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12 Hour Project Paper:
Becoming a Better Counselor through Effective Use of Humor in Groups

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Becoming a Better Counselor through Effective Use of Humor in Groups

Research on Humor in Groups

The research into the use of humor in groups proved to be more challenging than first anticipated. A preliminary search of humor in therapy produced many resources, but it was disappointing to discover that not much work has been done into the use of humor in groups. Still, what I did find was very helpful and instructive to me as to what would be needed to effectively use humor to be a better counselor.

I did an extensive search both with online resources and in-library searches in my quest for information of using humor in groups. I have membership in both the Milwaukee and Appleton Public libraries and I use their search engines to look for materials. I also used WISCAT which searched for materials in all state libraries. Lakeland's off-campus access to library materials was also helpful and I searched through the variety of databases they offered including ProQuest and JSTOR. I used Google to do internet searches as well. The libraries I visited in person for research were at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh and Lawrence University. What I came away from this experience with was, "Thank goodness for Sidney!"

It appears I am not the only one searching for information on the use of humor in groups. A common name kept coming up in many of the articles that even brought up the topic: Sidney Bloch. Most other authors I found who brought up the topic of humor in groups (Franzini,2001; Haig,1986; and Kuhlman, 1984) did not offer much original material but primarily referred to Sidney Bloch and his work on the subject. Bloch evidently wrote an earlier article that I was unable to locate, but I primarily relied on what is evidently the seminal piece

regarding humor in groups aptly named: “Humor in Group Therapy” (Bloch, 1987). Franzini (2001) made specific reference to the fact that little has been written about humor in group therapy even though the group setting seemed to be a natural opportunity for the therapist and patient to use humor (pp. 174-175).

So, despite my effort to provide a variety of resources, most of my references will be to Bloch (1987). My only consolation in this regard is that researchers and authors with far superior knowledge than my own refer to the same source.

The Benefits of Humor in Groups

Bloch (1987) believes that humor naturally fits into the group setting. He does not give a blanket approval of the use of humor in the group and he specifically outlines when humor would and would not be appropriate. But in weighing the potential harm humor might cause with the advantages it can bring, Bloch strongly favors its judicious use. Dismissing earlier research that claimed humor did not have a place in therapy, Bloch (1987) described humor as intrinsic to group therapy and believes the primary challenge of using humor is to find “how it can be optimally built into the group’s culture” (p. 173).

I remember reading how a group setting can be a safe environment for individuals to work on issues and to learn how to translate that knowledge into how they cope with the outside world. Bloch (1987) indicated how humor could be used in this regard:

If we assume that mature adaptation to the problems and challenges of living is a major aspect of mental health and that humor is one important means of accomplishing such adaptation, it makes sense to utilize the therapy group as a forum in which group members can learn to value this function of humor as well as to enhance their own sense of humor (p. 174).

The technique employed by the therapist goes a long way in making sure that humor is used to the group's benefit. If the therapist pushes the use of humor it can seem contrived and awkward. If the therapist just waits for it to surface and then decides to respond on a situational basis, full advantage of using the humor could be lost. What Bloch (1987) suggests is that "humor is an appropriate feature of group therapy when the therapist appreciates its various purposes and encourages its free and spontaneous expression in relation to those purposes" (p.175). In other words, it is important for the therapist to be familiar with what situations the use of humor would advance the group's goals and when spontaneous expressions of humor occur the therapist will be in a position to use or encourage it.

Specific Ways Humor Can be Useful in Group Counseling

There are a number of ways that humor can be used in group therapy by both the therapist and its members that can be beneficial to the group. The therapist can use humor in a number of constructive ways. The therapist can model humor when appropriate circumstances arise. Bloch (1987) gives an example of a therapist sitting with members on a group dinner break during a marathon session where the group was a bit awkward about eating together. The therapist was getting covered in juice eating a pear and he initiated making fun of himself which brought laughter from the group. After that comic relief, the group was more relaxed for the rest of the meal (p.177).

