Abstract

‘Creative efforts’, such as the use of humor, have been found to be beneficial to the nurse-patient (Nahas Lopez, 1998), teacher-student (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Liu, 2011), and psychologist-patient alliance (Franzini, 2006). Potentially humor use might benefit the working alliance in applied sport psychology, yet to date there is limited research. Sport psychology consultants \((n = 55)\) completed an online survey that explored humor use within their practice. Statistical analyses revealed most participants used humor for adaptive purposes such as to facilitate the working alliance, reinforce knowledge, and create healthy learning environments. Therefore, possible client change is likely to be facilitated by practitioners’ personal qualities and skills such as humor use and humor style. Recommendations are made for sport psychology practitioners in relation to humor use and further research.

Increasing recognition has been given to the importance of the professional relationship between the client and practitioner within sport psychology consultancy as a means of facilitating client change (Sharp, Hodge, & Danish, 2015; Tod & Andersen, 2012). The present study demonstrated that use of humor by practitioners is an important part of enhancing the professional relationship, and therefore potentially client change.

Key words: working alliance, creative effort, humor use.

A preliminary investigation into the use of humor in sport psychology practice
In clinical and counseling psychology interpersonal (practitioner-client) behaviors have been acknowledged as impacting positively, on client change, via the impact on the therapeutic alliance and the real relationship (Sexton & Whiston, 1994; Norcross & Lambert, 2011). Although the working alliance and real relationship in sport psychology have also been highlighted as important (e.g., Katz & Hemmings, 2009; Sharp, Hodge, & Danish, 2015) to intervention outcome (Petitpas, Giges, & Danish, 1999) there is relatively little associated research (Longstaff & Gervis, 2016; Tod & Andersen, 2012). Petitpas et al. (1999) highlighted that few studies have explored service delivery in depth. Furthermore, Pack, Hemmings, and Arvinen-Barrow (2014) inferred that the education and training of sport psychologists typically focuses on mechanistic learning of intervention techniques. Consequently, greater examination of the personal skills and qualities (i.e., non-specific factors; Oei & Shuttlewood, 1996), and creative efforts, that facilitate the working alliance and real relationship is warranted (e.g., Pack et al., 2014; Petitpas et al., 1999; Tod & Andersen, 2012). One such skill/quality and creative effort is the use of humor which, in clinical psychology, has been found to contribute to the development of the core counselling conditions (e.g., Hampes, 1994, 1999, 2001). Yet, within sport psychology there appears to be no existing published research having directly addressed the use of humor by practitioners.

Defined as “communication which is perceived by any of the interacting parties as humorous behaviour that leads to laughter, smiling, or a feeling of amusement” (Robinson, 1991, p. 10), humor is a complex phenomenon that incorporates emotional, cognitive, behavioural, physiological, and social aspects (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). Humor can be both intentional and spontaneous; meaning that its potential impact might differ according to delivery mode, humor style, and context. Given the multidimensional nature of humor (Beck, 1997), it is no surprise that its benefits are evident across many health contexts such as medical (e.g., Kisner, 1994),
social (e.g., Salameh & Fry, 2002), and psychological (e.g., Kuiper & Martin, 1998). In
the medical context, humor demonstrates the ‘humanness’ of practitioners by improving
student nurse-supervisor relationships, affording learning opportunities that limit possible
anxiety, creating memorable learning experiences, and facilitating socialisation between
staff and patients (Nahas Lopez, 1998). It has been proposed that humor provides an
acceptable outlet for emotion, a method for defusing tension and facilitating effective
communication, creating cohesion, decreasing embarrassment and anxiety, and for
creating positive lasting impressions on patients (Beck, 1997). It has also been found
that humor helps nurses cope by enhancing a sense of power and control, reducing
emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation (Wooten, 1992), and affording re-appraisal
of, and distraction from, difficult events (McCreaddie & Wiggins, 2008, 2009). In
addition to the beneficial outcomes, humor also serves many functions. For example, in
clinical psychology, it has been argued that humor might facilitate a client’s self-
understanding and is seen as an important component of behavior change (Franzini,
2006). Additionally, it is argued that humor helps in establishing rapport between
therapist and client, illustrating ir/rationality of clients’ problems, inducing relaxation,
reducing stress and anxiety, and promoting self-efficacy (Ventis, 1987).

