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## HUMOR AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO STUDENTS' ASSESSMENTS OF THE COUNSELLOR

JAMES A. FOSTER  
 JANE REID  
*Acadia University*  
*Wolfville, Nova Scotia*

### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the use of humor in counselling. Students viewed a videotaped simulated counselling session containing either facilitative counsellor humor, non-facilitative humor, or no humor and then rated the counsellor on four dimensions. The results indicated that non-facilitative humor is less desirable than facilitative humor or no humor at all in terms of counsellor likableness, approachability, or ability to create rapport but not in terms of client understanding. Ratings were unaffected by sex of the rater.

### Résumé

Les auteurs de cette recherche étudient le rôle de l'humour dans le *counselling*. Après avoir visionné sur vidéo cassette des séances de consultation simulées contenant soit de l'humour facilitatif, soit de l'humour non-facilitatif, soit aucun humour, des étudiants ont évalué le conseiller en rapport avec quatre dimensions. Les résultats indiquent que l'humour non-facilitatif est moins souhaitable que l'humour facilitatif ou que l'absence d'humour, et ce, en fonction de l'amabilité, et l'accessibilité du conseiller ainsi que de sa capacité de communiquer, mais non pas en fonction de sa compréhension du client. Le genre des évaluateurs n'a pas d'incidence sur leur évaluation.

Speculation on the nature of humor seems to be bound by neither discipline nor time. Some of the earliest treatises on human behavior make mention of it. Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, and Rousseau considered it a manifestation of man's baser qualities (Chapman & Foot, 1976; Keith-Spiegel, 1972). Freud (1922/1960) believed nearly all jokes were inherently obscene or hostile, and humor a defensive mechanism. Koestler (1964), on

the other hand, considered it a creative act, while Allport (1968) thought it indispensable to mental health and a sign of maturity. According to Duncan (1968) comedy and humor are useful ways to decrease social distance, to confront social problems which could not otherwise be confronted, and to express doubt over the wisdom of our superiors.

A few authors have reflected on the value of humor in counselling and psychotherapy, but the topic has not generated widespread interest. Paradoxical intention, Frankl's (1966) therapeutic technique, rests partially on humor.

Not only is the procedure frequently carried out in a playful mood but the therapist's advice to the patient often borders on the ludicrous. O'Connell (1976) argued that the effective therapist must also be a humorist, capable of appreciating the paradoxes in his or her own life as well as in the therapeutic relationship. Others (Foster, 1978; Greenwald, 1977; Grossman, 1977; Mindess, 1976) have shared this view, but Kubie (1971) has cautioned that the destructive potential of humor overshadows any benefits it might lend the relationship.

So little actual research has focused on the topic, however, that much of what has been said about humor in counselling remains unsupported empirically. It has been found effective in reducing anxiety (Laffal, Levine, & Redlick, 1953), used as a substitute for relaxation exercises in behavioral therapies (Ventis, 1973; Smith, 1973) and considered useful in creating positive client feeling towards the counsellor and encouraging client discussion (Killinger, 1978). Bayer (1979) however, was unable to corroborate some of Killinger's findings.

Bayer assigned students to one of three groups; counsellor initiated low level humor or non-facilitative humor, high level or facilitative humor, high level or facilitative humor, or no humor, contained in three separate videotaped simulated counselling sessions. Students rated the counsellor for approachability, likableness, competence and sense of humor under the three conditions. Bayer found no differences among the groups in their assessments. Ratings were also unaffected by sex of the rater.

Bayer raised a number of questions regarding the outcome. For one thing, she had not shown the participants in her study the client's response to the counsellor's humor. This produced a rigorous empirical design but subtracted from the naturalness of the counsellor-client exchange and from what O'Connell (1976) called the dyadic quality of humor.

In the present study this feature and others were modified, though some aspects of the format remained essentially unchanged. In other words, the purpose of the study was to determine how students assessed the counsellor on four dimensions of her performance – likableness, approachability, ability to create a positive relationship and to lead the client to a better understanding of her

concerns – under conditions of facilitative humor, non-facilitative humor and no humor. Since there is some evidence that males and females do respond differently to humor (Hassett & Houlihan, 1979) a further purpose was to ascertain whether sex differences played any part in the ratings.