The therapist can also use humor in what Bloch (1987) refers to as transparency. This relates to the therapist disclosing something about themselves which demonstrates their faults and similarity with everyone else. "[T]he therapist's disclosure of such universal qualities as vulnerability, compassion, uncertainty, fallibility, and warmth is considered desirable. The

therapist's capacity to laugh at himself or herself without showing embarrassment is relevant here ..." (p. 178). Other sources commented as well "that the professional roles of therapists were enhanced when the therapist were viewed by patients as more immediate and human, through the agency of humor" (Fry, 2001, p.206). And that "[t]he therapist's sense of humor further serves to correct 'transference distortions' and counteracts secret fantasies among group members as to the therapist's omnipotence" (Kuhlman, 1984, p. 107).

Interpretation is another way that the therapist could bring humor into the group setting. Sometimes the therapist through an example can bring in a metaphor to show how absurd a position a client takes might be. Bloch (1987) illustrates this point by describing someone in a group who constantly complained about things that were in his control. The therapist used a joke to bring his point home. The therapist told of a man who everyday complained about what was in his sandwich for lunch. When someone asked him why he did not tell his wife what he wanted in the sandwich he said, "Wife? I make these sandwiches myself." The complainer in the group laughed along with the rest of the group at the message that was given. The complainer came to see how he really had control over what he was complaining about. In that group, "making one's own sandwiches" had a special and deep meaning. In another source, a therapist interpreted a group member to be like "the Buddha of Constant Discouragement" and turned the member's complaints into something that should be worshiped. I personally did not get the humor, but the "Buddha" (who was a large man) and the group found the humor and it was used for positive gain in the group. (O'Connell, 1987)

Bloch (1987) indicated ways in which individual group members could beneficially introduce humor into the group. One such way is to develop a sense of proportion. "For the

typical patient in therapy whose everyday problems have assumed overwhelmingly grave proportions, humor can exert a counteractive influence and lead to a more balanced perspective ...” (p. 180). Bloch (1987) used an example of a group member disclosing an awkward event regarding an issue she had difficulty discussing. As the description turned from super serious into more of a description of a soap opera script, the disclosing member and the group found humor in the situation which led to the disclosing member being more open to talk about the issue later in the session (p.180).

The next category of positive uses of humor is very much related and was referred to as overcoming earnestness. As Bloch (1987) defined:

Earnestness is best conceptualized in terms of the incapacity or unwillingness to indulge in play, release inhibition, and permit the childlike spirit of creative fun to express itself. Thus the judicious introduction of a humorous, playful tone into the ethos of the group, coupled with establishing this humorous tone as a sanctioned norm, can help to penetrate the wall of earnestness a patient has erected around himself. (pp. 180-181)

I found this description particularly interesting. I have often believed that the “childlike spirit of creative fun” is an important part of meaningful personal communications. Although I was delighted to read this echoing of my sentiment, Bloch (1987) put it into a perspective that makes greater sense when considering the thoughtful manner in which this type of humor should be introduced.

Bloch (1987) described another benefit of humor as the promotion of social skills. This is similar to what I described above as the developing of skills in a sheltered environment.

“Because the ability both to appreciate and to create humor is an omnipresent feature of social discourse and contributes importantly to personal interaction, the group can provide a relatively

safe environment for members to practice and learn to obtain the beneficial social effects of humor” (p. 181).

I have witnessed in person the benefit of another type of group humor described by Bloch. Bloch (1987) mentioned the benefit of humor surrounding self-disclosure and catharsis. The strong emotions of disclosure can be powerful and hard to deal with. At times humor can be used to defuse some of this tension (p.181-182). In the group I am in, the powerful disclosure by a member was followed by that person’s offer to set up a group for people with screwed up lives. The tension was released a little bit with others offering their contributions regarding the formation of that group.

Another benefit of group humor described by Bloch (1987) came with a warning. Group cohesiveness can be developed through the use of humor. Bloch (1987) cautioned, however, that efforts to speed up cohesion by being too lighthearted in the beginning may lose its effectiveness and may seem contrived. He also warned that too much cohesion and “coziness” might develop a comfort zone that might inhibit the hard work that is necessary for change to occur in the group (p. 182).