However, there is limited research exploring the benefits and functions of humor
in sport psychology. During a study investigating the self-practice of sport psychologists
one participant described (unreported data) having attended humor workshops to
facilitate their work with clients (Pack et al., 2014). In addition, Longstaff and Gervis
(2016) noted that practitioners sometimes used humor to facilitate the practitioner-athlete
relationship. Alongside such research is an increasing evidence-base suggesting that
practitioners’ personal qualities (e.g., being authentic and genuine to self, being
comfortable to be around, seeing ‘behind’ the athlete and ‘getting through’ to them, and
being involved in ‘banter’) and contributions (e.g., self-referent responses, and dispelling
client myths relating to sport psychology) to the professional and affective bonds within consultancy are crucial (Sharp et al., 2015). Furthermore, Fifer, Henschen, Gould, & Ravizza (2008) highlighted the need for flexibility and ongoing creativity, being ‘down to earth’, and being fun-loving when consulting. The above positions humor as a potentially valuable component of applied sport psychology, but also as being poorly understood. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to investigate the use of humor in sport psychology consultancy.

**Method**

**Participants**

Purposive sampling (e.g., Barbour, 2001) was used to identify individuals who had completed, or were progressing toward completion of, a formal programme of education/experience/supervision leading to a potential professional qualification. Qualified and trainee practitioners with a range of experience levels were sampled to provide an overview of the use of humor, and possible differences, which might have proved useful for professional development purposes. Of the 126 individuals contacted 94 from the UK, USA, Ireland, and Australia accessed an online survey. Of those, 25 individuals accessed the participant information but did not proceed to complete the survey. A further 14 individuals accessed the participant information and provided some demographic details but did not proceed to the survey. A total of 55 individuals who completed the survey in full were included in the data analysis (n = 24 female; n = 31 male; M_age 40.2 years, age range = 24-77 years) (UK: n = 44; USA: n = 6; Ireland: n = 3 Australia: n = 2). The participants described their applied sport psychology experience as ranging between 1-38 years (M = 12.4 years) working with various sport populations (e.g., youth, high school, local, state, amateur, masters, national, international, Olympic, and Paralympic). Additionally, 15 participants were full-time consultants, 23 were part-
time consultants, and 6 were trainee consultants. 11 participants completed the survey anonymously. See Table 1 for details of participants’ professional certification/s.

**Survey Instrument**

A modified version of the survey constructed by White (2001) (for assessing the purposes of higher education teachers humor) was used to explore participants’ use of humor. To ensure context specificity, the original survey was adapted by adding one question relating to the working alliance. The first section of the survey comprised of demographic questions including age, years in professional practice, qualifications, sport/s consulted, and performance level of sport/s consulted. The second section of the survey asked respondents if they considered themselves a humorous person, if they used humor in spontaneous and/or planned ways, and whether their use of humor achieved its intended purpose. The third section of the survey comprised 13 statements related to purposes of using humor rated on a five-point Likert-Scale (1 = totally disagree; 5 = totally agree). Examples of the statements used include: (a) I use humor to relieve stress, (b) I use humor to motivate clients, and (c) I use humor to provoke a client’s thinking.

Currently White’s (2001) survey does not appear to have undergone validation processes, but as this study was an initial exploration the survey was considered acceptable for use in that it provided relevant focus.

**Procedure**

Following institutional ethical approval, potential participants were identified via purposeful sampling and contacted via email to invite participation. The email included a briefing regarding the purposes of the study, requirements of participation, and a URL to an online survey. The survey was constructed and distributed using Qualtrics software (Qualtrics, Provo, UT).

**Data Analysis**
Data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences software. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, and standard deviations) were calculated for the participant responses.

**Results**

**Use of Humor**

Of the sample, 80% (n = 44) stated ‘yes’, 14.54% (n = 8) stated ‘maybe’, and 5.46% (n = 3) stated ‘no’ to considering themselves as a humorous person. In total, 90.9% (n = 50) of the respondents reported using humor in their professional practice, and 9.1% (n = 5) did not. Of those who did use humor, 42% (n = 21) reported using humor ‘occasionally’, 36% (n = 18) ‘frequently’, and 22% (n = 11) ‘all the time’. A total of 46 participants stated that they used humor spontaneously, and eight participants indicated that they planned their use of humor. All the participants (n = 46) who answered the question ‘do you feel that your use of humour achieves its intended purpose/s?’ stated ‘yes’. Additionally, years of consultancy experience and professional status (e.g., full-time consultant, part-time consultant, trainee) did not appear to differentiate whether humor was used, or the purposes for humor use.

