

THE USE OF HUMOUR IN SELF-HELP GROUPS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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SUMMARY

This article presents a qualitative study on the use of humour in Self-Help Groups. It investigates four Self-help Groups with different targets, in order to understand what motivates individuals to use humour, whether its perception differs when used by a participant or by the facilitator, and what types of humour are employed, following Martin's classification: Affiliative, Self-Enhancing, Aggressive, and Self-Defeating. The results show that humour serves the function of cohesion, cognitive restructuring, and emotional management. It appears to benefit both the individual and the group as a whole (e.g., reducing anxiety and sadness). No significant differences were found in the perception of humour when used by a participant versus the facilitator.

Key words: humor - Self-Help Groups - styles of humor

Abbreviations: h: humor; SHGs: Self-Help groups

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INTRODUCTION

Self-Help Groups

Self-Help Groups (in the text: SHGs) originated in the United States in 1935 through the initiative of a Wall Street stockbroker and a surgeon, both alcoholics. After spending hours discussing their difficulties, they realised they no longer felt the urge to drink. This led to the idea that it might work for others too, resulting in the first group dedicated to Alcoholics Anonymous.

Self-Help is a practical and cost-effective methodology, to the extent that it has been described as an "emerging social movement" (Borkman 1990). Support within SHGs is based on fundamental principles: sharing, comparison, and mutual support, where each participant becomes a resource for others. SHGs promote health "from below" by supporting the importance of individual responsibility. Sharing experiences allows for emotional and informational exchange, learning from others and teachers, developing skills and attitudes exploring new paths or solutions to problems (Borkman 1990), fostering self-efficacy, and enabling the creation of new bonds (Toti 2004). Participation rules are minimal: primarily, suspension of judgment, non-judgmental listening, confidentiality, and privacy.

Humour in the Group

Sharing joyful experiences plays an important social role (Provine, 2001), creating cohesion and equal sharing, a form of "attraction to the group" (Romero & Pescolido 2008) through which shared experiences of positive emotions act as a "social lubricant" (Dimitrov & Petrov 2025, Kuiper et al. 1995). Laughter reduces the distance between group members (Romero & Pescolido 2008, Cann et al. 1997), helps create and maintain group identity (Martineau 1972), affects

perceived interpersonal support and thus reduces perceived stress (Martin 2001, Provine 2001), lowers tension and, creates a "warm climate." Fine (1977) emphasises that humour contributes to a group's idioculture meaning the shared set of thoughts, habits, and interaction styles; in essence, groups develop shared linguistic practices through continuous interaction (Holmes & Marra 2002). According to Fine (1977) for laughter to be successful, several conditions must be met: members must recognise each other as such, the informations that makes up the humorous interaction must be shared (knowledge), and jokes must align with the group-defined morals (usability). Humour must also be functional, i.e., facilitate interactions consistent with the group's themes and goals, and respect members' roles and status (appropriateness). Implicit rules also exist in the group regarding what triggers laughter which becomes part of the group's culture. Laughter can serve simply to entertain or to open up to others, gain their favour, reduce aggression through self-irony or test values and ideas (Francescato 2002). According to Lewin (1965), a group is more than the sum of its members; it is a dynamic whole in which a change in one element causes changes in all the others, thereby producing a significant transformation.

Laughter and Its Effects on Physical and Mental Health

Laughter has positive effects on physical health: it reduces physiological and emotional arousal (Abel 2002), activates the endocrine system, increases endorphin production and can reduce pain (Gelkopf & Kreiter 1996), lowers stress-related hormone cortisol, and has immunological protective effects (Gelkopf & Kreiter 1996). Numerous studies have reported reduced anxiety in stressful situations (Lefcourt & Martin

1986, Lefcourt & Martin 1983), decreased depression (Portfield 1986), and a mitigating effect on anger and hostility (Gelkopf & Kreiter 1996), although results are not always consistent (Provine 2013). Humour (in the text: h) also appears to increase self-esteem (Dimitrov & Petrov 2025) and general well-being.

