The true word in jest: an analysis of the impact of clients’ humour in therapy

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Why client humour?

Client use of humour is important to understand due to its impact on successful functioning (Mann 1991) and coping with ordinary human difficulties (Robinson 1991).

There is relatively little literature considering humour in psychotherapy and a lack of appetite for engaging with it (Lemma 2013). Most of the literature relates to therapists’ use of humour.

This study sets out to fill a gap in the literature by investigating the impact of instances of client humour on therapy in order that therapists can better understand and respond to client humour.

What has been found so far?

• Many clients use little or no humour in psychotherapy sessions.
• The case study client uses humour in clusters.

It is tentatively proposed that:
• The case study client uses humour to avoid confronting pain, manage distance in the therapeutic relationship and divert attention from parts of the true self to parts that he feels more confident displaying.
• The therapist misses at least part of the communication that the client is making by using humour, that this damages the relationship and contributes to the client disengaging with therapy.

How will it be examined?

This study examines therapy sessions recorded at a research clinic alongside weekly outcome measures (CORE 10) and process measures (ARM). A rich case record has been generated to investigate one client’s use of humour in depth following the HSCED approach (Elliott 2002). It is anticipated that the session transcripts will be analysed using a qualitative narrative analysis approach (McLeod and Balamoutsou 1996).

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This research project has received ethical approval from the University of Leicester.