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# Laughing at Cancer Online: a corpus-based investigation of irreverent humour as coping

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# Overview



- Context
- Introduction to the data & Taster
- Definitions of humour
- Method of identification
- Functions (discourse, interpersonal & possible psychological) of humour on 'Warped'
  - Talking about difficult/embarrassing subjects
  - Self-reassurance and identity maintenance
  - (Self-)empowerment
- Concluding reflections

# Context



- Humour is much discussed in the context of illness and interactions with healthcare professionals (who should joke, when, where and how?; what are the benefits of humour?)
  - risks
  - potential benefits
- Most studies do/cannot focus on what patients naturally do amongst themselves → Online data

# 'Warped'



Thread	Title	Length (posts)	Length (words)
<a href="#">mm12 7784</a>	THE GENTLE BANTER AND LAUGHTER THREAD	17631	415519
<a href="#">mm12 23694</a>	We talk Brain Tumours (Original)	16425	2498502
<a href="#">mm12 2374</a>	AM I THE ONLY CARER WHO NEVER SLEEPS!!!!	10330	673737
	2009) - what happens now?	7947	1255490
		6357	856842
	post the news here		
	inued)		
	e wanting to me		
<a href="#">mm12 27</a>	ve or widowed already (2)  (This thread was origi that all visitors to this thread will find comfort, inform or two along the way.)		
<a href="#">mm12 288</a>	autiful mum has gone page 2		85159
<a href="#">mm12 8751</a>	things that set me off..... (please, this is not a rant)		461702
<a href="#">mm12 3763</a>	C...lastoma Why Why Why  		511002
<a href="#">mm12 5108</a>	Breast cancer	398	424214
<a href="#">mm12 40784</a>	For those with a warped sense of humour WARNING- no punches pulled here	2544	530055

15. "For those with a warped sense of humour WARNING- no punches pulled here"

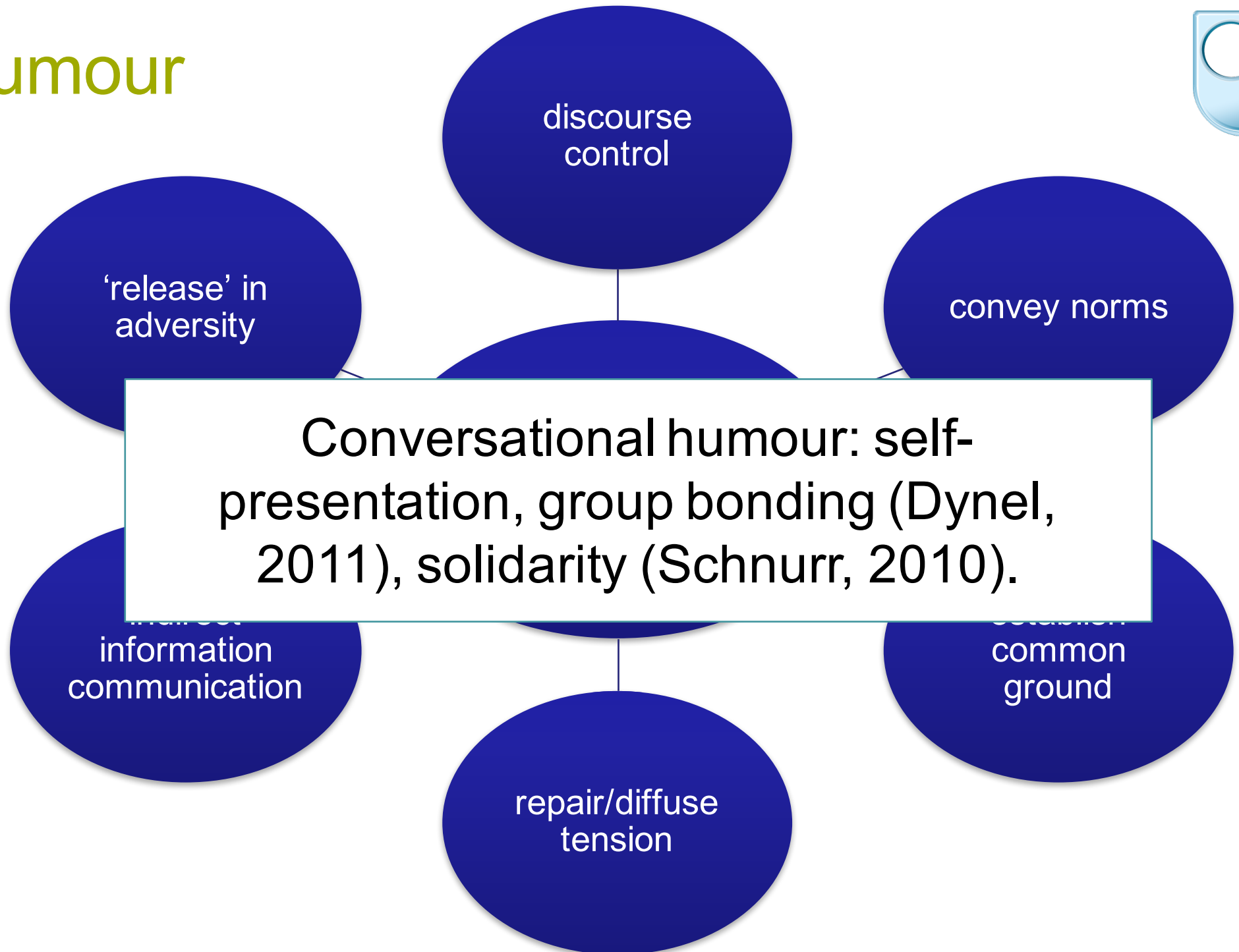
- 2011-12 (13 months)
- 2544 posts
- 530,055 words
- 68 contributors

