

Humor as a Defense Mechanism and Working Instrument of the Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy

Barbara Crăciun

Titu Maiorescu University, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract

The present theoretical paper sustains the idea that humor represents a complex phenomenon, characterized by a series of multidimensional valences whose implications can be observed at multiple levels of human functioning, by briefly looking over and analyzing its various conceptualizations, while still following two main objectives: on one hand to define and understand from a psychoanalytic point of view, the role of humor as a defense mechanism in people's lives, and on the other hand to describe humor as a tool in the therapeutic work framed by the cognitive-behavioral approach.

Thus, among other relevant aspects, we discuss the distinction that Freud proposed in 1905 concerning the witticism, comic and humor, as well as the complexity of their intrapsychological relationships; we dissect the components of humor and their complex functioning underlying the psychoanalytic defense processes; we present and comment the cognitive theories of humor, as well as the evolutionary perspective regarding the utility of humor in human communication; and we analyze humor as an essential part of nowadays psychotherapeutic interventions. Moreover, we highlight the necessity of conducting more scientific validated studies that ask the beneficial effects of humor in cognitive-behavioral therapy.

Keywords: *humor, defense mechanisms, incongruity, cognitive-behavioral therapy*

Corresponding author: Barbara Crăciun

Phone number: -

Email address: barbaracraciun@yahoo.com

I. INTRODUCTION

From an etymological point of view, the term "humor" passes through a historically inverse continuum through British, French and Latin origins such as "humor", "humeur" and *humor* (internal secretion).

In its development, humor consisted of a complex phenomenon, including a series of concepts such as language, means of expression and state of mind. Humor is considered to be a perquisite of reality which allows "dramatic" elements to blend in different quantities and individuals to utilize it in several situations with the main purpose of overcoming suffering.

Humor can be considered most of the times to be a solution, sometimes even a therapeutic one, but let us not forget that its primary mechanism is based on a simulation translated by "a comical form hiding a sad background" (Freud, 2002, pp.127).

Humor has been known to play a cathartic role ever since the Antiquity. At the beginning it described a fluid found in the organism that reflected the balance between different humors. Thus, people who were generally healthy were the ones who benefited from the balance between these fluids.

Ulterior to this conception, humor passed the boundaries of the body, sometimes describing the temperament or an emotional state. Later, people have started to use and write anecdotes, in other words being funny and making jokes, intentionally or spontaneously. Nowadays, psychology supports the idea that humor is characterized by cognition (Martin, 2010; Wyer & Collins, 1992; Attardo, 1997). Whether we speak of a defense mechanism or a complex process, humor might represent a way of escaping constraints felt on several areas both individually and on a group level.

II. HUMOR AS A DEFENSE MECHANISM

Most of the times when we speak of humor we refer metaphorically to the compound found in a crucible, consisted of both pain and pleasure, joy and depression, pleasant thoughts and tiring ruminations, etc. It seems somehow odd from this ambivalent point of view, but it is supported by numerous theories - some mention over 100 theories (Schmidt & Williams, 1971) - which try to define humor. One fact objectively agreed on by psychologists is that humor as a process involves a series of important components. These components are the following: the social context, the cognitive perceptual process, the emotional response and the vocal and behavioral expression of joy by laughter.

On the other hand, the conceptualization of humor brings to attention terms and concepts such as incongruity, surprise and playfulness. It is important to remember that the theories built

around incongruity are centered on cognitive aspects of humor in a broader way than the social and/or emotional ones (Hillson & Martin, 1994; Attardo, 2001).

Therefore, one of the essential elements of humor, respectively incongruity can be most easily understood through two suggestive examples. Thus, one of Molière's heroes stated that: "it is better to die by the medicine's laws, than living against them" (Bergson, as cited in Morar, 2008). Another example belongs to Freud, who was writing to Maria Bonaparte while worrying about his sickness: "An advertisement is keeping my mind at work and I consider it to be the best and most daring of all American adverts: "Why live when you can be buried for 10\$?" (Freud, 1961).

