

RATIONALITY AND HUMOUR IN COUNSELLING¹

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Abstract

Although frequently employed by counsellors on a non-systematic basis, humour is a relevant therapeutic variable in need of theoretical explication. The role of humour is demonstrated by contrasting it with the function of reason, and some of the psychological mechanisms of humour are explained. Because the author draws upon examples from his own counselling experience, brief discussions are made into related topics such as the new diagnostic category of "identity crisis", the understanding of counsellor training as a form of operant conditioning, and the role of theory in counselling.

Résumé

Quoique fréquemment employé par certains consultants sur une base non-systématique, l'humour est un rapport thérapeutique qui a besoin d'une explication théorique. Le rôle de l'humour est démontré en le comparant avec la fonction de la raison, et quelques mécanismes psychologiques de l'humour sont expliqués. Parce que l'auteur tire des exemples de sa propre expérience de consultant, de brèves déductions sont faites sur des sujets semblables, tels que la nouvelle catégorie intitulée "crise d'identité", la compréhension de l'entraînement des conseillers comme forme d'opérations conditionnées, et le rôle de la théorie en consultation.

Anyone who attempts to define counselling will soon be confronted with the inadequacies of his definition. It is easier to catalogue the negative instances: counselling is not a friendly conversation, nor a didactic address. The positive instances include such a broad range of human behaviour that no one but the counsellor himself can say what lies within his repertoire to perform. Supervisors of counsellors have long abandoned any designs of programming their students' behaviour before a therapy session. They might offer the student some diagnostic insights into the client's problem or report what they would do if they were the counsellor. But the heart of the supervisory task is a retrospective analysis of selective behaviours of the counsellor joined with statements of approbation or disapproval. Counsellor training has thus emerged as a form of operant conditioning which strengthens some response and weakens others, and ignores any direct attempt to program the form or content of the counsellor's behaviour. No doubt the study of

systematized counselling instructions prior to a session has proven irrelevant to the trainee's final counselling behaviour and left the field open to a post-counselling feedback mechanism.

If Fiedler (1950) correctly concludes that an accurate understanding of the client's verbal message is the primary component of all successful psycho-therapy, we are faced with this problem: the modes of life are present in such a variety of conditions, the emotions are so complex alone and in their combinations, and the human mind so influenced by local custom, that to understand each individual is a superhuman task. Theories of counselling have therefore arisen which condense the diversity of life around a few organizing hypotheses, such as Kelly's (1955) theory of developing life roles. An attempt is made to derive therapeutic variables from a recognition of which principles of healthy development were violated in the course of growth. Although the endless variety of life has proven itself a sturdy adversary of all reductionist systems and has affirmed the viability of the definition of psychology as the study of individual differences, global reductionist systems of counselling are necessary teaching devices. The alternatives to a fixed system are training sessions and the conversations of the educated, in which the elements of explanation are

¹This essay contains phrases and concepts drawn from the writings of Dr. Samuel Johnson. Some of the examples of humour are quoted from the videotapes of Dr. C. M. Christensen, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, Canada.

often contradictory, and are so far removed from one another that the lack of cohesion and fit prevent the establishment of principles of optimal growth and of guidelines for remedial intervention. The strength of any theory to organize data and suggest predictive hypotheses has been well employed by counselling theorists. Systems of counselling suffer more from mishandling than from any inherent defect of power. Those counsellors with a strong inclination to do nothing found it easy to misrepresent the Rogerian system.

The primacy of the ratiocinative function of the human mind is prominent in the therapeutic systems of Freud (1961) and Ellis (1973). In order to more clearly understand its strengths and limitations, this essay will contrast reason with humour, which is sometimes its opposite, sometimes its reciprocal. A theory of humour in counselling is proposed and happy examples are provided.

