

Humour as coping and Flow as correlates of Subjective Happiness among Athletes and Non-athletes

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ABSTRACT

This study intends to find out if humour as coping and flow could significantly be different among athletes and non-athletes, and if the above mentioned variables show any kind of relationship with subjective happiness. A sample of 62 athletes and 75 non-athletes aged between 16 and 22 were selected for the study. Inventories were used to collect the data. It includes The Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) by Lyubomirsky (1999), The Coping Humour Scale (CHS) developed by A. Martin (1983) and Flow State Scale by Jackson (1995). Demographic information including their age, gender, education level, and sporting involvement was also collected. The obtained results showed that Flow and humour are significantly higher for athletes than non-athletes. Flow and humour is also found to have a significant positive correlation with subjective happiness. Males are found to experience greater subjective happiness than females and they use more humour as coping. National level players experience more flow state than state level players. Second born children were found to be more happier than first born children. Thus within the limits and limitations of the present study results imply that engagements in athletic activities enhances humour coping and flow which contribute to better subjective happiness.

Keywords: *Flow, Humour, Happiness, Coping*

Sports is considered to be a way of learning how to live life, by overcoming its hardships, keeping commitments, showing courage, and to be co-operative within a team. It helps to handle the modern day life stressors with calmness and ease. Mastering a skill always build the confidence in one, to face challenges. Playing a game helps a person to understand his failures as setbacks and not shortcomings and deal with it effectively.

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Received: December 17, 2016; Revision Received: January 13, 2017; Accepted: January 27, 2017

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Many factors affect the performance of an athlete. "Athletic performance is operationally defined as carrying out of specific physical routines or procedures by one who is trained or skilled in physical activity, influenced by a combination of physiological, psychological and socio-cultural factors ". Non-athletes are the ones who have never engaged in any kind of sport activity. Many studies have been conducted on how sports play a role in making an individual's life better.

Happiness is defined as "the predominance of the frequency of the occurrence of positive emotional experiences over negative ones and happiness is a significant indicator of the athlete's success (Tabeian, 2013). Mental happiness consists of emotional response, satisfaction and general judgment about life. The mood-boosting benefits of a good laugh is known to us. The researchers (Bains et.al. 2014) at California's found that the "humour group" performed significantly better when it came to memory recall. It was also found that the humour group showed considerably lower levels of cortisol (stress hormone) than the non-humour group's stress levels. The health benefits of laughter was considered by many other researches like (Buchowski, 2006) who estimated that just 10-15 minutes of laughter a day can burn up to 40 calories.

Meanwhile, a study by Miller (2009) found that sense of humour can protect against heart disease. Bains (2014) found that laughter increases quality of life in older adults. Laughter is also found to enhance wellbeing by reducing anxiety tension and depression (Seyle, 1974). Laughter releases neuropeptides like Endorphins and Enkephalins which are natural opiates and pain suppressing agents. The ability of laughter to release muscle tension and soothe the sympathetic nervous system also helps to control pain, as does increased circulation. Thus, laughter has a multi-pronged approach for the relief of pain in conditions such as arthritis, spondylitis, etc. Cousins (1976) in his article found that 10 minutes of laughter had an analgesic effect for 2 hours, in his personal problem of severe ankylosing spondylitis. Cogan et al (1987) demonstrated by clinical experiments that discomfort thresholds were higher in subjects after bouts of laughter.

Berk (1989) found that laughter may attenuate some stress-related hormones and modify Natural Killer Cell activity, resulting in immunomodulation. Labott (1987) also supports Berk's (1989) findings, and concludes that laughter results in improved immunity. In a study (Zuzanek, 2015) it was well documented that laughter increases the levels of immunoglobulin IgA and IgG. Cousins (1988) also states that laughter serves as a blocking agent against disease.

Sense of humour is conceptualized as a habitual behavioural pattern, an ability, a temperamental trait, an aesthetic response, an attitude, a world view, or a coping strategy. According to Freud, Humour allows one to maintain a detached perspective in the face of misfortune and adversity, thus sparing oneself of depression, anxiety, and a realistic view of oneself and the world. In the current psychology research, Humour is a broad and multi-faceted construct (Martin, 2000). But

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according to the contemporary view, humour can now be as both aggressive and hostile, as well as benevolent and philosophical (Ruch, 1996).

Flow is the experience of the timelessness and oneness with the activity in which one is engaged. In a flow state, people have a sense that their abilities are only just equal to the challenge that the project provides. Flow was studied specifically as a factor that may increase positive affect, reduce negative affect, and boost life satisfaction in later life. (Collins, 2009).

