

Are you having a laugh: Exploring human coach distinctiveness in an age of AI: An IPA study of the role of humour in coaching



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Abstract

This study investigates the role of humour in the coaching process and its impact on both the coach-client relationship and its role as a differentiator between human coaching and AI coaching agents (AI coachbots). The research used semi-structured interviews with experienced coaches. It identified six interlinked themes: (i) Humour and trust, (ii) Timing (iii) Humour as a catalyst, (iv) Humour as a tension reliever, (v) risks (vi) alignment. The paper offers practical insights for coaches as to how and when humour may support their work.

Keywords

Coaching, Coaching Relationship, Coaching Conversation, Interpretative phenomenological analysis, AI coaching agents

Introduction

The emergence of AI in coaching has encouraged coaches to reflect on the uniqueness of being human. Some have argued that AI can never coach, as coaching is a relational activity (Bachkirova & Kemp, 2025). Others have noted the increasing use of AI and the ability of AI coaching agents to mirror human coach competencies (Passmore, et al, 2025a). However, little research has been undertaken to explore how human coaches, in an age of increasing AI usage, can more consciously differentiate themselves from new technologies and amplify the distinctive qualities of their humanity. This paper is the first in a series of papers exploring potential differentiators between AI coaching agents and human coaches. We hypothesised that five factors are key areas where humans can differentiate themselves from AI: (i) humour, (ii) work experience, (iii) lived experience, (iv) transformational and transcendental coaching and (v) affective empathy, in contrast to cognitive empathy (Passmore, et al., 2025b).

Humour in human relationships

The Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford University Press, 2025), suggests humour is a complex word with multiple meanings and uses. According to Martin (2007), humour can be divided into four components: (i) social context, (ii) cognitive-perceptual process, (iii) emotional response, and the (iv) vocal behavioural expression of laughter. Laughter and joking are fundamentally social phenomena, allowing individuals to interact with one another playfully. While many species engage in playful interactions to support physical

development, cognitive growth, social bonding, and stress relief, humans share their laughter response with several other great apes. Primatologists have observed similar types of laughter in chimpanzees, suggesting that humour and laughter serve an evolutionary purpose for animals and humans, contributing to natural selection (Gervais and Wilson, 2005). One key difference between how chimpanzees and humans laugh relates to social functions. Whereas chimpanzees primarily use laughter to regulate social play, reduce aggression, and reinforce social bonds, humans, in contrast, utilise humour for social signalling, such as managing inclusion/exclusion and alleviating awkwardness and tension (Dunbar, 2021). That laughter, induced through humour, can have positive health benefits such as improving blood circulation, aiding digestion, restoring energy, counteracting depression and enhancing the functioning of various organs of the body is highlighted in research conducted by Martin (2007). Martin argued that the value of laughter has gained popularity as modern medical discoveries like endorphins, cytokines, natural killer cells and immunoglobulins have been added to the list of bodily substances thought to be affected by humour and laughter. Humour plays a vital role in helping form human relationships. It is used between humans to increase connection, reduce conflict and to bond (Jach, et al., 2022). As such, it can be an essential communication skill for all humans. In the words of Ziv (1984), humour 'oils the wheels of communication'. Martin suggests that we tend to have more positive attitudes towards people who demonstrate a sense of humour (Martin, 2007) and that people with a sense of humour are generally perceived to have other positive characteristics and that humour is a trait that is highly desirable in partner selection. Studies of dating and married couples have also shown that individuals who perceive their partner to have a good sense of humour tend to be more satisfied with their relationship (Rust & Goldstein, 1989; Ziv & Gadish, 1989). This implicates that humour could be an important criterion for and influence the selection and choice of coaching partners and how the client/ coach relationship develops over time. Humour can also help enhance the quality of human relationships. An example of this put forward by Norrick (1993) is when humour is used to shift the focus of a conversation from being threatening to more light-hearted. He examines how humour helps enliven a conversation and looks at different ways humour can help break the ice, fill awkward silences and create smoother conversations between human beings.

