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Research Paper

Exploring the Therapeutic Role of Humour in Counselling: A Counsellor's View

Angel Mary Mathew[1]*, Praveen Thomas A[2]

ABSTRACT

The qualitative study explores the role of humour in counselling from the counsellor's perspective. A semi-structured interview framework was used to interview six counsellors from Bengaluru with a minimum of five years of experience in counselling. The interviews analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study examined counsellors' experiences determining humour's role in a therapeutic setting. The study indicated that humour is often spontaneous and used to ease tension and build rapport. Participants noted laughter builds rapport, shifts perspectives, promotes reflection, and gain insight. Being mindful of humour's use is crucial, as it can backfire if not sensitive to client cues, emotional state, and cultural background. Counsellors must read the room and prioritise client safety. This study expands the understanding of humour's therapeutic role.

Keywords: *Counselling, humour, therapeutic humour, therapeutic relationship, client receptivity*

In counselling, humour is considered detrimental when it does not align with therapeutic objectives (Pierce, 1985) or if it primarily serves to benefit the therapist in a self-serving manner (Chaloult & Blondeau, 2017). Moreover, when humour is applied without considering the client's age, gender, cultural background, mood, or personality traits, it can create irredeemable impact on the client-counsellor relationship (Hussong & Micucci, 2021; Prerost, 1994; Panichelli, 2013; Venkatesan et al., 2023).

Historically, humour was not always perceived positively. In ancient times, it was viewed as slapstick, morally questionable, and ugly (Venkatesan et al., 2023). Prominent philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and later Descartes, regarded laughter as scornful or ridiculing, unsuitable for the virtuous or rational individual (Morreall, 2024).

In contrast, the twentieth century witnessed a shift in the perception of humour, particularly in the Western world, where its therapeutic benefits began to gain attention (Jiang, 2019). Sands, Ellis, and Rogers emphasised that if used adequately humour can be effective in developing a healthier perspective that exhibits therapist's authenticity and support toward the client's concerns (Longe, 2018). Over the last four decades, studies have demonstrated

[1]Counselling Psychologist, St. Joseph's University, India, Karnataka
[2]HR, Cavinkare Pvt. Ltd, India, Tamil Nadu
*Corresponding Author

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the positive effects of humour on mental well-being, and a helpful approach to manage stressful or traumatic events (Menéndez-Aller et al., 2020). Furthermore, humour is seen as a desirable personal trait. Individuals who employ humour are often perceived as motivating, creative, emotionally intelligent, and socially connected (Allport, 1961; Martin & Ford, 2018). These attributes align closely with the therapeutic goals of fostering resilience, flexibility, and meaningful client engagement.

Although humour is recognised as beneficial, its use in Indian counselling settings remains underexplored. Most existing research either focuses on humour as a general social skill or views from a client-centric standpoint. The present study aims to explore the role of humour through the lens of practising counsellors in India, particularly in Bengaluru, focusing on their perspectives, and the therapeutic strategies used in the sessions.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

Qualitative research design is used to explore the role of therapeutic humour from counsellors' perspective. Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling.

Research paradigm

The study was addressed within the framework of constructivism and interpretivism. The key principle of the study is to understand the therapeutic role of humour in counselling from the counsellor's perspective, emphasising their experiences, opinions, and attitudes as accurately as possible while also accounting the interpretations of the authors.

Problem Statement

To explore the therapeutic role of humour in counselling

Objectives

1. To understand the role of humour in the therapeutic process.
2. To explore the strategies and techniques that counsellors use to effectively incorporate humour into their sessions.

Operational Definitions

- Humour: The ability to perceive or express the amusing aspects of a situation (APA Dictionary of Psychology, n.d.).
- Therapeutic humour: Therapeutic humour is a form of constructive, empathic humour, which is not related to sarcasm, racist or sexist humour, deformations, put-downs and other forms of abusive humour (Fry & Salameh, 1987; Briggs & Owens, 2022).