**Purpose of Humor Use**

The mean values from the five-point Likert scale are presented in Table 2, depicting the practitioners’ purpose of humor use within their practice. The results revealed that the three most strongly ‘agreed’ humor use statements were: (a) to build the working alliance relationship, (b) to create a healthy learning environment, and (c) to reinforce knowledge. In contrast, the results showed that the four most strongly ‘did not agree’ humor use statements were: (a) to intimidate, (b) control, (c) retaliate against, or (d) embarrass clients. It was also noted, that the practitioners tended to neither agree/disagree with the statement regarding using humor to handle unpleasant situations.

**Discussion**
The purpose of this study was to investigate the use of humor in applied sport psychology. Most participants considered themselves to be humorous, and used humor within their practice, indicating that humor is a common form of communication. The results also indicated that the participants used humor predominantly to build a working alliance, to create a healthy learning environment, and to reinforce clients’ knowledge. These results are similar to those found in medical settings wherein there is emphasis on using humor to create facilitative environments for trainee staff, staff, and patients (Ventis, 1987).

The results also support and extend existing sport psychology research (i.e., Longstaff & Gervis, 2016) which indicated that humor is a pervasive ‘non-counselling’ strategy used to develop and maintain the working/real alliance. Although Longstaff and Gervis (2016) did not elucidate on this strategy researchers in other contexts have previously advocated the use of humor for such purposes. For example, in counselling, Foster (1978) argued that humor sits alongside confrontation, empathy, and self-disclosure which may facilitate a therapeutic alliance and client progression. The current results add to the limited literature, as relatively little is known regarding how sport psychologists use creative efforts to establish an effective working/real alliance.

The results also demonstrate that although most participants used humor some did not. Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield (1991) argued that not all people might be considered (by themselves or by others) as humorous, and these differences might be understood via comparisons of expertise. For example, differences in humor-related expertise lie in information-processing (e.g., encoding and retrieving types of humor), and in message production (e.g., using humor more frequently in varied contexts). Additionally, perhaps these participants simply felt that the use of humor is not appropriate (i.e., Thomson, 1990).
While inappropriate to be prescriptive it is possible to give some initial recommendations for practice. First, most of the participants stated that they used humor to create a healthy learning environment alongside building the working alliance. Foster (1978) argued that the presence of humor in communication might be considered as a measure of a client’s learning and growth. Therefore, sport psychologists might consider this in relation to their practice; not necessarily to assess client growth, but perhaps toward assessing the growth and efficacy of the working alliance. This is also supported in previous literature as Tod and Andersen (2012) argued that the ability to establish positive working relationships is a key factor that contributes to effective practice.

Second, inappropriate use of humor can affect the working alliance negatively (Katz & Hemmings, 2009). It cannot be confirmed that participants were successful in avoiding negative consequences of humor, however all did indicate that their use of humor achieved its intended purpose/s. Furthermore, all participants indicated that they did not use humor in a controlling and/or punitive manner (i.e., ‘to intimidate clients’, ‘to embarrass clients’, ‘to control clients’, or ‘to retaliate against clients’). However, the spontaneity of humor might negate the appropriateness of its content.

To include humor practitioners should be mindful of certain issues. For example, Foster (1978) suggested that space for humor must be ‘allowed’ in that practitioners should accept and share their own vulnerabilities and limitations (i.e., self-disclosure via humor). However, practitioners should be mindful that such self-disclosure presents the possibility of failure (Foster, 1978). For example, self-disclosure might consist of content that does not contribute to the client’s understanding and/or well-being, and may tarnish a client’s perspective of the practitioner’s competency and/or well-being (Franzini, 2001). In the current study most of the participants ‘allowed’ space for, and reported being comfortable, using humor. Therefore, to ensure appropriateness of humor practitioners (irrespective of experience level) might reflect upon the following: (a) Am I
comfortable using humor? (b) Why, why not? (c) Is the dis/comfort due to my personality? (d) Is my use of humor congruent with my practice philosophy?

In addition to the above, practitioners might also consider the immersion of one’s self within processes of building rapport, trust, and empathy associated with effective practice and the real relationship (i.e., Gelso, 2009). Since humor is considered a stable personality trait (Martin et al., 2003) individuals might be sensitive to their own comfort level with using humor. However, Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield (1991) concluded that although people are sensitive to detecting opportunities for humor use in most situations individual predispositions influence this sensitivity to use humor in other situations. They also concluded that people who have a higher humor orientation might use humor in both socially approved and less socially approved contexts as they engage in less planning and/or consideration of situational sensitivity. In contrast, people who are not predisposed to use humor tend to evaluate context and appropriateness of message more carefully. Therefore, before using humor within professional practice it would be prudent that practitioners compare their humor use in professional and non-professional contexts and seek to enhance contextual intelligence (i.e., Sternberg, 1985).

