

Chapter 6

Concluding Reflections on Jokes-Based Research Methods



6.1 Introduction

Based on the concluding sections in the previous chapters we can say that each of the applied jokes-based research methods has different strengths compared to traditional research methods in business ethics. Also compared to journalistic research, jokes-based research methods in ethics have as a strength that they uncover the more common, every day transgressions in business we feel ashamed of, and that cause strong enough emotional responses for laughing. Journalist in contrast operate more in the emotional anger zone by reporting on big scandals and major crimes.

Still, when doing research based on new jokes-based research methods, reviewers may not be familiar with their strengths. Rejection is a safe way out for them, to prevent they might suggest acceptance of an article that is flawed in its methods. The only way to convince reviewers in social science journals is to be very transparent about a new method. Transparency might be as important when submitting to philosophy journals, as they may have less tradition in publishing empirical research. In all cases it is good to describe new methods in a way that they can be replicated, and to highlight limitations carefully and explain how you have dealt with them as suggested in Suddaby (2006). That gives reviewers the best opportunities to assess a new qualitative method, or a new application.

This chapter seeks to compare the four research methods for their strength, scope and validity. The question is *when to use each of the jokes-based research methods, and for what type of ethical research questions*. While each individual method chapter has discussed strengths and weaknesses of the methods, the following sections will compare and relate scope and benefits of the four jokes-based research methods. Then, validity issues related to the methods will be discussed. Next, wider applications of the methods beyond the field of business ethics are considered, and the chapter concludes with a reflection on the normative and analytical characteristics of business jokes.

6.2 Scope and Benefits of Jokes-Based Research Methods

The four jokes-based research methods all have a different scope, ranging from narrow to broad, and they help to answer different research questions. They also have specific benefits when compared to their traditional counterparts. Table 6.1 summarizes scope and benefits of the four methods. Each method will be discussed in turn.

6.2.1 Use of Jokes as Illustration in Business Ethics Research

The scope of the first method used for illustrating empirical or theoretical arguments in business ethics is rather broad. Critical business jokes do cover the main types of

Table 6.1 Scope and benefits of jokes-based research methods

Method	Scope	Benefits
Jokes-based illustrations added (descriptive and evaluative questions)	Broad scope, common issues <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not the most recent issues • Not the most painful issues • The illustration implies valuation, abstraction, and requires interpretation 	Compared to case illustrations in newspapers on business ethics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More common transgressions • Less extreme transgressions
Jokes-based interview study (explorative questions)	Somewhat narrow scope due to interview focus <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Great descriptive depth • Room for exploring memories of work experiences associated with the jokes • Interpretative reflections triggered, both normative and explanatory 	Compared to traditional interviews: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More rapport • Reduced social desirability bias • Interviewee gets better access to own memories of relevant experiences
Jokes-based survey questions added (descriptive questions)	Narrow scope, linked to interpreting specific joke content <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No room to go beyond the joke • Comparisons of stakeholder opinions • Part of mixed method survey design 	Compared to traditional surveys: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher completion and response rates • Respondents get better access to own memories of relevant experiences • Visualization (cartoons) • Extra control
Jokes-based content analysis (explorative questions)	Potentially broad scope, but dependent on the sample criteria <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not the most recent issues • Not the most painful issues 	Compared to common theoretical reviews in business ethics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More empirical detail • Multiple stakeholder perspectives

unethical behaviour in the context of management consulting as explored in over 100 interviews leading to a top ten of ethical transgressions. Each one of them could be illustrated. We can expect this applies to business jokes in other fields as well, like banking, law, engineering etc. where business jokes abound. Jokes as illustration contribute to descriptive research questions that investigate various transgressions in the business world, and they help to evaluate such practices by activating shared ethical standards.

Newer kinds of transgressions were not included in jokes and cartoons in as much detail as older ones. For instance, related to new privacy rules Internet jokes or cartoons need some time to develop. With such new norms and regulations, jokes might start as workplace humour, just between colleagues, and later develop into published and shared internet jokes.

