JOEL P. KLEIN,
Institute of Child Study,
Faculty of Education,
University of Toronto.

ON THE USE OF HUMOUR IN COUNSELING*

ABSTRACT: The techniques of famous comic playwrights are explicated in an attempt to establish prominent parallelisms between the literary and therapeutic use of humour. On the first level of comparison, the sources of human belief in what is true and real are explained. It is shown that they rest on certain subjective but rarely questioned assumptions about human nature. Using the well developed literary devices as a model for illustrating the manifold ways in which reality can be interpreted, the essay then proceeds to elaborate on ways in which the counselor can profitably employ similar strategies with his clients. On a deeper level of comparison, it is suggested that the miniature world of the theatre and the phenomenological universe of the client both emerge from an arbitrary verbal syntax which circumscribes the number and nature of the possible alternative explanations of reality.

The author's own assumption about truth is that by using the model as a form of intellectual inquiry, the results of psychological investigation can be confirmed and advanced by external disciplines.

Never has psychology been so bluntly coerced into searching for historical antecedents to explain a current phenomenon than in its attempts to handle the elusive elements of humour in counseling. The research has confirmed both the obvious dichotomy between laughing with and laughing at someone, and the further notion of reluctance to use aggressive laughter, laughing at someone, in the presence of strangers. Such experimental advances can explain the more commonplace function of humour, but the exploitation of comic effects which is used to

*This essay contains snatches of phrases from Erasmus, Northrup Frye, and various literary critics that have been pulled from their original context and applied to counseling.

such therapeutic advantage by Ackerman and other singular counsellors of expert and unexplicated skill derives from a metaphysical explanation of man's place in the universe which has been known and lost. Its roots lie in ancient theology, its branches flourished in the Middle Ages, and its exquisite blossoms appeared in Renaissance literature. At each point the history of literature reflected and developed these germinal notions. The modern institution of counseling is a necessary product of man's inability to live life without comedy. Therapy is only effective to the extent that it writes the perfect comic play to fill the gap created by the noteworthy dearth of good comedies amongst all forms of modern creative literature.

The earliest extant comedies, those of Plautus, based on Greek models, illustrate some simpler dramatic devices which produce the comic effect. First among these is the sudden revelation of a mistaken identity. The narrative flounders on a problem which seems to be without solution. Two people are in love but can't marry because they are close relatives, or one is of high and the other of low birth. Suddenly a messenger arrives from a distant land to disclose information which completely reverses some basic assumption about the personal identity of a major character in the story. He is not the person who he thought he was. He is someone alse. Acting immediately upon the news, the person assumes his new role and proceeds to marry the one who a moment earlier was unquestionably forbidden to him. The play is a comedy because it closes on the happy note of a marriage which was made possible by a rapid shift in a life role. The more rigid and rule-bound the social structure of the world of the play, the greater the comic effects of acting a completely different role within that structure. But the audience, by simply accepting the possibility of an implausible shift in a basic limiting life characteristic, profits from the enjoyment of knowing that obstacles can be surmounted without changing the rules by which life must be ordered.

The most common criticism of this comic device is that the resolution is mechanical and external. The *dramatis personae* have no active part in creating their own happiness. They are the passive recipients of a blind beneficence. These critics overlook, however, the more central lesson delivered by this theatrical trick, which is an opinion about the nature of reality. The audience experiences comic relief from the tension of conflict by admitting that a truth to which they were committed was nothing more than an unfortunate mistake. The truth is always arbitrary and external. It cannot be debated; it lacks as much rational support as the falsehood they believed. The truth is comic because it leads from a negative, pessimistic view of life, to a joyous realization of its broad possibilities. The more sudden the awareness of the difference, the greater the comic relief.

These mechanisms, known to the most ancient of writers, appear in the early comedies of Shakespeare in unaltered form. The greatest of geniuses often began in blanket imitation of earlier models to show that they could do it too. In Shakespeare's later works the question of the nature of reality as expressed through comedy is given a more original and direct expression. We see two worlds in *As You Like*

It: the commonplace work-a-day world, and the romantic life in the forest of Arden. Shakespeare has taken the denouement of the Plautus comedy and expanded it into an entity which coexists with the mundane world and serves as a constant foil for it. The play's action constantly alternates between the two antagonistic points of view. Shakespeare has achieved the supreme goal of the ideal therapists. That he has created an alternative world for his client to accept as real is only a partial measure of his art; neither can the ease with which the client can move between these two opposing worlds be considered the ultimate criterion for Shakespearian success. It is only when the audience can no longer decide which world is a more faithful representation of reality that the playwright can claim to have transformed the final effect of the Plautus drama into a perpeual comedy with a moral lesson. For all later Shakespearian laughter is thoughtful. We leave the theatre with the wisdom that our perceptions of social structure are necessarily false if one-sided. We are amused at our own narrow certainty of our grasp of reality. We sense our indebtedness to the concurrence of social opinion in forming the cognitive superstructure that guides our acceptance of certain notions as truthful. By entertaining as he teaches, the playwright has achieved what only the most gifted therapist can claim — greater inner freedom with a minimum of work effort and no resistance.

