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The influence of laughter and humour on mental health and well-being of children and youth

Die Auswirkung von Lachen und Humor auf die psychische Gesundheit und das Wohlbefinden von Kindern und Jugendlichen

Für die meisten Menschen ist Humor und Lachen ein wesentlicher Bestandteil ihres täglichen Lebens. Humor ist überall zu finden: in einer Zeitungskarikatur, Späße mit den KollegInnen während der Mittagspause, eine Komödie im Abendprogramm – er hat wichtige soziale, kognitive und emotionale Funktionen und stellt eine zentrale menschliche Fähigkeit dar.

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For most people humour and laughter is an essential part of their daily lives. Humour can be found everywhere: A caricature in the morning newspaper, a good laugh with a working colleague during lunch break, the comedy we watch before going to sleep – it has important social, cognitive and emotional functions and is a central human condition¹. A good sense of humour is also socially desirable and an important personality trait – it serves us well in our daily interactions and it is usually one of the highest rated traits when it comes to what we look for in romantic partners. Likewise, the universal language of laughter is also a social-cultural phenomenon, overriding cultural boundaries because it sustains social harmony and stability.

After a long history of psychological research on humour and the association between humour and mental health, research in this field gained stronger momentum with the emergence of Positive Psychology in the 1990². The body of research about

humour and the influence of laughter and humour on mental health, development and well-being of children and youth is continually growing since then. The creation of research institutions, like the ISHS (International Society for Humor Studies) and scientific journals, like »HUMOR – International Journal of Humor Research«, are supporting this endeavour. However, it has to be said, that humour studies have received only minor attention in mainstream psychology compared to other fields of research.

Even though Elwyn Brooks White and Katharina White³ warned us that analysing humour is like dissecting a frog - you learn a lot about it, but you end up with a dead frog - this article provides an overview of (a) theoretical conceptualizations of humour, (b) the current state of research regarding the influence of humour on mental health and well-being of children and youth, and (c) the application of humour in different healthcare and educational contexts. It claims that humour and laughter have a beneficial influence on mental health and well-being of children and youth, but it is complex. The complexity is largely due to the multidimensionality of humour, different cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal functions of humour, and various direct and indirect associations to mental health and well-being. This is why it is important to utilize the benefits of humour in a sensitive and context-specific way to empower and encourage children and youth.

Humour and Laughter: A theoretical approach

A major problem of psychological research on the nature of humour is that there is no single accepted definition of humour in the scholarly community. Likewise, there are different general humour theories and no consensus exists about the origins of humour, what it is and which functions it may serve. In a recent review the authors claimed that there are over 100 theories about humour, but based on their shared assumptions they can be grouped in three categories⁴.

¹ Martin, R. A. (2007). *The Psychology of Humor: An integrative Approach*. Elviesir

² Foot, H., & McCreaddie, M. (2006). *The Handbook of Communication Skills*. London: Routledge.

³ White, B.E., & White, K.S. (1941). *A Subtreasury of American Humor*.

⁴ Dionigi, A. (2012). *Humour theories*. In P. Gremigni, *Humor and*

The relief (or sometimes also called psychoanalytical) theory of humour is based on the idea that humour, in particular laughter, helps to physiologically release tensions. This theory was initially based on the historical understanding of a mechanical nervous system in the 18th century medical world and it was further developed by the psychoanalytical writings of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. In their understanding humour and laughing is a relief habit that helps to overcome inhibitions in social situations, reveals suppressed personal desires or subverts societal rules and limitations. The basic assumption of the superiority and disparagement theory is the observation that people laugh about the misfortune, humiliation and suffering of others. Therefore, a lot of classical writers like Plato, Aristotle and Hobbes described humour and laughter as expression of aggression and superiority, because it represents the triumph over an enemy or an object.⁵ The incongruity theory and expanded incongruity-resolution theory⁶ is focusing on the human enjoyment of surprise and absurdity. People enjoy things that clash with their expectations, for instance when the punchline of a joke is out of structure or alludes to a general mismatch of expectations and relations. Interindividual differences are believed to be more due to humour comprehension differences than differences in humour appreciation.

To summarize, the main difference between the mentioned humour theories is their focus on the structure of humour content versus the importance of social context. Relief and superiority theory are important historical approaches to discern the origins and functions of humour. Because of their focus on the content of humour they are not so important anymore but created an interest in humour in the first half of the 20th century. The central elements of the incongruence-resolution theory are the cognitive elements of surprise, absurdity and

nonsense. In the last decade, the incongruency-resolution theory has become the leading humour theory for many experts in the field.