Humour and Cognitive Change

Humour is therapeutic because it reduces anxiety and stress (Abel 2002). This occurs through more positive and realistic re-evaluation of situations (Kuiper & Martin 1998) exploring alternatives and consequences, promoting less severe perceptions of situation or of oneself (Kuiper 1995), and fostering emotional distancing by defuse a situation (Rim 1988). In short, a form of coping mechanism based on emotions and the problem (Fry 1995). This may be due to the ability of those with humour to perceive the unexpected, the new, the surprising, and the incongruous between two elements (Incongruity Theory, Bateson 2016). Other theories see laughter as a disruption of symbolic order and logical rules (Purdie's Theory in Troncon, 2017). Koestler's theory of bisociation (1979) links h. to creativity: two elements from different registers are perceived simultaneously as both associated and incompatible. H. aids content shifts and broadens the cognitive field in a way similar to trial-and-error processes (Gelkopf & Kreiter 1996).

H. is a social lubricant that creates a positive atmosphere among group members, facilitating interaction and the exchange of positive emotions (Curşeu & Fodor 2025). The distinction made by Martin (Martin et al. 2003) distinguishes adaptive h. styles (Self-Enhancing and Affiliative) from maladaptive ones Aggressive and Self-Defeating. Affiliative humour asserts itself in a tolerant way through jokes and funny stories that promote cohesion, in contrast to Aggressive humour, which is sarcastic and ridiculing. Self-Enhancing humour helps people maintain an optimistic outlook during adversity, whereas Self-Defeating humour aims to gain approval through self-ridicule and mockery.

Adaptive styles are associated with high self-esteem, low levels of depression, increased well-being (Dimitrov & Petrov 2025) and, emotional stability (Verma & Gupta 2023). Positive styles allow for reinterpretation of negative events reducing emotional impact (Richards & Cruger 2017). In particular, Affiliative humour reduces stress, increases cooperation, team spirit, harmony, and group satisfaction. Maladaptive styles are associated with negative group atmosphere (Samson & Gross 2012), superiority and disparagement, ridicule, emotional distancing without cognitive reframing (Romero & Arendt 2011), low self-esteem, poor social cohesion and, high levels of depression (Richards & Cruger 2017).

SUBJECT AND METHOD

Hypotheses

The study aimed to test several hypotheses: Do SHGs recognise h. as a helpful factor within the group? What types of humour do SHG members use? What do they feel when they use humour in the group? Is there a difference in emotional perception when humour is used by a participant versus by the facilitator?

Operating Modes and Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed to descriptively assess humour use in SHGs. It was reviewed by 20 individuals with diverse socio-occupational and demographic backgrounds. After necessary revisions, it was administered to group participants. The 7-item questionnaire asked participants to express their views on emotions/motivations driving their use of h., emotional responses to h. used by both facilitators and members, and their perception of h. type following Martin's distinction (2003): Affiliative, Self-Enhancing, Aggressive, and Self-Defeating. This was to access the association between the use of the h. awareness and the act of emotional consequences. It also gathered information on group type, duration of attendance, and group size.

Subjects and Sociodemographic Characteristics

The participating groups focused on bereavement, caregiving, and psychological issues (depression). 81.5% of participants were female and 18.5% male. Most were over 55 (66.6%), the age range was between 35–45 which made up 11%; 45–55 about 15%; and 25–35 accounted for 7.4%. The 59.3% were married, 18.5% single, and 14.5% widowed. Educational levels included 26% with a bachelor's or master's degree, and 18.5% each with lower or upper secondary education. All occupational classes were represented, though retirees were the largest group (46.2%), but employees, shopkeepers, and self-employed individuals are present.

Group sizes were generally large, and attendance was long-term: 53.8% had participated for over 4 years, 15.4% for 2–4 years, and 30.8% for 0–2 years.

RESULTS

The 96.3% of respondents considered h. useful in the group while 3.7% rated it as neutral. 59% reported using humour every time, 33% occasionally, and 3.7% never or only during group sessions.

All respondents indicated using adaptive h. styles: 53.8% Affiliative and 69.2% Self-Enhancing. No responses were given for maladaptive styles. These results were mirrored in perceptions of h. used within the group (63% Self-Enhancing, 55.6% Affiliative), except for one participant who reported Aggressive humour.

Participants reported being motivated to use humour in SHGs by a "Desire to share" (65.4%) and a "Desire for greater closeness" (50%). Equally, "Desire to reduce another's sadness" and "to defuse a situation" were both at 42.3%. Other responses included "Desire to reduce perceived sadness in the group" and "To lessen the impact of another's negative situation" (38.5%). "Desire to entertain" and "Desire to reassure" (23.1%); "Desire to reduce another's anxiety" (26.9%) and "Desire to reduce group anxiety" (30.8%), "Desire to instil optimism" (19.2%). The 15.4 % of members signes "Desire to express emotions and feelings freely" (15.4%). One person (3.8%) marked "Anxiety."