Research suggests that when athletes employ mindfulness in a competitive setting, focus on the present moment rather than the future has a positive effect on performance. The present study hypothesized that athletes who participated in a mindfulness training program would experience greater flow than they experienced previously. It was also predicted that mindfulness-trained athletes would experience greater flow than athletes in the control group. The cultivation of flow is seen as a performance-enhancing technique for athletes. This work offers additional insight into athletic training programs that strive to better performance and well-being. Results of the present study shed light on the effect of mindfulness training on athletes' flow experiences during competitive sport training. Both the significant increase in global flow scores and the sizeable increases in the flow dimensions of clear goals and sense of control support the effectiveness of the six-week mindfulness training intervention. Results offer promising evidence for sport psychology practitioners interested in improving flow among athletes.

Potential maladaptive behaviours related to flow was identified in the work of Partington & Oliver (2009). The relationship between transcendent experience, flow, and happiness are significantly positive. Furthermore, findings suggest that transcendent experience is an antecedent to flow, and flow positively affects happiness. Flow has demonstrated a mediating role between transcendent experience and happiness, where high levels of flow post-climb positively correlated with increased perception of happiness (Tsaor, Yen, & Hsiao, 2013).

High levels of flow are frequently found within discontinuous and abruptly changing environments. These findings are a novel addition to traditional linear flow models, as they suggest that employing different patterns of change (e.g. gradual, continuous, sudden, nonlinear) can complement linear relationships, enhancing employee happiness and well-being (Ceja & Navarro, 2012). A study by Asakawa (2004) found that increased flow experience leads to increased positive affect (PA) while decreasing negative affect.

Need And Significance

The present study focuses on college athletes as its target group. The main reason for choosing them is because it is commonly seen that they are healthier, sociable, less stressed, happy and influential than their peer group. Our world needs a generation of such characteristics. If we focus on them and adopt their strategies, it will enhance the quality of life of non-athletes to a

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great extent. We will also be able to find out the areas of special attention that athletes need. It will influence many non-athletes to at least be involved in some physical activities on a daily basis. The time has come and is already here for an immediate intervention for a healthier tomorrow.

Aim

The present study aims to explore the relation between the variables flow, humour as coping and subjective happiness among athletes and non-athletes. This study also verifies whether men are happier than women, whether birth order is in anyway related to happiness and whether levels of athletic performance shows any difference in the experienced flow state in athletes.

METHOD

This part includes the way the research problem has been formulated and the procedures adopted to verify the problem. A sample of 62 athletes and 75 non-athletes aged between 16 and 24 were selected for the study. The sample selected were members of team events and they were selected from different districts. Some of them were national level players while others were state level players. These players have been playing for more than 5 years.

Inventories were used to collect the data which are *The Subjective Happiness Scale* (SHS) by Lyubomirsky (1999), *The Coping Humour Scale* (CHS) developed by R.A Martin (1996) and *Flow State Scale* by S.A Jackson (1996). SHS is a four-item scale, measuring global subjective happiness. All the scales were re-standardised locally and were found to have adequate reliability and validity.

SPSS version 16 was used for analysing the data. Pearson Correlation method was used to find the correlation between humour as coping and flow. Student 't' test was used to verify the significance of difference between the two groups with respect to gender and levels of performance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through the present study the investigators tried to study the relation of flow state and humour as coping on subjective happiness among athletes and non-athletes and also whether men are happier than women, are second born happier than first born and whether there is any difference in the flow state experienced by state level athletes and national level athletes. The obtained data were scored and analysed to draw a meaningful inference. The found results are discussed in the following sessions.

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Table 1: Difference between athletes and non-athletes in terms of happiness, humour as coping and flow state

| | Group | N | Mean | Std. D | 't' value |
|-------------------------------|--------------|----|--------|--------|-----------|
| Happiness | Athletes | 62 | 18.94 | 4.53 | 0.18 |
| | Non-athletes | 75 | 18.82 | 4.20 | |
| Humour | Athletes | 62 | 20.31 | 2.89 | 3.38** |
| | Non-athletes | 75 | 18.68 | 3.87 | |
| Flow | Athletes | 62 | 141.78 | 18.49 | 7.55** |
| | Non-athletes | 75 | 120.77 | 19.76 | |
| ** significance at 0.01 level | | | | | |

Results of the present study indicate that flow and coping humour as significantly high among athletes than non-athletes. The higher flow rates among athletes indicate their mastery of the event and they have learned to experience flow in their own area of interest and could apply that to other areas of interest also. This is because one cannot enter flow state at will, it requires the knowledge to do that activity. Flow is a sense of that one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand in a goal directed, rule bound action system that provides clear clues as to how one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted. An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it, even when it is difficult or dangerous." (Csikzentmihalyi, 1990). It is also found that when in flow state people lose track of time and external concerns or stimuli, feels connected to someone greater than oneself, and feels challenged but not overwhelmed but not in terms of the ability and attention needed to complete a task. (Worthington, 2011). All these reasons substantiate the higher levels of performance.

