

# The Spontaneous Use of Humour by Career Counsellors

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### Résumé

Cet article porte sur la manière dont les psychologues conseillers en orientation utilisent l'humour dans leurs entretiens, thème peu étudié en psychologie. Nous avons analysé, par une approche qualitative, les échanges humoristiques spontanément initiés par les conseillers dans seize réels entretiens d'orientation. Les résultats montrent que l'humour intervient sur trois plans : conceptuel, formel et attentionnel. Une omniprésence des émotions doit aussi être notée. Par ailleurs, en employant l'humour, les conseillers visent deux buts principaux : appréhender la situation et accompagner la construction du projet professionnel ou de formation de leurs clients.

Mots-clés : humour, orientation scolaire et professionnelle, adolescents

### Abstract

This article focuses on the use of humour by psychologists in career counselling interviews, a quite neglected field of research. Using a qualitative approach, we analyzed the spontaneous humour initiated by career counsellors in sixteen actual vocational interviews. Results show three levels of humorous intervention: conceptual, formal and attentional. Moreover, humour can be associated with a variety of different emotions. Humour was used for two major purposes: to grasp the situation and to support the development of the client's educational or vocational plan.

Keywords: humour, career counselling, adolescents

Humour is a complex phenomenon which evolves through contexts, cultures and time. Its definition, usefulness in therapy, and the way to measure it are still controversial. We know it is closely linked to the comic (Ruch, 1998), can take many forms (Franzini, 2012; Furman & Ahola, 1988) and is universally pervasive in human relationships (Martin, 2010). Some studies have shown a link between the working alliance and counselling effectiveness (Masdonati, Perdrix, Massoudi, & Rossier, 2014; Massoudi,

Masdonati, Clot-Siegrist, Franz & Rossier, 2008), and some authors have highlighted the significance of relationship influences in vocational choices (Schultheiss, 2003). Humour, therefore, could be relevant within career counselling interactions and might influence its outcomes.

### Dimensions, Functions and Therapeutic Use of Humour

Despite mixed research results, many authors support the use of humour in personal counselling and therapy (Poland, 1990). However, its use in psychology is controversial, in particular because of the potential risks for misunderstanding, unsuitable emotional implications, or setting violations (Kubie, 1971). Humour entails emotional, cognitive and social dimensions and functions (Martin, 2010). For instance, it helps manage stress (Kuiper, Martin, & Olinger, 1993; Strick, Holland, van Baaren, & van Knippenberg, 2009), promotes a healthy self-concept (Martin, Kuiper, Olinger, & Dance, 1993) and, for some practitioners, calls into question dysfunctional beliefs (Furman & Ahola, 1988). Humour also appears to be linked to social norms (Martin, 2010), group membership (Collinson, 1988), and conflict resolutions (Smith, Harrington, & Neck, 2000).



## Positive and Negative Styles of Humour

According to the dimensions generally accepted by researchers and literature models (e.g. Eysenck, 1942; for a review, see Martin, 2010), we define humour as a verbal expression highlighting a surprising or incongruous characteristic in reality, in a cognitive playful way, and accompanied by a certain emotional tone. Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir (2003) have postulated that the contradictory empirical results concerning the effects of humour may be due to the (incorrect) assumption that humour is limited to non-hostile and harmless aspects of the comic. To take the dark side of humour into account, they have established a two-dimensional model of humour: intrapsychic versus interpersonal; healthy versus unhealthy humour. The healthy-interpersonal style, called affiliative humour, corresponds to the tendency to entertain people and laugh with them. The healthy-intrapsychic style, self-enhancing humour, is linked to coping strategies, control of emotions and self-protection. Aggressive humour is considered an unhealthy-interpersonal style. It is the use of humour in a compulsive way or to manipulate others. In the unhealthy-intrapsychic style, also called self-defeating humour, humour is used at one's own expense in order to win someone's favour. It can be employed as well to hide negative emotions or to avoid thinking about problems.

Based on this framework, our research aimed at exploring how humour is spontaneously used by career counsellors in one-to-one interviews. More specifically, we tried to answer the two following research questions: (1) what are the forms of humour that are used by the counsellors? (2) what are the functions likely to be fulfilled by humour, as employed by counsellors?

### Method

#### Material

This research is a secondary analysis of audio-taped anonymous interviews collected for a doctoral dissertation (Rochat, 2017). The interviews were unstructured, without any framework, instruction or experimental manipulation, which made them appropriate for assessing spontaneous exchanges. They were led in 2014 by career counsellors working in public schools, in the francophone part of Switzerland. Our material consisted of sixteen interviews conducted by eight counsellors, four men and four women, with a Master's degree (or equivalent) in career counselling psychology. (Note that no data is available about the degree for two of them). Following the methods detailed by Schwab and Syed (2015), we re-sampled the material according to three criteria. First, we selected the interviews displaying the maximum use of humour (identified through pre-tracking) according to a purposive sampling principle. Second, following the maximum

variation method, we sought to maximize the number of counsellors included in order to maximize interpersonal variability in the use of humour. Third, as far as possible, we sought to include equal numbers of male and female counsellors and clients. Clients (9 girls and 7 boys) were between 14 and 17 ( $M = 15$ ) and were in their last compulsory school year, except one who was in the preceding year.