Humour in professional relationships

The importance of humour as a supportive communication skill in medical counselling, along with its role in enhancing a therapist's overall effectiveness, is explored in several research studies. Therapists can help convey empathy, caring and genuineness toward clients, and humour is more likely to be therapeutic when used genuinely,

communicating empathetic understanding and concern for the client (Bachelor & Horvath, 1999). Franzini (2001) argued that humour should be integrated into the training of all psychotherapists and counsellors. When humour is used effectively, it can help create rapport and put a client at ease, reduce tension, and make a shared 'play space' (Gelkopf & Kreidler, 1996). Laughing together may promote feelings of intimacy and friendliness and facilitate a client's trust in their therapist. (Martin 2007). Furthermore, a humorous, as opposed to a defensive response from a therapist, can convey the message that they remain hopeful and are not overwhelmed by the client's criticism and problems (Olson, 1994). Humour, when applied in therapy, helps the client gain alternative perspectives, with an 'aha' experience leading to spontaneous laughter. When the therapist joins this laughter, they celebrate the client's new insights, which can further reinforce the new perspective (Martin, 2007). This idea is supported by some of the comments made by the coaches we interviewed, and we will touch on this in the third theme of this paper. There may be close parallels between the relationships formed in therapy and coaching, and this paper will shed light on how humour helps build trust in the coach-client relationship from an empirical perspective. However, there are also risks associated with using humour in therapy that have emerged from research. One such risk is that humour may give the impression that a therapist is not taking the client's problems seriously or is merely attempting to showcase their own 'wittiness'. This view is presented by Kubie (1971), who, along with Kuhlman (1984), expressed concern that humour, when used by a psychotherapist, could divert attention from a problem and thus interfere with information processing. The relationship between humour and creativity, as well as how humour supports a shift in perspective when used in therapy, is explored by Koestler, who, using humour as a starting point, examines 'bisociative' thinking, which he describes as the creative leap made by the mind that leads to new perceptions and insights into reality (Koestler, 2014). Murdock & Ganim, (1993) examine this more deeply, identifying and analysing thirteen definitions and eleven theories of humour. They explore the interplay between creativity and humour. They note the role humour can play in reducing negative feelings, such as anxiety, depression, and anger, is well-researched. Kallen (1968) echoes this: "I laugh at that which has endangered or degraded or has fought to suppress, enslave, or destroy what I cherish and has failed. My laughter signals its failure and my own liberation". O'Connell (1976) too believes humorous people are "skilled in rapid perceptual cognitive switches in frames of reference". May (2009) described this effect as a "healthy way of feeling a 'distance' between one's self and the problem, a way of standing off and looking at one's problem with perspective". However, while the psychology field of humour has been explored, little of these insights have been applied to the field of coaching.

Vendl and colleagues. (2024) completed the only comprehensive systematic review of the use of humour in the fields of psychotherapy, personal development, mental health, and coaching, reviewing studies between 2000 and 2023. They identified just 13 relevant studies, highlighting that although humour is one of the most effective forms of communication, it is often overlooked in professional dialogue and research. The team identified five themes across the 13 studies about its use: 1) the well-being of the client, 2) fostering a working alliance, 3) effects on energy, creativity, and depth, 4) cognitive and behavioural shifts, and 5) effects on the practitioner.

Humour as a leadership skill that support learning and growth

The role humour plays in facilitating learning by creating a close personal connection (immediacy) between the learner and the teacher is examined by Anderson (1979), who established that there is a greater perceived learning effect and more positive student attitudes towards the teacher. This idea is supported by comments from the coaches we interviewed and is explored in the third theme of this paper. Based on experiments conducted with students, Ziv (1988b) found that humorous information is recalled better than non-humorous information when both are presented in the same context. This suggests that humour can create a 'stickiness' that enhances the student learning process when relevant and when used sparingly. De Vries (2014) observed that play helps individuals establish closer connections with their environment, which in turn assists them in developing effective learning strategies. This suggests humour may help a client retain what they learn about themselves in a coaching conversation. Decker (1987) explored the effect and impact of humour as a leadership skill. His research revealed that employees who were surveyed rated supervisors with a strong sense of humour as possessing more positive leadership qualities. Additionally, these employees reported higher levels of job satisfaction.

