# Sport Psychology Consultants' Reflections on the Role of Humor: "It's Like Having another Skill in Your Arsenal"

Date of resubmission: 5th June, 2019

**Abstract**

Previous research demonstrates that sport psychology consultants use humor to facilitate the working alliance, reinforce client knowledge, and create healthy learning environments. The current study sought to gain further insights into consultants' reflections on the role of humor, humor styles, purposes for humor, and experiences of humor use. Forty-eight sport psychology consultants completed an online survey comprising open-ended questions. Thematic analysis revealed four themes: (a) it's the way I tell 'em, (b) it's the way I don't tell 'em, (c) this is why I tell 'em, and (d) learning to use humor in consultancy. Participants used two styles of humor (i.e., 'deadpan' and 'self-deprecating') each having the goal of facilitating the working alliance. Although not all participants used humor during consultancy, its incorporation might render the working alliance and the real relationship as resources in ways (e.g., a "barometer" that predicts consultancy outcomes) previously not considered in applied sport psychology.

*Key words: humor style, humor outcome, applied sport psychology*

## Sport Psychology Consultants' Reflections on the Role of Humor: "It's Like Having another Skill in Your Arsenal"

In clinical psychology, it has been argued that the client-therapist relationship accounts for a large variance in client outcome compared to expectancy effects and therapeutic techniques (Lambert & Barley, 2001). Similarly in sport psychology, a general consensus exists that successful consultancy outcomes are influenced by the client-consultant relationship (e.g., Longstaff & Gervis, 2016; Petitpas, Giges, & Danish, 1999; Sharp, Hodge, & Danish, 2015). For example, the *working alliance* (i.e., the agreement between the client and the consultant regarding shared goals, tasks, and emotional bonds; Bordin, 1979) has been suggested as an important determinant of successful consultancy outcomes. Researchers have also identified a number of factors that can influence the quality of the working alliance. For example, the *real relationship* (i.e., a transference-free, genuine, and authentic relationship based on realistic perceptions), between the client and the consultant, is said to silently either facilitate or impede an effective working alliance (Gelso, 2002).

In addition to the working alliance and real relationship, a number of personal characteristics of effective consultants have been found to influence the client-consultant relationship (e.g., Fifer, Henschen, Gould, & Ravizza, 2008; Sharp & Hodge, 2011; Sharp et al., 2015; Staples, Sloane, Whipple, & Yorkston, 1976). These characteristics include good interpersonal skills (Orlick & Partington, 1987; Partington & Orlick, 1987), being approachable (Dunn & Holt, 2003), being friendly, easy-going, fun, and fitting-in with athletes (Anderson, Miles, Robinson, & Mahoney, 2004; Weigand, Richardson, & Weinberg, 1999), and more recently, the use of humor as part of consultancy (Pack, Hemmings, Winter, & Arvinen-Barrow, 2018).

Typically defined as "communication which is perceived by any of the interacting parties as humorous behavior that leads to laughter, smiling, or a feeling of amusement" (Robinson, 1991, p. 10), humor is a complex biopsychosocial phenomenon, consisting of physiological, cognitive, affective, behavioral, and socio/contextual components (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). Humor use by the consultant can be intentional or spontaneous, both of which can lead to improvements in the client's self-understanding and behavior (Franzini, 2001), client-consultant relationship (by influencing the working alliance and real relationships), and consultancy outcomes. For example, Nelson (2008) argued that laughter (as an expression of humor) serves as an attachment process and facilitates closeness within the client-consultant relationship. When used as a form of interpersonal self-disclosure, humor has also been found to influence the extent to which the consultant is "open for approval", thus indicating the level of congruence between the client and the consultant (Wheeless & Grotz, 1976).

The use of humor has also been linked to the development of effective learning environments. It is known that humor helps to create a non-threatening atmosphere, aids attention span and retention of information, and enhances problem-solving and coping strategies (Achike & Nain, 2005; Morales-Mann & Kaitell, 2001; Ulloth, 2003). In education, teachers' use of humor has been found to make students' learning more enjoyable and interesting (Gilliland & Mauritsen, 1971), and it has been proposed that use of humor should elicit learnable opportunities to clients (e.g., Falkenberg, Buchkremer, Bartels, & Wild, 2011).

To date research into the use of humor in applied sport psychology consultancy is limited. A recent preliminary investigation into consultants' ($n$ = 55) use of humor found that the majority of participants used humor within their professional practice (Pack et al., 2018). The results revealed that most participants used humor with the goal of facilitating

the working alliance, reinforcing client knowledge, and creating healthy learning environments. The authors concluded that humor in consultancy can be an important part of enhancing the client-consultant relationship, and as a consequence, it can have a positive effect on consultancy outcomes. Since the research was the first of its kind, and preliminary in nature, further research is warranted to gain a better insight into consultants' use of humor in their practice. The current study sought to gain an insight into consultants' reflections on the role of humor in consultancy. More specifically, the study aimed to explore consultants' humor styles, the purpose of humor use, and their experiences of humor use.