Associations between humour, (mental) health and well-being

Most of the empirical literature about the influence of humour on health focuses on physical health and the healing process. Paul McGhee summarized that different empirical studies support that humour strengthens the immune system, lowers blood pressure, triggers muscle relaxation, reduces stress-related hormones, helps to manage both asthma and diabetes, and reduces some allergic responses⁷.

The state of the art in psychological research about the influence of humour on various aspects of mental health and well-being is investigated by a smaller and discrete body of research. One way to study the association of humour and emotional well-being is based on the positive emotion of mirth, which is elicited through humour and laughter. In a series of laboratory studies researchers were able to positively correlate increased positive mood with self-reported cheerfulness and mirth. This means that smiling and laughing, naturally or even artificially introduced, creates amusement and mirth and accordingly benefits mental health.⁸ Likewise, there is strong evidence that humour and laughter reduces negative emotional states, such as depression, anxiety, and emotional distress. Different reviews found further evidence that psychological states of anxiety, aggression, depression and stress are better managed through humour and laughter. Humour is therefore contributing to mental health by improving the ability to regulate and manage emotions. In summary, there is strong evidence that positive mood is boosted and better managed by humour and laughter.⁹

Health Promotion, (pp 15-44) Nova Science Publishers.

⁵ Martin, R. A. (2007). *The Psychology of Humor: An integrative Approach*. Elviesir

⁶ Gremigni, P. (2012). *Humor and Health Promotion*. Nova Science Publishers

⁷ McGhee, P. (2010). *Humor: The lighter path to resilience and health*. Bloomington: Authorhouse.

⁸ Galloway, G. & Cropley, A. (1999). Benefits of humor for mental health: Empirical findings and directions for further research. *Humor* 12(3). 301-3014.

⁹ Gremigni, P. (2012). *Humor and Health Promotion*. Nova Science Publishers

A different approach to study the influence of humour is when humour is understood as a general ability to have a positive outlook about yourself, life and the world in general. The reason to study humour as a personality trait or from a temperament perspective is that humour might be conditioned by culture, but it is believed that the underlying foundation is more universal. For instance, in the »Values in Action Inventory«, one of the main psychological assessments that investigates personality profiles, sense of humour is an important individual character strength. However, correlational studies on the other hand found only weak or inconsistent evidence for mental benefits of it. Several authors link these inconsistent findings to the different ways of humour we use and which functions it serves us.¹⁰ Rod Martin and colleagues¹¹ distinguished four distinctive styles of humour, namely self-enhancing humour, aggressive humour, affiliative humour, and self-defeating humour. Affiliative and self-enhancing humour are positively correlated with increased self-esteem and decreased anxiety and depression symptoms. The different ways we use humour might therefore be related to different psychological health and well-being outcomes and can have adaptive as well as maladaptive consequences for mental health.

Theoretically, next to the described direct pathway by the ability to regulate negative emotions and enjoy positive emotions there are two further ways of association. Humour might also be associated with supporting mental health and well-being by increasing capabilities to cope with stress and other adversities or by supporting close and meaningful relationships with others. Based on the stress theory of Lazarus, the appraisal of stress is more important than stressful life events, because we cannot prevent hardship in life, but how we deal with it.

¹⁰ Dionigi, A., & Gremigni, P., (2012). The psychology of humour. In P. Gremigni, Humour and Health Promotion. (pp. 1- 15) Nova Science Publishers.

¹¹ Rod, M., 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 (1): 48–75.

Humour is an effective coping strategy for adverse and stressful life experiences because it enables cognitive reframing and a shift in perspective. In this way the difficult life situation is experienced more manageable and less threatening. This indirect path is depicted in popular movies like »Life is Beautiful« and historical accounts by Viktor Frankl. Studies investigating coping strategies of prisoners of war mentioned that humour was regularly and strongly correlated with better psychological adjustment. The conclusion of the authors is that humour is supporting resilience through mastery of difficult life events and has beneficial influence on group cohesion. Another pathway between humour, mental health and emotional well-being is based on the assumption that humour can be used as a mean to support meaningful relationships. The proposed explanation is that humour is a social skill that secures social support and is initiating and maintaining social relationships that in turn are beneficial for mental health. General support for this assumption can be drawn from evolutionary psychology studies that rank humour very high in the mating preference¹² and epidemiological studies that show that married people are happier, live longer and healthier.