Now that we have come this far in grasping our indebtedness to the past in our present goal of utilizing humour as a therapeutic variable in its own right, why stand in the middle of the journey? We begin afresh by saying that modern man labors under a remarkable error about himself which medieval man could never have made. As a result of the immeasurable success the scientific age has granted in terms of technological progress, medical advances beyond the wildest imagination of earlier ages, and the promise of dream worlds as yet unborn, modern man has consequently fallen prey to the haunting suspicion that human nature, like everything else in nature, is perfect or perfectible. But it is only when the opposite assumption is accepted that human frailty can become an object of humour. The Middle Ages was so keenly aware of the gap between man's current status and the ideal which both preceded him in the form of the first man and will follow him in the miraculous restitution of human nature at the latter days, that it accepted imperfection as the world's natural state. It was the consciousness that we are not what we should be that led the Middle Ages to place ludicrous gargoyles of men with their trousers half down and grinning idiotically as objects of adornment at the entrances to their most illustrious churches. Surrounding the massive doors are statues of men with their hair standing up, tongues stretched out, and bodies twisted into the most grotesque contortions. Medieval man believed that it pleased God to save the world by foolishness, seeing that it could never be redeemed by wisdom. The person of the fool was thus revered as divine, because through his demonstrations of the imperfections of the world you learned the lesson to save your soul. The goal of counseling is to make the client capable of acting Falstaff: fat and invulnerable. Without the rudiments of a conscience, the figure

of Falstaff was created in Renaissance time from a rough draft of the ubiquitous medieval fool. His comic human imperfections make him the perfect representative to the modern age.

The role of the fool in Shakespearian drama is very much expanded from his activities of simple buffoonery and horseplay. He is often the wise fool, speaking with impudence to princes and kings. They rarely rebuff him, accepting the jester's reproof and mockery as their earthly source of divine intelligence. Their function is not to condemn evil in human motivation, for they only wish to show "virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure." But in presenting their own interpretation of current events, they naturally perform the counsellor's work of humourously ridiculing the protagonist's lack of self-knowledge. The jester's comments are accepted by Lear because they are comically presented, even when the fool tells Lear he is the true fool for not understanding himself. Righteousness wins out in Shakespearian comedy, not because the playwright has taken a philosophical position on the question of good and evil, but only because he accepts the rules for writing good comedy. The comic results of release and clarification in therapy are likewise attained without an alteration in the value system of the client, if one follows the rules of good counseling.

It is possible to write a play in which the audience knows less, as much, or more about the actors than they know about themselves. In all of Shakespearian comedy the audience knows more important facts about various characters than they know about themselves. Watching the actors guide the conduct of their lives based on partial or inaccurate information, the audience enjoys the unfolding of consequences from causes unknown to the very perpetrators of the deeds. Of even greater delight is to calmly watch the actors slowly arrive at the fuller understanding of circumstances as their assumptions are corrected and gaps in knowledge narrowed in, until at the close of the play their wisdom equals the level which the audience possessed at the start of the story. This situation of discrepant awareness is the one in which the counsellor most frequently finds himself. The meaning of the client's words are often immediately grasped in depth by the counsellor whose job is to bring the client to see himself as he is seen by the counsellor. The learning experience which is necessary for the levels of awareness to be finally equalized is often arduous and of limited success because didacticism, moralizing, and the mere repetition of good advice are techniques never employed by comic authors who can instruct only because they can entertain. The client can easily be drawn to accept an alternative perspective if the therapy hour is more consciously structured as a play in which two alternatives are given and their logical consequences pursued through a prescribed series of events in which decisions must be made. But discrepant awareness must make sound logic lead to false conclusions. By immediately pulling the counseling encounter out of the realm of the client's real world of experience, the subject matter of counseling is revealed to be not life or the nature of reality or any issue which the philosopher or moralist

builds upon, but a verbal substrate from which all these emerge. The rules for differentiating truth and error are derived from the syntax of a given verbal universe. This at once makes counseling the most elusive and the most promising of all disciplines.