Sample

Six counsellors (two males and four females) with a minimum of five to eighteen years of professional experience in counselling from Bengaluru were the participants.

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection with predetermined probing questions. Even though the questions were predetermined some questions were improvised based on the participants response. The consent form was shared to the participants, ensuring the participants understood the purpose of the study. Participants were also asked for consent before audio recording which was later used for data analysis.

Each of these interviews lasted approximately 35 to 50 minutes based on the participants' responses, schedules, and willingness to share their knowledge and experience. The socio-demographic details of the participants were asked at the start of the interview. The participants for the study were recruited through LinkedIn, Gmail and personal networks. Those who consented were then contacted to schedule an interview through online videoconferencing or face-to-face depending on the participants convenience.

A pilot interview was conducted on a counsellor with six years of experience in the field from Bengaluru. Followed by the pilot study the participant was requested to provide feedback on the questions, later based on this feedback minor changes were made in the interview guide.

Analysis of Data

The study uses Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to examine the experiences of practicing counsellors in incorporating humour in their sessions. The interview audio files were transcribed using transcription tools, after which initial coding was conducted using a Taguette, an open- source qualitative research tool. The coded data were then organised into themes and sub-themes interpreted based upon the existing literature.

Table No. 1 Participant Profile

Participant	Gender identity	Age	Years of practice	Regularity of using humour	Theoretical orientation
JT	Male	28	6	Frequently	ACT
TM	Male	50	18	Occasionally	Existentialism & Psychoanalysis
JO	Female	48	15	Occasionally	Transactional analysis & CBT
VA	Female	33	9	Seldom	ACT
MA	Female	28	5	Occasionally	Integrative approach
CH	Female	42	14	Frequently	Narrative therapy

DISCUSSION

The data received through semi-structured interviews were systematically examined to identify recurring themes and sub-themes.

Theme 1: Therapeutic relationship

The theme explores on how therapeutic humour can have a positive influence on the therapeutic relationship. Hence it is important to create a trustful environment which may not be possible in the initial sessions. Therapeutic relationship was apparent in all participant interviews to improve the counsellor-client relationship.

1.1: Promotes acceptance in client

When using humour in counselling, it gives a message to the client that the counsellor intends not to judge, but accept them as they are (Frakes, 1999). Participants noticed that the use of humour enhances their mood, making it more interactive and productive.

1.2: Client's receptivity

Frakes (1999) if the client is unable to reciprocate to humour it indicates emotional disturbance which has to be addressed in the session, during such situation using humourous techniques also has to avoided, the client requires a formal approach to make the client feel

validated and understood by the counsellor. Participants stated that it is crucial to understand the client's emotional state before using humour.

1.3: Connect with client's interest
Counsellors mentioned the relevance of relating to the client's interests which could build a strong therapeutic relationship. Participants shared memes, their favourite series or cartoons which would help them understand client's interests help them view their problems more humorously.

1.4: Creates ease in communication
Humour as a tool to create ease in communication was mostly discussed by participants. Humorous way of responding helps reduce tension which paves way for change in the client, progress is often seen in client when there is ease in communication and reduced stress (Gladding, 1995). Humour helps to diffuse tension in the therapy session, by easing the process of confronting clients on their maladaptive behaviours, and to help strengthen the therapeutic relationship between the counsellor and the client (Stone, 2023).

Theme 2: Therapeutic Process
Therapeutic process includes the interactions that has occurred in the therapeutic relationship that has led to positive change and improvement. There have been significant shifts noticed by counsellors in clients when humour is used in their practice.

2.1: Change in perspective
Participants mentioned that the use of metaphors and humourous exaggeration helps clients view situation through a different lens. Humour is used in various ways like metaphors, stories, or even self-deprecating jokes, which helps in understanding the client and strengthen the relationship between counsellor and client (Amici, 2019).

2.2: Promotes insight
According participants humour increases insight in the clients by providing in-depth understanding about themselves and their struggles, making the client realise, things are not as bad as it looks. Mosak (1987) argues that through laughter clients can come across moments of realisation that reveal insights into their difficulties. Cronin (2023) counsellor's humour helps the client to gain insights and form a meaningful by addressing struggles.