In conclusion, the way humour and mental health are connected is complex¹³. Cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal aspects of humour are all connected to mental health and emotional well-being outcomes. For instance, by joking with friends about a difficult situation at work, the perception of the situation can be altered, the emotional state of the person is lifted, and the relationship with friends is improved. Yet, different humour styles, the direct as well as indirect pathways between humour and mental health limit the research design options and

¹² Kaufman, S.B., Kozbelt, M.L., Bromley, M.L., & Miller G.F. (2008). The role of creativity and humor in human mate selection. In G. Geher, & G.Miller (Eds.), *Mating intelligence: Sex, Relationships, and the Minds Reproduction System*. (p. 227 – 262), Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

¹³ Schneider, M., Voracek M., & Tran, U. (2018). »A joke a day keeps the doctor away?« Meta-analytical evidence of differential associations of habitual humor styles with mental health. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 2018, 59, 289–300.

results might therefore be ambiguous¹⁴.

Application of humour in different healthcare and educational contexts

The number of experts interested in the use of humour in different healthcare and educational contexts is continually growing. Psychotherapists, psychologists, counsellors, trainers, nurses and teachers made very positive individual experiences by using humour in their respective fields.¹⁵ Lately, Healthcare Clowns became part of treatment plans in many hospitals to support children, families and staff.

Humour and laughter can be used in various ways by healthcare professionals. Most healthcare professionals use humour to improve their interpersonal communication. By increasing empathy and caring the relationship with patients can be improved and in turn the rapport of patients is improved. Additionally, humour can also be used as intervention or therapy itself. Up to now, there is little empirical support for this, nevertheless, initial findings are promising and some see great potential in it.

Studies have shown that a Healthcare Clown intervention in preoperative areas, during medical procedures and during hospitalization reduces children's anxiety, pain and stress which leads to a shortened hospitalization time and is thus cost-effective¹⁶. Furthermore well-being of young patients as well as relatives could be improved and Healthcare Clowns are also well-perceived by healthcare staff because their presence is creating a lighter hospital atmosphere¹⁷. Thus, the presence of Healthcare Clowns

in the healthcare context is highly desirable and recommended as it has positive effects for all parties involved.

Another beneficial application of humour might be in educational institutions. Teachers and trainers increase attention, immediacy and group cohesion of their students through a more relaxed environment. Through improved emotional intelligence and empathy, as well as more positive relationships with others especially shy students benefit. There are strong effects on the classroom environment and credibility of the instructor but mixed results about learning outcome. One conclusion for practitioners and educators is to focus on the positive side of humour and ensure that the use of humour is appropriate for the audience and is adapted to the age, cultural background and aspired aim of the group.

Conclusion

This paper summarized three major aspects that are important in order to assess the influence of laughter and humour on mental health and well-being of children and youth, namely the conceptualization of humour, the pathways between humour and mental health, and the application of humour in different healthcare and educational contexts.

Key functions of humour as well as strong links between humour and a broad range of improved mental health outcomes have been identified in the literature. There is scientific evidence that laughter and humour are benefitting children and youth in various ways. Cognitive, emotional and interpersonal aspects of humour are all connected to mental health and emotional well-being. Likewise, professionals in healthcare and pedagogical institutions made very positive experiences by using humour in their respective fields. Professionally trained artists became part of treatment plans as Healthcare Clowns to support children, families and staff. But the whole picture of the pathways between humour and mental health is becoming more complex the closer you study the details. The complexity is largely due to the multidimensionality and different functions of humour that in turn have influence on

¹⁴ McCreaddie, M., & Wiggins, S., (2007). The purpose and function of humour in health, health care and nursing: a narrative review, *Journal of advanced nursing* 61(6): 584-95.

¹⁵ Banas, J. A., Dunbar, N., Rodriguez, D., & Liu, S. (2011). A Review of Humor in Educational Settings: Four Decades of Research, *Communication Education*, 60:1, 115-144.

¹⁶ Sridharan, K., & Sivaramakrishnan, G. (2016). Therapeutic clowns in paediatrics: a systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. *European Journal Paediatrics*, 175, 1353-1560.

¹⁷ Barkmann, C., Siem, A., Wessolowski, N., Schulte-Markwort, M. (2013). Clownin gas a supportive measure in paediatrics – a survey of clowns, parents and nursing staff. *BMC Pediatrics*, 13, 166.

different psychological health and well-being outcomes. More systemic research is needed to summarize the existing studies about the beneficial influence of laughter and humour on mental health and well-being of children and youth. Because of the very demanding situation in the healthcare and educational context it is important to utilize the great potential of humour and laughter in a positive, sensitive and context-specific way to empower and encourage children and youth in need.