

Chapter 3

Critical Jokes and Moral Reflection in Interviews



3.1 Introduction to a Jokes-Based Interview Method

One of the more pressing themes in business jokes are the unethical behaviours of managers. The issue of over demanding management has been touched upon in the previously discussed top ten of business ethical transgressions under ‘selling juniors for seniors’ and in the ‘fake it till you make it’ practice, where managing consultants promise more in the contract than they should. During a project, consultants then have to put in overtime, and a lot of learning on the job. While clients are mostly satisfied with the end result, consultants, and in particular juniors have to pay by investing lots of time and effort. As in the consultant joke on bear hunting, juniors have to kill and skin the bear, while their managers only do ‘acquisition’. As a result, juniors receive more work, and much more difficult work, than they should handle.

The previous chapter has shown how jokes can illustrate the most common unethical practices in business. In this chapter we turn the question around, to find out *how interview responses can illustrate and deepen the ethical issues raised in jokes, and how jokes may inspire such exploration*. Pressuring leadership in consulting is the example case used to introduce this method. The jokes-based interview method is based on open in-depth interviews that start with an invitation to reflect on jokes, in the current example study two cartoons and one text joke. The three jokes all illustrate the issue of pressuring leadership from a different angle. Interviewees are asked to interpret the jokes and to relate them to their own work experiences.

While social scientist are familiar with interview studies, for scholars in ethics this may be less common. Usually, philosophers have limited experience with empirical research methods. They may use secondary data that can be quoted, they select example cases to illustrate their argument, or use thought experiments. However, in the field of business ethics scholars are well advised to take responsibility for finding out what is going on in practice themselves, and not leave that task to journalists or social scientist only. Journalists have an interests in extreme cases. Social scientists have a broader interests but will only touch on the ethics topic incidentally. While scholars in business ethics do have a strong interest in ethics cases, their methods

to explore them are very limited. Learning to do jokes-based interviews may add to their own set of useful research methods for studies in business ethics. Social scientist may benefit from the new method as well, when they need to overcome social desirability bias in their studies.

The following sections first review the state of knowledge related to pressuring leadership in consulting, to establish the pre-knowledge that can serve as standard to evaluate the findings of the new method. Then the new jokes-based interview method and the outcomes it has generated, will be discussed. The chapter concludes with the possibilities and limitations of the new jokes-based interview method, including possible reviewer concerns.

3.2 The Issue—Experiencing Overly Pressuring Leadership

The new jokes-based interview method is applied to the issue of pressuring leadership in the consulting context. What do we know about this issue based on previous studies? The consultant literature states that consultants are asked to work on average over 60 h a week in certain settings (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Bouwmeester et al., 2021). Promotions only occur through high commitment, and workers can feel anxious about their current status and performance (Gill, 2015, p. 309). Such factors make consulting a stressful work environment with high levels of burnout reported (Vahl, 2013, p. 8). Ultimately, society may view such negative health effects as defying morality (Skagert et al., 2008, p. 807).

However, moral criticisms on the manager-consultant relationship are less prominent in the consulting literature than criticisms related to the consultant-client relationships (cf. Allen & Davis, 1993; Poulfelt, 1997; Redekop & Heath, 2007). The latter has negative reputation effects and undermines business (Krehmeyer & Freeman, 2012, p. 87; O'Mahoney, 2011, p. 107). When it comes to the consultant-manager relationship, there are no such consequences, and many graduates even love to start working at consultancies (Rivera, 2016). Consultancies seem somehow immune to these critical judgements, or very good at neutralizing or normalizing them (Ashforth et al., 2007; Bouwmeester et al., 2021). While consulting research has identified various stressors, disturbed work-life balance and reduced employee well-being (Meriläinen et al., 2004; Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2016; Noury et al., 2017; O'Mahoney, 2007), pressuring management is no big issue yet, and not addressed in codes of conduct either.