# Laughing at cancer and its consequences



- *It's just one of the evil Mr Crab's funny little jokes that we now have to spend our lives thinking not just "What shall I have for tea?" but "What shall I have for this random nameless meal - that I am having at an odd time because I couldn't face food till now - that won't kill me?" I am pretty sure that my own evil Mr Crab has taken control of my stomach-to-brain signals. He gets hungry in the night, and demands steak and chips. I don't eat meat!! Bastard..*
- *"I find it very distressing you mentioning the importance of the arsehole, when I actually don't have one anymore. Mine went in the bucket with the rest of my rectum!) I am ofcourse joking (about being distressed not about the bucket thing 'cos that's true haha)"*

# Humour



# Method



- Determining key parts-of-speech and key semantic categories in Warped thread (compared to patients/carers online data) using Wmatrix (Rayson 2009)
- Examining key POS and SEM for 'humorousness'\*
- Concordancing categories that contain humorousness
- Examine humour that is arguably most characteristic of the thread and what patients are doing with it

# Key POS and SEM



Tag	Description	Freq. 1	% 1	Freq. 2	% 2	LL	Log Ratio	Examples
<b>NNB</b>	preceding noun of title (e.g. Mr. Prof.)	234	0.05	191	0.02	69	1.17	Mr_Crab, Mrs_PF, Mr, Mrs_NH, Mrs, Mr_G, Uncle_Bulgaria, Mr_Crab, Mrs_Doyle, Dr
<b>Z99</b>	Unmatched	13719	2.71	14937	1.61	1917	0.75	haha, xxxxx, im, cwatches, pube, warpies, hehe, warpy, nobhead, hahaaaa, manflu, hols, macland
<b>B5</b>	Clothes and personal belongings	2437	0.48	1165	0.13	1559	1.94	bag, pants, wear, bags, clothes, dress, wearing, knickers, shoes, dressing
<b>O4.4</b>	Shape	1531	0.3	806	0.09	882	1.8	warped, baggy, lines, line, straight corner, cross, baggies, flat, shape
<b>N3.2+</b>	Size: Big	1042	0.21	1029	0.11	196	0.89	big, fat, large, massive, growing, grow, Hefty, grown



# Talking about 'unmentionables'



1. *"If baggy had farted lots then HB would have shot across the pool... jet propulsion!"*
2. *"today at this meeting, i took a bottle of coke. I like a coke but those bubbles work their way through your guts at a frightening rate and out they pop in no time making the same noise as a whoopee cushion very loudly its just like a fake fart noise! Of course I get the giggles big time with this, right in the middle of the meeting and of course no-one can tell me off cos I've got a bag and they are embarrassed...."*

# Self-reassurance and identity maintenance



1. *[HoneyBee:] ha ha can you imagine if Hefty came out and said boo! I was hiding ha ha actually*  
*[HoneyBee:] Got to go and see GC again in 2 weeks time to check Hefty is still missing presumed dead*
2. *It's just one of the evil Mr Crab's funny little jokes that we now have to spend our lives thinking not just "What shall I have for tea?" but "What shall I have for this random nameless meal - that I am having at an odd time because I couldn't face food till now - that won't kill me?" I am pretty sure that my own evil Mr Crab has taken control of my stomach-to-brain signals. He gets hungry in the night, and demands steak and chips. I don't eat meat!! Bastard..*

# (Self-)Empowerment



1. *“I think baggies do it on purpose. They never misbehave when you are at home and it doesn't matter do they? Mine went bonkers today too with the wet and windy lunch”*
2. *“DO YOU HEAR THAT BAGGY \*behave yourself, Sam deserves a bloody good night out*
  - *cheers everyone, and a kick up the arse for Mr C!*
  - *Boot to Mr Crab. Hugs to everyone else*

# Reflections



- The role of humour (benefits)
  - Indirect information communication
  - Release and self-reassurance
  - Identity maintenance and ‘blaming someone else’
  - BUT also: empowerment – individual & collective
- Risks of humour in illness

# Risks & Benefits: 1<sup>st</sup> post of 'Warped'



[...] I set up this thread as explained below with a lovely dear lady called Sunshine May. We had a lot of chat on here and **the silliness got me and her and lots of others through some hard times**. Sunshine left the site when **there was some criticism of warped** and she deleted all her posts when she left. That is why it doesn't make sense to start with as all her posts are missing and it is a bit of a one sided conversation.... Enjoy it all the same... [...] If you are feeling sensitive please don't read this thread as you may feel offended.... and **we need a place to say what we need to say without worrying about offending people so you have been warned!!!!**

**This is for those of us who cope by being irreverent and silly and able to laugh at all the bad stuff.**

# Reflections



- The role of humour (Kleinman 1989)
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  - Indirect information
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- Role of online forum
  - Anonymity (Suler 2004)
  - Retractability (cf. deniability of humour)
  - Community boundaries
  - (Researcher access)

I found a warped sense of humour came with the cancer, it was either laugh.....or cry, I prefer to laugh. It's a sort of 'gallows humour', it gets worse every day. You begin to notice what miserable sods the 'non cancer' community are, with their trivial worries and whinges. Lunacy is therapeutic, everyone should be mad.



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**Thank you**

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