Reason has been variously defined as the opinions of a wise man — reasonableness, the skill of constructing perfectly logical syllogisms, or anything not based on fancy. Freud longed for a messianic age in which knowledge, and the consciousness of the observing ego, would regulate the influence of imagination and superstition. Although Ellis' (1973) theory of rational-emotive therapy employs reason in a wide variety of definitions, in therapeutic practice the client is urged through argument to relinquish certain ideas he has about himself and the world and to replace them with others of the counsellor's choice. The process is roughly similar to a Socratic dialogue in which Socrates shows his disputant that he has not examined his own belief system and hardly can define the principles which guide his behaviour.

The 30 minute monologue that Ellis delivered in the presence of Gloria cannot be considered an adequate demonstration of the use of reason in therapy. Every theory of counselling assumes that the client must make a response which is part of some change process, be it a verbal, behavioural or covert cognitive response. Ellis talks Gloria to death.

Ellis (1973) states a basic concept of his therapeutic system:

Giving up demandingness, the most basic and elegant solution to the problem of irrational demandingness and the emotional disturbances that are its concomitant, is to induce the individual to become less commanding, godlike or dictatorial. (p. 182)

By attacking the inordinate desires of mankind, Ellis strikes at envy, one of the chief sources of misery. We are always uneasy when presented with the attainment of others, because we feel that our happiness has been reduced by that amount which is being withheld from us. But Ellis' system provides

no measure to determine what is a reasonable desire. Envy has motivated more than one man to great achievement. We may supply this deficiency by stating that whatever can be provided by the common occurrences of life which does not require the general rules of action to be broken can be considered a reasonable desire. In all other expectations, the will of the 'desirer' plays too prominent a role. A talented young man had a single presenting problem: "I am just not happy". The psychiatrist constantly challenged this problem by asking the client, "Why do you think that you have the right to happiness?" This is a rational response to those who suffer from needs for which this world provides no manner of gratification. It is a response the client repeats to himself and others to this very day.

Despite its strengths, the system of rational-emotive therapy naively assumes that reason plus a few good homework assignments will obviate the distress caused by erroneous notions commonly advanced by our culture. There is the implicit promise that life, led according to reason, will prevent us from being the slaves of fear and the fools of hope. None suffer, it seems, but by their own fault. Yet are there not a myriad of interpersonal disputes which reason can never decide? What of the serious questions a thinking man ponders in perplexity, some of which elude investigation and others which make logic ridiculous? Much of the spontaneous, quiet joy in living through the minute details of daily domestic life would make a man wretched if they were subjected to the scrutiny of reason. What comfort can reason offer one who suffers the restrictions of poverty, the infirmity of disease, or mourns the death of his child? A warm, sympathetic relationship may alleviate some problems which reason cannot touch. A faithful adherence to the process of reason gives Ellis brighter moments, but not better sessions.

The strongest challenge to the power of reason to dissolve fancy is found in those disorders in which imagination is joined with moral guilt. Anxieties can produce discomfort without the possibility of real danger, but such fictions can be voluntarily dispelled when they serve no social function or through excessive mental stimulation provide no further pleasure. But when imagination and duty are inextricably united, reason can offer no opposition. Such individuals have been seen to symbolize their dilemma in small bodily gestures reprobate of some past misconduct. One client reported that a seemingly meaningless occasional outstretch of his arm was a gesticulated form of self rebuke accompanied by sub-vocal admonitions. He worked diligently to obstruct the intrusion of these thoughts on a vacant mind, and to gain the general anaesthesia of fatigue.

The non-systematic use of reason provides examples of much industry and little productivity. The author has accumulated the following examples in which the counsellor reasons with the client to no avail. For example, the client is told that "he has to learn to get along with his father". In addition to being one of the most generalized and therefore meaningless statements in the English language, the knowledge of how to achieve this goal is often the very reason the client sought advice. Consider the counsellor, who in so many words, explains that God is wise, but man errs. What has the client heard that he didn't know before? The prestige of the counsellor grants the client a sense of achievement although nothing has been learned. Cognitive therapy is likewise filled with examples devoid of any use of cognition. The guilty client is told that he has just offered an explanation, not an excuse for his behaviour. The greater the disability of the client to mistake words for ideas, the more rapid the gains in therapy. Current English usage has left much language proverbial. But by practicing a careless attitude for the exactitude of observation and thought, the groundwork for future problems is prepared. This same haphazard use of language is demonstrated by the popular term "identity crisis" which is employed without any regard to some standardized definition. Those who intentionally demand what they know cannot be obtained, just as those who don't know what to demand, are labelled with an "identity crisis" because it is the easiest way to handle someone who will not be satisfied. Yet they are not similar to other "identity crisis" clients who have reached some crucial growth point in their personality which leaves them tottering on the brink between the past and the present.

