

# THE USES OF HUMOR IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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*This narrative examines the functions and uses of humor in social work practice. Two types of humor, purposively telling a joke and spontaneously responding to a situation, are illustrated as a way of putting people at ease during initial contacts, engaging reluctant clients, exploring taboo areas, and improving cognitive and problem-solving skills. Practice principles and cautions are also presented.*



*Laugh and the world laughs with you;  
Weep and you weep alone;  
For the sad old earth must borrow its  
mirth,  
But has trouble enough of its own.*

Laughter is essential to life. Jokes, witticisms, ironies, teasing, clowning, and other verbal and nonverbal behaviors are a fundamental characteristic of interpersonal communication and have a profound impact on everyday interactions (Wyer & Collins, 1992). Humor serves numerous functions. Humor permits expression of inhibited thoughts and feelings and provides for a release of associated repressed or suppressed anxieties and tensions (Freud, 1928; Freud, 1960). For oppressed and vulnerable populations, humor and laughter provide a safety valve for coping with painful realities.<sup>1</sup> Ethnic and racial humor helps a stereotyped group to vent anger and to dismissively laugh at the dominant culture's stereotypes. Laughter affirms that "the injustices suffered are undeniably wrong" (Bowles, 1994, p. 3). Humor also surfaces the less visible, more subtle forms of prejudice and discrimination. By making the less visible more visible, oppression is challenged (Gordon, 1998). When a member of the ethnic and racial group pokes fun at absurd stereotypes, laughter in the face of adversity releases tensions and provides hope.<sup>2</sup> Laughter "deflects, un.masks, and frees us from unreal, pretentious, and imprisoning beliefs or perceptions" (Siporin, 1984, p. 460).

Humor is essential to life and is potentially useful in social work practice. Humor puts people at ease during initial contacts, as they enter an unfamiliar situation and meet a professional stranger for the first time. Shared laughter serves as a social bridge and facilitates engagement and rapport. Laughing together softens the power differential, reduces social distance, normalizes the helping process, and advances the therapeutic relationship. Socially, laughter provides people with a common experience, akin to breaking bread together. Feeling more at ease, clients are more likely to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Humor also provides a ticket into taboo areas by helping both client and worker cope with their emotions. Gentle humor relieves anxiety or embarrassment and eases pain. In dealing with resistance or power struggles, humor may increase positive reactions to ideas and motivate involvement (Gitterman, 1998). Finally, humor stimulates and enhances cognitive processes, problem solving, and self-exploration (Suls, 1983).

Humor should be constructive and devoid of countertransferral ridicule, sarcasm, or hostility (Tuttman, 1991). Destructive and harmful humor often serves the purpose of masking vulnerability and achieving superiority at another person's expense. Moreover, one is cautioned about using humor to avoid dealing with important client issues, e.g., a client may feel that the worker is not taking his or her problem seriously (Huxtable, 1989). Finally, some clients may

not respond to humor. In some situations, the worker may simply not be funny; in others, the worker's type of humor may be misunderstood or misinterpreted, e.g., teasing a client who is unable to handle teasing. The worker must deal with the awkwardness of the situation by quickly assessing whether the humor was misunderstood or misinterpreted (Pollio, 1995). Effective humor is spontaneous, gentle, and well-timed and requires the capacity to laugh at oneself.



Two types of humor are available to a social worker: (1) purposively telling a joke, and (2) spontaneously responding to a situation (Pollio, 1995; Richman, 1995). These two types of humor will be illustrated for the purposes of putting people at ease during initial contacts, engaging reluctant clients, exploring taboo areas, and improving cognitive and problem-solving skills.

### **Using Humor to put People at Ease During Initial Contacts**

**Illustration 1:** In a first meeting of an adult educational group, the worker asked members to introduce themselves and to share something that they wanted the other members to know about them, such as a favorite hobby, a special pet, and so forth. The worker wanted to help members become comfortable with each other by keep things safe and light. As members went around the room, they were becoming more relaxed and interested in each other. This flow shifted when a member created an awkward moment. She prematurely shared, "Hello, my name is Gail and I am a recovering alcoholic and victim of sexual abuse." The group became silent. After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, the worker responded with a smile: "Gee, I was hoping you would share something more

personal and intimate about yourself." All members (including Gail) began to laugh at the paradoxical comment and the uncomfortable moment dissipated. The worker followed by stating, "Gail, I appreciate that you shared these life experiences with us and we will be examining how all of us have dealt with life traumas."

### **Using Humor to Engage a Reluctant Client**

**Illustration 2:** A social worker specialized in reaching difficult adolescents. A 14 year old was referred for anti-social behavior and rebelling against parental limits. Family and legal pressures coerced him to see the worker. He arrived with a scowl on his face and pronounced, "You are the ugliest looking social worker I have ever seen." Quite a beginning, but it did not throw this social worker.