The Freudian approach states that humor and psychoanalysis can be perceived as a harmonious dyad. Freud elaborated in the year 1905 the paper entitled "The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious" based on the idea that "humor is a way of obtaining pleasure despite the negative affects which might abolish it" and that it can be considered the highest of all defensive processes of the psyche. During 1927 he proposes a new study entitled "The Humor" emphasizing for the first time the existence within the Super-Ego of a tendency to tenderness, a "maternal attitude towards the Ego". Freud suggests that as for the identity's dynamics, the first and most important and all is the primordial one, namely the one involving the mother. It is where the Super-Ego develops its shades related to the configured parental essence.

We consider that a first relevant aspect in approaching humor might be related to the difference that Freud proposed in his 1905 concerning the witticism, comic and humor. This difference sighted firstly the wide number of people who can be placed on the scene of "the three". Thus, for humor only one person is needed, who works for one's self, without turning to an external presence; when it comes to comic and witticism, two or three people are involved – one being the ingenious support, the accidental witness to a phenomenon, while in the case of witticism the other person is actively involved.

A second aspect is represented by the complexity of intra-psychological relationships which subsume to becoming from simple to complex, according to the following hierarchy: first comes the comic, second comes the witticism and then, humor. As Freud stated, "If comic is found, the spirit is developed".

While discussing humor as a defense mechanism we should emphasize that the Freudian interpretation considers humor de facto to be a singular variant which allows the person to represent one's own work object. In other words, we may speak of the subject and object of one's pleasure, where the humor represents a distance (we should take into account the psychodynamic interpretation of humor as a defense mechanism), a given which allows the subject to detach from his own affects, namely the painful ones.

Such detachment permits, on one hand, the reduction of the suffering's effect, and on the other hand it can partially cancel it because, as Freud stated, "it involves a smaller effort". The next step consists of initiating a pleasure generating motion that is inherent to humor, namely to the one that "smiles amidst tears" (Freud, 2002, pp.228).

Freud insists on making this distinction because humor consists of losing the contact with reality, as we might say, it represents more of a discovery of reality and its acceptance. The essence of this argument can be viewed in relation to the "Ego Triumph" (Freud, 2002) and the pleasure principle which makes the psychological labor requested by humor to be easier.

As this psychological labor continues, if the painful representation is maintained along with the pleasure, the affect which is connected to this representation will be transformed. In the end, the essence of humor is to obtain a bit of pleasure where we may meet surrender in front of despair. In this context we should also discuss the source of humor (observation made by Freud in 1905) regarding the connection with what is infantile - and thus with what might represent some of its means to defeat the painful affects -, which after all represents a background economical operation.

Freud stated: "Through these two traits: rejecting the reality's request and imposing the pleasure principle, humor gets close to the regressive or reactionary processes which concern us so deeply about psychopathology" (Freud, 2007, pp.197).

As a defense mechanism, humor consists of presenting a new situation experienced as traumatizing so that it's pleasant, ironic; thus, the unusual aspects are found and emphasized. In this given situation we may evidently speak of the humor applied to one's self. This mechanism makes objectivity easy towards the events and makes it possible for the individual to reflect on what he is going through (Gabbard, 2007).

In some situations, humor as a defense mechanism can become a way of overcoming what seems to be insurmountable, without letting it become harmful. Facing unhappiness, humor might have a bragging character, as Freud gives the clarifying example of a person sentenced to death, who on the way to the execution exclaims: "That's a good way of starting a week!" (Freud, 2002, pp.229). In such context we refer to the black humor which is rather qualified as a support mechanism in front of impossible situations.

In the same context, the components of humorous actions as defense mechanisms sight a complexity and playful performance of the people using it.

From the point of view of psychoanalysis these effects are highly connected to other defense mechanisms, as we may mention for example sublimation, which includes pleasure; this time though, we speak of overcoming (but not repressing) sexual pleasure considered to be dangerous (Ionescu, Jacquet & Lhote, 2002). Similar to the result of sublimation (such as

literature, film, etc) humor can be “communicated” to another person, leading to connecting to that person or experiencing together the humorous moment.