When h. was directed at them by another participant, respondents reported: "Greater connection whit the other" (59.3%), "Pleasure" in the 48.1%, "Amusement" (40.7%), "Relief from worry" (in the 29.6%), "Relief from anxiety" (11.1%), "Relief from sadness" (22.2%), and "Gratitude". Only one person (3.7%) marked "Annoyance." Other options (Anger, Feeling devalued, Feeling nothing I particular, Feeling recognised, Humiliation) received no responses.

When h. came from the facilitator, reactions were similar: "Greater connection whit the other" is 46.2%, "Pleasure" and "Relief from sadness" are 26.9%, "Gratitude" (23.1%), "Amusement" and "Relief from worry" (19.2%), "Relief from anxiety" (11.5%), and likewise "I feel recognized", "Annoyance", "Nothing" and "Humiliation" at 3.8% equal to one subject in the sample, "Relief", "Anger", "I feel devalued and "Boredom" were zero.

DISCUSSION

Participants did not report using or perceiving maladaptive h. in their groups (with one exception of one out of 27). This could reflect a desire to protect the group's image? In line with existing literature, participants perceived the group climate similarly (Gheorghe & Curşeo 2023), identifying with the two adaptive styles. It remains unclear whether the groups atmosphere emerges from a sum of styles (compositional vs compilational) or a shared perception though it can be considered a group-level phenomenon. Research often analyses humour from an individual perspective (Gheorghe & Curşeo 2023).

Groups recognised h. primarily as a social facilitator-Affiliative humour (Dunbar & Mehu 2008) used to convey emotions, foster cohesion (Gheorghe & Curşeo 2023, Curşeo & Fodor 2025) and, increase engagement (Romero & Pescolido 2008). This is especially true given that the members of the group share the same goal, which can lead to a perception of similarity between the members increased h. "in-group jokes-we laugh together, for the same things" (Gheorghe & Curşeo 2023). Self-Enhancing humour (63%) was also important, highlighting laughter as a

way to manage stress and reduce negative emotions. H. creates a cognitive-affective shift (Abel 2002), promoting emotional distancing to stressefull events and positive reappraisal, reducing distress, anxiety, or depression, and bridging gaps between expectations and reality (Boerner et al. 2017, Martin 2001); h. extrapolates new interpretations, obtains a reinterpretation of the threatening situation in more positive terms (Gibson & Tantam 2018, Lazarus & Folkman 1984). It acts as problem-solving mechanism that eases negative emotions (Pietrantonni & Dionigi 2006). It is therefore not surprising that humour is considered a valuable tool in SHGs. This perception aligns with the answers given regarding the motivations with which the subjects use h. in the group. In fact, a preponderance of responses emerged regarding the "Desire for sharing" (65.4%) and "Desire for closeness" (50%) reflects Affiliative humour, with regards to the recognition of h. as a factor of cognitive and emotional distancing; "Desire to reducing another's sadness" and "to defuse a situation" (42.3%) show Self-Enhancing qualities. Participants did not perceive major differences in h. use by members versus facilitators. Gratitude emerged as an interesting response, suggesting h. is seen as a gift; other emotions included greater connection, pleasure, and relief from negative emotions (sadness, anxiety). Notably, participants recognised h. as beneficial not only individually but for the entire group, helping reduce collective anxiety (30.8%) and sadness (38.5%).

CONCLUSIONS

Ultimately, h. is perceived as a positive and well-accepted experience in SHGs, it is well tolerated and considered useful. Laughter fosters cohesion through shared positive emotions, acting as a social lubricant (Kuiper et al. 1995). Laughter allows you to manage negative emotions (anxiety and sadness), creates a distance from distressing experiences and restructuring troubling content, allowing emotions to flow more freely (Clapp et al. 2015). Laughter alleviates loneliness and is used not only for individual well-being but also to benefit the group as a whole, making it a valuable tool for emotional and perceptual change. The study has some limitations, primarily the small sample size, which limits statistical significance. Future studies should consider more structured questionnaires.

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