In order to identify the humorous interventions in the interviews, and according to our definition of humour, we focused on three elements highlighted in the literature: (1) the para-verbal components (e.g. prosody, rhythm, laughter) as they can reflect an emotional process; (2) the signified, as it is linked to the cognitive dimension of humour; (3) the signifier, or the way something is signified, in particular humorous techniques (Franzini, 2012; Furman & Ahola, 1988) such as play on words, language register variations or absurd remarks.

#### Analysis Procedure

Given the complexity of humour processes and the exploratory nature of our research aims, we chose a qualitative approach for data analysis. More precisely, a content analysis was applied to the counselling interviews transcriptions. We transcribed the interview sections displaying humorous interventions within their context. Then we proceeded to the content analysis using an induct-



ive approach and following the six steps described by L'Ecuyer (1990): (1) several readings of the whole transcriptions; (2) identification of unities of meaning; (3) building of categories, separately for the forms and the purposes of humour; (4) qualitative analysis for each category, then establishing themes and strands to obtain more global merging; (5) counting of the themes; (6) interpretation by analysing the links between categories, themes and strands.

## Results

### Forms of Humour: Three Levels of Intervention

Results are organized in three levels: categories, themes, and global strands. Three global strands were observed: conceptual (abstract ideas), formal (speech style), and attentional (attentional focus) (Figure 1). The conceptual strand, corresponding to abstract and cognitive manipulations, includes two themes: ambiguities about meaning (e.g. ironical remarks) and the association of elements that appear to be disparate (e.g. paradoxes). The form strand emphasizes the message style and is composed of two themes: the manipulation of language components and registers (e.g. metaphors) and amplitude changes or intensity variations in remarks (e.g. caricatures or euphemisms). The attentional focus strand uses the discourse layout to emphasize one specific element. It is divided into two themes: perception

is the weight given to one fact in the situation (e.g. provocative remarks); staging is the setting built to deliver a message or to bring the conversation partner to consider a specific idea (e.g. rhetorical questions). Furthermore, an emotional involvement

jectives also covers two themes: questioning the plan and guiding its implementation. Questioning leads to considerations about one's own attitude and plan; it also strengthens the plan and includes it in social reality (e.g. to confront it with reality or dis-

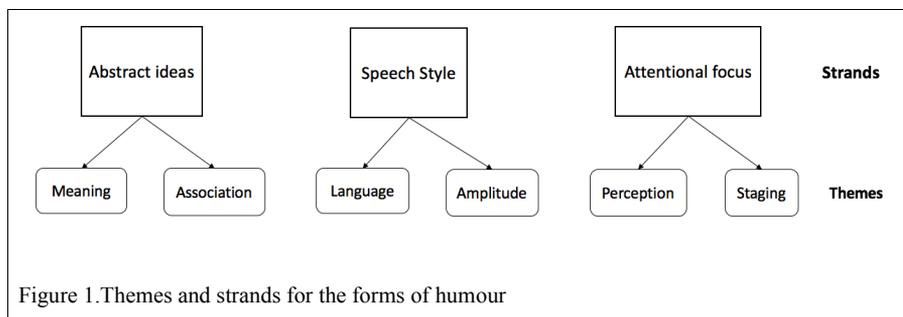


Figure 1. Themes and strands for the forms of humour

was identified across strands and themes.

### Purposes of Humour: Relationship and Vocational Guidance

Considering humour as a way of communicating, we identified the counsellors' purposes of using humour throughout the full context of the humorous exchanges. The merging of categories, themes and strands led to the identification of two major purposes: to grasp the situation, and to develop the client's vocational or educational plan (Figure 2). Grasping the situation involves establishing contact with clients and their situation and corresponding positioning. It includes two themes: connecting with others (e.g. to encourage the clients to express themselves and to explore and share emotions) and providing feedback (e.g. to criticize and to positively reinforce). The development of career ob-

crepancies, and to refer to social norms). Guiding clients involves influencing their intentions, ranging from giving information to setting out arguments as a specialist of career counselling (e.g. to counsel). These purposes cover the whole development of a vocational plan, from its conception to a concrete action plan.