RESUME: Afin d'établir l'existence de parallèles remarquables entre la façon d'utiliser l'humour en littérature et en thérapie, on rend explicite les techniques employées par des auteurs comiques célèbres. A un premier niveau de comparaison, on explique l'origine de nos croyances dans ce qui est vrai et réel. Il ressort qu'elles reposent sur certains postulats subjectifs concernant la nature humaine, postulats qui sont rarement remis en question. Les procédés littéraires bien connus servent de modèle pour illustrer comment la réalité peut être interprétée de plusieurs manières. L'auteur indique ensuite comment le consultant peut utiliser à bon escient des stratégies similaires avec ses clients. A un niveau de comparaison plus profond, on suggère que le monde miniature du théâtre et l'univers phénoménologique du client émergent tous deux d'une syntaxe verbale arbitraire; cette syntaxe circonscrit le nombre et la nature des alternatives possibles pouvant rendre compte de la réalité. Pour sa part, l'auteur postule qu'en utilisant ce modèle comme méthode d'appréhension intellectuelle de la vérité, il est possible de confirmer et d'améliorer par l'apport d'autres disciplines les résultats de la recherche psychologique.

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C.G.C.A. RESEARCH AWARDS

The Canadian Guidance and Counselling Association has decided this year to give an award for the best dissertation and for the best thesis written during the past two years. There is also an award for the best research article published during the same period of time. This is the second occasion on which this award will be given. Although the Awards will not include a cash prize, an appropriate citation will be presented to recipients of the Awards during the CGCA National Convention at Vancouver in June, 1975.

1. *Description of the Awards.*

Three research awards will be presented:

(a) "The Canadian Guidance and Counselling Association Outstanding Thesis Award" will be presented for the outstanding Master's Thesis by a student in a graduate program in counselling and guidance, or working under a professor in this field;

(b) "The Canadian Guidance and Counselling Association Outstanding Dissertation Award" will be presented for the outstanding Doctoral Dissertation by a student working in the area of counselling and guidance, or under a professor in this field;

(c) "The Canadian Guidance and Counselling Association Outstanding Research Article Award" will be presented for the top research article in a Canadian publication by a CGCA member.

2. *Who is eligible to apply for the Awards?*

The Master's and Doctoral awards are open to individuals who completed their dissertation/thesis at a Canadian university. The Outstanding Research Article Award is limited to CGCA members. Members of the Board of Directors will not be eligible for these awards.

3. *How often will the Awards be made?*

The Awards will be presented during the Association's national conference, in Vancouver, 1975.

4. *What form will the Awards take?*

(a) The Awards will not include a cash prize.

(b) An appropriate citation will be presented to recipients of the Awards during the Association Banquet.

(c) Recipients will be invited to make a presentation of their research at the Conference.

(d) The Association will publish or reprint the recipients' papers (in the case of dissertation/theses, a 2,500-word abstract).

(e) Supervisors of Outstanding Dissertations and Theses will receive a special letter of recognition.

5. What are the deadlines for applications?

Entries should be in the hands of the Awards Committee by February 1, 1975. Dissertations, theses, and research articles completed since the 1973 Conference are eligible. Finalists should be prepared to supply copies of their dissertations/theses by April 1, 1975.

6. How should entries be submitted?

Authors of research articles should submit nine (9) reprints or Xerox copies of their articles. Master's and doctoral applicants should submit nine (9) copies of a 2,500-word dissertation abstract, following *APA Publications Manual* specifications, and suitable for publication. Abstracts should be typewritten and double-spaced, and may be in either French or English.

7. Dissertation abstract title page.

The title page should include the following information: (a) name of applicant; (b) address of applicant; (c) telephone number of applicant; (d) title of dissertation/thesis in full; (e) name of institution granting degree; (f) address of institution; (g) examining committee: names and addresses of chairman and members; (h) date on which oral examination was held; (i) date on which the university conferred the degree.

8. To whom should abstracts/articles be submitted?

Dr. Harvey W. Zingle
Chairman — Research Committee, CGCA
Dept. of Educational Psychology
Faculty of Education
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta.

9. What is the procedure for judging the entries?

(a) The Awards Committee will be composed of the CGCA President, President-elect, and the Co-chairmen of the Research Committee.

(b) Each abstract/article will be read by at least three CGCA members selected by the Awards Committee.

(c) A small group of entries rated "excellent" by the judges will be chosen as finalists in each of the three Awards categories. The Awards Committee will then ask three CGCA members to form three small committees comprised of members not serving on the thesis committees of any of the finalists. One committee will choose an Outstanding Thesis, a second committee will choose an Outstanding Dissertation, and third committee will choose an Outstanding Research Article from among the finalists.