## Method

### Participants

Sport psychology consultants ($N$ = 48; $n$ = 20 female; $n$ = 28 male; $M_{age}$ 42.2 years, age range = 26-77 years) were included in the data analysis (UK: $n$ = 38; USA: $n$ = 6; Ireland: $n$ = 2 Australia: $n$ = 2). The participants' professional experience ranged between 4-38 years ($M$ = 14.2 years). The sample had experience working with various sport populations (e.g., youth, high school, local, state, amateur, masters, national, international, Olympic, and Paralympic). Please see Table 1 for details of participants' professional certification/s.

### The Survey Instrument

A survey constructed by White (2001) for assessing the purposes of higher education teachers' humor (see Pack et al. 2018 for further details), was modified to explore consultants' use of humor via the addition of open-ended questions. Examples of the additional questions include: (a) do you consider yourself a humorous person? (b) do you use humor in your professional practice? (c) can you give examples of when/why you have used humor in your professional practice? Please note your thoughts, feelings, and perceptions that you can remember about these examples; and (d) what is it like to use humor in your

professional practice? These questions were intended to elicit responses that would provide illustrative information regarding the context of humor use, the motives for humor use, the social dynamics impacted by humor, and personal perceptions of humor, in order to complement existing research.

## Procedure

Following institutional ethical approval, potential participants were purposefully identified via consultant registration lists, the sport psychology Listserv® database, and contacted via email. Qualified and trainee applied sport psychology consultants worldwide with a range of experience levels were sampled for the study. 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

A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) was conducted on all responses. "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). Initially, all open-ended responses per question were retrieved from Qualtrics, and reviewed by the authors. Preliminary codes were generated based upon themes (e.g., humor style; Martin et al., 2003) within existing literature, and then organised into higher-level themes. The second, third, and fourth authors acted as critical friends (Smith & McGannon, 2018) to the first author in challenging and developing the interpretations of the data set, and coding was deemed to be complete when no new themes or concepts emerged from the data.

# Results

The following sections discuss key elements of four over-riding themes which emerged from the data: (a) it's the way I tell 'em, (b) it's the way I don't tell 'em, (c) this is why I tell 'em, and (d) learning to use humor in consultancy.

## It's the Way I Tell 'Em

The data revealed that the consultants' used different styles of humor for different purposes. It seemed that the two most commonly used styles were: (a) deadpan (affiliative other-enhancing), and (b) self-deprecating (affiliative other-enhancing).

**Deadpan (affiliative other-enhancing).** The participants described their humor style as "storytelling", "quick wit rather than laugh out loud", "light-hearted", "banter", "sarcasm", "dry humor", "quips", and "curious language." The term "deadpan" was often used. For example one participant commented: "I am often described as having a dry sense of humor, saying something odd but keeping deadpan." The effectiveness of deadpan humor rests upon the way it is delivered and focused, usually in an emotionless, straight-faced, and sarcastic manner. Unsurprisingly, deadpan might often be viewed as an aggressive/hostile style of humor when used to disparage self and/or others (i.e., Martin et al., 2003). However, in the current context, deadpan was portrayed as affiliative (as opposed to disparaging) and as fostering agency (as opposed to instilling hopelessness):

> I can be sarcastic, and funny in most settings. I think I am able to read individual clients and see when it might be ok to press their buttons a bit in the name of getting a smile or a laugh. I believe that this opens a portal for further engagement.

The importance of explaining the use of deadpan to clients was also apparent:

> One thing I try to do is to ensure my pitch, tone, and body language do not suggest I am trying to make them feel stupid. I will often, even state that I am not saying it like this to make you feel silly, but I am saying it how you have said it (which might and often does sound silly), but it lets them come to that conclusion, which potentially has more of an impact.

Contained within the participants' use of humor were aspects of personal and professional life. In particular, the participants described the use of "irony, incongruity, and absurdity in the human condition", the "entertaining elements of life", and the "paradoxical" as being common elements of discussion with their clients. The success of deadpan seemed linked to the ability to juxtapose seemingly unrelated issues within personal and professional life to create positive consultancy experiences. Due to the potential nature of deadpan, it seemed paradoxical that the participants used this style frequently, although several highlighted the need for a good vocabulary and the creativity to construct and deliver alternative narratives from often disparate information. However, deadpan seemed to provide a stabilizing and precipitating factor for clients to permit exploration of complex issues (i.e., Marmarosh et al., 2009). Therefore, as Kuipers (2009) stated the (effective) production of humor seemed to require "considerable linguistic aptitude" (p. 392), and a heightened reflexive ability and contextual intelligence if the humor was to achieve the intended purpose.

**Self-deprecating (affiliative other-enhancing).** Most participants also used self-deprecating humor, that is humor that involves doing or saying funny things at one's own expense with the purpose of gaining approval, ingratiating oneself, and permitting oneself to be the "butt" of others' humor (Martin et al., 2003) in their consultancy. Humor, as a form of interpersonal self-disclosure renders the consultant "open for approval (or not)" (Wheeless & Grotz, 1976), and consequently is an important factor in developing empathy. Self-defeating

humor might also represent defensive denial or provide a mask to one's self-focused negative feelings (Martin et al., 2003). Thus, elements of emotional neediness, avoidance, and poor self-esteem are often associated with this style of humor (Fabrizi & Pollio, 1987). However, the current participants were not seeking to mask such insecurities via humor. Instead, as with the use of deadpan, some participants considered that sharing humor (e.g., in the form of self-disclosure of personal fallibility) enhanced their clients' sense of agency: "I use self-deprecating humor when showing an athlete how I've handled similar situations in the past, so they understand no one has it all together." Another participant commented: "Sometimes I may make a joke about myself to make them feel more comfortable. It often makes them laugh and validates that it's ok for them to feel however it is that they feel."