From the findings of the present study it is clear that those who are involved in sports use more humour as coping in order to deal with stress. Collegiate athletes experience more stress since they are faced with meeting the academic demands of their institution as well as the practice and performance demands of their sport teams. As a result of this dual role of student and athlete, these individuals experience unique stressors related to extensive time demands, pressure to perform, managing relationships, and meeting academic expectations (Fletcher et al, 2003; Humphrey et al, 2000). Even though we do not have many researches to support the potential health benefits of laughter, it is commonly seen and believed that the impact that laughter can create is very similar to that of physical exercise (Gervais and Wilson,2005).

Coping is seen as a shifting process in which one form of coping must be relied on more heavily at one time while another form of coping is needed at another time. The researchers that study

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relations between stress related hormones and humour have shown that laughter reduces at least four neuroendocrine hormones associated with stress response including epinephrine, cortisol, dopac and growth hormone (McGhee, 1999). Other studies like the one conducted by Pert (1999) supports the mind and body relation .This shows how the use of humour by athletes gives them the advantage over non-athletes. This enables them to have reduced stress hormone, which in turn helps them in improving their performance and experience better flow state. It improves the immune system, reduces both pain and blood pressure and it is an excellent source of cardiac exercise.

Table 2: Gender difference in the dimensions Happiness, Humour as coping and Flow state

| | Gender | N | Mean | S. D | 't' |
|--|---------|----|--------|-------|--------|
| Happiness | Males | 79 | 20.20 | 3.55 | 4.89** |
| | Females | 58 | 16.32 | 5.23 | |
| Humour as coping | Males | 79 | 20.74 | 2.74 | 2.41* |
| | Females | 58 | 19.42 | 3.03 | |
| Flow | Males | 79 | 140.99 | 18.75 | 0.68 |
| | Females | 58 | 143.42 | 18.08 | |
| *Significance at 0.05 level, ** significance at 0.01 level | | | | | |

The above table shows that males experience significantly higher levels of happiness than females and they use more humour as coping mechanism. This contradicts the study by Pew Research Center (2003) where it was reported that women are happier than men (Conger, 2009).This might be due to the cultural setting in India. Women are not completely free to choose their career or to pursue their dreams. They lack economic independence and experience relationship problems, health issues, feelings of insecurity etc. which aggravate the situation. One of the major difference between males and females are in the way they handle problems. Men are more free and use more humour as a coping strategy. Therefore, even thou both genders face similar problems, men are successful not just in tackling it but in remaining happy as well.

Table 3: Relation between level of participation and the variables flow, humour as coping and subjective happiness.

| | Level of participation | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | 't' |
|-------------------------------|------------------------|----|--------|----------------|--------|
| Happiness | National | 77 | 19.46 | 4.57 | 1.67 |
| | State | 46 | 18.06 | 4.38 | |
| Humour as coping | National | 77 | 20.29 | 3.15 | 0.09 |
| | State | 46 | 20.34 | 2.43 | |
| Flow | National | 77 | 145.86 | 14.82 | 3.79** |
| | State | 46 | 134.96 | 21.92 | |
| ** significance at 0.01 level | | | | | |

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The above table indicates that national level athletes experience significantly higher levels of flow states than state level athletes. Nakamura (1998) studied on why some students achieve more whereas others do not even when they have the same cognitive endowment. As mentioned before only those who master an event will be able to achieve the flow state. This is one of the reasons why National players experience more flow state than state players. National players who were selected for the study had participated in a number of competitions. Some of the girls practiced with players of opposite gender for 4.5 to 5.5 hours per day. This in turn prepared them to face any possible scenario. But the case of state players was different. They did not practice like the way National players did. The number of competitions they have participated was also less when compared to national level players. Another important factor of this study was that the national level players were strictly time bound and they were under very strict practice sessions. This must have enabled them to concentrate more on the game than on other activities. Most of them reported of visualising the game situation when they were alone. They believe that such imaginative experiences have enabled them to tackle even some of the obstacles they haven't experienced before, which in turn has resulted in better flow experience. This result is supported by the findings of Csikzentmihalyi and Larson (1984).

