

Running head: RESEARCH ARTICLES

Research Articles on Humor in Therapeutic Relationships

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### **Research Articles on Humor in Therapeutic Relationships**

I chose two articles to review that had an emphasis on the use of humor in therapeutic relationships. The articles also focused on two areas I am interested in: awareness of multicultural issues in counseling and counseling adolescents.

The first article I researched was entitled, “Ethnic diversity and the use of humor in counseling: Appropriate or inappropriate?” (Maples, Dupey, Torres-Rivera, Phan, & Garrett, 2001). This article reviewed the scholarly work done on humor in therapeutic relationships, described the use of humor in four different ethnic groups, and gave recommendations for those who wished to use humor in therapeutic relationships – especially those relationships with clients with different ethnic backgrounds.

The article indicated there has been very little research or study into using humor in therapeutic relationships and, except for a little research on humor in counseling with Native Americans, almost no research exists that combines humor and diversity in counseling. The little research that has been done regarding humor in therapeutic relationships has come from those individuals who have developed or use the existential theory according to the article. Major developers of existential theory, including Frankl and May, believed the importance of humor is that it helps an individual put themselves and their environment in a “healthy” perspective. These theorists believed that humor could be used to help clients learn more about themselves, become less uptight and serious, and become more accepting of themselves and other people. Another advantage identified is that a helper who uncovers a client’s sense of humor has a valuable source of information about how the client approaches things in their life.

The article focused on four ethnic groups (Native Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and African Americans) and how humor is used in these cultures. The authors indicated that Native Americans have been incorrectly stereotyped as being stoic and humorless. Humor is used a lot in the Native American culture, especially when they gather together with family and friends around mealtimes. Native American humor is described as “dry” humor and light hearted jabs at each other are often used to lessen tension or to subtly talk about a serious matter. Native Americans often set themselves up for these light hearted jabs by their friends and family because being teased in this way is a form of humbling themselves and of being part of the group. The authors cautioned though that a helper should only use humor with a Native American client if the client invites it, thereby indicating that the client trusts the helper enough that they could connect in that way.

The importance of gaining trust before considering using humor in a therapeutic relationship with ethnically diverse clients was emphasized in describing work with both Asian American and Latino clients. In both ethnic groups it is very important to have a strong knowledge of their culture from a personal perspective and not just from “book learning.” It was important to be fully aware of the many different cultural subgroups of Asian Americans and to realize that they all do not have one shared belief system. In Latino culture to be a part of their “family” (or *familiarismo*) and thereby in a position to exchange humor with them, one needs to be actively engaged in the community and participate in important religious and community events. In both Asian American and Latino culture, it is important for the helper not to make fun of themselves too much as it is important in these cultures for the helper to retain respect as a professional. The

African American section was not very useful as it only described the personal experience of an African American helper with African American clients.

The article concluded that the helper and the client need to be comfortable with the incorporation of humor into the therapeutic relationship which means the helper must gain the client's trust in a way that is consistent with the client's cultural background. The helper must also consider the level of acculturation that has occurred in the individual that makes their situation unique. The authors made a good suggestion of asking the client's permission to make a humorous reference and be able to graciously accept their response if they do not wish to proceed in that way.

The other article I researched involved using humor with adolescents in a therapeutic relationship. The article was entitled, "To Weep, to Laugh, to Mourn, to Dance: Key factors for Therapeutic Change in the Clinical Exchange with an Adolescent Girl" (Levy-Warren, 2005). The article was the case study of an adolescent client the author worked with. The author used this case study as an illustration to describe effective techniques for interacting with adolescents. A primary technique focused on was the use of humor.

This article was exceptional in many different ways. The case study itself was useful in illustrating the special skills and techniques that are needed to assist this very special population. The article gave me new insights on how to work with these clients as well as validation for some of the ways I communicated with clients in my former role as a legal counsel for individuals in this population.

The importance of the helper getting on the same level as the adolescent client was emphasized a number of times. I agree with the author's statement that breaking

down barriers and appearing to the adolescent client not as someone of an elevated status that was unapproachable, but as a helper that would respect them and work *with* them, as a key ingredient of a successful therapeutic relationship. Self-disclosure was identified as an important tool to facilitate this leveling. I personally have seen young people's eyes light up when I talk of how I had similar faults and problems. They were impressed with seeing me as an adult (and a lawyer to boot) admitting mistakes and seeming like a normal person that they could aspire to be. This leveling seems to help raise the adolescent's confidence and give them some self-assurance that they too are capable of finding a solution to their problem or advancing to a higher position as an adult.

Laughing with clients was also described as a great way to share the same level with clients. The client in the case study was a wild teenager that was too wise for her years due to experiences she had gone through. The client was in some ways the opposite of the therapist who the client described as goody-goody. The therapist used this description of her as a point that both she and the client could use as something to make fun of. This allowed the client to open up and make light of her own idiosyncrasies and difficulties she would run into.

It is with this light-hearted exchange that more serious matters could be brought up in a subtle way and addressed like was described in the first article in the use of humor by Native Americans. Just as was described in the first article, however, it is essential before using humor in a therapeutic relationship with a client, that one gains their trust. This trust is not easy to gain with adolescents, but it is almost impossible if the helper puts themselves in the same role as parents and other hierarchical authority figures.

### References

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