The normalizing and validating impact from the participants' self-deprecation contradicts researchers (e.g., Saroglou & Scariot, 2002) who suggest that self-defeating humor is negatively related to communion and security in attachment. However, as with their use of deadpan, the participants described the importance of not allowing their self-deprecation to position them inappropriately (e.g., over-shadowing their sport psychology knowledge) nor to over-shadow a client's issues.

**It's the Way I Don't Tell 'Em**

Not all the current participants used humor in their consultancy. Some participants considered humor as potentially inappropriate for two reasons: (a) humor is just not me, and (b) they don't get it.

**Humor is just not me.** Most participants seemed to consider themselves as being humorous, but four participants seemed uncertain, and two considered themselves to have a serious disposition and as not being naturally humorous. The context of humor use seemed important to influence these reflections, and one participant also believed that the strength of the working alliance influenced their use of humor:

> When I feel like I have a strong relationship with my clients, I can then challenge some of their beliefs, thoughts and actions by using humor. I guess at times it can feel awkward when you have not built a relationship with someone.

Some of the participants considered that using humor was incongruent with their professional philosophy. As Tudor and Worrall (2004) argued it is important for practitioners to recognize, examine, and align their personal and professional philosophies. One participant commented:

> I typically follow a person-centred approach in my work and most of my work is office-based. Much of this philosophy focuses on the other person and displaying empathy, congruence, and acceptance. I guess there is space for humor outside this setting.

In contrast another participant (who did use humor) commented:

> It allows me to more closely match my personality to my work, and that level of congruence is reflected in the level of rapport with clients. As humor is a natural part of my personality, I believe that when the time is appropriate, humor allows me to practice within my humanistic framework of behaving true to myself as a consultant.

Congruence affords a sense of authenticity when interacting with clients (Tod, 2007), and involves expressing oneself in a way that is consistent with inner thoughts and feelings (Harter, 2005). Several participants described their use of humor as “liberating” and as

allowing them to "be more of myself" thereby acknowledging a greater personal-professional congruence resulting from their humor use. However, humor is based upon mutual understanding and should perhaps only be used by those who receive validation for previous uses of humor within similar contexts, and even then consultants might "follow the lead" available from a client's own humor style (Wooten, 1992). Not only might a consultant appear unprofessional, and ineffective, but a client might also feel that their issues are being demeaned or over-looked in favour of a consultant's ego as their attempts at humor overwhelm the consultation (i.e., time, and emotional "space") and the client's expectations:

> I also think that the general perception of psychologists is for us to sit there seriously listening to people's problems and that there is no place for humor because it could be seen as belittling our clients. It's definitely something that has to be carefully managed and balanced in order for it to have therapeutic gain, both in terms of developing the professional alliance or therapeutic relationship and in helping individuals reflect and change. Too much humor and it will lose its point and we will lose our credibility. Not enough humor and we might appear as emotionless robots.

The participants' choice whether to use humor was considered in terms of professional and personal congruence, authenticity, the effectiveness of practice, and the resulting impact upon the real relationship. Despite some participants having chosen not to use humor in their consultancy other participants' use of humor highlighted the perhaps inevitable (and necessary) blurring of personal and professional roles, and the difficulty of maintaining an artificial boundary between self-as-person and self-as-consultant.

**They don't get it.** Despite using deadpan and self-deprecating humor some participants did so with an underlying sense of caution. One participant commented:

"sometimes it can be difficult judging what is accepted and possibly expected across cultures, contexts, and individuals." Sultanoff (2013) pointed out that a client must "get" a consultant's humor (i.e., can identify, understand, and appreciate what is meant to be humorous; Garner, 2006) otherwise they are unlikely to perceive the incongruity and absurdity of their situation suggesting that the intention of humor has been lost. One participant reflected on an instance when a client had not "got it": "There is nothing worse than trying to connect with a younger athlete by being humorous and it going down like a lead balloon, it won't do anything for helping to develop that relationship." Researchers have frequently stated the need for practitioners to impart advice, and communicate, in a manner accessible to all (i.e., using layperson terminology; e.g. Orlick & Partington, 1987; Pain & Harwood, 2004). Other participants had considered such issues, including the impact of initiating or reciprocating humor, and some reflected at length on their possible use of humor prior to its actual use:

> The possibility of misinterpretation is high particularly when being professional on difficult, complex, and serious concepts and skills. Humor has its place in the form of not taking oneself too seriously, but never at the expense of clients. Clients deserve our full attention and for us to take everything seriously. We can respond to their humor but not initiate it.