Table 4: Significance of difference in the variables subjective happiness, humour as coping and flow state with respect to birth order.

| | Birth order | N | Mean | S. D | 't' value |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|----------|-------------|-------------|------------------|
| Happiness | First born | 63 | 18.01 | 4.89 | 2.48** |
| | last born | 55 | 20.07 | 3.97 | |
| Humour as coping | First born | 63 | 20.15 | 2.70 | 0.74 |
| | last born | 55 | 20.54 | 2.95 | |
| Flow | First born | 63 | 140.95 | 18.06 | 0.38 |
| | last born | 55 | 142.15 | 19.74 | |
| ** significance at 0.01 level | | | | | |

From the above table, results indicate that last born children are significantly happier than first born children. Daily Worth (2015) reports last born children are more contempt and happier. They are more sociable and better at team sports because of their position in the family. Ever since they are born they have a constant competition. This makes them work harder in order to stand out from the shadow of elder siblings. This is further supported by parkinson (2016). According to Schumann and Salmon (2011) last borns claims to be happier in relationships. This may be the reason why they experience more happiness.

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Table 5: Pearson’s Correlation between the variables subjective happiness, humour as coping and flow state. (N= 198)

| variables | | Happiness | Humour | Flow |
|--|---------------------|-----------|--------|--------|
| Happiness | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .566** | .482** |
| **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). | | | | |

The results indicate that subjective happiness has significant correlations with Humour as coping and flow. This indicates that as the person copes better and when he shows more involvement in the activity he is doing, he experiences more happiness. Researches show that the relation between coping and emotions are bi-directional (Folkman and Lazarus, 1988). Therefore, coping can bring about changes in environment relationships, which in turn leads to a different emotional state (Crocker and Graham, 1995). Therefore, if we focus on a task, it will enhance our knowledge on the improvement areas which will in turn influence our overall happiness. This will also improve our quality of life.

Table 6: Linear regression table predicting level of happiness from flow and humour as coping.

| Model | | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | t | Sig. |
|---|------------------|-----------------------------|------------|---------------------------|-------|------|
| | | B | Std. Error | Beta | | |
| 1 | (Constant) | 4.545 | 2.350 | | 1.934 | .055 |
| | Humour as coping | .429 | .093 | .312 | 4.609 | .000 |
| | Flow | .043 | .015 | .197 | 2.911 | .004 |
| Dependent Variable: Happiness (P≤ .01), R square- 0.17 and F value 19.93 | | | | | | |

In order to test whether humour as coping and flow predicts happiness Baron and Kenny’s (1986) linear regression method was used. It is found that flow state and coping humour significantly predicts 17 percentage of happiness among the sample. The number of stressors that one can face is many and the damages it can create is also very high. But not all individuals are affected with these stressors. Some individuals are successful in turning their difficulties into opportunities. This is because of the individual differences in the people’s reaction to stress (Steiner,2010). From the results of this study we have seen that athletes use more humor as coping and experience better flow state and that it is capable of predicting happiness. This is because one develops many positive qualities as a result of experiencing flow state (Hektner, 1996). Folkman and Lazarus(1988). Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter (2003) also reported similar findings.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined the relations between the variables humour as coping, subjective happiness and flow. It was found that flow state and humour as coping to stress as significantly higher for athletes than non-athletes. Males have higher levels of happiness than females and use humour as a coping mechanism. National level athletes experience more flow state than state level athletes which helps them to focus better and be better achievers. Last born are relatively happier than first born as they aim and achieve more than their elder ones. It was also seen that happiness has significant correlations with humour as Coping and flow state.

LIMITATIONS

As with all other studies, this study is also not free of limitations. We have not been able to identify whether the athletes that were chosen for the study were naturally pre disposed to better happiness, humour sense and flow state.

IMPLICATIONS

The awareness of the psychological components that enhances the optimal performance is crucial in applied sports psychology. Now that we know that flow state is a determining factor with relation to the level of participation, coaches must check whether the team members has acquired the required mastery level in their events in order to experience better flow state. Another implication of this study is that females must be taught to use more humour in order to deal with life's stress factors. Not only is this method a socially acceptable one but also more matured as well. Second born children must be given more preference while selecting members of team events as they have better socialising and influencing capacity. They have all the required leadership quality. Finally, every individual must be encouraged to be actively involved in physical activities as it will help them to boost their subjective happiness, humour sense and flow state.

Acknowledgments

The author appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interests

The author declared no conflict of interests.

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How to cite this article: Jose S, Faisal T, Mathai M (2017), Humour as coping and Flow as correlates of Subjective Happiness among Athletes and Non-athletes, *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, Volume 4, Issue 2, No. 85, ISSN:2348-5396 (E), ISSN:2349-3429 (P), DIP:18.01.011/20170402, ISBN: 978-1-365-68608-5