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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

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232 respond to humor? (e) do clients transcend humor and perceive problems from a more  
233 helpful perspective? and (f) does humor serve to hide a practitioner’s nervousness and/or  
234 incompetence? (Foster, 1978).

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

### **Conclusion**

256 The current study is the first to focus specifically on the use of humor in sport  
257 psychology consultancy, and incorporated responses from a range of practitioners in the

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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- 373



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).

## HUMOR AND SPORT PSYCHOLOGY CONSULTANCY

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*