## Discussion

### A Specific Humour Style for Helping Relationships

The majority of humorous interventions within our material can be placed on the healthy pole of the model of Martin and colleagues (2003) and targeted an affiliative purpose. In addition, a large number of exchanges aimed at dealing with emotions or coping with adversity, especially when the goals were to connect, to question, and to guide. They therefore largely correspond to Martin and colleagues' self-en-

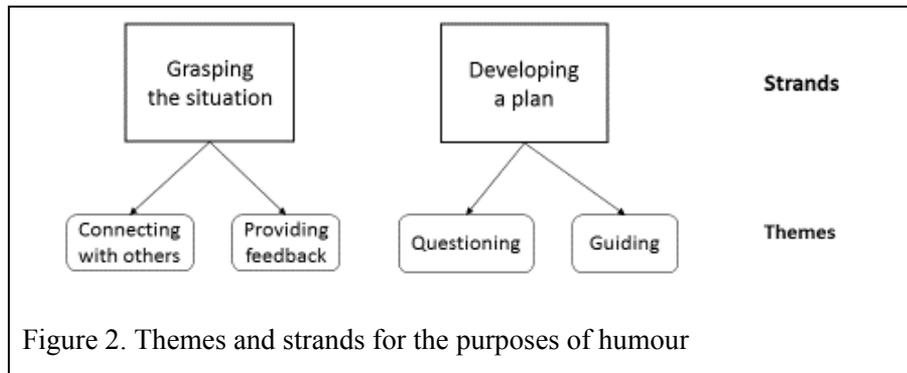


Figure 2. Themes and strands for the purposes of humour

hancing humour style, although the humour was oriented toward others and not the self. This humour style can be placed in the interpersonal-healthy category and seems to be particularly relevant for the therapeutic relationship. In the career counseling setting, this type of humour could possibly help the client to become aware of career development challenges and to discover new resources to deal with them. For instance, highlighting obstacles or discrepancies in one's behaviour may emphasize the need for adjustments. Through positive reframing or defusing of a situation, humour may also contribute to emotion regulation and support self-confidence despite difficulties.

### Humour as a Support for the Working Alliance and Coping with Transitions

Humour seems to help establish and maintain an empathic relationship between the counsellor and the client: on one hand, through the expression, management and sharing of emotions; on the other hand, simply by encouraging the clients to make their remarks explicit (connecting with others). Hu-

mour is also employed to express criticism (providing feedback) or to initiate reassessment (questioning). Thus, it may reduce the stress occasioned by these evaluations and maintain a positive link. Since it can help to resolve conflicts (Smith et al., 2000), it can also potentially contribute to the agreement on goals and tasks, and indirectly foster the working alliance (Bordin, 1979). Moreover, humour appears to question representations about the self and the world, through confrontation to specific difficulties, positive reframing or emphasizing social norms (questioning). This can foster creative solutions, realistic evaluations about the world and the self, and the adjustment to constraints, as stated by Kuiper and colleagues (1993). These functions are particularly useful in a career counselling setting, since humour might support vocational exploration, flexibility and adaptation skills. Humour can also contribute to supporting clients' vocational choices, the latter depending on self-evaluation and on the representation of the world of work (Gottfredson, 2005; Huteau, 2007). Additionally, our results highlight a link between humour and emotions: humour is used to explore and

to share emotions, as well as to provide support. Some humorous statements, such as provocative remarks, also generate emotional reactions. Through its emotional dimension, humour may help the client manage stress and achieve distance from negative emotions. As stated by Strick and colleagues (2009), humour constitutes a cognitive distraction, as it consumes cognitive resources for resolving incongruity. Hence, conceptual forms of humour may be especially effective. Moreover, as it is multidimensional, humour could help clients achieve consistency, in particular between cognition and emotion (Pierce, 1985). Through the use of humour, counsellors encourage clients to pay attention to their stance concerning social norms, giving an opportunity to reposition. Hence, humour can open up new possibilities and projections. Acting simultaneously at these different levels, humour could therefore help people to cope with career transitions.

### Limits and Perspectives

Subjective biases might have affected the tracking of humorous interactions, since analyses were carried out by a single person. Moreover, the material was re-sampled, and it may have impacted the results. We studied the interviews displaying the most humorous markers and excluded those with no or few humorous interventions. There may be differences in the way humour is used depending on whether people use it frequently



or not. Furthermore, the audio material may not have permitted observations of non-verbal markers (e.g. facial expressions, gesture or glances), so some humorous interventions may have been overlooked. Finally, the identification of humour based on humour mechanisms highlighted in the literature may have led to ignoring new forms of humour. Despite these limits, this research shows that career counsellors' spontaneous use of humour is not inconsequential for the counselling process. It is integrated into the interactions to establish and maintain positive relationships with clients and to help successfully complete the tasks involved in all stages of the career decision-making process. Further research might investigate the impact of specific forms of humour according to different intervention goals, as well as clarify the links between humour and emotions. Through a better understanding of its mechanisms, humour could be used in the future as a powerful relational tool, which might increase the effectiveness of career counselling interventions.

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