The purpose of using humor as a defense mechanism might be reflected in the health area, in the ability to defeat problems and diminish stress (Olsson, Backe, Sörensen, & Kock, 2002).

III. HUMOR AND COGNITIVE-BEHAVIORAL THERAPY

We should also mention that in psychology studies have shown that humor is highly connected to attitudes and memory and that the perception thresholds vary according to the emotional baggage of the presented material (Fry, 1992; Kellaris & Cline, 2007).

Also, we may suggest that life experience influences humor as a mechanism, and so we may modify our individual way of perceiving reality. Therefore, the set of cognitive elements which seem to be characteristic to all types of humor (including jokes, teasing witticism, even irony, satire and sarcasm) are shaped.

Recent models proposed by evolutionary psychology suggest on one hand that humor and laughter could have played a very important role in developing and maintaining the social group (Gervais & Wilson, 2005; Panksepp, 2000). Therefore humor as a way of communicating and later as a social form of organizing, extends its influence further than a simple conceptualization which at a first glance could be connected only to making things easy and obtaining light pleasures.

The cognitive theories suggest the existence of an incongruity as basis of each humorous situation (Suls, 1983; Pien & Rothbart, 1976; McGhee, 1979; Ruch, McGhee & Hehl, 1990). The same cognitive theoretical block suggests that there are two or three stages which humor passes through during processing.

Thus Suls (1977) emphasizes the way people firstly perceive the incongruity created by the humorous stimuli and then by the way they solve/understand it (process it). On the other hand Attardo (2001) describes three stages of humor processing: encoding, incongruity-detection and incongruity-resolution.

In psychotherapy humor is known for a while to be a useful instrument (Salameh, 1983; Gelkopf & Kreitler, 1996; Freeman & Ventis, 2010). Even so there are a relatively small number of empirical studies describing the use of humor with effective results in the therapeutic frame. This fact can be explained by the descriptions given by other specialists who emphasized that humor is spontaneous, un-intentional and so harder to follow according to an experimental protocol (Ventis, Higbee & Murdoch, 2001).

Nowadays humor is part of the psychotherapeutic intervention, being described as a practical procedure. For the cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy, one of the conditions which stand out regards the fact that humor should be utilized during the therapeutic process only when there is complete, detailed knowledge regarding the client, his problematic and the cultural customs he adheres to (Wright & Davis, 1994). Such elements become indispensable in establishing the therapeutic alliance between the client and the therapist; only after the latter has been settled and recognized as functioning, the technique of humor can be utilized when appropriate.

Secondly, it can be noticed that humor can represent a technique itself or may describe an entire therapeutic approach (Franzini, 2001). Thirdly, humor can also be received as communication ability in the therapeutic context. For instance, in Ellis' Rational-Emotive Therapy (REBT), humor was used in order to view the irrational cognition or the central beliefs brought to discussion by the clients in a lighter, more playful manner (Ellis, 1987; Ellis, 2007).

Also, during the cognitive-behavioral therapy, humor can be utilized with the purpose of reducing the level of distress or of changing the cognitive and behavioral dysfunctional patterns signaled by the patients (Kuiper, McKenzie & Belanger, 1995; Lewis, 2000).

It is well known that humor is accompanied by laughter, and its ending produces a discharge of endorphins with immunestimulating, calming, sedative and euphoric effects (Berk, Felten, Tan, Bittman & Westengard, 2001; Bennett & Lengacher, 2006; Martin & Lefcourt, 2004).

The technique of humor can be used in the cognitive-behavioral therapy in order to facilitate an adaptive type of behavior when the client signals the experience of unpleasant situations (Samoilov & Goldfried, 2000). Therefore, from calming the state of tension and the anxiety states, to experiencing hostility and anger, humor might allow a temporary escape from such behaviors or even their correction.