To conclude the list of counsellor mishaps, counsellor mishandling of client self-pity will be examined. Declarations of self-pity are often met with silence and despair by the counsellor who is made aware of the progress yet to be made toward self-sufficiency. But the client's request for the counsellor to join in his sorrow is an attempt to restore a damaged sense of self worth; the client can commend his own status if, despite his reduced condition, he still has the regard of the counsellor. Self-pity is a condition in which the power of reason to ascertain the right is undiminished, but the power to pursue is impaired. Any response to self-pity which supports the client and prompts him to action should be utilized. The chief detraction to self-pity is in the excess which can lead to an indolent form of perpetual grief.

The function of humour is to enlarge reality by imagination, and instead of seeing things as they are, to imagine how they might be. Contrary to rationality

which depends upon inviolable order, humour has no rule but the whim of the present moment. When the whim makes reason absurd, humour can begin to work its effects. All nonsense is humorous if it is experienced as a deviation from anticipation. This recognition of incongruities develops in childhood and is positively correlated with intelligence (Kendall, 1931).

The psychological mechanisms of humour are numerous, although much can be explained by a simple but sound Pavlovian paradigm. Oscar Wilde, is known to have said, "I can resist anything but temptation". The first part of the sentence leads one to anticipate the disclosure of a given weakness. The abrupt conclusion is "temptation". Although given in the singular form, temptation is all inclusive, for what else is there to resist but temptation? The introductory statement is a conditioned stimulus which is not followed by the usual response — extinction has occurred. Retold jokes may excite humour, but not if repeated with excessive frequency. This gradual, slow decline of the response perfectly parallels the standard extinction curve.

Many clients refuse to impute their miseries to themselves, and continue to guide their behaviour by the same principles. They proceed from misfortune to misfortune, their suffering having no educational value. By avoiding a direct confrontation with the client's weakness, humour allows reason to operate and enables the client to see his real state. An obsessive woman allowed herself no entertainment because of the impossibility of obtaining baby-sitting services which she could fully rely upon. The counsellor gently repeated her statement in a light tone of mimicry, allowing the client to laugh at the absurd notion that a city of two million persons could not supply one good baby-sitter.

A young lady appeared in a short dress and had conspicuously long, well-groomed hair. As she began to complain about her mother, the counsellor interjected, "What does she want from you? Your skirt's too long, your hair's too short?" The client laughed at this perfectly incorrect description, and only with effort did she take up her theme. Why inveigh against a mother whose words are not accurate representations of reality? Extinction must first occur before a cognitive reappraisal can be made. This point has been overlooked by Arnold Lazarus (1971). He has his clients enter a contract for behavioural change, often in the direction of greater self-assertion. These people frequently claim that their aggressive behaviour brought them to therapy. By interpreting this as a defense and not accepting the complaint literally, it is easy to overlook the magnitude of the clients' self-reproach for the few assertive behaviours they have made. By not

extinguishing a client's disgust of noisy, assertive people, Lazarus (1971) leads him to say words he doesn't believe and act like those whom he looks down upon. Massive anxiety reactions are not rare, and a high relapse rate is recorded without surprise.

A person can learn to laugh through a process of classical conditioning. A student tape recorded an interview in which he demanded that the client "think of Venice" whenever she experienced a mood of depression. The more firmly she decided against compliance, the more resolutely he demanded obedience. For the remainder of the school year it was easy to set the class at a roar with the mere mention of Venice, an event of the past not remotely applicable to the present moment. If grief can be conditioned, so can laughter, if it was once successfully employed in a ludicrous narrative.