In comparison to journalistic accounts of cases based on interviews and observation, illustrative jokes and especially cartoons give less detail about how practices develop over time, what aspects have influenced a transgression, what actors were involved etc. Jokes may only highlight some relevant details, maybe exaggerate elements, use irony, leave much implicit, etc. Jokes assume the audience can fill in the gaps with experience, and is able to interpret.

In newspapers, cartoons are often published next to articles, indicating these genres can complement each other. Business jokes focus on common transgressions and can add emphasis in a business ethical argument, which may help to make a problem more visible, and mark it as a problem, to raise awareness for the illustrated norm violation. Academic articles in different fields and for different subjects have used jokes and cartoons as illustration before (i.e. Fincham, 1999, p. 341; Schneider & Sting, 2020; Sturdy et al., 2008, p. 134), but here not explicitly linked to business ethics.

6.2.2 Use of Jokes-Based Interviews in Business Ethics Research

The scope of jokes-based interview studies is more focussed than the jokes-based illustration method. Every common transgression joked about can be illustrated, whereas the topic for an interview needs some more focus. The method uses a small sample of jokes on one topic as starting point for an open in-depth interview conversation. Jokes-based interviews start with text jokes or cartoons as invitation for a conversation, and then give interviewees room to interpret and compare with their own experiences. The initial response can be denial or acceptance of a joke, but qualifications always follow, such as “true, but it is an exception”. The next step is to ask for illustrations, and to discuss own experiences and similar events the respondents have witnessed. Maybe respondents can even share related workplace jokes themselves. Experiences that come to mind this way are triggered by the jokes based on

associative connections. It also helps interviewees to get access to more memories. This makes the method suitable for answering open, explorative research questions.

The strength of the method is that jokes invite respondents to open up. Direct questioning about unethical behaviours mostly generates defensive responses, due to social desirability bias. Social desirability bias can be reduced when starting the conversation on ethical transgression with illustrative jokes. In my ethics classes where students need to do an interview with consultants on experienced unethical behaviours, I advise them to select some relevant cartoons to illustrate typical unethical behaviours in consulting. Students who follow up on this advice hand in interview transcripts that are in general much richer in describing events, providing more short cases and better narratives. Compared to normal interviewing the method generates richer empirical material to reflect on theoretically.

As sample sizes are limited in most interview studies, only tentative conclusions can be drawn by looking at patterns in the data. In addition, not all possible transgressions are illustrated in jokes and cartoons due to humour bias (not everything is funny). Therefore, the interviewer should be open to move away with the interviewee from the more stereotypical examples illustrated in jokes, memes and cartoons. It is good practice to explore the more common and stereotypical examples first, relate them to experiences of the interviewee as familiar or not, and then move on to more nuanced, deeper and related experiences later in the interview, when trust has been established, and the taboo character of the topic has become less salient.

6.2.3 Use of Jokes-Based Surveys in Business Ethics Research

The third method based on a jokes-based survey with rating questions can only assess the content given in the presented cartoons. That makes the scope of the method rather narrow. There is no room to go beyond the cartoon as in open interviews. Therefore it is important to carefully select a set of relevant cartoons related to the issue. That the cartoons have a focus on common and stereotypical transgressions is no disadvantage, because larger groups of respondents will be able to give their opinion related to the criticisms, as they are relatively well known. The method picks up on the fact that different respondents have different perspectives towards the ethics claims made in business jokes. When rating cartoons in a survey, it is possible to compare average stakeholder responses for groups. That makes the method suitable to answer descriptive research questions, and to quantify, rate and compare.

A challenge is to identify the different respondent groups. If stakeholder groups can be identified, based on some diagnostic questions, follow-up questions can be about perceptions of funniness, truth elements and specific characteristics of the presented cartoons. Cartoons are more suitable in a survey than text jokes, due to their visual communication and fast transmission of the message. The less time a survey takes, the better for response and completion rates.

Integrating jokes in survey questions improves response rates and completion rates due to the fun aspect of doing the survey. The cartoons also stimulate the mind and give better access to memories as observed with jokes-based interviews. As an additional type of questions, they can serve as control questions.