In contrast, public jokes do criticise leadership in the consulting context extensively. Leadership jokes can be found on Internet forums, in the television series *House of Lies* based on Kihn's (2012) novel and there are such criticisms in some autobiographical accounts of ex-consultants (i.e. O'Mahoney, 2007). Still, these criticisms do not easily surface, due to social desirability bias, career consequences, and

the fact that managers and their juniors seem very skilled at normalizing such leadership behaviours. As a consequence, there seems to be a gap in our knowledge on leadership pressures due to social desirability bias.

To invite a more open reflection on morally dirty leadership in consulting as exemplary context, this chapter introduces a jokes-based interview method that starts with reflecting on jokes that illustrate pressuring leadership. The method has been developed in Bouwmeester and Kok (2018). Below the method and its outcomes will be discussed in more detail.

3.3 Application—Open Interviews and Jokes Based Reflections

3.3.1 Jokes-Based Interview Method: Start with Reflecting on Critical Business Jokes

The empirical study of ethical transgressions in business is relatively nascent. There are some interview studies, however, due to social desirability bias interviewees do not open up so easily about unethical behaviour. That also applies to consultant studies on demanding leadership roles. Discussing a topic such as pressuring leadership can be sensitive, due to feelings of shame, fear for stigma, or for career consequences. Creating rapport when discussing such sensitive topics is very important (Hermanowicz, 2002). Studying ethical transgressions in an explorative way would make a good methodological fit (Edmondson & McManus, 2007, p. 1170). Therefore, to break through barriers of social desirability bias, the proposed jokes-based interview method starts with displaying manager–employee jokes as an icebreaker, to set up the conversation and to introduce the relevant topics for an open interview.

To make it work, jokes need to be selected carefully. The purpose is to steer the conversation to morally relevant leadership issues. The two selected cartoons were found on the Internet, and illustrate different aspects of unethical leadership behaviour. The selected text joke indicates a more general dirty work experience of consultants, and work in the evenings. Such variation within the scope of the leadership topic gives interviewees room for choosing what aspects relate most to their own experiences, and what aspects they want to illustrate further. The text and the web addresses of the selected jokes can be found in Table 3.1.

The jokes-based interview method is similar to Zaltman's (1996, 1997) metaphor elicitation technique. He has used metaphors as images to learn about what consumers think of particular products or brands. In order to get the broadest possible exploration of meaning, Zaltman has suggested participants in his research to select various images themselves. The images should illustrate a brand or its meaning. When it comes to images more general, our world offers plenty of visuals with metaphorical meaning that can be selected. In contrast, there are less jokes on a topic like pressuring leadership. Therefore, we as authors have done the search in Bouwmeester and Kok

Table 3.1 Jokes used to start interviews on leadership

 Cartoon and joke images, texts and web addresses

Cartoon 1: Manager A standing in the office of manager B: What are they complaining about The work is challenging, interesting, demanding!

Manager B, sitting behind desk: AND we let them do it 80 h per week!

Fran (06/07/2009)

- Retrieved from: <https://www.cartoonstock.com/cartoon?searchID=CS167077>
 - Last accessed: 26 April 2021
-

Cartoon 2: Male manager A to female manager B when walking through the office: Naturally our workers look happy. The penalty for not being happy is instant dismissal
Financial Times, 20 May 2013

- Retrieved from: <https://www.ft.com/content/41f990f0-b955-11e2-bc57-00144feabdc0#axzz2U2zMvxmp>
 - Last accessed: 26 April 2021
-

Text joke: Please don't tell my mother I'm a consultant. She thinks I play guitar in a strip joint

- Retrieved from: <https://ronspace.org/consult.htm>
 - Last accessed: 26 April 2021
-

(2018), and selected three jokes. The jokes-based interview method would allow for selecting more jokes, and to give respondents more options to choose from.

