can also be a moment of fun and play in the hard work of counselling. Sometimes humour can be the therapy, not just a function in counselling.

Yet humour can also be destructive. The counsellor may use humour to express masked aggression to the client or the counsellor may use humour to gain a superior position to satisfy the counsellor's own needs. Humour can be used as a defense mechanism to avoid helping the client deal with certain issues or humour can be used as a social distancer to prevent the important therapeutic relationship from forming.

3. Studies that isolate specific humour variables and operationally define terms often have limited application for practicing counsellors. Many of the anecdotal studies fail to provide a sound theoretical base that ties humour in with counselling. To understand humour it must be



embedded in the larger context of counsellor personality and counselling relationship. The established core conditions of empathy, acceptance, and genuineness can facilitate effective counselling and constructive humour. Another useful approach is to conceptualize humour as a core condition worthy of study and practice. Elevating humour to this level would focus more attention and research on the topic.

4. Constructive humour in counselling also requires some unique conditions. These include playfulness, timing, risk, humour awareness, and tacit knowledge. These conditions indicate why specific rules or procedures cannot be followed. You cannot be spontaneous by following the directive, "Be spontaneous!" Counsellors must learn to be playful and to gain a tacit understanding and integration of humour in counselling sessions.

5. Counsellors must care for themselves before they can provide effective counselling. Counselling self-care can include seeing the humour of the counselling profession. This detached concern can reduce stress and tension. Being able to laugh at yourself is a strong indication of a healthy sense of humour, and a prerequisite to using humour with clients.

#### Recommendations for Research, Practice, and Training

Twelve recommendations for research, practice, and training, are derived from the study.

## Research

Here are four directions for further research on the topic:

1. The whole topic of humour in counselling requires more research. Counsellors will benefit from both descriptive and empirical studies. Descriptive studies can provide guidelines and general understanding while empirical research can further our understanding of important variables. For instance, there is a need for more research on the physiological functions of humour and laughter. What are the specific physiological effects of laughter and how do these effects act as a healer? Are there negative physiological effects to laughter? Can we really laugh until we die or is laughter the best medicine?

2. Comparing the outcomes of humour versus more traditional counselling would provide needed research on humour as therapy. Clients with similar difficulties could randomly be assigned to one of two groups. The experimental group could be treated with humour while the control group could receive more traditional counselling. Much pre-experimental research would be needed to devise appropriate humour treatments and control for confounding variables. The outcomes of these studies could be compared to see how effective humour is as therapy. Various studies using different types of clients, humour, and counselling could be conducted to isolate specific effects.

3. There is a need for more research on individual differences in humour construction and appreciation. Are there differences between male and female humour appreciation and construction? Do counsellors have specific preferences in humour construction? Do more experienced counsellors use different types or forms of humour than inexperienced counsellors?

4. Humour should be studied as a core condition. Viewing humour as a core condition would focus more attention and research on the topic. As a beginning, Foster's (1978) five point scale on humour needs to be refined, validated and studied. This would provide a specific tool for researchers to use. In addition, the relationship between the humour condition and other core conditions could be studied and clarified.

### Practice

Here are three recommendations for counselling practice:

1. The primary implication for counselling practice is for counsellors to be knowledgeable and skillfull with humour. Counsellors need to discuss the topic and read the relevant literature. They need to know the various functions of humour and the factors that contribute to these functions.

2. As counsellors are research-practitioners, they need to be aware of their own use of humour. They can use the humour awareness

questions and the five point scale to analyze their own use of humour. Moving between personal research and practise will give counsellors increased confidence and knowledge in using humour. An additional valuable source of information on humour and its functions in counselling is for counsellors to occasionally discuss the use of humour with their clients to gain direct feedback about the effects of humour.

3. Counsellors need to laugh about themselves and share jokes about their profession with other counsellors. Before we use humour with others we need to see the humour in ourselves. Laughing about counselling assists in reframing our viewpoint and opens us to alternative practices and conceptions of counselling. Humour can indicate the limitations of our profession and give us a balanced perspective on our ability to help and change people.

### Training

Here are five recommendations for training counselling students in the use of humour in counselling:

1. Traditional training in counselling needs to be maintained. As humour is only one variable in counselling, students need basic counselling skills and knowledge of the core conditions. Humour must be placed fully in the context of counselling if beginning counsellors are to learn the effects of humour and how to use humour effectively with clients.

2. Counselling students need to be exposed to humour in courses and textbooks, and humour needs to be discussed in practicums and placements. Humour can be discussed as a double-edge sword and the various functions of humour can be outlined and discussed. Students should be encouraged to analyze humour incidents and hypothesize about the function humour is serving. Counsellor trainers can also facilitate humour by modelling constructive humour in their courses.

3. Students need practice in using humour. The exercise outlined in chapter four could be conducted. Students can have practice in generating and evaluating their own and other students' humour creations. This gives students a safe opportunity to take risks in using humour and provides immediate feedback on how others perceived their humour.

4. Humour in counselling could be offered as an optional course. Students could study and analyze the literature on the topic, practice using various types of humour creation, do empirical studies on humour, and collect and discuss cartoons and jokes about counselling. This would provide students with an opportunity to be more involved with the topic than they would by only taking humour as a brief section in a basic counselling course.

5. The ultimate goal of humour training is to make students comfortable and aware of humour in helping. Hopefully they would learn

about humour so well that they could forget about it, and become less self-conscious in using it with clients. The goal would be to make the counsellor's use of humour both constructive and tacit. For when we learn to trust ourselves, we combine our inner wisdom with the knowledge gained through experience. We are able to bring all our resources, including humour, to our profession and fully encounter the unique client before us with our efforts at constructive counselling. Ideally, humour used in counselling will be for the better, not for the worse.

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