The Risks of Humor in Group Therapy

It was important to Bloch (1987) to be clear when humor would not be appropriate. Humor in groups must be carefully used to be effective. Bloch (1987) made it clear that humor would not work in all groups. He indicates that humor should be used in groups that did not have members often coming and going with an open door policy. He also indicated that the group should be more of a long-term group where they have evolved into a cohesive and working group

(p. 176). Using humor before trust is developed can lead to misinterpretations and other negative reactions.

When the group leader uses humor they must be conscious of the motives for their use of it. The leader should not use humor as a defense mechanism to avoid anxiety or discomfort with an issue that is brought up. The leader should also avoid joking or humor as a veil for aggression. “If the therapist unconsciously resorts to humor to deal with his or her aggression, manifested as belittlement, ridicule, sarcasm, or innuendo, the patient is deprived of any opportunity to respond appropriately or to learn” (Bloch, 1987, p. 185). The leader should also avoid the use of humor for self-display or to attain popularity with the group in order to fulfill their own needs (Bloch, 1987, p. 185). The leader should also be cautioned not to use so much humor that the group is confused as to the purpose of the group: Is this a place I am suppose to just have fun, or am I trying to work on serious issues? (Bloch, 1987, p. 186) Group members themselves may use frivolous humor to avoid working on issues, and the leader should be aware if the group is going in that direction (Bloch, 1987, p. 187).

The therapist (leader) needs to be vigilant regarding other unhelpful or harmful ways that group members could use humor. Just as the therapist was cautioned above not to use humor to gain the group’s affection, the therapist should be on the watch for members acting “the clown” in order to receive the same affection. The “clown” disrupts the serious work of the group (Bloch, 1987, p. 186) and the rest of the group quickly tires of that kind of disruption (Kuhlman, 1984, p. 110). Humor should also not be used by members to scapegoat other members (Bloch, 1987, p. 186) or to create harmful sarcastic comments (Kuhlman, 1984, p. 110) under the guise of being softened by that humor. Group members should also not be allowed to avoid hard issues through self-mockery. “For example, he or she might immediately follow the

disclosure of some highly personal information with a self-critical ‘crack.’ In essence the message is, ‘Please don’t take me seriously; I was only kidding a moment ago. I don’t deserve your attention anyway’” (Bloch, 1987, p. 187). The therapist misses an important moment to explore this issue if they let the person off the hook in this way.

How this Perspective of Using Humor in Groups Will Make Me a Better Counselor

In many ways I am idealistic and philosophical. I like seeing the Good in people. I like laughing and spreading humor. I have really grown to enjoy and see the power of the group process. If I combined the above and set a course for interjecting humor in the first group I would lead, I would be brewing up a recipe for disaster. This project has made me come to realize how much more involved and complicated interjecting humor into the group can be. As Bloch (1987) often stated the potential rewards of humor in groups outweigh its dangers, but one must be knowledgeable about when to use it and when it could be harmful.

Another author stated, “There may be both constructive and destructive aspects of humor in psychotherapy When humor emerges in therapy it may be utilized constructively by the therapist who is receptive to it, not threatened by it, and who has given some thought to its implications” (Haig, 1986). I am definitely receptive to the humor, but now, more cautious. I look forward to entering my practical experience with this knowledge so I might more judiciously interject the humor when appropriate.

I also came to realize I may have put humor in group counseling on a higher level than it deserved. I was seeing humor as almost a key to how I could develop a style. Bloch (1987) brought me back down to earth: “[H]umor warrants an important place in the culture of the group but it is only part of a more comprehensive process and therefore does not constitute a

cornerstone; neither is it based on a comprehensive theoretical model” (p. 191). This does not discourage me from using humor in groups; it just makes me more aware of what is needed to use it. Regarding the use of humor in the group setting Bloch stated, “its effective application rests on an attitudinal quality in the therapist whereby he or she values humor as part of human experience and is cognizant of its beneficial effects in the clinical sphere....” (p. 191). I have half of this equation accomplished. I do value humor as part of the human experience. This project has made me more cognizant of humor’s beneficial effects, but I know I need significant training to be able to determine the right time to apply, encourage, or discourage its use in the group setting.

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