One of the reasons why humor helps us as a coping mechanism stands in the fact that by seeing the funny side of a situation, the individual gets to evaluate it as being less threatening and so responding with a lower level of the sympathetic system activation (Farnè, Boni, Corallo, Gnugnoli & Sacco, 1994). The neurophysiologic decrease can therefore eventually lead to relaxation and establishing more functional types of behavior.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Metaphorically speaking, when we refer to humor we may easily visualize the compound found in a crucible, consisted of both pain and pleasure, joy and depression, pleasant thoughts and tiring ruminations, etc. – a mixture made of melting contrasts that suggest the complexity of

its nature. Therefore, it is not surprising that humor is known for a while as being a useful instrument within psychotherapy. For instance, on one hand, in Ellis' rational-emotive therapy (REBT), humor was used as a technique in order to view the client's irrational beliefs in a lighter and more playful manner (Ellis, 2007), while on the other hand from the point of view of psychoanalysis, we may discuss humor as a defense mechanism, a given that provides distance allowing the person to detach from her painful affects.

In some situations, humor as a defense mechanism can become a way of overcoming what seems to be insurmountable, without letting it become harmful. Facing unhappiness, humor might have a defying character, clearly described by Freud's example of a person sentenced to death, who on the way to the execution exclaims: "That's a good way of starting a week!" (Freud, 2002, pp.229).

The technique of humor can be used in the cognitive-behavioral therapy in order to facilitate an adaptive type of behavior when the client signals the experience of unpleasant situations (Samoilov & Goldfried, 2000). Therefore, from calming the state of tension and the anxiety states, to experiencing hostility and anger, humor might allow a temporary escape from such behaviors, or even their correction.

However, it is important to emphasize that even though we have listed some important aspects met in what represents the use of humor in the cognitive-behavioral frame, there is still a general need of conducting further scientific validated studies in order to provide solid evidence for the therapeutic benefits of humor, as well as for the best strategies to apply it efficiently.

Even so, we may conclude by asserting that humor, perceived as a defense mechanism or as a therapeutic technique, presents a series of multidimensional valences whose implications can be found in the psychological, physiological, social, emotional and cognitive human development.

References

- Attardo, S. (1997). The semantic foundations of cognitive theories of humor. *Humor*, 10(4), 395-420.
- Attardo, S. (2001). *Humorous texts: A semantic and pragmatic analysis* (Vol. 6). Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Bennett, M. P., & Lengacher, C. A. (2006). Humor and laughter may influence Health: II. Complementary Therapies and Humor in a Clinical Population. *Evidence-based Complementary and Alternative Medicine: eCAM*, 3(2): 187-190.
- Berk, L.S., Felten, D.L., Tan, S.A., Bittman, B.B., & Westengard, J. (2001). Modulation of neuroimmune parameters during the eustress of humor-associated mirthful laughter. *Alternative Therapies*, 7(2), 62-76.