Lastly, Foster (1978) argued that humor is a matter of good taste and timing. Before using humor it would be advisable for practitioners to first identify their client’s readiness for humor, and to consider refraining from using humor until they have a well-established working alliance, and that the practitioner is aware of how and when to use humor for specific purposes. To achieve the above practitioners might explore the following: (a) the different humor types/styles available, (b) the practitioner’s dominant humor style, (c) the congruence between practitioner and client’s dominant humor style, and (d) identification of potentially humorous moments. Moreover, practitioners might also consider the following: (a) are clients ‘silenced’ by humor? (b) does humor overshadow a client’s problems? (c) do clients ‘agree’ with humor to be polite? (d) do clients
respond to humor? (e) do clients transcend humor and perceive problems from a more helpful perspective? and (f) does humor serve to hide a practitioner’s nervousness and/or incompetence? (Foster, 1978).

Although the current study incorporated responses from a range of practitioners it must be acknowledged that the sample size was small, and that White’s (2001) questionnaire has not undergone validation processes. However, as an exploratory study the findings indicate that further research attention should be given to the use, and purposes, of humor in sport psychology consultancy. Further research might explore the specific types of humor used (i.e., humor style), how this humor is used/delivered, and the purposes for different humor styles. Also, the impact of different humor styles should be investigated to better understand the positive and negative effects on the development and maintenance of the working alliance. For example, a self-deprecating humor style might be used with good intent for normalising a client’s difficulties, yet the client might perceive this humor style as disparaging (Martin et al., 2003). Consequently, humor might cause client inhibition and failure of the working alliance. Researchers might also explore practitioners’ personal experiences of using humor. For example, the following questions are yet to be explored within applied sport psychology: (a) what is it like to use humor, (b) how does humor use impact on the practitioner, (c) what might/should happen if the use of humor is problematic, and (d) is humor use congruent with a practitioner’s personal and professional philosophy? Such research might provide rich information for the training and development of practitioner skills and add to the current understanding of the many types of knowledge, skills, and processes involved in delivery competence including different communication styles (Tod & Andersen, 2012).

Conclusion

The current study is the first to focus specifically on the use of humor in sport psychology consultancy, and incorporated responses from a range of practitioners in the
UK, USA, Ireland, and Australia. The exploratory findings suggest that humor is used widely in sport psychology practice across different levels of sport and sport-types. Humor is principally used for adaptive purposes such as to build the working alliance relationship, create healthy learning environments and to reinforce knowledge. Therefore, practitioners should seek to explore their humor style, and to refine its use to gain an additional ‘tool in the box’.

References


Table 1 - The professional qualifications/licences held by participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Participants (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BASES (British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences)</td>
<td>Accreditation</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BASES high performance sport accreditation</td>
<td>Accreditation</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Science Council (UK)</td>
<td>Chartership</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BPS (British Psychological Society)</td>
<td>Chartership</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BPS Stage 2 trainee</td>
<td>In training</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HCPC (Health and Care Professions Council – UK)</td>
<td>Registered practitioner</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AASP (Association for Applied Sport Psychology – US)</td>
<td>Certified</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AASP trainee</td>
<td>In training</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AHPRA (Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency)</td>
<td>Registered practitioner</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Some participants held dual qualifications.*

Table 2 – Participant responses for different purposes for humor use during professional practice (ranked in order of agreement).
### Purposes of humor statements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purposes of humor statements</th>
<th>( (M \pm SD) )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I use humor to build the client-practitioner relationship</td>
<td>4.58 ± 0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I use humor to create a healthy learning environment</td>
<td>4.21 ± 0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I use humor to reinforce knowledge</td>
<td>3.64 ± 0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I use humor to help clients develop a good self-image</td>
<td>3.38 ± 0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I use humor to handle unpleasant situations</td>
<td>3.17 ± 0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I use humor to motivate clients</td>
<td>2.23 ± 0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I use humor to provoke a client’s thinking</td>
<td>2.13 ± 0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I use humor to gain a client’s attention</td>
<td>2.00 ± 0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I use humor to relieve stress</td>
<td>1.82 ± 0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I use humor to embarrass clients</td>
<td>1.45 ± 0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I use humor to retaliate against clients</td>
<td>1.38 ± 0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I use humor to control clients</td>
<td>1.33 ± 0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. I use humor to intimidate clients</td>
<td>1.19 ± 0.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Key:* 5 = Strongly agree/ 4 = Agree / 3 = neither agree-disagree/ 2 = Disagree/ 1 = Strongly Disagree