**This is Why I Tell 'Em**

The participants who used humor seemed to do so for two purposes: (a) positioning the sport psychology consultant, and (b) lightening the mood.

**Positioning the sport psychology consultant.** Previous researchers have reported problematic perceptions of sport psychology consultants (e.g., Dunn & Holt, 2003; Pain & Harwood, 2004; Wilson, Gilbert, Gilbert, & Sailor, 2009). However, humor appeared to

combat such perceptions when used to position (i.e., Van Langenhove & Harré, 1993) sport psychology and to defuse uncertainty and myths:

> Athletes are sometimes intimidated by sport psychology, worried that they are somehow broken or otherwise concerned that I am psychoanalyzing them. I try to break the ice by bringing out the elephant in the room using humor and empathy for their position.

Another participant commented: "I use jokes about perceptions that people have about psychology, for example not being a mind-reader, I am not going to crawl into your head and start reading your deepest thoughts." Humor helped shape mutual expectations, to normalize the use of sport psychology and to position the consultant as "human" and approachable. Previous researchers in sport (e.g., Burke, Peterson, & Nix, 1995; Dunn & Holt, 2003; Grisaffe, Blom, & Burke, 2003) have identified the importance of such consultant-related qualities but have not identified the role of humor in constructing and purveying them. Wampold and Budge (2012) suggested that each client-consultant meeting is a "dose of connectedness" (p. 611); perhaps this sentiment might be more specific in the current context and amended to each shared humorous moment is a dose of connectedness. Several participants commented that they believed their use of such humor enabled clients to perceive them as "normal" and "authentic" by demonstrating that they are approachable, not above judgement, not overly serious, and able to reflexively experience and express emotion. As one participant stated, the use of humor to position themselves as a consultant allowed them to demonstrated to their clients: "I'm human."

**Lightening the mood.** In addition to positioning sport psychology consultancy, humor was used to create an atmosphere wherein clients, and the consultants, felt

comfortable to discuss issues and to provide respite for observing circumstances within a wider context. One participant commented: “It lightens the mood and it actually makes those clients that are perfectionists acknowledge they are doing really well in comparison to the general population.” It was considered that clients would be more likely to engage with the consultancy process, and to achieve desired outcomes, if humor was incorporated. Participants also described using humor to clarify and normalize a client’s circumstances, and/or to restructure unhelpful perspectives by making light of circumstances to enable an enhanced appreciation and understanding of current predicaments:

> I often use humor to exaggerate and illustrate the irrationality of an individual's belief, perhaps taking it one step removed, or even putting myself into the situation so that the client is imagining me expressing the belief rather than themselves, although that depends on our relationship and my view of whether it would be beneficial to the client or not at that point. I don't think humor changes what I would say, but it puts the message into a memorable context and individuals are able to look at themselves and reflect on their thoughts, actions and feelings in a more light-hearted way.

An emphasis was placed upon affording purposeful contradiction and distortion that gave opportunity to raise consciousness, identify rigid unhelpful thinking patterns (Sultanoff, 2013), reframe irrational circumstances of clients’ issues (e.g., “excessive self-criticism”, and “temporary setbacks”), and regain a more helpful perspective (or, “remoralization” as opposed to demoralization; Frank, 1973). In addition to benefitting clients, it also seemed that humor afforded a “lighter” approach for the participants, some of whom described their experiences of using humor in consultancy as “refreshing”, “exhilarating”, “comfortable”, “relaxing”, “pleasurable”, and “rewarding.”

### Learning to Use Humor in Consultancy

The aims of this study did not originally include exploring recommendations for using or learning to use humor within professional practice. However, several participants commented on this issue and considered that humor should be incorporated within a consultant's skill-set:

> As I have gained experience I feel more comfortable introducing humor into my work. It would not be something I would suggest someone developing the consultancy skills pays conscious attention to trying to improve, but I would suggest encouraging awareness and reflection as to when it might be useful.

Therefore, the ability to use humor effectively might only be derived through ongoing practice, experience, and validation (e.g., in the form of shared laughter). Another participant went further and suggested that humor can be taught, learnt, and used: "I believe consultants can be taught to be funny. I believe there are specific skills and tactics that when learned and applied can be very effective." However, given some of the preceding discussion it might be difficult to ascertain a client's reasons for laughing, and so it should not be assumed that clients necessarily share a practitioner's humor.

## Discussion

The current study sought to gain an insight into sport psychology consultants' reflections on the role of humor. More specifically, the study sought to explore consultants' humor styles, the purposes of humor use, and their experiences of humor use. The results revealed that participants predominantly used two humor styles: (a) deadpan (affiliative other-enhancing), and (b) self-deprecating (affiliative other-enhancing). Although many styles of humor exist (see Martin et al., 2003) the current study captured two recognized

humor styles, albeit used for different purposes than typically suggested in the existing literature. Both deadpan and self-deprecating humor are usually regarded as negative styles of humor (Martin et al., 2003). However, the current participants used both humor styles in a positive manner.