When showing the three jokes to the interviewees, the first cartoon generated the liveliest discussions, taking up more than half of the time of the entire interview in most cases. The second cartoon also resonated well, but interviewees came up with fewer illustrations. The text joke inspired only little discussion and was not recognized as being very illustrative for most consultants. They were mostly proud of what they did, and willing to share or tell their family and friends about their work.

My co-author has performed all interviews. She intended to become a junior consultant, and had a real interest in learning about experiences of juniors, including the perspectives of their managers. She started the interviews with a brief general introduction before showing the two cartoons and the joke, and explained that we would talk about tensions in the manager–employee relationship, but without listing the issues we had in mind. The interviewees could indicate if they recognized the messages of the jokes, and how well they illustrated what happened in their work context, given that jokes may exaggerate, include irony etc. Next the interviewer facilitated a broad discussion related to the jokes, including questions regarding over-demanding managers and being employee in such a context. Starting point were the leadership topics addressed in jokes.

To prevent that our jokes-based interview questions would become leading (Alvesson, 2003, p. 20), interviewees could talk about the cartoon they considered most relevant, and they could freely associate, illustrate with related experiences, elaborate or add nuance. The interviewer asked follow-up questions related to the experiences and memories that were shared. In this process the text joke got little attention. Therefore, when a joke does not resonate well with experiences, it hardly leads to results. In this case the strip joint joke also seems to be too generic, and not sufficiently related to the topic of leadership.

Interviewees were 12 managers and for each of them one of their junior employees. This dyadic approach secured we could hear the story from two sides. The 24 Interviews lasted an average of 45 min, ranging from 30 to 60 min. We offered anonymity, requested permission to record, and transcribed all interviews. Interviews have been analysed based on open and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Gioia et al., 2013). The next section illustrates the approach for the first cartoon (see Fig. 3.1), by showing the kind of responses it has helped to generate.

3.3.2 Interview Results Show Recognition, Nuancing, and Going Beyond the Cartoon

Confirming and Nuancing When interviewees started reflecting on the Fran (2009) cartoon, the interpretations from both junior 7 and manager 12 indicated it is quite common in consulting to be asked to work up to 60 h a week and incidentally also up to 80 h a week:

Yes, juniors work long hours. There are projects where they work for longer periods about 60 h a week.—Manager 12.

Consulting is working from deadline to deadline. And if a deadline requires a lot, then working 80 h occurs easily.—Junior 7.

Most responses indicated that consultants work substantially longer than the Dutch legal maximum of 40 h a week, but also less than 80 h on average. The cartoon requires interpretation to understand that the 80 h is common but not average:

I understand that cartoon saying we work 80 h, but it is exaggerated. Who is working 80 h ...?—Junior 1.

We can thus see respondents don't feel pushed to agree with the cartoon. They seem to know the genre invites interpretation. Still, because projects have overlapping deadlines, and consultant face pressuring managers and demanding clients, junior 11 confirms the cartoon by comparing his work environment to a "pressure cooker":

Working here is working in a pressure cooker. It is just hard work. You have deadlines.—Junior 11.

Managers make the pressures as high as the juniors indicate. Junior 10 for instance *laughs* while looking at the cartoon:

This is anonymous? Yes, this applies to my manager! This is quite bad indeed. But I need to add some nuance. I recognize this, but it is also something I want to do. I chose to work the 60, 70, 80 h. And I seek challenges, new clients, personal development, etc. This works bi-directional.—Junior 10.

The manager rhetoric in the cartoon is thus taken up on by junior 10. The challenges and the interesting work are seen as motivating as suggested in the cartoon, whereas at the same time the long workweeks up to 80 h are also felt as something quite bad.



