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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

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

45 Defined as “communication which is perceived by any of the interacting parties
46 as humorous behaviour that leads to laughter, smiling, or a feeling of amusement”
47 (Robinson, 1991, p. 10), humor is a complex phenomenon that incorporates emotional,
48 cognitive, behavioural, physiological, and social aspects (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen,
49 Gray, & Weir, 2003). Humor can be both intentional and spontaneous; meaning that its
50 potential impact might differ according to delivery mode, humor style, and context.
51 Given the multidimensional nature of humor (Beck, 1997), it is no surprise that its
52 benefits are evident across many health contexts such as medical (e.g., Kisner, 1994),

53 social (e.g., Salameh & Fry, 2002), and psychological (e.g., Kuiper & Martin, 1998). In
54 the medical context, humor demonstrates the ‘humanness’ of practitioners by improving
55 student nurse-supervisor relationships, affording learning opportunities that limit possible
56 anxiety, creating memorable learning experiences, and facilitating socialisation between
57 staff and patients (Nahas Lopez, 1998). It has been proposed that humor provides an
58 acceptable outlet for emotion, a method for defusing tension and facilitating effective
59 communication, creating cohesion, decreasing embarrassment and anxiety, and for
60 creating positive lasting impressions on patients (Beck, 1997). It has also been found
61 that humor helps nurses cope by enhancing a sense of power and control, reducing
62 emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation (Wooten, 1992), and affording re-appraisal
63 of, and distraction from, difficult events (McCreaddie & Wiggins, 2008, 2009). In
64 addition to the beneficial outcomes, humor also serves many functions. For example, in
65 clinical psychology, it has been argued that humor might facilitate a client’s self-
66 understanding and is seen as an important component of behavior change (Franzini,
67 2006). Additionally, it is argued that humor helps in establishing rapport between
68 therapist and client, illustrating ir/rationality of clients’ problems, inducing relaxation,
69 reducing stress and anxiety, and promoting self-efficacy (Ventis, 1987).

70 However, there is limited research exploring the benefits and functions of humor
71 in sport psychology. During a study investigating the self-practice of sport psychologists
72 one participant described (unreported data) having attended humor workshops to
73 facilitate their work with clients (Pack et al., 2014). In addition, Longstaff and Gervis
74 (2016) noted that practitioners sometimes used humor to facilitate the practitioner-athlete
75 relationship. Alongside such research is an increasing evidence-base suggesting that
76 practitioners’ personal qualities (e.g., being authentic and genuine to self, being
77 comfortable to be around, seeing ‘behind’ the athlete and ‘getting through’ to them, and
78 being involved in ‘banter’) and contributions (e.g., self-referent responses, and dispelling

79 client myths relating to sport psychology) to the professional and affective bonds within
80 consultancy are crucial (Sharp et al., 2015). Furthermore, Fifer, Henschen, Gould, &
81 Ravizza (2008) highlighted the need for flexibility and ongoing creativity, being ‘down
82 to earth’, and being fun-loving when consulting. The above positions humor as a
83 potentially valuable component of applied sport psychology, but also as being poorly
84 understood. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to investigate the use of humor
85 in sport psychology consultancy.

86 **Method**

87 **Participants**

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

104 time consultants, and 6 were trainee consultants. 11 participants completed the survey
105 anonymously. See Table 1 for details of participants' professional certification/s.

106 **Survey Instrument**

107 A modified version of the survey constructed by White (2001) (for assessing the
108 purposes of higher education teachers humor) was used to explore participants' use of
109 humor. To ensure context specificity, the original survey was adapted by adding one
110 question relating to the working alliance. The first section of the survey comprised of
111 demographic questions including age, years in professional practice, qualifications,
112 sport/s consulted, and performance level of sport/s consulted. The second section of the
113 survey asked respondents if they considered themselves a humorous person, if they used
114 humor in spontaneous and/or planned ways, and whether their use of humor achieved its
115 intended purpose. The third section of the survey comprised 13 statements related to
116 purposes of using humor rated on a five-point Likert-Scale (1 = totally disagree; 5 =
117 totally agree). Examples of the statements used include: (a) I use humor to relieve stress,
118 (b) I use humor to motivate clients, and (c) I use humor to provoke a client's thinking.
119 Currently White's (2001) survey does not appear to have undergone validation processes,
120 but as this study was an initial exploration the survey was considered acceptable for use
121 in that it provided relevant focus.