Gelso and Carter (1994) have suggested that the real relationship is the most essential element of brief therapy work, and recent research in sport (e.g., Longstaff & Gervis, 2016; Sharp et al., 2015) supports this suggestion. Gelso (2002) also argued that client-consultant relationships characterized by high levels of genuineness are likely to be most effective. The current results suggest that humor may contribute to the development of the working alliance by enhancing the sense ("amount") of genuineness and transparency (i.e., the real relationship) between client and consultant (Watson, Greenberg, & Lietaer, 1998). The results revealed that many of the participants used humor to integrate their personal and professional life within consultancy. In doing so enhanced their sense of congruence and authenticity, by affording transparency whereby the consultant's experiences are revealed to clients (Watson et al., 1998).

The results also support existing literature (Sultanoff, 2013) with regards to how humor was used in consultancy. The participants highlighted that humor use in consultancy should align with, and elicit, core therapeutic ways of being (i.e., Rogers, 1957). That is, the sender and receiver of humor should mutually experience empathy, acceptance, and genuineness. Kolden, Klein, Wang, and Austin (2011) argued that consultants using humor in their practice must strive for genuineness and mindfully develop congruence with their client via practice, effort, and feedback. Furthermore, therapists might model congruence by using personal pronouns, expressing personal dis/likes, and using incongruent moments as a means of returning to genuineness. The current results revealed that the participants were modelling

congruence through sharing and explaining their humor with clients in a manner akin to psychoeducation.

The results also revealed that participants used deadpan and self-deprecating humor to dispel clients' uncertainty regarding the nature of sport psychology and did so by creating a sense of equal footing and thus reducing perceptions of sport psychology consultants as frequenting "ivory towers" (Orlick & Partington, 1987). This is an interesting finding, given that research on humor outside of sport has indicated both of these humor styles are negative in nature. However, it can be argued that in the context of sport, the participants' use of deadpan (i.e., as sarcasm) and self-deprecating humor mirrors, and validates, existing communication styles (i.e., "banter") is inherent and congruent with the existing sport culture. For example, Theberge (1995) acknowledged that banter plays an important role in developing and maintaining the sense of community within sport teams. Similarly, Pain and Harwood (2004) have illustrated the necessity for consultants to possess the character to deal with the environment and banter of soccer players, and to use language appropriate to the sport, in order to enhance their integration within that community environment. Kuipers (2009) argued that humor use is significantly related to group boundaries and social belonging. As humor often draws upon "insider-knowledge" it represents a form of social solidarity and emotional attunement, and people who do not share the same humor might be shunned as outsiders.

Use of deadpan humor by the consultant is also likely to cause the client to reflect on the sometimes ridiculousness of their circumstances. Foster (1978) suggested that humor is perhaps best used in a professional context when a client needs a temporary detachment from troubles, especially when they "can't see the figure for the ground, or having stared excessively at his navel, now comes dangerously to falling precipitously into it" (p. 48). The use of deadpan humor can also afford opportunity to broach and rationalize difficult issues

and provide a platform for subsequent re-interpretation of circumstances (Bercovitch, 2002; Garner, 2006). In the current study, most participants described using deadpan and self-deprecation humor as hyperbole and/or to downplay or refute the significance of a client's irrational beliefs, present paradox, and to challenge negative frames of reference within clients who seemed unaware of these. Similarly to existing literature, the participants were also aware of potential problems caused by inappropriate use of humor. These potential problems included awareness of how failed attempts at humor use might reflect badly upon a consultant's competency (i.e., Franzini, 2001). Even though use of deadpan humor can lead from ha-ha to aha moments (Garner, 2006) of reflection and transformation, the participants in the current study were also aware of the importance of ensuring that the client gets it (Saper, 1987) for the humor use to be effective.

The current participants' development of humor use in consultancy appeared to be experiential in nature as opposed to formal structured training. This is somewhat problematic, as the production of effective humor use within a client-consultant relationship is proposed to be an act of contextualized creativity (Derks & Hervas, 1988; Cayirdag & Acar, 2010). More specifically, for humor use to be effective, it requires many skills and intelligences (e.g., empathic accuracy, contextual, and emotional intelligence). To develop effective humor use trainees, supervisors, and consultants might explore formal ways of practicing and integrating humor. This might include opportunities to model (Watson & Emerson, 1988) and role-play (Lee & Lamp, 2003) established consultants' humor use within an educational curriculum. Also, consultants could also develop their sense of humor by surrounding themselves with comedy, jokes, and seeing humorous situations in their own lives and the world around them (Ulloth, 2003).

For humor use to be therapeutic (or cathartic) it should also be purposive (Franzini, 2001), appropriately timed (Salameh, 1987), and extend beyond the simple sharing of jokes

in that it should also afford problem-solving and create hope (Salameh, 1987). Wooten (1992) has suggested that humor should be used only when a practitioner has established their competency (i.e., a practitioner identity). Experienced practitioners might be more confident with their abilities and be more prepared (i.e., informed) to take appropriate risks regarding the use of humor (Sumners, 1990).