Fig. 3.1 Cartoon illustrating pressuring leadership. www.CartoonStock.com

Further Elaborations The cartoon sparks recognition and some nuancing, but also inspires further associations beyond the direct message. For instance, in what way leadership is demanding is not only a matter of work hours. It also comes with a competitive work culture:

Consulting is a hard environment. As a junior you have to satisfy your project managers. Failing to satisfy your manager can only happen 1 or 2 times. Then they look for someone else.—Manager 9

Not only managers need to be satisfied, also clients. That is what managers try to accomplish when juniors feel they are overly demanding:

The key rule is: as long as the client is happy. And that can be a really dangerous criterion, in which you can easily go too far.[...] If you [...] want to do everything perfectly, working as a consultant is not sustainable. And that's what happened to me. I made myself sick.—Junior 10

When consultants get sick for a longer period like junior 10, it often means a burnout. Not only junior 10 reports illness when reflecting on the leadership style illustrated in the cartoon, also managers recognize this is happening increasingly:

What I do see, is the age at which people come down with long-term illness is rapidly declining. I have an increasing number of people under 30 coming to me with such symptoms.—Manager 3

Next to burnout, there are other health effects indicated like lowered wellbeing and lowered motivation, both impacting performances. Manager 5 illustrates what happens when leadership becomes over demanding, and how consultants lose motivation:

If you are not handling them [the stressors of consulting] well, you see that in your performance. Then you don't even like working here, and you couldn't care less about performance.—Manager 5.

What makes the problem bigger is that managers do not notice overload problems often, and juniors do not share:

Often juniors are ashamed, like, I am so young, why does it happen to me? As a manager you often discover it [overload struggles] later than their direct environment, and that it does not go well.—Manager 3.

I know myself. I sure have my issues here. But I would never go with those to my boss [...] opening up could be seen as a loss of face.—Junior 4.

Ultimately consultants make choices. Both managers and juniors report that management requiring 80 h of work and high levels of commitment is not sustainable in the end. It only works over a shorter period of time:

In the moment you are like 'Okay, we have to get through this'. But you know it's not sustainable. You can't let juniors work that many hours for several weeks on projects. You know that they will leave after a year or so. It's not sustainable.—Manager 12.

Further elaborations thus go into health effects like burnout, the competitive work culture, the problem of not feeling you can share your struggles, the problem of losing motivation, and people drawing conclusions like leaving consulting. These associations all go beyond the direct content of the cartoon. They are invited, or triggered.

While the first interpretative answers focus more on what the cartoon tells, and to what extent it illustrates consultants work practice and experienced leadership, that is only the beginning of the conversation. During the interviews consultants do not only confirm, add nuance, or explain how the cartoon covers their daily reality. They also go deeper and illustrate effects for their health and wellbeing, not directly covered in the cartoon, but clearly related to the experience of the respondents. They also discuss what comes before the cartoon by detailing the work culture, the client demands, and the high standards.

3.3.3 Jokes-Based Interviews and Their Contribution to Ethical Research Questions

When relating the leadership cartoon to interviewee experiences, leadership in the context of consulting is assessed as unethical due to overly high demands. While the cartoon suggests ironically only positive wellbeing consequences, when asking consultants, they instead mention negative health and wellbeing consequences. The cartoon thus invites critical consequentialist reflections. For respondents the irony is not difficult to see. The cartoon sparks the discussion, invites various responses, and fosters exploration.

Responses also share deontological reflections. Working 80 h does not fit within the limits of labour law. That judgement is invited by the cartoon. The reader needs to know about labour law to be able to see this implied criticism. Labour law is designed with the intention to keep people healthy by keeping workhours reasonable. Interviewees discuss how staying within these normal limits has a low priority at consultancies. Other intentions like serving clients and making money are mentioned as the more central management priorities.

The management cartoon also inspires reflection on virtues. The presented over demanding manager is no virtuous leader. Compassion and being considerate are missing qualities in the managerial character depicted. The interview quotes confirm this managerial attitude with its focus on outputs and client satisfaction, more than on employee wellbeing. It is illustrative that the boss in the cartoon does not understand the complaints. This triggers all kinds of associations, memories of similar experiences, and evaluations of the work situation.