- Ellis, A. (1987). The use of rational humorous songs in psychotherapy. In W. F. Fry, Jr. & W. A. Salamed (Eds.), *Handbook of humor and psychotherapy* (pp. 265-287). Sarasota, FL: Professional Resource Exchange.
- Ellis, A. (2007). *Overcoming resistance: A rational emotive behavior therapy integrated approach*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.
- Farnè, M. A., Boni, P., Corallo, A., Gnugnoli, D., & Sacco, F. L. (1994). Personality variables as moderators between hassles and objective indications of distress (S-IgA). *Stress medicine*, 10(1), 15-20.
- Franzini, L. R. (2001). Humor in therapy: The case for training therapists in its uses and risks. *The Journal of general psychology*, 128(2), 170-193.
- Freud, S. (1961). Letter from Sigmund Freud to Marie Bonaparte, April 28, 1939. In *Letters of Sigmund Freud 1873-1939* (pp. 458-458). London: The Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (2002). *Opere, Volumul 8, Comicul și umorul*. București: Editura Trei.
- Freud, S. (2007). *Opere, Volumul 6, Inhibiție, simptom, angoasă*, București: Editura Trei.
- Freeman, G. P., & Ventis, W. L. (2010). Does humor benefit health in retirement? Exploring humor as a moderator. *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, 6(3), 122-148.
- Fry, W. F. (2002). Humor and the brain: A selective review. *Humor*, 15(3), 305-334.
- Gabbard, G.O. (2007). *Tratat de psihiatrie psihodinamică*, Editura Trei, București.
- Gelkopf, M., & Kreidler, S. (1996). Is humor only fun, an alternative cure or magic? The cognitive therapeutic potential of humor. *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 10(4), 235-254.
- Gervais, M., & Wilson, D. S. (2005). The evolution and functions of laughter and humor: A synthetic approach. *The Quarterly Review of Biology*, 80(4), 395-430.
- Hillson, T. R., & Martin, R. A. (1994). What's so funny about that? The domains-interaction approach as a model of incongruity and resolution in humor. *Motivation and emotion*, 18(1), 1-29.
- Ionescu, Ș., Jacquet, M-M, Lhote, C. (2002). *Mecanisme de apărare*, Editura Polirom, București.
- Kellaris, J. J., & Cline, T. W. (2007). Humor and ad memorability: On the contributions of humor expectancy, relevancy, and need for humor. *Psychology & Marketing*, 24(6), 497-509.
- Kuiper, N. A., McKenzie, S. D., & Belanger, K. A. (1995). Cognitive appraisals and individual differences in sense of humor: Motivational and affective implications. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 19(3), 359-372.
- Lewis, M. W. (2000). Exploring paradox: Toward a more comprehensive guide. *Academy of Management Review*, 25(4), 760-776.
- Martin, R. A., & Lefcourt, H. M. (2004). Sense of humor and physical health: Theoretical issues, recent findings, and future directions. *Humor*, 17(1/2), 1-20.
- Martin, R. A. (2010). *The psychology of humor: An integrative approach*. Academic Press.
- McGhee, P. E. (1979). *Humor: Its origin and development* (p. 208). San Francisco: WH Freeman.

- Morar, V. (2008). *Estetica. Interpretări, texte, studii*. București: Editura Universității din București.
- Olsson, H., Backe, H., Sörensen, S., & Kock, M. (2002). The essence of humour and its effects and functions: a qualitative study. *Journal of Nursing Management, 10*, 21-26.
- Panksepp, J. (2000). The riddle of laughter: Neural and psychoevolutionary underpinnings of joy. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 9*(6), 183-186.
- Pien, D., & Rothbart, M. K. (1976). Incongruity and resolution in children's humor: A reexamination. *Child Development, 47*, 966-971.
- Ruch, W., McGhee, P. E., & Hehl, F. J. (1990). Age differences in the enjoyment of incongruity-resolution and nonsense humor during adulthood. *Psychology and Aging, 5*(3), 348.
- Salameh, W. A. (1983). Humor in psychotherapy: Past outlooks, present status, and future frontiers. *Handbook of humor research, 2*, 61-88.
- Samoilov, A., & Goldfried, M. R. (2000). Role of emotion in cognitive-behavior therapy. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice, 7*(4), 373-385.
- Schmidt, N. E., & Williams, D. I. (1971). The evolution of theories of humor. *Journal of Behavioral Science, 1*, 95-106.
- Suls, J. M. (1977). Cognitive and disparagement theories of humor: A theoretical and empirical synthesis. In A. J. Chapman & H. C. Foot (Eds.), *It's a funny thing, humour* (pp. 41-46). Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Suls, J. (1983). Cognitive processes in humor appreciation. In P. E. McGhee & J. H. Goldstein (Eds.), *Handbook of humor research* (pp. 39-57). New York: Springer New York.
- Ventis, W. L., Higbee, G., & Murdock, S. A. (2001). Using humor in systematic desensitization to reduce fear. *The Journal of general psychology, 128*(2), 241-253.
- Wright, J. H., & Davis, D. (1994). The therapeutic relationship in cognitive-behavioral therapy: Patient perceptions and therapist responses. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice, 1*(1), 25-45.
- Wyer, R. S., & Collins, J. E. (1992). A theory of humor elicitation. *Psychological review, 99*(4), 663.