122 **Procedure**

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

128 **Data Analysis**

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

132 Results

133 Use of Humor

134 Of the sample, 80% ($n = 44$) stated 'yes', 14.54% ($n = 8$) stated 'maybe', and
135 5.46% ($n = 3$) stated 'no' to considering themselves as a humorous person. In total,
136 90.9% ($n = 50$) of the respondents reported using humor in their professional practice,
137 and 9.1% ($n = 5$) did not. Of those who did use humor, 42% ($n = 21$) reported using
138 humor 'occasionally', 36% ($n = 18$) 'frequently', and 22% ($n = 11$) 'all the time'. A total
139 of 46 participants stated that they used humor spontaneously, and eight participants
140 indicated that they planned their use of humor. All the participants ($n = 46$) who
141 answered the question 'do you feel that your use of humour achieves its intended
142 purpose/s?' stated 'yes'. Additionally, years of consultancy experience and professional
143 status (e.g., full-time consultant, part-time consultant, trainee) did not appear to
144 differentiate whether humor was used, or the purposes for humor use.

145 Purpose of Humor Use

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

154 Discussion

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

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

172 The results also demonstrate that although most participants used humor some did
173 not. Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield (1991) argued that not all people might be
174 considered (by themselves or by others) as humorous, and these differences might be
175 understood via comparisons of expertise. For example, differences in humor-related
176 expertise lie in information-processing (e.g., encoding and retrieving types of humor),
177 and in message production (e.g., using humor more frequently in varied contexts).
178 Additionally, perhaps these participants simply felt that the use of humor is not
179 appropriate (i.e., Thomson, 1990).

180 While inappropriate to be prescriptive it is possible to give some initial
181 recommendations for practice. First, most of the participants stated that they used humor
182 to create a healthy learning environment alongside building the working alliance. Foster
183 (1978) argued that the presence of humor in communication might be considered as a
184 measure of a client's learning and growth. Therefore, sport psychologists might consider
185 this in relation to their practice; not necessarily to assess client growth, but perhaps
186 toward assessing the growth and efficacy of the working alliance. This is also supported
187 in previous literature as Tod and Andersen (2012) argued that the ability to establish
188 positive working relationships is a key factor that contributes to effective practice.
189 Second, inappropriate use of humor can affect the working alliance negatively (Katz &
190 Hemmings, 2009). It cannot be confirmed that participants were successful in avoiding
191 negative consequences of humor, however all did indicate that their use of humor
192 achieved its intended purpose/s. Furthermore, all participants indicated that they did not
193 use humor in a controlling and/or punitive manner (i.e., 'to intimidate clients', 'to
194 embarrass clients', 'to control clients', or 'to retaliate against clients'). However, the
195 spontaneity of humor might negate the appropriateness of its content.

196 To include humor practitioners should be mindful of certain issues. For example,
197 Foster (1978) suggested that space for humor must be 'allowed' in that practitioners
198 should accept and share their own vulnerabilities and limitations (i.e., self-disclosure via
199 humor). However, practitioners should be mindful that such self-disclosure presents the
200 possibility of failure (Foster, 1978). For example, self-disclosure might consist of
201 content that does not contribute to the client's understanding and/or well-being, and may
202 tarnish a client's perspective of the practitioner's competency and/or well-being
203 (Franzini, 2001). In the current study most of the participants 'allowed' space for, and
204 reported being comfortable, using humor. Therefore, to ensure appropriateness of humor
205 practitioners (irrespective of experience level) might reflect upon the following: (a) Am I

206 comfortable using humor? (b) Why, why not? (c) Is the dis/comfort due to my
207 personality? (d) Is my use of humor congruent with my practice philosophy?

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

222 Lastly, Foster (1978) argued that humor is a matter of good taste and timing.
223 Before using humor it would be advisable for practitioners to first identify their client's
224 readiness for humor, and to consider refraining from using humor until they have a well-
225 established working alliance, and that the practitioner is aware of how and when to use
226 humor for specific purposes. To achieve the above practitioners might explore the
227 following: (a) the different humor types/styles available, (b) the practitioner's dominant
228 humor style, (c) the congruence between practitioner and client's dominant humor style,
229 and (d) identification of potentially humorous moments. Moreover, practitioners might
230 also consider the following: (a) are clients 'silenced' by humor? (b) does humor over-
231 shadow a client's problems? (c) do clients 'agree' with humor to be polite? (d) do clients

258 UK, USA, Ireland, and Australia. The exploratory findings suggest that humor is used
259 widely in sport psychology practice across different levels of sport and sport-types.
260 Humor is principally used for adaptive purposes such as to build the working alliance
261 relationship, create healthy learning environments and to reinforce knowledge.
262 Therefore, practitioners should seek to explore their humor style, and to refine its use to
263 gain an additional ‘tool in the box’.

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

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

Note. Some participants held dual qualifications.

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

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

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