To use humor in applied sport psychology consultancy, in light of the current findings, the authors of this study encourage consultants to explore the following: As part of ongoing personal development counselling, consultants should pay special attention to their "inner world" by identifying their preferred humor style/s, and any existing personal-professional barriers to using humor. It would be important for consultants to consider the development of their holistic cross-context self as a lifelong multi-contextual empirical task. Thus, the importance of ongoing personal development/counselling becomes especially salient. Professionals who also supervise trainee practitioners should find ways to afford specific opportunities for exploring and developing a trainee's personal development (including personal-professional congruence, and their use of humor). The use of humor in sport psychology consultancy should therefore be based upon the following considerations: Applied consultants should seek to be genuine in terms of "who they are" (as a person and as a consultant), and whether they also get a client's humor. Humor should only be used when the consultant has the ability to be contextually intelligent. Any "fails" during the use of humor should be acknowledged, reflected on, and used productively.

With regard to fails in the use of humor, Gendlin (1967) argued that client-consultant congruence does not necessarily imply the practitioner is without personal fault or errors in practice. Instead, being congruent infers that the consultant be true to themself and move beyond "formulas and stereotyped ways of responding", including allowing oneself to "look the fool (p. 121)". In the current study, some of the participants (on occasion) purposely

positioned themselves as the fool. That does not mean that in order to effectively use humor in applied sport psychology consultancy the consultants should adopt deadpan and self-deprecating humor styles. Instead, consultants should develop their own style of humor use, be aware and knowledgeable of other styles, and permit the immediate context to dictate what might be achieved using humor (Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 1998). Consultants should be encouraged to search for such moments of integration, including potentially humorous experiences, to provide the ambience required for clients to speak freely. Furthermore, consultants might purposely search for anomalies within a client's speech (e.g., discrepancy, contradiction, metaphor), which afford humorous interlude.

The current study has provided an insight into sport psychology consultants' reflections on the role of humor in consultancy. Given the scarcity of research in this area (Pack et al., 2018), further research might further explore: (a) humor styles used by consultants, (b) humor use and humor styles of athletes in different sports, (c) athletes' perceptions of consultants' humor use, and (d) how humor might be embedded within professional training processes. Based on the results of this study, the authors conclude that applied sport psychology consultants should not "stand behind" a traditional psychological skills intervention, rather they should permit their personality (including humor style/s) to direct any interventions used. Equally, it is encouraged that at times, humor use itself can become an effective intervention. In such cases, consultants must manage possible personal-professional incongruence, and thus need to separate themselves objectively from their clients. Although not all participants in this study used humor in their consultancy, its incorporation might render the working alliance and the real relationship as resources in ways (e.g., as a barometer that predicts consultancy outcomes) previously not considered in applied sport psychology research.

## References

Achike, F. I., & Nain, N. (2005). Promoting problem-based learning (PBL) in nursing education: A Malaysian experience. *Nurse Education in Practice, 5*, 302-311. doi:10.1016/j.nepr.2005.04.002

Anderson, A., Miles, Robinson, P., & Mahoney, C. (2004). Evaluating the athlete's perception of the sport psychologist's effectiveness: What should we be assessing? *The Sport Psychologist, 5*, 255-277. doi:10.1016/S1469-0292(03)00005-0

Bercovitch, S. (2002). Deadpan Huck; or what's funny about interpretation. *The Kenyon Review, 24*, 90-134. doi:10.2307/4338379

Bordin, E.S. (1979). The generalizability of the psychoanalytic concept of the working alliance. *Psychotherapy (Chicago, Ill.), 16*(3), 252–260. doi:10.1037/h0085885

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*, 77-101. doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). Thematic analysis. In A. C. Michalos (Ed.) *Encyclopaedia of quality of life research*. New York, NY: Springer.

Burke, K. L., Peterson, D., & Nix, C. L. (1995). The effects of the coaches' use of humor on female volleyball players' evaluation of their coaches. *Journal of Sport Behavior, 18*, 83-90. doi:10.1080/10413200.2011.650820

Cayirdig, N., & Acar, S. (2010). Relationship between styles of humor and divergent thinking. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences, 2*, 3236-3240. doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2010.03.494

Derks, P., & Hervas, D. (1988). Creativity in humor production: Quantity and quality in divergent thinking. *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society, 26*, 37-39. doi:10.3758/BF03334854

519 Dunn, J. G., & Holt, N. L. (2003). Collegiate ice hockey players' perceptions of the delivery
520 of an applied sport psychology program. *The Sport Psychologist, 17,* 351-368.
521 doi:10.1123/tsp.17.3.351
522 Fabrizi, M. S., & Pollio, H. R.(1987). A naturalistic study of humorous activity in a third,
523 seventh, and eleventh grade classroom. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 33,* 107-128.
524 Falkenberg, I., Buchkremer, G., Bartels, M., & Wild, B. (2011). Implementation of a manual-
525 based training of humor abilities in patients with depression: A pilot study. *Psychiatry*
526 *Research, 186,* 454-457. doi:10.1016/j.psychres.2010.10.009
527 Fifer, A., Henschen, K., Gould, D., & Ravizza, K. (2008). What works when working with
528 athletes. *The Sport Psychologist, 22,* 356-377. doi:10.1123/tsp.22.3.356
529 Foster, J. A. (1978). Humor and counseling: Close encounters of another kind. *The Personnel*
530 *and Guidance Journal, 57,* 46-49. doi:10.1002/j.2164-4918.1978.tb05094.x
531 Frank, J. D. (1973). *Persuasion and healing (2nd Ed.).* Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins
532 University Press.
533 Franzini, L. R. (2001). Humor in therapy: The case for training therapists in its uses and risks.
534 *The Journal of General Psychology, 128,* 170-193. doi:10.1080/00221300109598906
535 Garner, R. L. (2006). Humor in pedagogy. How ha-ha can lead to aha! *College Teaching, 54,*
536 177-180. doi:10.3200/CTCH.54.1.177-180
537 Gelso, C. J. (2002). Real relationship: The "something more" of psychotherapy. Journal of
538 *Contemporary Psychotherapy, 32,* 35-40. doi:10.1023/A:1015531228504
539 Gelso, C. J., & Carter, J. A. (1994). Components of the psychotherapy relationship: Their
540 interaction and unfolding during treatment. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 41,*
541 296-306. doi:10.1037/0022-0167.41.3.296

