

social research Update

Humour Analysis and Qualitative Research

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- **Qualitative research is characterized by a heavy dependence on data that are word-based (interviews, observer notes, documents, manuscripts, etc.).**
- **Humour primarily consists of jokes (spoken or written words) and actions (describable through words) which elicit laughter or generate merriment.**
- **Humour analysis has inherent attributes that make it similar to typical qualitative research methods.**
- **Qualitative researchers can apply humour analysis more frequently as an analytical tool to investigate various cultural and social phenomena.**

Humour is a universal phenomenon that is exhibited by most cultures. What constitutes humour, under what conditions it is considered acceptable, what are the responses to an instance of attempted humour, and other related questions can shed light on cultural and social beliefs and practices.

Humour primarily consists of jokes (spoken or written words) and actions which elicit laughter or generate mirth (these actions can be described in words) (Critchley, 2002; Ritchie, 2004). Given that qualitative research is characterized by a heavy dependence on data that are word-based (interviews, observer notes, documents, manuscripts, etc.), this *Update* posits that humour analysis has potential as an investigative qualitative research tool.

Definitions of Humour and Theories of Humour

There are dozens of different definitions of humour. The following are two representative ones. Crawford (1994: 57) defines humour as any communication that generates a 'positive cognitive or affective response from listeners.' Romero and Cruthirds (2006: 59) define humour as 'amusing communications that produce positive emotions and cognitions in the individual, group, or organization.' Just as with the definition of humour, there is no single universally accepted, all-encompassing theory of humour. The following four theories are among the most commonly discussed in the humour literature.

1. *The Relief Theory*

Cooper (2008) says that the relief

theory has its origins in the ideas of Sigmund Freud who believed that the pleasure obtained from a humorous event or utterance originated in the unconscious realms of our mind. The process of humour is a defence mechanism on the part of the ego and the superego to circumvent reality and protect themselves from the emotional consequences of adverse real-life situations. Freud also believed that humour (primarily in the form of jokes) was a means by which people could release their suppressed aggressive and sexual instinctive urges in a socially acceptable manner (Freud 1960; Cooper 2008). Meyer (2000), along somewhat similar lines, proposes that humour is a vent through which people get relief from the tensions that originate in their desires or fears.

2. *The Superiority Theory*

The superiority theory says that humour is a manifestation of a feeling of superiority over others or even over one's own former situation (Berger 1987; Cooper 2008). In other words, a humorous utterance can be a sign of the person "lording" it over another person whom he or she considers inferior (in the case of self-deprecating humour, it can be the case that the person is making the humorous comment to distract others' attention away from a gaffe that he or she has committed).

3. *The Incongruity Theory*

According to Cooper (2008), incongruity theory is different from the previous two theories in that, while they try to explain how certain conditions motivate humour in people, it focuses on the object that is the source of the humour (joke, cartoon, etc.). More specifically, this theory posits that for an object to have a humorous effect, it has to harbour some kind of incongruity within itself. The incongruity can exist between what an individual expects and what actually occurs (Veale, 2004).

4. *The Comprehension-Elaboration Theory*

Cooper (2008) describes the comprehension-elaboration theory as a novel theory that tries to determine under what conditions individuals will find an event humorous. According to this theory, the degree to which someone will enjoy a humour attempt is determined by how difficult the humour is to understand and also by the amount of cognitive analysis the humour recipient conducts after he or she has comprehended the humour attempt. The post-comprehension cognitive analysis includes such considerations as whether or not the humour is socially acceptable under the circumstances or if the humour is offensive to a particular person or group.

Humour Analysis and its Similarities to Qualitative Research

Qualitative research has many identifying features including, but not limited to, the following: Use of qualitative data (word, pictures, and photographs); inductive analysis; holistic perspective; naturalistic investigation; context sensitivity; empathic neutrality; and design flexibility (Creswell 2006; Bogdan & Biklen 2007). In the context of humour analysis and its similarities to qualitative research, some of the above-listed features are particularly noteworthy, as discussed below.

The most common type of humour analysis deals with the analysis of spoken or written jokes. Jokes consist of either written or spoken words; therefore, analyzing jokes entails the analysis of the words (in the form of phrases or sentences). This fact alone makes it easy to see why humour analysis can be regarded as a qualitative research tool.

In terms of data analysis, qualitative research involves coding techniques to organize the data and to allow themes or patterns to emerge from

the data. In most conventional types of qualitative research, the data are collected in the form of interviews, which are then transcribed and coded to identify themes. Qualitative research frequently also involves field notes of on-site observations. The investigator subsequently analyses the field notes in conjunction with data from other sources (e.g., interviews) and then develops the research narrative (Creswell 2006; Bogdan & Biklen 2007).

The analysis of humour can be similar to the analysis of data that are in the form of interview transcripts or field notes. Jokes or other incidences of humour that are present in human interactions can be "trapped" by recording them in context. The humorous incidents may be analysed either separately or within a thick description of the context. Interviews and field notes from qualitative methods may produce information about various social phenomena; likewise, the analysis of humour can provide information about various situations and cultures.