Humour and playfulness in coaching

The International Coaching Federation defines coaching as "partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximise their personal and professional potential" (ICF, 2025). Turner and Norris (2012) describe humour as an intrinsic element of being human and central to building and maintaining relationships, which, when used wisely, can have transformative power on the coaching relationship. Wheeler and Leyman (2024) examined the idea that humour is most effective when it aligns with the coach's mindset. They emphasise the importance of authenticity in playfulness, stating, "If you are trying too hard, you will probably misfire." When a coach engages in improvisation and playfulness, it can deepen trust by

signalling authenticity, presence, and mutual vulnerability—foundational qualities for a strong coaching relationship. Through improvisational, playful moments, the coach demonstrates flexibility and responsiveness, creating a space where the client can feel safe to experiment, risk being wrong, or reveal aspects of themselves without harsh judgment. This experiential safety fosters trust, as clients perceive the coach's intentions as supportive rather than controlling. Over time, this trust feeds the relational bond, enabling deeper work, more candid communication and more effective co-creation in coaching. Wheeler and Leyman clearly link such relational benefits with playfulness, not as a luxury but as a lever for growing connection, psychological safety and depth. This is echoed by comments received from the coaches we interviewed and covered in the sixth theme in this paper.

Much of the existing research has explored the critical role humour can play in building human and professional relationships. One of the purposes of our research is to validate and investigate how this holds up from an empirical standpoint based on the experiences of experienced coaching practitioners. Artificial Intelligence has informed the development of AI coaching agents, which, in turn, are creating new ways of coaching. Given these changes, we are also seeking to explore how human coaches can use human to amplify their humanity, and in this way, differentiate themselves from AI coaching agents. Humour is one aspect of a coaching relationship where human coaches arguably differ from AI coaching agents (Passmore, et al., 2025b), given the unique relational and situational qualities of humour, which often draws on shared lived experiences.

Method

Research design

We have chosen Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as a qualitative research framework because it helps make sense of lived experiences and how a coach (as an experiential expert) interprets their experiences with humour, specifically within the context of interactions with clients. With our aim to gain deep insights and multiple perspectives—considering that the use of humour in coaching is not formally defined or trained as a skill set and is underrepresented and under-discussed in practitioner supervision—we have opted for IPA over Thematic Analysis (TA).

Participants – Researchers

The research team consisted of two researchers. Both researchers are experienced coaches who engage in reflective practice. During the study, the researchers engaged in active discussion and introspection to increase their awareness of the influence of their own beliefs, experiences, and assumptions, which could shape the interpretation of participants' accounts in the interviews and the writing up of the findings.

Participants – Coaches

We recruited twelve experienced coaches from six countries across four continents for an interview. Details of the participants are summarised in Table 1. The sample size of twelve complies with IPA guidelines (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Participants were recruited based on their personal experience as well as their experience with clients from various continents and cultures. The recruitment of new participants ceased when data saturation occurred, and new themes ceased to emerge. We have summarised the participants in Table 1, who were predominantly female and white.

Table 1 Participant Location and Coaching Experience

Pseudonym	Location	Coaching Experience (Yrs)	Gender	Racial Identity
Anni	UK	8	Female	White
Bernhard	Germany	18	Male	White
Carla	US	14	Female	White
Dina	Hungary	16	Female	White
Emily	US	18	Female	White
Franzi	UK	7	Female	White
Gwen	UK	14	Female	White
Hanna	Germany	28	Female	White
Ilse	UK	5	Female	White
Joana	Australia	24	Female	White
Kate	US	38	Female	White
Jacob	South Africa	15	Male	Black

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews lasting 30 minutes were conducted via Zoom, allowing participants to select a convenient time and date based on their location and time zone. All interviews were recorded on Zoom using video and were transcribed.

Data Analysis

The transcripts were analysed to develop experiential statements, which were then grouped into individual experiential statements for each participant. These personal

experiential statements were used to create group experiential themes according to the process outlined in IPA (Smith and Nizza, 2022).

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at Henley Business School, University of Reading.

