



## Evolving Grounded Theory Methodology: Towards a discursive approach

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 24 February 2009

Received in revised form 2 November 2009

Accepted 7 November 2009

#### Keywords:

Grounded Theory Methodology

Discursive Psychology

Ethnomethodology

Humour

### ABSTRACT

Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) is a widely cited research approach based upon symbolic interaction with a focus on interaction, action and processes. Relatively recently, Discursive Psychology; a language-based interaction research approach also based on symbolic interaction, emerged. At present Discursive Psychology is principally cited in the social sciences literature. Given Discursive Psychology's symbolic interaction foundations, what relevance does this approach have for evolving GTM?

A number of methodological challenges were posed by a study looking at humour in Clinical Nurse Specialist–patient interactions. This paper will use the phenomenon of spontaneous humour in healthcare interactions to illustrate the potential for a new form of GTM drawing on discursive approaches; Discursive GTM.

First, the challenges presented by a study looking at spontaneous humour in Clinical Nurse Specialist–patient interactions are presented. Second, the research approach adopted to meet these challenges – Discursive GTM (DGTm) – is explicated and the results of the study are outlined. Third, the different GTM approaches and Discursive Psychology are compared and contrasted in relation to the DGTm approach adopted. Finally, the challenges and tensions of using DGTm as well as the opportunities afforded by the use of naturally occurring data are reviewed.

The authors contend that a DGTm approach may be appropriate in analyzing certain phenomena. In particular, we highlight the potential contribution of naturally occurring data as an adjunct to researcher-elicited data. Thus, when exploring particular phenomena, a DGTm approach may address the potentially under-developed symbolic interaction tenet of language.

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### What is already known about the topic?

- Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) is a widely cited qualitative approach in the social sciences.
- Traditional and evolved forms of GTM abound however there might be disparities between GTM theory and application.
- Constructivist GTM is the most recent version of GTM and provides a postmodern updating of traditional GTM.

### What this paper adds

The phenomenon of spontaneous humour is helpful in illustrating the potential for an evolved form of GTM drawing on discursive approaches; Discursive GTM. GTM's relevance for and potential to, orient to a more language-aware discursive approach and the associated challenges and tensions are presented. The potential contribution of naturally occurring data as an adjunct to researcher-elicited data is highlighted.

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### 1. Introduction

Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) is a widely cited and used methodology within the social sciences generally

and nursing research specifically (McCann and Clark, 2003a). Glaser and Strauss (1967) issued an invitation early in their seminal text for others to develop their work. Numerous authors – including students of both Glaser and Strauss (1967) – subsequently seized the opportunity and a plethora of ‘new’ GTM scholars emerged (e.g. Charmaz, 2006; Clarke, 2005; Hall and Callery, 2001; Kearney, 2001; MacDonald and Schreiber, 2001). In this article we too seek to evolve GTM.

Like GTM, ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967) is also based on symbolic interaction (SI) (Blumer, 1969) concepts. Although GTM (and to a lesser extent phenomenology) are favoured research approaches in nursing (e.g. Schreiber and Stern, 2001), ethnomethodology features less prominently (Dowling, 2007; Traynor, 2006; O’Connor and Payne, 2006). Nursing is an area that embodies interaction and language therefore, it is reasonable to assume that ethnomethodology may provide equally useful insights. We suggest that GTM could benefit from using certain methodological approaches based on ethnomethodology.

Ethnomethodology-inspired ‘discursive’ approaches such as Discursive Psychology (DP) (Edwards and Potter, 1992) have emerged fairly recently in the social sciences literature. Constructivist or constructionist GTM scholars (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2006; Clarke, 2005; MacDonald and Schreiber, 2001) and non-GTM scholars (Cresswell, 2007; Denzin, 1992) have suggested that GTM requires a postmodern make-over. Willig (2001), citing the postmodern turn to language, suggested that any further development of GTM should focus on how it treats discourse.

In this article a new form of GTM drawing on discursive approaches; Discursive GTM is proposed as a useful addition to existing research approaches. Discursive GTM (DGTm) attends to specific aspects of discourse as appropriate when analyzing particular phenomena in conjunction with introspective data. Here we use the interaction-based phenomenon of humour to illustrate the potential of and for, DGTm.

### 1.1. *The phenomenon of humour*

The phenomenon of humour is often viewed as a somewhat stable expression of personality in humans (Foot and McCreaddie, 2006). Nevertheless, it is reasonable to suggest that humour may present differently (or not at all) in certain circumstances or conditions. Humour, after all, is an integral aspect of communication between humans and is also noted to exist (principally via laughter or play) among other species (Martin, 2006). It is therefore ostensibly a social phenomenon principally occurring in social situations between two or more people (Martin and Kuiper, 1999; Apter, 1991) and is therefore, not necessarily stable, but dynamic and potentially complex.

A literature review undertaken by the first author prior to establishing a research question revealed the insular nature of humour research to date. For example, the humour-health hypothesis – the concept that humour is thought to directly or indirectly positively impact upon health – was the main focus of a number of ‘traditional’ psychological research studies. Such correlational studies were invariably

carried out on psychology students in laboratory conditions using various ‘humour scales’ (McCreaddie and Wiggins, 2008). The field of humour research, academic and applied, was noted to share a number of commonalities. Humour research was (a) dominated by rehearsed humour (e.g. comedy films, cartoons), (b) principally supported the notion that humour is an entirely positive phenomenon, (c) tended to denote humour via laughter (e.g. humour support), (d) studied healthy young people and (e) sought to measure, distill or correlate the phenomenon. There was a paucity of humour research in situations where the (spontaneous) phenomenon was more likely to occur (e.g. social interactions). Moreover, important situated contexts such as healthcare interactions had been virtually ignored. The first author’s (MM) doctoral study therefore, aimed to elicit new and robust findings reviewing the spontaneous phenomenon in ‘real world’ settings (McCreaddie and Wiggins, 2009).

### 1.2. *Researching the phenomenon of spontaneous humour*

Morse (2001) contends that GTM is particularly useful in exploring phenomena of which little is known and is a flexible means of inquiry specifically in terms of data collection and analysis. The phenomenon of spontaneous humour in healthcare interaction is a relatively unexplored area and therefore, data collection and analysis needed to be flexible and responsive. Humour, being primarily a social phenomenon, is something that is constructed between two or more people—a process, action and interaction involving indeterminacy, multiple realities and interpretations. The unexplored nature of the phenomenon, the need for a flexible and responsive data collection and analysis strategy in keeping with processes, actions and interactions involving multiple realities, led the first author to adopt a constructivist GTM approach.

No matter the approach adopted, Burns and Grove (2001) suggest researchers need to carefully consider how a phenomenon is to be defined and, or interpreted and collected. The first challenge therefore, lay in delimiting the phenomenon. What constitutes humour? How will we know what it is? Will we be able to recognize and interpret it? How will we be able to make these findings explicit to others so that any implications for clinical practice can be addressed? Finally, what would be the best kind of data to provide examples of spontaneous humour?

### 1.3. *Delimiting the phenomenon*

The challenges presented by the phenomenon of humour can be illustrated by the often interchangeable use of the terms humour and laughter. Humour and laughter are often taken to mean one and the same thing whereas they are two (potentially) distinct aspects of a phenomenon. Nonetheless, both exist on a broad spectrum incorporating many facets from stimulus (or no stimulus) through emotion, social, cognitive–perceptual and behavioural aspects: the latter taken to mean (in research terms at least), almost exclusively, laughter (Glenn, 2003). There can, of course, be humour without laughter, in the same way that laughter may occur without humour, e.g.

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