Gendlin, E. T. (1967). Subverbal communication and therapist expressivity: Trends in client-centered therapy with schizophrenics. In C. R. Rogers & B. Stevens (Eds.), *Person to person* (pp. 119-28). Lafayette, CA: Real People Press.

Gilliland, H., & Mauritsen, H. (1971). Humor in the classroom. *The Reading Teacher*, *24,* 753-756.

Grisaffe, C., Blom, L. C., & Burke, K. L. (2003). The effects of head and assistant coaches' use of humor on collegiate soccer players evaluation of their coaches. *Journal of Sport Behaviour, 26,* 103-107. doi:10.1080/10413200.2011.650820

Harter, S. (2005). Authenticity. In C.R. Snyder & S.J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 382-394). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Kolden, G. G., Klein, M. H., Wang, C-C., & Austin, S. B. (2011). Congruence/Genuineness. *Psychotherapy, 48,* 65-71. doi:10.1037/a0022064

Kuipers, G. (2009). Humor style and symbolic boundaries. *Journal of Literary Theory, 3,* 392-393. doi: 10.1515/JLT.2009.013

Lambert, M., J. & Barley, D., E. (2001). Research Summary on the therapeutic relationship and psychotherapy outcome. *Psychotherapy*, *38,* 4, 357-361. doi: 10.1037/0033-3204.38.4.357

Lampert, M., & Ervin-Tripp, S. (1998). Exploring paradigms: The study of gender and sense of humor near the end of the 20th century. In: R. Willibald (Ed.). *The sense of humor.* (pp.231-270). New York, NY: Mouton de Gruyter.

Lee, C. J., & Lamp, J. K. (2003). The use of humor and role-playing in reinforcing key concepts. *Nurse Educator, 28,* 61-62. doi:10.1097/00006223-200303000-00005

Longstaff, F., & Gervis, M. (2016). The use of counseling principles and skills to develop practitioner-athlete relationships by practitioners who provide sport psychology support. *The Sport Psychologist, 30,* 276-289. doi:10.1123/tsp.2015-0029

Marmarosh, C. L., Markin, R. D., Gelso, C. J., Majors, R., Mallery, C., & Choi, J. (2009). The real relationship in psychotherapy: Relationships to adult attachments, working alliance, transference, and therapy outcome. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *56*, 337-350. doi:10.1037/a0015169

Martin, R. A., Puhlik-Doris, P., Larsen, G., Gray, J., & Weir, K. (2003). Individual differences in uses of humor and their relation to psychological well-being: Development of the humor styles questionnaire. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *37*, 48-75. doi:10.1016/S0092-6566(02)00534-2

Morales-Mann, E. T., & Kaitell, C. A. (2001). Problem-based learning in a new Canadian curriculum. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *33*, 13-19. doi:10.1046/j.1365-2648.2001.01633.x

Nelson, J. K. (2008). Laugh and the World laughs with you: An attachment perspective on the meaning of laughter in psychotherapy. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, *36*, 41-49. doi:10.1007/s10615-007-0133-1

Orlick, T., & Partington, J. (1987). The sport psychology consultant: Analysis of critical components as viewed by Canadian Olympic athletes. *The Sport Psychologist*, *2*, 105-130. doi:10.1123/tsp.2.2.105

Pack, S., Hemmings, B. H., Winter, S., & Arvinen-Barrow, M. (2018). A preliminary investigation into the use of humor in sport psychology practice. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, doi:10.1080/10413200.2018.1514428

Pain, M. A., & Harwood, C. G. (2004). Knowledge and perceptions of sport psychology within English soccer. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, *22*, 813-826. doi:10.1080/02640410410001716670

Partington, J., & Orlick, T. (1987). The sport psychology consultant: Olympic coaches' view. *The Sport Psychologist*, *1*, 95-102. doi:10.1123/tsp.1.2.95

Petitpas, A. J., Giges, B., & Danish, S. J. (1999). The sport psychologist-athlete relationship: Implications for training. *The Sport Psychologist, 13,* 344-337. doi:10.1123/tsp.13.3.344

Robinson, V. M. (1991). *Humour and the health professions*. Thorofare, SLACK, New Jersey: Charles Slack.