How can the client learn humour if the counsellor does not model it well? Philosophers of reason are naturally deficient in its antithesis. Unless obscenity can be mistaken for wit, Ellis cannot be considered a man of humour. Examples of Freud's (1961) humour in counselling are hard to accumulate, and the handling of the subject in his book is serious to the point of gloom. The most rapid learning of humour through modelling occurs between young siblings. If one gesticulates a comic antic and laughs, the others immediately join in the fun. A single nonsense word is often sufficient to spread the contagion of happiness. The author has experimented with the use of one sibling as a model of humour in the control of the other's psychotic moodiness. What is modelling but the herd instinct in man exploited at a tender age? And based on an instinct, this is an example of humour which reason finds hard to explain. The humour of madness in adults is abhorred because it defies rational explication even further.

Children, more than adults, exploit comedy by gesture and are more free in applying the actor's skill of action to create laughter. The physical stance of counsellors is generally too fixed. A counsellor's concluded advice to a client was that its purpose was to wring some joy "out of this so called world of ours". The latter phrase was accompanied by horizontal spreading of the arms and a slight vertical movement of the hands each time a word was slowly pronounced. The client reported an immense relief of anxiety, having suddenly attained through comic derisiveness the philosopher's ability to look on the world with indifference. Thereafter he was more free to cope with the natural force of evil without complicating its effects.

Pleasure in itself may be considered good. From Dante to Shelley, writers have justified the creation as a means for experiencing transcendental joy. But pleasures are rarely unalloyed by vices of physical

excess or the ignorance of opinion which fill the otherwise tedious hours of life. A harmless pleasure is a rare phenomenon indeed. The promise of heaven is the perfect compatibility of pleasure and reason.

Counselling is necessary because our sense of pain is stronger than our sense of pleasure. The ability to experience the past in the present distinguishes us from the brutes, and in our memories the ideas of pain predominate. Clients are persons so overconscious of past and present suffering that hope for the future is eradicated. Humour is central to the counselling process because it dulls criticism and suspends judgments, leaving reason impotent to restore our former opinions. The overwhelming power of pleasure makes memory inoperative. The mind is most vigorous when in pain, but pleasures are not scrutinized by philosophy. Humour is a general anodyne, allowing every man to be wise or foolish in his own way.

Though one may suffer in silence, pleasures are more commonly social. Humour will advance rapport more quickly than empathy, but unlike empathy, some social rapport is a prerequisite. No man enjoys a joke in close proximity to criticism, a hazard of insight therapy. When the author was an elementary school principal, he requested a meeting with the parents of a behaviour-problem child. As the parents entered his office, jokingly he said, "I guess we're having a little difficulty with your son". When the father was seated, he replied, "I see you don't take my family's problems too seriously, Mr. Klein". The meeting contained an implicit criticism, and the father, wanting to maintain a front of anger, would not allow himself to laugh. Nor will those who strive to maintain their rigid understanding of the world allow humour to present common things in an uncommon way. Members of the obsessive and paranoid groups are notoriously humorless.

One further limitation of the use of humour should be mentioned. Thus far our subject has been the application of lighter humour to the faults of mankind. Far different is the task of considering parents in a light-hearted vein. A counsellor once said to a client, "Let me guess what your mother said. I'll bet it was something like, 'I gave my life for you, how have I failed?'" The client sprang from her seat and laughingly said "That's exactly it, that's exactly it." It was easy for the client to accept this mimicry because of its strong resemblance to the original. Consider another counsellor who, after eliciting information from the client, solemnly lifted a pen and paper from the desk and recited what he was writing — "Let's see now, mother - neurotic slob". The client laughed, but reason put a quick end to the merriment. The cruelties of parents are exercised with a power we are taught to honour from the first

moments of reason. Their dominion is guarded from insult by all that can impress awe upon the mind of man. Supplication and tears are the child's only recourse to the intoxications of dominion. At the recollection of such moments, humour can but deceive itself. A counsellor who has the power to please by an unfailing ability to excite laughter may temporarily dislodge reason and honesty from their entrenchments, but for many clients only a long counselling experience will convince them that such levity is not stained with some enormous crime.

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