Results

Six interlinked themes emerged from the interviews, which are summarised in Table 2 and discussed in this section:

Table 2: Themes

(i)	Humour & trust
(ii)	Timing
(iii)	Humour as a catalyst
(iv)	Humour as a tension reliever
(v)	Risk of humour
(vi)	Alignment

(i) Humour and trust

Humour helps build trust and develop the coaching relationship and can be applied as a strategy to forge a deeper connection, thereby shaping the relationship with the client. Carla described this as: “It allows us to go deeper; we are really exploring who the person is.” Kate referred to this as a “bonding element – if done correctly”. They both suggest that humour can help shift the relationship from transactional to relational. This is achieved in a way that Carla described as “we connect by laughing together”. When this occurs, a sort of embodied presence is created with the client. Kate talks about this as “when you are in humour, there is a oneness inside because all of you are participating ... that essence of mind, body, spirit all coming together.” In Ilse’s words “it creates a warmth”. This warmth can create a sense of ease and reduce nervousness, so putting the client and their topic at the forefront of the conversation. Emily used the phrase “working with a human being.” This suggests humour could help give a coach the edge over AI coaching agents. When a coach uses humour, they also show that they are vulnerable, which can further build trust in the coaching relationship. Carla described this using the following words: “When I am doing something silly, I am being

vulnerable,” and Gwen as “dropping my work mask.” When the coach takes the lead on this, it can provide the client with space that helps them “describe themselves, their vulnerabilities and us stepping back and just lightly, kind of warmly smiling or sometimes giggling about that”. (Ilse). Humour can help a coach become a more humane partner.

(ii) Timing

As examined in our first theme, Humour plays an important role in building Trust and rapport in the coaching relationship, but at what stage of the coaching relationship is the right moment to introduce it? There were different points of view on this from the coaches interviewed. Dina believed the right moment was “not when coaching someone for the first time, but when you have already developed trust.” Anni’s comments also suggest not at the beginning of a coaching relationship, “I wouldn’t bring it into a first session.” The words Ilse used suggest a more intentional approach may be helpful: “I give a lot of attention to warmth and creating a safe environment. And then, inherently, humour comes in.” Carla believed that it was an essential part of contracting and getting to know the client to determine if humour is appropriate in the relationship: “it begins with the contracting. Some clients laugh easily from our first meeting.” Bernhard believed the coach knows this early in the coaching relationship: “With some clients, you were never able to really use or find humour. That was quickly determined, probably within the first five minutes of getting to know someone.” Carla thought it was important that first, “you need to be able to tune into that person and put yourself on the client’s wavelength. ” This attunement may depend on the chemistry and mutual receptivity between the coach and the client. Indeed, there may not always be a place for humour for Dina, it is only: “If the client is open to that.” and before introducing humour “We need to have a history together”. Franzi took a different viewpoint namely that humour was not pivotal in forming the relationship: “I think the relationship was already strong, and I don’t think it played a role in the relationship,” Dina believed that misplaced humour could damage trust and rapport in a coaching relationship: “I think the worst is when it’s not in the right place at the right moment.” How does a coach know when it is the right moment for humour in a coaching conversation? Responses to this question suggest that this is often intuitive and spontaneous. The coaches we interviewed largely used kinaesthetic language when describing this: “coming in the moment when it feels right to use it.” (Anni) “having the insight to know when it is appropriate.” (Ilse) “It’s always a spur-of-the-moment decision – it’s kind of ad hoc.” (Joana), “It has to come from the moment; it is certainly something spontaneous.” (Bernhard) and “it’s what’s happening in the here and now with this person at that moment” (Carla). Carla believed that humour emerged spontaneously in emotional

moments: “He started to cry, and I started to cry. Then all of a sudden, I said, 'Look at the two of us. How ridiculous we are!' And we just laughed and laughed about how touched we were by this situation.” There was some belief that coaches must be responsive to the clients mood and energy level to determine when humour is appropriate: “if the client is not open to that fun in the moment we have to drop it” (Dina), “always be sensitive to how it sits with the client (Dina) and prepared to drop it when “funny remarks can be stopping the thinking of the client” (Dina).