### Method

#### Participants

Initially 102 students from four sections of an introductory guidance course agreed to participate in this study. Nine of the students, however, were actually unable to take part, leaving a total of 93 participants, 58 of whom were females, 35 males. Approximately 90% of the participants already held undergraduate degrees and were taking the course as a requisite for the Bachelor of Education degree. The remaining students were taking it as an elective.

#### Procedure

A videotaped simulated counselling session was developed first and became the no humor tape (NH). The session depicted a young college woman with concerns about her academic future and the demands being placed upon her by her boyfriend and parents. The central issue revolved around her attempt to meet her educational goals and still satisfy her other personal needs and those of significant others in her life.

A female master's student near the end of her training in counselling played the counsellor; a female psychology major in her senior year, the client. The roles were explained to each and a script was provided. When the humor tape was satisfactorily completed the facilitative humor (FH) and the non-facilitative humor (NFH) tapes were made. Every effort was taken to make these tapes identical both in tone and content to the original with the exception, of course, that each tape contained two examples of the particular brand of humor corresponding to its title.

Foster's 5-point assessment scale for humor served as a guide in the preparation of the FH and NFH tapes. Constructed along the lines of Carkhuff's (1969) scales for measuring various facilitative conditions in counselling, Foster's scale provides five categories of humor corresponding to the therapeutic value of the counsellor's humor and its effect on the client. Thus, levels one and two on the scale represent

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non-facilitative humor; four and five, facilitative humor; and level three those humorous responses which neither detract noticeably from the relationship nor enhance it.

For the purpose of the present study an attempt was made to write into the script two non-facilitative humorous remarks and two facilitative remarks corresponding respectively to levels two and four on Foster's scale. These levels were chosen because they represent subtle rather than dramatic differences in terms of the kind of humor used and the response it evokes in the client.

Creating two examples of each type of humor was, understandably, not an easy task and certainly no claim can be made that the humorous remarks which were eventually included, exhausted the list of possible alternatives. Since, as shall be explained shortly, the students were to be the final judges of the quality and frequency of the humor in the tapes, it seemed pointless to enter into what could easily be an indefinite search for something as elusive as the "perfect" one liner. Accordingly the following examples of counsellor initiated humor were adopted.

#### Non-facilitative humor

Example 1. Near the middle of the tape

Client: (Lamenting the demands her boyfriend places on her time and in muted voice, after a pause) He's a bit possessive...  
Counsellor: Sounds like he's possessive and you're possessed. (There is a very brief pause before the client goes on, giving no indication that she gets the humor.)

Example 2. Near the end of the tape

Client: (Continuing to explore her relationship with her boyfriend and family conveys in her manner, voice, and words her feelings of worthlessness)... It kind of makes me feel about two inches tall.  
Counsellor: And look at you, you're not very tall to start with! (This is in obvious reference to the client's height. She was, in fact, about 5'2".)  
Client: (Pauses, and shrugs slightly, then goes on.)

#### Facilitative humor

Example 1. Near the middle of the tape

The dialogue and tone here are for all intents and purposes identical to the NFH tape. The only difference is that the counsellor responds to a different statement by the client.

Client: (Speaking about the demands of her boyfriend and the relationship)... It's like a bad habit.

Counsellor: I've got a feeling if it's that bad you'd like to kick the habit!

Client: (Smiles slightly and goes on.)

Example 2.

Client: (In speaking about the relationship with her boyfriend indicates the relationship survives through her efforts)... I can act "together" all the time!

Counsellor: With all that acting sounds like you deserve an Oscar.

Client: (Nods in agreement and smiles and goes on.)

The no humor tape was about five minutes long; the two humor tapes about 35 seconds longer.

Names of the students were obtained through the office of the Dean of Education. Males and females were randomly assigned to each of the three groups. Since nine students were unavailable at the time the tapes were shown the eventual group sizes were as follows. The no humor group included 11 males and 20 females; the non-facilitative humor group consisted of 13 males and 21 females; and the facilitative humor group included 11 males and 17 females.