2.3: Promotes reflection
Participants elaborated that reflection promotes self-awareness and helps the clients take responsibly for their own choices. Through humour reflection becomes less intimidating and reducing the intensity of their beliefs. Laughter indicates change in client and that the therapeutic intervention is helping client view things in a new perspective, reflecting on client's experiences and release of pent-up emotions (Cronin, 2023).

Theme 3: Strategies to use humour
Participants shared the strategies humour is used in sessions that bring about change and progress in the client. Recognising the timing, and intentionality behind the use of humour and the key the strategies used by the counsellor that has led to positive change in client.

3.1: Spontaneous humour and intentional humour
Spontaneous humour is not deliberately used as a technique. The participant shared that it is not predetermined to use a certain kind of humour, instead it comes in the session naturally and spontaneously.

Intentional humour is slightly used in the initial sessions intentionally to understand their openness towards the use of humour according to the participants.

Therapeutic humour can be intentionally and spontaneously used by therapists and other healthcare providers, this helps clients understand their thoughts and behaviours (Franzini, 2001).

3.2: Self-deprecating, hyperbole, sarcasm
Self-deprecating and hyperbole are types of humour that commonly came up from the participants. Self-deprecating humour initiates an equal relationship allowing the counsellor to advice without directly criticising the client (Lee et al., 2015). It Indicates that the counsellor is comfortable in their shortcomings (Frakes, 1999). Hyperbole, creates absurd images by stretching the truth to an extreme, this mismatch seen in between the reality and the statement are considered humorous (Vanderheiden & Mayer, 2024).

The use of sarcasm had varied opinions. Two participants completely disagree the use of sarcasm in their sessions as it might lead to humiliation, and belittling the client's problems. Others support the use of sarcasm much cautiously, here the use of sarcasm is encouraged to help the client view their problems through a different perspective.

3.3: Humour timing
Participants reported the importance of observing the client to make sure the humour is timed appropriately if not it could lead to invalidating feelings and lack if acceptance from the counsellor's side. The counsellor has to peruse the circumstance to use humour, introducing when the client is emotionally distress, could be insensitive of the counsellor leading to feelings of misunderstanding (Gladding, 1995).

3.4: Awareness about client's cultural background
Participants mentioned the need to be aware of the client's background and reframing from jokes related to their practices, religious beliefs, or anything related to their current struggles, being conscious of their background will reduce the negative impact of humour, avoiding the potential risks coming from it.

Table No. 2 Main themes and Sub-themes

Main themes	Sub-themes	Examples from the interview transcript
Therapeutic relationship	1.1: Promotes acceptance in client	"Hmm… humour is one of the ways to always cheer them up and emotionally uplift their state of being, which automatically puts them in a better place to find out their truth, what about themselves, accept themselves better." (Participant CH).
	1.2: Client's receptivity	The participant stated that "mindset of the client at the time of session, if the client in complete distress, having very low receptivity to humour is it crucial for the counsellor to refrain from doing so. Hence considering the client's emotional state is essential in using humour in sessions" (Participant JT).