(iii) *Humour as a catalyst*

The use of humour in coaching extends beyond joke-telling to include wordplay and embracing spontaneity. Hanna used humour as a synonym for light-heartedness and described humour as “being light-hearted in the right way”, suggesting that light-heartedness shouldn’t be confused with carelessness; instead, it is about maintaining a positive, flexible and confident stance with a client. Dina formulated this as helping the client “look at the lighter side of the story.” So, using humour in coaching can help create lightness and energy to help shift a client's perspective and develop fresh insights on topics where they may have become bogged down. Gwen described this as “lift up, see things in a different way, and find new opportunities and ideas.” Anni discussed how perspective shifts can be “away from the negative” and how humour helps “remove stuckness in awful things” by “getting them thinking of things in a different way.” Joanna referred to this as “lightening the mood,” and Gwen believed that playful metaphors can help facilitate a “really powerful shift” in clients. This suggests that humour may help create a more profound sense of self-awareness and so supports self-exploration, which Dina described as “fun and laughter can also be something that is supporting new awareness and explorations.” Using humour allows the coach to challenge clients in a non-threatening way, which Dina described as “fun can be that I give it a twist” and together with the client “, laugh at our absurdities and our humanity”. Joanna believed that laughter enhances learning and should be an intentional part of coaching: “You learn better when you are laughing” and Emily thought that engaging a client in playful or unexpected activities fosters experiential learning and deeper retention of concepts “when people are having fun, they learn.” Kate was adamant that humour helped memory retention “anything we do that brings emotion goes straight into long term memory”. There were, however, concerns raised that humour should be balanced and not become the central focus of the session or even get in the way of things: “humour may hinder reflection time because when you are in humour, you are not in that reflection time.” (Franzi) The coach's ability to use humour also demonstrates compassion and empathy with the client, without necessarily diminishing the gravity of a topic. Emily formulated this using the words “a little bit of lightness

shows compassion. A little chuckle can show empathy. It can show kindness. Things can sometimes be so heavy that people are paralyzed by that.” So, humour helps shape the relationship between coach and client and can be a channel for the client to release emotion, with laughter and tears being an indicator of emotional release in coaching, and so provide the coach with useful signals in calibrating where their client stands. and Bernhard described humour as an emotion: “Humour is definitely an emotion”. Ilse interpreted this as a cue “that we’ve tapped into something, and there has been a release and then from that comes the awareness.” So humour, when expressed in coaching, elicits physiological and emotional benefits, leading to a more relaxed and trusting environment. This creates a “all-around better conversation” (Bernhard) in a way that is “healthy” (Carla).

(iv) *Humour as a tension reliever*

When used effectively, coaching can act as an antidote to stress and pressure lubricating the coaching process to create a relaxed and comfortable coaching environment which helps the client move forward: “A little bit of humour with a bit of creativity helped him connect with something that’s quite deep, quite inherent” (Ilse), to “relax” the client and “loosen up”, like a glass of wine” (Bernhard). In emotionally intense environments, humour can provide relief and empower clients facing hardship: “sometimes to lighten up the real severity of the situation” (Emily) even “defusing when the client has an emotional hijack” (Carla) and opening up new communication channels with the client. Emotional release “moves us forward in some ways.” (Ilse) and can “create a release from stuckness and acceptance” (Ilse). Anni formulated this as part of a strategy: “I ask to share a funny story about a difficult situation they had”. Emily and Kate went one step further using humour as a way to build their own energy levels when working with clients, “If I don’t see the fun element of something, it’s really hard for me to engage.” (Emily) and “it jiggles everything and wakes you up,” (Kate).

(v) *Risk of humour*

Humour carries both risk and reward and should be used with care with coaching clients: “I hold it delicately” (Ilse) and always be used in moderation: “when it’s done, it’s done” (Kate). The coaches interviewed believed that it was important to ensure that the client was open, receptive, and responsive, and that humour is used situationally and contextually, paying attention to the fact that “it’s not forced and it’s not introduced by the coach randomly, but rather by the situation” (Franzi). Hanna described this as “allowing someone to create space. ” Humour can be detrimental when it lacks empathy: “a big regret on my side, when I was the coach, was that there was not

enough empathy before humour was applied, probably due to my own helplessness” (Hanna). Gwen and Carla emphasized the importance of kindness in humour: “if the coach finds themselves constantly making wisecracks and quips and, obviously, in some way making fun or being sarcastic, then that’s not appropriate humour” (Gwen) and “never be nasty, don’t be mean. Meanness is not funny” (Carla). Coaches should always be aware that humour could be misunderstood and create unintended consequences for the coaching process: “the challenge with it is if the other doesn’t perceive it in that way, it can have the opposite effect ” (Ilse). Overuse of humour can even interfere with coaching effectiveness: “Don’t exaggerate or overdo it in terms of the amount of time, but also the intensity” (Kate). The client should also be at the forefront of Humour: “focusing on what the coachee is returning to you in response to that humour, not what you think the response to that humour will bring” (Anni). When used effectively, humour supports the coaching process rather than being used as an end in itself: “What’s your intention here? Is it to tell jokes or to deepen the learning and forward the action?” Cultural, generational, and hierarchical factors can significantly influence a client’s receptiveness to humour in coaching, and the coach needs to be cognizant of this. Comments collected during the interviews point out that coaches should be able to adapt to a client’s humour styles and “be aware of your own biases” (Joana). There are pitfalls that a coach should be aware of: “it’s a risky business humour I think” (Ilse). Cultural sensitivity is particularly important in multicultural coaching environments, and coaches should be aware of potential misinterpretations or offensive humour, especially in diverse settings. Kate noted, “What is humorous to one person may be insulting to another.” Bernhard emphasized the importance of preparing for this reflecting that, “We need to thoroughly study international practices, cultures, and histories if we are going to venture down any humorous road.” Franzi noted that “people have different levels of tolerance for self-criticism.” One of the coaches, Bernhard, had experienced that younger German clients were more open to humour when “they were not as high in an organizational hierarchy”.