He used situational humor to join the resistance. He replied, "My looks are really that bad, huh?" The youngster replied, "Worse than bad!" "Well, because you think I'm ugly and we have to work together, would it help if I went into the closet for about five minutes so that you will not have to look at me?" The youngster looked confused, smiled, and responded that it would help a great deal. The worker went into the closet (large space with a light and a chair) and before shutting the door suggested that if the boy needed anything to let him know. After five minutes, the worker inquired if the youngster could get used to his looks. And when the youngster suggested that he was still ugly, the social worker returned to his closet. At the end of the session, the worker left the closet and said that it was time to go and that he hoped the boy had found the session helpful. The youngster looked bewildered and left.

The social worker envisioned the subsequent conversation between the youngster and his parents.

Parent: "What did you and Mr. Kelly talk about?"

Youngster: "Talk? We didn't talk. He sat in the closet the whole time."

Parent: "If you don't want to tell me, just say so, but don't say such ridiculous things."

Youngster: "Call him if you don't believe me."

The mother did call and was surprised to hear that her son was telling the truth.

The second session followed a similar script. The youngster announced that the worker was still ugly and would appreciate his returning to the closet. (The social worker was becoming anxious and his self-doubts increased.) However, by the third session, the youngster stated, "You know, you are not quite as ugly as I thought at first. You don't have to go to the closet today, but could you look out the window so that I don't have to look at your face." In a Rodney Dangerfield voice (connoting not being appreciated), the worker responded, "I get no respect." The youngster laughed, their conversation began, and shortly thereafter he began to discuss his life troubles.

### Using Ethnic Humor to Ease Tension and Overcome Obstacles

**Illustration 3:** My student, an Irish American middle-aged woman, was assigned to work with Mr. Kennedy, a 62-year-old Irish-American widower who was forced to retire on complete disability because of severe diabetes.<sup>3</sup> One leg was in a cast following a fall at a local city hospital when he attempted to get off an examining table where he had been left unattended. Mr. Kennedy was then placed in a shelter because a fire had destroyed most of his home and all of his clothing. Mr. Kennedy was in the hotel for two weeks when the Department of Social Service worker informed him that he would have to attend a hearing the following week to determine his eligibility for an extension. He cursed and yelled that he didn't intend to go to any hearing. "I've worked hard all my life, paid my taxes. I am not going to any

meeting." After this outburst, he asked if the shelter had "a social worker like in the hospital." He wanted to see a social worker and see what she could do to "help me with you damned people."

The student agreed to help him stay in the shelter while he was on crutches and unable to look for an apartment. She agreed it must be hard to go up and down the stairs on crutches and told him that she would request a fair hearing and try to have it held close to the shelter. She called the Hearing Office to request a hearing at the shelter because of Mr. Kennedy's physical condition. The student could not reach Mr. Kennedy by telephone, so she left a note in his mail box apprising him of the new date. When the day came, Mr. Kennedy did not arrive. She called him but did not receive an answer. The following morning Mr. Kennedy arrived at the worker's office for the first scheduled meeting. She felt annoyed and the following conversation ensued:

*I asked Mr. Kennedy why he had not come the previous day, and he looked puzzled. I asked him if he received my note. He said that he had gotten some paper in his box, but didn't know what it was about. I continued by asking if he had read it. He said that he didn't have his glasses with him that morning. I kept asking if he had read the note later in the day. Mr. Kennedy became fidgety and looked quite uncomfortable. His face was red, he looked angry, and he started yelling. 'I am sick and tired of this bull shit — you are just like all the others asking me to do things I can't do for myself.' I pointed out that I had found a more convenient location for the hearing for him, and all I asked him to do was to get himself to the hear-*

*ing on the right day.*

Mr. Kennedy grabbed his crutches, stood up, glared at me and blurted, 'Look you dumb social worker...I've been trying to tell you I CAN'T READ!' As he walked out he yelled back, 'I don't give a ... about the hearing, you can all go to hell.'

The social work student realized that Mr. Kennedy probably would not return to meet with her. So, she went up to his room:

*When Mr. Kennedy asked who was knocking, I told him my name and that I wanted to talk to him. He yelled, 'Go back to your office before you freeze out there.' I said, 'Look, Billy, there's a bullheaded Irish lass on the outside of this door who can be just as stubborn as the bullheaded Irish bloke on the inside. So, you better open the door before the two of us make a holy show of ourselves.' With that, the door opened wide and Mr. Kennedy stood there laughing. 'Well, now,' he said, 'I guess there's still a little of the old sod in you after all...' 'Well, now,, I said mimicking him, 'I guess you are not the only Irishman who kissed the Blarney Stone either.' We both laughed and he invited me to sit down and have a 'good cup of tea.'*



*As we drank the tea, there was some tension in the air. I broke the silence by saying, 'I am sorry about the other day, I am sorry that I*

*didn't listen to you and hear what you were saying, and I am sorry that I was impatient. I really want to try to help you and hope you will give me another chance.' He immediately answered that if anyone should be sorry, it should be him with his 'trashy mouth and rotten temper.' He apologized for cursing at me and explained that he was upset because it was hard for him to let anyone know that he can't read. He told me that he is very ashamed and feels like a dummy.*

The common Irish ethnicity lent special meaning to the worker's use of situational ethnic humor. Laughter eased the tension and helped them overcome the obstacles in their work. Subsequently, the student helped Mr. Kennedy to grieve for the death of his wife and for the loss of his home. She also connected him with a reading teacher. Ultimately, it was the student's use of humor that led to a breakthrough in the quality and depth of their work.