Starting the conversation with reflecting on carefully selected jokes invites deep conversations in the domains of business ethics, covering various grounds. Most ethical judgements in the cartoon are somewhat implicit or ironical, and need interpretation. That is what a reader needs to do when reflecting on the realities illustrated

in the cartoon, and this is what happens in the conversation between interviewee and interviewer. The process of interpretation and making the ethical criticism explicit, entails much more than repeating what the cartoon tells. Interpretation means activating the implied norms and visualizing the consequences. When respondents interpret the cartoon in interviews, we see descriptive confirmation of the 80 h workweeks, partly also nuancing accounts, and explanations are given, but overall, there is a shared assessment that work pressures are too high too often.

Important for the method is the process of association towards the wider realities connected to the situation addressed in the cartoon: the stress, examples of lowered wellbeing, burnout, and consultants leaving as results of the leadership and performance culture experienced. Such observations receive a negative moral assessment from most of the interviewees. Explorative findings based on the jokes-based interview method supported a contribution to the literature on consulting ethics by shifting attention to the manager–consultant relationship, instead of only focussing on the client–consultant relation. Based on the explorative jokes-based interview method many more empirical and theoretical contributions can be expected in the field of business ethics, by answering open research questions like *how* business actors experience particular ethical transgressions addressed in jokes, or *how* they act on them.

3.4 Possibilities and Limitations of Jokes-Based Interviews

3.4.1 Critical Cartoons Stimulate Reflections on Business Ethical Transgressions

Starting open interviews by showing a cartoon offered a strong statement to start the conversation. The cartoon was initially confirmed or denied, but such responses were only the beginning. What happened next was that the cartoon was nuanced, which better fits an open interview approach, as cartoons and jokes mostly somewhat exaggerate or distort reality. Secondly, when a cartoon was sufficiently spot on, as with the cartoon indicating 80 h workweeks, it also triggered memories and released energy to talk about related issues. These could be causes and effects of the illustrated situation, but also moral leadership responses not indicated in the cartoon. Managers often recognized the problem and told how they acted on the situation (see Bouwmeester & Kok, 2018). To get such associative responses, the interviewer has to encourage the interviewee to go on and elaborate more by asking open follow-up questions related to the given answers: how did you do it, when, what happened next, who were involved and how, etc.

How to use cartoons as a trigger and starting point? Cartoons are very condensed in how they communicate, and thus leave a lot of the message implicit. They can be a starting point for further exploration in follow-up questions like: how does it happen in your work context, what did it mean to you when it happened, etc. The cartoons are

a powerful icebreaker to start an exchange, but they need a follow-up conversation. Discussing ethical transgression in work life will usually cross the line of social desirability, and then denial is a common coping strategy. Cartoons can help to get beyond this denial by their humour, and they stimulate topical associations that create opportunities for further exploration in such areas. When the conversation has started, open interview techniques can follow, including having a topic list, preparing some questions you could ask, etc. (cf. Hermanowicz, 2002; Legard et al., 2003; Schein, 2006, Chap. 5). Another way to move on is to ask for related relevant workplace jokes the respondent knows of, and would like to share.

How to move to the respondents' experiences? In case of confirmation, nuancing or association, it is important to relate the cartoons' critical messages to experienced unethical behaviour in the interviewees own work context. The cartoon is an invitation to talk about work experiences that could illustrate the cartoon and vice versa. While we found that all transgressions in the ethics top ten could be illustrated by jokes, the reverse is true as well. Good jokes can be illustrated with experiences. That is due to the normality condition of humour (Veatch, 1998). The normality condition therefore explains why funny cartoons are a perfect starting point for a conversation on the addressed topics. For an interview study, these shared experiences count. They give the good quotes for analysis. Associations sparked by the cartoon were often critical, but have also addressed moral leadership responses that were aiming at preventing negative health effects, or illustrated what the organisation has done to prevent the addressed issues. The associative process demonstrated in the interviews can be assessed as very open and explorative.