(vi) *Alignment*

Some of the interviewed coaches talked about the challenges they had encountered when using humour in the coaching process. So that humour can act as a catalyst for building trust with clients, it should emerge organically and authentically. Confidence and experience are critical factors: “New coaches have a lot going on in their heads; it’s very hard for them to be light and humorous.” (Joana). “Being confident in knowing who you are and being comfortable in your skin took me a long time to get to that point,” (Emily). Joanna describes it as “you need to have courage and not worry that it will land badly with the client”. To use humour effectively, it is essential that the coach first has trust in themselves, which comes with experience. What can help achieve this,

according to Dina, is when a coach is aware of “who you are,” and for humour to be effective, it must come across naturally without appearing to be “a try-hard” (Joanna). For Franzi, this was a struggle at times: “I really had to learn how to respond to these jokes. Humour is not something that came naturally to me”. Carla believed that: “If you have no sense of humour, do not try this” If a coach chooses to use humour, it should be done seamlessly and be congruent with their personality, rather than deployed as a tool or simply overlaid into coaching sessions. “If a person is funny, I think they can integrate this into their coaching, but you need to come across as authentic and natural” (Franzi). Emily described humour as an offer to clients which needs to be: “as genuine and authentic as possible” and “you must be genuine, client centred, respectful, authentically yourself”. Humour can support a coach in showing up as their authentic selves “as full and whole human beings,” (Gwen) so that the client “receives me as being such,” (Emily).

Discussion

Our research findings, drawn on the views of experienced coaches, suggests humour, when used appropriately, and at the right moments, by the coach, can strengthen trust and help build a stronger relationship between the coach and the client. In this sense, humour can act as the WD40 of coaching, unlocking difficult territories and leading to the client granting the coach permission to step into areas previously restricted or unexplored.

Humour, when used well, is a potential area of differentiation as it is relational and situated within the relationship and in a specific moment, both in the relationship and in the broader cultural context of organisational and global events. In this way it differs from a joke, which is a specific, scripted structured form of humour, deliberately designed to create a laugh, which is why it often would feel crass when used in a coaching conversation.

One of the main benefits of humour when used by a coach, both relationally and situationally, is its ability to generate energy and facilitate perspective shifts in clients. This insight emerges as a common theme from interviews: humour serves as a powerful catalyst for helping clients gain new perspectives, and it can act as a tension reliever, enabling clients to move forward when they feel stuck. This supports research conducted in other fields, including the works of Koestler (2014), Murdock and Ganim (1993), Kallen (1968), O'Connell (1976), and May (2009). One surprising insight that

emerged in our interviews is how coaches also used humour as a way of maintaining their own energy levels in difficult conversations, serving a bidirectional function. Interviews conducted with our coaches align with and support other research in the field of coaching (Turner & Norris, 2012) as well as medical research (Rust & Goldstein, 1989; Ziv & Gadish, 1989). Humour is most effective when it is used genuinely, naturally integrates into their interactions and aligns with the coach's and client's personal values. Authenticity is key; our findings suggest that the coaches should be self-aware and avoid forcing humour. Additionally, using humour effectively requires confidence, experience, and self-acceptance, which develops over time. Incorporating humour into the coaching relationship may provide a coach with an advantage over AI coaching agents (Passmore, et al., 2025b). While AI coaching agents can generate jokes and use humour, they lack the relationship and cultural context which makes humour so personal, reflecting the unique relationship between the two individuals sharing the joke. Humour offers one way for coaches to differentiate themselves from AI coaching agents.