Prior to viewing the tape the students read a brief outline of the client's concerns and examined a 5-point Likert type rating scale consisting of nine statements. The first five items were divided into two parts, (a) and (b). Four of these first five items were included only to conceal the importance of humor. To determine whether students actually saw the tapes as the researchers had intended, in terms of the kind and presence of humor, item 3 on the rating scale required a rating for the quality (a), and frequency (b), of the humor contained in the tape. Essentially this item served as a rough validating measure and read as follows.

3(a) As far as I could see, the counsellor's ability to use humor in a positive and helpful way was

very poor	poor	adequate	good	excellent
1	2	3	4	5

(b) Roughly speaking, the counsellor demonstrated this ability

very frequently	frequently	occasionally	seldom	never
5	4	3	2	1

Items 6, 7, 8, and 9 called for ratings of the counsellors's likableness, approachability, ability to create a positive relationship, and ability to lead the client to greater understanding, respectively. The direction of the ratings were varied to prevent a response set.

### Results

Differences among mean ratings for the

six items were examined by separate 2 (sex) x 3 (humor) analyses of variance (ANOVA).

Means and standard deviations of students' ratings for the six measures are reported in Table 1. The higher the score, the more favorable the rating on the 5-point scale.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Students' Ratings of Counselor

Scales	Group 1		Group 2		Group 3							
	Males		Females		Males		Females					
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD				
Quality of Humor	3.00	1.18	2.94	1.03	1.15	.38	1.67	1.02	2.73	.79	2.00	.86
Frequency of Humor	2.82	1.08	3.00	.71	2.69	1.03	2.52	.87	1.73	.65	1.50	.76
Likableness	3.45	.82	3.41	.87	2.77	.93	3.05	.87	3.82	.87	4.00	.56
Approachability	3.00	.89	3.06	1.03	2.38	1.04	2.81	.87	3.18	1.33	3.65	.67
Ability to Create Positive Relationship	3.45	.93	3.53	.87	2.62	.65	3.05	1.07	3.82	.98	3.85	.75
Ability to Provide Understanding	4.00	.63	4.06	.56	3.77	.44	3.86	.73	3.82	.75	3.80	.70

Group 1 = Facilitative humor. Group 2 = Non facilitative humor. Group 3 = No humor.

Significant main effects were found on ratings of the quality of humor ( $F_{2,87}=20.42, p<.001$ ), frequency of its use ( $F_{2,87}=20.41, p<.001$ ), counsellor likableness ( $F_{2,87}=11.98, p<.001$ ), approachability ( $F_{2,87}=6.08, p<.003$ ), and ability to create a positive relationship ( $F_{2,87}=9.56, p<.001$ ). No significant relationship was found between humor groups and the counsellor's ability to lead the client to a greater understanding ( $F_{2,87}=1.14, p<.32$ ). No main effects for sex were found on any of the measures, although a significant interaction was revealed on ratings of the quality of the counsellor's humor ( $F_{2,87}=3.43, p<.037$ ).

Post hoc analyses employed Scheffé test.

#### Quality and frequency of humor:

The post hoc comparisons indicated that the quality of humor was rated significantly higher ( $p<.05$ ) under the FH condition than under the NFH and NH conditions. Students' ratings on this dimension were also significantly higher ( $p<.05$ ) for the NH tape than the NFH tape. On the other hand comparisons on the frequency of humor measure indicated that the FH and NFH groups saw humor occurring significantly ( $p<.05$ ) more often than the NH

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group, while no differences existed between FH and NFH groups.

#### *Counsellor likableness:*

Comparison of means on this dimension indicated that the counsellor was rated significantly more likable ( $p < .05$ ) by the NH group than the FH and NFH groups. No difference existed between mean ratings for the FH and NFH.

#### *Counsellor approachability:*

Students saw the counsellor as more approachable ( $p < .05$ ) under the FH and NH conditions than under the NFH condition, while no difference was found between FH and NH groups.

#### *Ability to create a positive relationship:*

Results of the Scheffe's test on this dimension indicated that no difference in mean ratings existed between the NH and FH groups. However, mean ratings for both of these groups were significantly ( $p < .05$ ) higher than those of the NFH group.