Humour analysis is also akin to conventional qualitative research in other respects. As mentioned before, qualitative research is characterized by a "naturalistic" orientation to the investigation. In other words, qualitative researchers usually go directly to a particular place or setting to make observations of subjects and record data. The instance or setting in which the investigator is collecting data is expected to be as close to the "natural" state as possible. The analysis of humour can also be naturalistic in its orientation. If the specific instances of humour (mostly jokes) are gleaned from regular (i.e. spontaneous and unscripted) conversations, then the "data" so procured can be classified as those from a naturalistic setting. If the jokes are embedded in the script of movies, then there is still an air of "quasi-naturalness" about them and that can provide insightful information

about the type of humour that is publicly acceptable in that society.

Another signature feature of qualitative research is its reliance on inductive analysis. Inductive analysis entails the gathering of data and then seeing what patterns or themes emerge from the data. Most types of qualitative research follow this script, regardless of the methodology employed (be it grounded theory, phenomenology, etc.). Humour analysis can follow the same method of inductive analysis. Instances of humour (e.g., jokes) are "mined" from conversations or printed matter (such as movie scripts) and then analysed for common themes or patterns. The above discussion describes several similarities between most forms of qualitative research and humour analysis and it is easy to see why humour analysis can be used as a special type of qualitative investigative tool.

Research Implications of Humour Analysis

Qualitative research is used in many of the social sciences to understand people's feelings and views about the world in which they live and how these views influence their behaviour. Qualitative research can be used for understanding one specific individual's views and reasons for his or her behaviour; it can also be used for understanding the views and behaviour of a specific group of people. Humour analysis can likewise be used to understand how an individual or a group of individuals view the world, albeit through a humorous lens. While qualitative researchers from diverse backgrounds (various social sciences, business management, etc.) have so far sporadically used humour analysis as an investigative tool, this *Update* advocates that, given that humour analysis has inherent attributes that are so similar to other qualitative research methods, it should be much more frequently utilized as an analytical tool to investigate a

diverse range of cultural and social phenomena.

Humour analysis can also be applied to understand how people behave in special situations, including the possibility that there may be differences in this regard between the two genders (Hay 2000; Crawford 2003). De Koning and Weiss (2002) discuss the important role that humour plays in the formation and functioning of intimate relationships. On the negative side, humour analysis can also shed light on how males can manifest their dominance and power in social settings vis-a-vis women. Pryor (1995), for instance, has shown that teasing, jokes, and remarks that are governed by sexual overtones are among the most common forms of sexual harassment.

Humour application may also be studied in the context of solemn occasions, such as death and dying, or to understand how people who may suffer from depression react to or use humour as a form of therapy, or possibly as a coping mechanism against the trials and tribulations of daily life (Henman 2001; Abel 2002). Maples et al. (2001) have drawn attention to both the inherent benefits and the risks of using humour as a counselling tool, especially when treating clients from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

The analysis of humour can be an interesting tool for understanding the nuances of workplace cultures. For instance, humour analysis can be used to see how individuals (from different levels of the organisational hierarchy) interact with one another, especially in terms of humour usage (both the production of and reaction to humour) (Holmes & Marra 2002; Romero & Cruthirds 2006; Robert & Yan 2007). Some studies have examined whether or not humour can break down communication barriers that generally exist between supervisors and their subordinates

(Barbour 1998; Holmes & Marra 2002). Schnurr (2008) looks at how humour is used diplomatically in the workplace by female leaders to balance their gender and professional identities, thus enabling them to appear authoritative in their leadership roles (but without projecting an excessively masculine or feminine image). Of course, humour in the workplace has its dark side also, given its potential to offend colleagues and adversely affect workplace camaraderie.

Another fascinating and insightful use of humour analysis is for cross-cultural studies. Ziv (1988) and Davies (2002) highlight the cross-cultural utility of humour analysis by discussing how various societies treat men, women, and children differently in terms of humour usage. They have conducted content analysis of popular jokes across different countries and they show how societies use humour differently and how these differences are indirectly linked to factors such as technological development and literacy levels.

Conclusion

This *Update's* primary thrust has been to draw attention to the utility of using humour analysis as a somewhat novel (and, as of today, relatively infrequently utilized) qualitative research tool for understanding diverse cultural and social phenomena (be it at either the individual or group level). To do so, it has described the similarities that exist between conventional qualitative research tools (as in grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenology, case studies, etc.) and humour analysis. Given the similarities between the two, it is easy to appreciate why humour analysis can be regarded (and applied) as a special type of qualitative research tool.

Humour usage analysis can be used to understand both intra-gender and inter-gender interactions in

a multitude of diverse contexts. As mentioned before, several studies have adduced evidence to demonstrate that there are differences in humour usage between the two genders, while other studies have shed light on the negative attributes of humour usage in social communications between men and women.

The *Update* also referred to the existing literature that shows how useful humour analysis can be as a novel qualitative research tool to understand both intra-cultural beliefs and inter-cultural differences. Various cultures use humour in different ways, and humour analysis is a potent anthropological and ethnographic tool to gain insight into the mores and values of these different cultures.

Whether it is intra-cultural studies (for example, how blue-collar workers use humour), the previously described inter-cultural studies, or the large body of research on humour's role in workplace settings, it is clear that humour analysis has utility as a potent investigative tool. Qualitative research methods have become increasingly popular with social scientists over the last two or three decades. As this *Update* has demonstrated, there is sufficient justification to encourage qualitative researchers to consider adding humour usage analysis more regularly to their research repertoire.

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