How to select the joke that works best in an interview? Because cartoons work with visual expression and limited text, they can transfer their message quite fast. Therefore, cartoons can be used very well in an interview setting, and probably better so than text jokes. Still, the topical match is important for selection. In addition, the cartoon helps breaking through defences of social desirability, by its humorous touch. However, a cartoon is only the beginning, as everything needs to be told and illustrated by the interviewee. In the end only little is said in a cartoon, and what is said is overly general, provocative, sometimes ironical, partly fictional etc. As a genre, a cartoon needs interpretation similar to a metaphor. It makes the match between the interviewees' experiences and the cartoon's content of great importance. If there is not much of a link, as with the strip joint joke, little or no stories will be triggered. To prevent a wrong selection, a test interview might help, and some try outs related to how the jokes work on people that could be your interviewees. Next to the good match, some variation between jokes is important, to cover as much perspectives as possible. In the end the selection should not be too big, as there should be enough time for interpretation, association, elaboration and discussing interviewees own related experiences. While three jokes is towards the lower end, ten might be a lot. Then it would be good to let the interviewee focus on three to five, out of these ten.

How do I report the research method? The next steps of open coding, axial coding and further analysis are no different from other in-depth open interview approaches. Still, it is important to describe the whole method in steps from the start and till analysis as asked for in Gioia et al. (2013) and Suddaby (2006). Reviewers expect

this especially with more unique or new approaches like applying a jokes-based interview method. See for examples of method sections in articles using jokes-based interviews Bouwmeester and Kok (2018) or Bouwmeester et al. (2022).

3.4.2 Method Limitation of Jokes-Based Interviews

A first limitation to consider is that jokes could be leading, and preselect answers like leading question do (cf. Alvesson, 2003). There is also a risk due to the stereotyping effect jokes can have. However, this has not been our experience. This might be due the fact that if there is a leading or stereotyping element in jokes or cartoons such as with the over demanding leaders, it is so provocative and so part of the genre, that it does not take you by surprise. Secondly, it is not the interviewer who makes the joke, or is suggesting the stereotype. It is a public joke that is shared. In addition, interviewees are in no way expected to agree with the joke. In contrast, it is very interesting for a researcher to see how some jokes do not resonate, or less well. Our strip joint joke might illustrate this, as most interviewees did not recognize the suggested experience of shame. Their hard work or the pressuring management is not something they would hide for family. With other types of dirty work hiding might happen, but consultants were not ashamed to share these aspects of their work.

Similar to the limitations addressed in chapter two, jokes, memes or cartoons entail humour bias, meaning that not all forms of ethical transgression have fun potential. Only the mild offense of ethical norms or moral expectations can be appreciated as funny (McGraw & Warren, 2010; Veatch, 1998). In addition, such benign norm violations focus on the negative only, not the positive. That is a limitation as well. When selecting jokes, the interviewer also needs to be aware of the fact that the more serious issues may not be addressed in jokes and cartoons. This limitation makes them the perfect start for an interview, but probably not a sufficient source of knowledge on all potential ethical issues. Still, to start explorations with the lighter issues is good practice, as the personal risks and social desirability bias related to the bigger issues will only increase, and they are not the best topics to open an interview with.

In addition, jokes are condensed and abstract. They do not go into rich description. They mostly focus on key aspects and some funny details. The illustrations given by interviewees based on their experiences need follow-up questioning to get into the rich descriptions. Therefore, cartoons or small text jokes can best be used as a starting point for triggering stories, and to subsequently explore these cases further. I have observed how respondents could not mention sensitive issues when first asking them a question in words only. However, when following up with looking at some cartoons and memes, giving space for interpretation, and subsequently asking for related experiences, then relevant memories were triggered, and stories could be told that were initially blocked.