	1.3: Connect with client's interest	"One thing client usually like, which I do and most of my clients get connected with that. Taking reference from famous series or movies like Friends. Like, you know, whenever I start talking about Friends, like how Joey says it, how Chandler says this, they laugh at it and then after some time they start using that in their therapy. Like, you know, today I was Monica, like, you know, since morning I have been cleaning like anything." (Participant CH).
	1.4: Creates ease in communication	"So emotional conversations, too emotional conversations make you close to them and not too like robot like conversations also right. So, humour makes it human. I, I believe in that. Like you know, when we are having, we crack a joke, we share a laugh, you know." (Participant CH).
Therapeutic Process	2.1: Change in perspective	"I think it's just whatever comes in flow, particularly to either what I have said or the client said or to give a different perspective on how we're looking at the problem." (Participant TM). "Metaphors and humorous exaggeration helps in viewing situation through a different lens" (Participant VA).
	2.2: Promotes insight	"So, there was this client you know, there was some issues with her husband and kind of insight and there was also action. And so, it ended up very well. So, yeah, there was a breakthrough there," (Participant TM).
	2.3: Promotes reflection	"Humour works with clients, accept themselves better and reflect upon. A person having a very good laughter like, you know, laugh from their heart will always reflect it makes them aware" (Participant CH).
Strategies to use humour	3.1: Spontaneous humour and intentional humour	Spontaneous humour: "It has to be very light hearted. It has to be something like, you know, just like, you know, just, just, just a flowing thought kind of thing" (Participant VA). Intentional humour: "I think I do use humour at least in a small scale in maybe the first five sessions and then after that whenever it's appropriate" (Participant JO).
	3.2: Self-deprecating, hyperbole and sarcasm	Participant JT uses hyperbole and self- deprecation "So even if I'm the best therapist in the world which I'm not" "So, one of my clients was terrified of making mistakes in conversations so she avoided speaking in sessions. So, in one session I playfully exaggerated the worst-case scenario and said Oh no, what if you say good morning at 12:01 PM? Instant disaster. And then. She laughed, and over time, humour helped her loosen little by little which was evidently seen in the sessions" (Participant VA). "I don't use sarcasm. I never use sarcasm. Because that is, for me it is an ulterior message. So that is not a healthy transaction Because for me my transactions are very explicit. There is no, there's only a social message. There's not a psychological message. So, when you're talking about sarcasm, there is a psychological message also which goes with the social message." (Participant JO).

		"Sarcasm, yes, I use particularly to either what I have said or the client said or to give a different perspective on how we're looking at the problem." (Participant MA).
	3.3: Humour timing	Humour is been a part of my practice with experience and observing if the client is open to humour in the session or is it something that needs to be focused seriously is also decided then" (Participant VA).
	3.4: Awareness about client's cultural background.	"I think it's better that we refrain using humour, especially on their values, religious differences, you know, where they are struggling with a particular aspect of their life." (Participant TM).

CONCLUSION

This study explores the role of therapeutic humour in counselling from the perspective of practising counsellors.

Humour reduces emotional tension, builds rapport, and promotes openness in the counselling relationship. It is an intuitive and adaptive process, here counsellors do not plan humour in advance instead, they adapt its use spontaneously through various tools like humourous metaphors, sharing memes, cartoons or discussing about favourite each other's series based on the session's flow and the client's mood.

Self-deprecating humour and a minimal use of self-disclosure are used to establish trust and to make the client feel less judged.

Defusion techniques that involves humour help the clients reduce disruptive beliefs leading to laughter and improved insight simultaneously. Seldom, counsellors use sarcasm to confront client's rigid thoughts.

The counsellor's observation, and constant check-ins about the client's emotional state will help determine if the use of humour is appropriate; being flexible and making changes in the approach to ensure the client's safety and dignity will create progress and change.

Limitations and Implications

Limitations that should be acknowledged in the current study include:

- The inadequate representation of participants. In terms of gender, four of the six participants were female. There's a growing disparity in the psychology field, with men being underrepresented. Women now constitute the majority, making up fifty-three percent of the psychology workforce as of 2011 (American Psychological Association).
- The participants found difficulty in recalling specific experience related to the positive and negative use of humour in sessions. It was seen challenging for the participants to discuss and reflect upon specific incidents during the interview.
- The study focused on the use of humour in general in a counselling setting without looking into a specific approach or theoretical orientation.

Implications

- Understanding the use humour as a tool for strengthening the therapeutic relationship can improve the therapeutic process

- The findings of the study can help in reducing the hierarchy between the counsellor and client by promoting a more collaborative and equivalent approach.
- The study exhibits the need for cultural awareness in the use humour, where in mental health practitioners are encouraged to explore clients cultural background to refrain from insensitive use of humour.

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Conflict of Interest

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