#### **Using Humor to Soften Taboo Areas**

**Illustration 4:** A social worker was recruiting members for a post operative cardiac group. She learned from a nurse that John, a blue collar worker, was anxious about possible impotence and was becoming increasingly depressed. He had been unable to discuss his concerns with the physician. After various efforts to reach for his concerns, the worker dealt with the awkward silences between them by using a metaphor and asking with a smile, "Are you worried about whether the lead has run out of your pencil?" He responded with laughter and tears, and a frank discussion followed. Humor relieved his anxiety and embarrassment.

#### **Using Ethnic Humor to Relieve Tension**

**Illustration 5:** A Jewish couple in their

forties sought help with marital problems which were related to a decrease in the husband's sexual drive. He was obsessed with thoughts that his wife was looking at other men. Her adamant denials were met with further accusations. The tension between them was escalating and neither could hear the other. The Jewish social worker told them the following joke using a Yiddish accent to get their attention and to help them listen to each other.

*An 80-year-old Jewish couple, Sadie and Harry, were having daily fights with loud shouting. Everyone in the apartment house could hear them. Harry decided he would get Sadie real good. He ran into the courtyard and shouted up so everyone could hear: "I had you bevore ve vere married!" Sadie put her head out the window and laughingly yelled back: "You vasn't the only one!"*

The couple howled with delight and finally began to listen to each other.

### Using Humor to Improve Problem-Solving and Self-Exploration

**Illustration 6:** A social work student was working with a group of elderly members who complained about loss of memory but resisted developing compensatory mechanisms for remembering. To encourage members to write things down, she told a joke with an obvious message.

*Barry and Selma visited their doctor and Selma complained about her husband's memory loss—"He goes to the store and always forgets several things I tell him to buy." The doctor urged Barry to write things down and to go shopping with a list: "This way*

*your wife will stop complaining and you will feel better about yourself." That night while they were watching television, Selma went to get some ice-cream. Barry asked for vanilla and told Selma to write down the name of the flavor. She left the room and reassured him that she would not forget. Barry told her that he also wanted a little chocolate sauce and that she should write that down so as not to forget. "I won't forget!" she replied in an annoyed voice. A few more steps and Selma heard, "And put some nuts on it and write it down so you don't forget." "I won't forget!" she responded sharply. Selma returned, handing Barry a bagel. Barry yells, "See, you forgot the cream cheese!"*

The members laughed and began to discuss what memory loss meant to them.

### Conclusion

Gentle humor can help in the formation of a therapeutic relationship. Appropriate humor demonstrates understanding and invites further discussion. When clients are stuck in their perceptions, thinking, and verbalizations, humor can help them to look at their situation in a new way and invite self-reflection. Humor also helps both in dealing with client and worker and with family and group members' interpersonal strains and obstacles. In exploring taboo areas, humor can relieve anxiety or embarrassment and ease suffering.

Humor is a creative tool that must be used differentially based on client background, level of functioning, and specific situation. The worker's natural style and comfort must also be taken into account. Humor cannot be forced or over used. In using humor, the worker should be willing to take risks and be prepared to make a mistake and then to openly



deal with it. Similarly, the worker also must be prepared for the client to use humor. When the worker is poked fun at, she or he must have the capacity to laugh at him or herself. I recall conducting a workshop for about 200 professionals. A participant asked a question, and I asked her to stand. When she replied, "I am," I became quite anxious as I thought I had offended a vertically challenged person. I then realized that she was having fun with me and was, in fact, sitting. The ensuing laughter and my sharing my anxiety made the participants much more willing to risk themselves, and the work was considerably advanced.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Haig (1986) attributes to Freud the characterization of "humour that smiles through tears." p. 544

<sup>2</sup>If an "outsider" would tell the same joke, ethnic group members might feel disparaged. Bowles (1994) states, "A sense of community is fundamental to appreciating the creator's intent, and to the ability to identify with the humorist's marginal position in relation to dominant society that s/he is ridiculing" (p.2). However, when the humor is exaggerated, as we learned from the Archie Bunker character in "All in the Family," humor cushions the devastating impact of oppression - it demeans the demeanor.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Gitterman 1996, pp. 306-310.

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