3.4.3 *Reviewer Perspectives on Jokes-Based Interviews and Possible Responses*

The jokes-based interview method starts with giving respondents opportunity to look at cartoons or text jokes, interpret them, and then relate such interpretations to their own experiences. The method did not get much push back in the publication on moral or dirty leadership (Bouwmeester & Kok, 2018) in *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (IJERPH). Before we first got a rejection from another journal. The reason was that our contributions were partly contradicting results of earlier dirty work studies that only reported normalization responses. Also the connection with moral leadership studies to explain the other type of responses was not seen as appropriate or helpful, as earlier dirty work theories were considered the better point of reference. Therefore we had to find another place to publish.

The first reviewer of the IJERPH article asked us to make the coding process more transparent by adding an overview of code families with parent and child codes. The second reviewer asked for more information about the respondents, which we both did. Overall, the reviewers liked the method and could relate to the results and its implications for occupational health. That results were in line with their theoretical expectations must have made it easier to accept the new method. When reviewers see novel, somewhat provocative results based on a novel method, they may be more inclined to doubt the results.

When using the jokes-based interview method, a central concern in cases of rejection has been that using cartoons, memes or text jokes was expected to be leading. This has not been our experience. To mitigate this concern, I have shown how our interviewees came to their interpretations (cf. Alvesson, 2003) and how their stories clearly moved beyond the content of the jokes, demonstrating that jokes are only a starting point and trigger for the conversation. Jokes very much support doing open in-depth interviews. To further prevent a leading influence, it is good to emphasize during interviews that the jokes represent a public critique, independent of the researchers' judgement. Therefore, use a cartoon as the starting point for reflection, ask open follow-up questions related to the first responses, ask for illustrations, own experiences, and take it from there. The purpose is that interviewees move to their own narratives, stories, and descriptions of the events they have experienced.

In the jokes-based interview study of Bouwmeester et al. (2022) reviewers asked stronger motivations for using the new method, and mentioned Zaltman's metaphor elicitation technique. Zaltman (1996, 1997) gives respondents complete say in what images they would like to talk about, as being illustrative of a brand. While the search of illustrative jokes is quite laborious and not something you could ask from an interviewee, we could give respondents more jokes and let them select which ones feel most relevant to them. Zaltman has also mentioned that participants sometimes looked for images they could not find. Then he invited respondents to tell what pictures they were looking for, and what these images could have told. In the same way we could ask what moral critique was not well covered in the jokes, or how

cartoons could be adapted to criticize better. We did not do so, but these are interesting possibilities to further develop the method.

Jokes only give the slightest bit of structure, much less than traditional semi structured interviews based on a topic list (cf. Hermanowicz, 2002; Legard et al., 2003). Still, due to the thematic focus given by the selected jokes, the jokes-based interview method is somewhat semi structured. Given its open character it works very well for explorative research questions and in nascent fields of research. While the method is already to the open side, it will be even more so if interviewees can select from a wider set of jokes. The method helps interviewees to open up if there is social desirability bias, such as when talking about ethical transgressions in business. Until today the dominant source of case knowledge in business ethics is what journalists report, which is a very clear indication that business ethics is very nascent in its empirical research of ethics cases (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). While journalists cover very severe cases mostly, business jokes invite to study the more common, mid-range transgressions we still know little about.

Acknowledgements This chapter is based on a research method as used in Bouwmeester and Kok (2018), a study published in *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*.