A surprising finding from our interviews was that humour and playfulness are not traditionally included in coach training programs. This was identified as both a gap and an opportunity. The potential for humour and playfulness, including improv, to be developed as a teachable and transferable coaching skill appears to be a promising area for further research and for program development (Flower, et al., 2025). Franzini noted, *"It would be great to hear how others used it,"* while Hanna pointed out, *"There is not a lot of training available on this, in terms of books that have been written."* These observations support Franzini's (2001) work in the field of medicinal counselling, which argues that humour should be incorporated into the training of all psychotherapists and counsellors. We believe that coach training schools have an opportunity to differentiate themselves by incorporating humour into their future training programs.

The coaches we interviewed held varying opinions and experiences regarding the appropriate time to introduce humour in a coaching conversation. There was no consensus on this topic; however, their comments indicated that the decision to use humour is often intuitive and develops naturally through experience with different clients over time. Carla expressed that humour is an intrinsic part of her identity rather than a skill she consciously developed, stating, *"It's just part of who I am."*

Limitations of the study

While this study offers valuable insights into the role of humour in coaching, it is not without limitations. First, the sample was predominantly white and female, even though

drawn from four continents. This range has implications for the generalisability of findings across more diverse cultural, racial, and gender groups. As we note in the paper, humour is deeply contextual and culturally contingent, so different interpretations or applications of humour may be underrepresented, as noted in multiple media cases (BBC, 2025). Secondly, although Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) allows rich exploration of lived experiences, its idiographic nature limits the study's scalability. Thirdly, our focus in this study was on experienced coaches, as we sought to explore differentiating factors between humans and AI coaching tools. However, the focus on highly experienced coaches means the use or misuse of humour by less experienced practitioners was not included. Finally, humour, as we note, is difficult to define or categorise systematically. This makes it difficult to distinguish between different forms or types of humour. Future research could build on this work by employing cross-cultural samples, more diverse coaching populations, and exploring the differential impact of various humour styles on coaching outcomes, from jokes to sarcasm and witty remarks.

Future research

Deeper research in this field could benefit human coaches and coach education. Future studies might explore which types of humour can foster trust in the coaching relationship and which types may be inappropriate or even harmful if used by the coach. A second area of study might explore how human humour differs from AI humour. We have suggested one difference is the relational and situation aspect of human humour compared to the more scripted AI attempts.

The way a coach uses humour and how it is perceived varies greatly depending on cultural norms, beliefs, and values, all of which are influenced by a person's upbringing and social background. This variation involves the assessment of the appropriateness of humour in various contexts. For coaches operating in international environments, the development of a foundational intercultural guide to humour could be advantageous. Such a guide would offer guidelines and insights into culturally appropriate and inappropriate uses of humour, thereby enhancing a coach's awareness and sensitivity. This domain presents a promising avenue for future scholarly research.

Practical implications

This study highlights the nuanced role humour can play in strengthening coach-client relationships, building trust, and facilitating shifts in perspective. Coaches may consider reflecting on their own humour style, exploring how it aligns with their identity and authenticity in practice. Secondly, we believe there may be value in incorporating references to humour in coach education programmes—focusing on timing, cultural

sensitivity, and ethical use. Thirdly, humour can serve as an energy-management tool, not only aiding clients but also supporting the coach's resilience in emotionally demanding sessions. Finally, as AI coaching agents continue to evolve, the relational, spontaneous, and context-sensitive qualities of humour may offer a meaningful way for human coaches to differentiate their practice. Developing coach awareness of humour as a relational skill can enhance both coaching outcomes and the humanity of the coaching process.

Conclusion

This study highlights the subtle yet powerful role humour can play in coaching, acting as a catalyst for trust, perspective shifts, and emotional connection. Humour, when used authentically and sensitively, strengthens the human dimensions of coaching that may be difficult, if not impossible at present for current AI coaching agents to replicate. While not without risks, its thoughtful application can deepen rapport, facilitate learning, and sustain coach-client engagement. As coaching evolves alongside technological advances, we suggest humour is one of several distinctly human differentiators. Integrating humour into coaching education and reflective practice offers both developmental value for coaches and a richer, more relational experience for clients.

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