### *Discussion*

The results tend to suggest that the counsellor's use of humor affects how the counsellor is perceived. Contrary to Bayer's findings, students' assessments of the counsellor's performance varied according to whether the counsellor used facilitative humor, non-facilitative humor, or no humor at all.

The results cast some doubt on the value of using NFH or mildly derisive humor in counselling. Notwithstanding Greenwald's claim, that is, that sarcasm and banter can be therapeutically useful, the participants' ratings favored the FH and NH counsellors over the NFH counsellor on five of eight dimensions.

On the other hand the claim that humor should be avoided at all costs in therapy was not supported either. No significant differences were obtained on any of the dimensions between the ratings for the counsellor who used facilitative humor and the one who used no humor. In other words students apparently did not see this kind of humor as being harmful to the relationship, or more specifically, to the counsellor's ability to establish a positive relationship.

It is puzzling that no differences were

found between groups on the client understanding dimension. One possible explanation is that the ratings may have been confounded by the students' expectation that there would be a resolution of the client's concerns which, of course, did not actually occur in the tapes. Had this been the case, however, mean scores for all three groups would have more likely fallen at the lower end of the scale. In fact, the opposite was true. The three groups rated the counsellor's ability on this dimension higher than on any of the other dimensions. Possibly then students considered "client understanding" as having more to do with the outcome than the process or relationship, and hence judged non-facilitative humor as having some didactic or goal oriented value similar perhaps to Carkhuff's concept of confrontation.

The students' ratings on the quality of humor dimension also warrant mention. It will be recalled that item 3(a) and (b) on the rating scale was included to ascertain whether the students' assessment of the tape they saw corresponded to the researchers' intentions for that tape in terms of the quality and frequency of the humor contained in it. If students rated the FH tape highest of the three tapes in terms of quality of humor and at the same time saw counsellor initiated humor occurring more often in the FH and NFH tapes than in the NH tape, then there could be some assurance that the tapes did depict the intended level of humor. As the results indicate, this is exactly how the students rated the three tapes. There was, however, a slight discrepancy. The NH tape received significantly higher ratings than the NFH tape with respect to the quality of humor. Since, by definition, the NH tape contained no humor, the reason for these results is open to speculation.

One possibility is that some aspect of the tape was unintentionally humorous. Another plausible explanation is that the very nature of the rating scale contributed to the results. Response categories for 3(a) ran from "very poor" to "excellent" so that students in the NH group were in a sense compelled to assign a value even though humor was not present. Or, put another way, students might have felt the need to "read" humor into the tape to comply with the item. The results for the frequency of humor dimension would support either of these explanations. Both males and females, for example, placed the occurrence of humor in the NH tape between "never" and "seldom" suggesting that what-

ever influenced their ratings for quality of humor occurred infrequently.

The sex by humor interaction on the quality of humor item is more difficult to explain, especially since the sex of the rater was unexpectedly unrelated to any of the other ratings. While the interaction may reflect subtle differences in the way males and females respond to humor, no pattern in the ratings across groups emerged on this dimension to support such a claim. The relative position of the mean ratings for males and females was inexplicably reserved for the NFH and NH tapes though virtually no difference existed in their assessments of the FH tape.

Admittedly then, the present research was not without some limitations. A revised rating scale, for instance, which would circumvent the problems just mentioned would most certainly strengthen future research. So too would a more rigorous design especially one that would also preserve the naturalness of a counselling session. Finally, study designed to examine more closely variations within the groups, perhaps along a personality dimension might shed additional light on the subject. The important thing, however, is that the results despite the limitations, would seem to provide sufficient grounds for further investigation.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

James A. Foster (Ph.D., North Dakota) is a professor of Education at Acadia University, Nova Scotia and coordinator of the Graduate Program in Counselling. For ten years he was Director of the Acadia University Counselling Centre. Besides his interest in use of humor in counselling he has been studying the impact of a genetically linked life threatening illness on families.

Jane Reid is a case worker with Family and Children's Services of King's County, Nova Scotia, and is completing her M.Ed. in Counselling at Acadia. Her latest research represents an extension of the study presented here.