References

- Allen, J., & Davis, D. (1993). Assessing some determinant effects of ethical consulting behavior: The case of personal and professional values. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 12(6), 449–458.
- Alvesson, M. (2003). Beyond neopositivists, romantics, and localists: A reflexive approach to interviews in organizational research. *Academy of Management Review*, 28(1), 13–33.
- Alvesson, M., & Robertson, M. (2006). The best and the brightest: The construction, significance and effects of elite identities in consulting firms. *Organization*, 13(2), 195–224.
- Ashforth, B. E., Kreiner, G. E., Clark, M. A., & Fugate, M. (2007). Normalizing dirty work: Managerial tactics for countering occupational taint. *Academy of Management Journal*, 50(1), 149–174.
- Bouwmeester, O., Atkinson, R., Noury, L., & Ruotsalainen, R. (2021). Work-life balance policies in high performance organisations: A comparative interview study with millennials in Dutch consultancies. *German Journal of Human Resource Management: Zeitschrift Für Personalforschung*, 35(1), 6–32.
- Bouwmeester, O., & Kok, T. E. (2018). Moral or dirty leadership: A qualitative study on how juniors are managed in dutch consultancies. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 15(11), 2506.
- Bouwmeester, O., Versteeg, B., van Bommel, K., & Sturdy, A. (2022). Accentuating dirty work: Coping with psychological taint in elite management consulting. *German Journal of Human Resource Management*, 36(4), 411–439. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23970022211055480>
- Edmondson, A. C., & McManus, S. E. (2007). Methodological fit in management field research. *Academy of Management Review*, 32(4), 1246–1264.
- Gill, M. J. (2015). Elite identity and status anxiety: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of management consultants. *Organization*, 22(3), 306–325.
- Hermanowicz, J. C. (2002). The Great Interview: 25 Strategies for Studying People in Bed. *Qualitative Sociology*, 25(4) 479–499. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021062932081>.

- Kihn, M. (2012). *House of lies: How management consultants steel your watch and then tell you the time*. Business Plus.
- Krehmeyer, D., & Freeman, R. E. (2012). Consulting and ethics. In T. Clark & M. Kipping (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of management consulting* (pp. 487–498). Oxford University Press.
- Legard, R., Keegan, J., & Ward, K. (2003). In-depth interviews. In J. Ritchie & J. Lewis (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers* (Vol. 6, pp. 138–169). Sage.
- McGraw, A. P., & Warren, C. (2010). Benign violations: Making immoral behavior funny. *Psychological Science*, 21(8), 1141–1149.
- Meriläinen, S., Tienari, J., Thomas, R., & Davies, A. (2004). Management consultant talk: A cross-cultural comparison of normalizing discourse and resistance. *Organization*, 11(4), 539–564.
- Mühlhaus, J., & Bouwmeester, O. (2016). The paradoxical effect of self-categorization on work stress in a high-status occupation: Insights from management consulting. *Human Relations*, 69(9), 1823–1852.
- Noury, L., Gand, S., & Sardas, J.-C. (2017). Tackling the work-life balance challenge in professional service firms: The impact of projects, organizing, and service characteristics. *Journal of Professions and Organization*.
- O'Mahoney, J. (2007). Disrupting identity: Trust and angst in management consulting. In S. C. Bolton & M. Houlihan (Eds.), *Searching for the H in human resource management: Theory, practice and workplace contexts* (pp. 281–302). Palgrave Macmillan.
- O'Mahoney, J. (2011). Advisory anxieties: Ethical individualisation in the UK consulting industry. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 104(1), 101–113.
- Pouffelt, F. (1997). Ethics for management consultants. *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 6(2), 65–70.
- Redekop, B. W., & Heath, B. L. (2007). A brief examination of the nature, contexts, and causes of unethical consultant behaviors. *Journal of Practical Consulting*, 1(2), 40–50.
- Rivera, L. A. (2016). *Pedigree: How elite students get elite jobs*. Princeton University Press.
- Skagert, K., Dellve, L., Eklöf, M., Pousette, A., & Ahlberg, G. (2008). Leaders' strategies for dealing with own and their subordinates' stress in public human service organisations. *Applied Ergonomics*, 39(6), 803–811.
- Vahl, R. (2013). Hard werken en gezond leven. *Gezond Ondernemen*, 6(2), 6–11.
- Veatch, T. C. (1998). A theory of humor. *Humor-International Journal of Humor Research*, 11(2), 161–216.
- Zaltman, G. (1996). Metaphorically speaking. *Marketing Research*, 8(2), 13–20.
- Zaltman, G. (1997). Rethinking market research: Putting people back in. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 34(4), 424–437.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