Rogers, C. (1957). The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change. *Journal of Consulting Psychology, 21,* 95-103. doi:10.1037/h0045357

Salameh, W. A. (1987). Humor in integrative short-term psychotherapy (ISTP). In W. F. Fry, Jr. and W. A. Salameh (Eds.), *Handbook of humor and psychotherapy: Advances in the clinical use of humor* (pp. 195-240). Sarasota, FL: Professional Resource Exchange.

Saper, B. (1987). Humor in psychotherapy: Is it good or bad for the client? *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 18,* 360-367.

Saroglou, V. & Scariot, C. (2002). Humor styles questionnaire: Personality and educational correlates in Belgian high school and college students. *European Journal of Personality, 16,* 43-54. doi:10.1002/per.430

Sharp, L-A., & Hodge, K. (2011). Sport psychology consulting effectiveness: The sport psychology consultant's perspective. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 23*, 360-376. doi:10.1080/10413200.2011.583619

Sharp, L-A., Hodge, K., & Danish, S. (2015). Ultimately it comes down to the relationship: Experienced consultant's view of effective sport psychology consulting. *The Sport Psychologist, 29,* 358-370. doi:10.1123/tsp.2014-0130

Smith, B., & McGannon, K. R. (2018). Developing rigor in qualitative research: problems and opportunities within sport and exercise psychology. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 18,* 101-121. doi: 10.1080/1750984X.2017.1317357

Staples, F.R., Sloane, B. Whipple, K. Cristol, A. & Yorkston, N. (1976). Process and outcome in psychotherapy and behavior therapy. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *44*(3), 340-350. doi: 10.1037/0022-006X.44.3.340

Sultanoff, S. M. (2013). Integrating humor into psychotherapy: Research, theory, and the necessary conditions for the practice of therapeutic humor in helping relationships. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, *41*, 388-399. doi:10.1080/08873267.2013.796953

Sumners, A. D. (1990). Professional nurses' attitudes towards humor. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *15*, 196-200. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2648.1990.tb01802.x

Theberge, N. (1995) Gender, sport, and the construction of community: a case study from women's ice hockey. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, *12*, 389, 402. doi.org/10.1123/ssj.12.4.389

Tod, D. (2007) The long and winding road: Professional development in sport psychology. *The Sport Psychologist*, *21*, 94-108. doi:10.1123/tsp.21.1.94

Tudor, K., & Worrall, M. (2004). Issues, questions, dilemmas and domains in supervision. In K. Tudor & M. Worrall (Eds.), *Freedom to practise: Person-centred approaches to supervision* (pp.79-96). Ross-on-Wye, United Kingdom: PCCS Books.

Ulloth, J. K. (2003). Guidelines for developing and implementing humor in nursing classrooms. *Journal of Nursing Education*, *42*, 35-37. doi:10.3928/0148-4834-20030101-08

Van Langenhove, L., & Harré, R. (1993). Positioning and Autobiography: Telling Your Life. In, N. Coupland and J.F. Nussbaum. *Discourse and Life Span Identity*. London, UK: Sage.

Wampold, B. E., & Budge, S. L. (2012). The 2011 Leona Tyler Award Address: The Relationship—and its relationship to the common and specific factors of

Psychotherapy. *The Counseling Psychologist*, *40*, 601-623. doi:10.1177/0011000011432709

Watson, M. J., & Emerson, S. (1988). Facilitate learning with humor. *Journal of Nursing Education*, *27*, 89-90. doi:10.3928/0148-4834-19880201-12

Watson, J. C., Greenberg, L. S., & Lietaer, G. (1998). The experiential paradigm unfolding: Relationship and experiencing in therapy. In, L. S. Greenberg, J. C. Watson, & G. Lietaer (Eds.), *Handbook of experiential psychotherapy* (pp. 3-27). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Weigand, D. A., Richardson, P. A., & Weinberg, R. S. (1999). A two-stage evaluation of a sport psychology internship. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, *22*, 83-104.

Wheeless, L. R. & Grotz, J. (1976). Conceptualization and measurement of reported self-disclosure. *Human Communication Research*, *2*, 338-346. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.1976.tb00494.x

White, G. W. (2001). Teachers' report of how they used humour with students perceived use of humour. *Education*, *122*(2), 337-347.

Wilson, K. A., Gilbert, J. N., Gilbert, W. D. & Sailor, S. R. (2009). College athletic directors' perceptions of sport psychology consulting. *The Sport Psychologist*, *23*, 405-424. doi:10.1123/tsp.23.3.405

Wooten, P. (1992). Does a humor workshop affect nurse burnout? *Journal of Nursing Jocularity*, *2*, 46-47.

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

| Organization | Qualification | Participants (*n*) |
|---|---|---|
| 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 |
| HCPC (Health and Care Professions Council – UK) | Registered consultant | 23 |
| AASP (Association for Applied Sport Psychology – US) | Certified | 5 |
| AHPRA (Australian Health Consultant Regulation Agency) | Registered consultant | 2 |

*Note*. Some participants held dual qualifications.

663