6.2.4 Use of Jokes-Based Content Analysis in Business Ethics Research

The fourth method is most dependent on the content provided in jokes such as cartoons, memes or other humorous sources that are analysed. As with the illustration method the scope is potentially broad, but limited by the sample criteria. In contrast to the third approach, all relevant jokes related to the topic found online can be included in the sample. With a larger set of jokes more ethical aspects can be joked about, and more content is available for content analysis.

The method of jokes-based content analysis fits explorative research questions. For exploring a relatively nascent empirical field of research in business ethics, content analysis of critical business jokes can generate relevant new insights, covering multiple stakeholder perspectives and adding more detail and nuance to earlier findings in academic literature, as shown in the example study.

Jokes-based content analysis is a promising approach in the context of business ethics, related to various themes and professions, when research is nascent and questions are explorative. Limitations of the method are that jokes might not cover the most recent ethical issues, and not the most serious ones, but only the more common transgressions that meet the normality condition. Compared to traditional philosophical studies in business ethics the method can provide more empirical detail on the more common transgressions, and on the kind of ethical standards that are violated in business contexts.

6.3 Validity of the Four Jokes-Based Research Methods

If the validity of a method improves, research findings and conclusions become more truthful, credible and accurate. When doing qualitative research, criteria to realize this are different from criteria for quantitative research (Golafshani, 2003). Qualitative research has a focus on words in “observation, interviews, extracts from documents, [and] tape recordings” (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 23). Words express subjective experiences, meanings, social context and a researcher aims at intersubjective validity of interpretations. The four jokes-based research methods are all based on words, image and interpretation. That has impact on what potential kinds of bias need attention, to improve reliability and validity of results and conclusions.

Table 6.2 Validity issues related to jokes-based research methods

Jokes-based methods and impacted validity conditions	Illustration	Interview	Survey	Content analysis
Importance context knowledge researchers (for interpretation)	+	+	++	++
Importance topical fit (data selection)	++	+	++	+
Dependence on the jokes' content (data quality; humour bias)	+	+	++	++
Importance sample size of jokes (data quality; neutralizing representation bias)	+	+	+	++
Possibilities for triangulation (data analysis)	++	++	++	+
Reduced social desirability bias (data quality)		++	+	
Importance context knowledge respondents (for interpretation)		+	++	
Importance context knowledge readers (for interpretation)	+	+	+	++

Improving reliability means that other researchers doing the same research in a comparable research context will come to similar conclusions (Brink, 1993; Bryman, 2016; Miles & Huberman, 1984). Therefore researchers should describe exactly what they did: how they sampled, collected and analysed data, etc. They make their method transparent and replicable. To further improve validity, several practices have been suggested, focusing on possible bias that relates to the researcher, the data and their analysis, the study participants (respondents), and the audience (Brink, 1993; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Gioia et al., 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1984). For each of the four jokes-based methods potential biases and validity conditions work out differently. Table 6.2 summarizes these differences, where + indicates importance/dependence etc. and ++ great importance/dependence etc. of the validity condition for the method. The conditions will be discussed in turn.

Starting with the researcher, interpretive abilities need to be excellent (Alvesson, 2003; Brink, 1993; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Miles & Huberman, 1984). In the jokes-based illustration method, selection of illustrative jokes is dependent on researcher interpretation. A check with the audience is important, to see if the selected illustration also makes sense to others. This happens automatically in the second and third method when respondents interpret jokes. It gives researchers access to different interpretative perspectives next to their own. When reporting results it is important to distinguish in the presentation between respondents interpretation of jokes, and when respondents contrast interpretations with their own experiences. In illustrative quotes readers should also be able to see these differences. There are also other ways to reduce researcher bias when doing jokes-based content analysis: by doing the interpretation in steps, asking friendly reviewers to look at the work, and relating codes to what we know already from earlier research. A recommended approach is

also to do interpretations with two or more researchers independently, and discuss different interpretations to improve intercoder reliability (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 22). For all methods it is important to be reflective on the researcher in the research process.

A second source of potential bias for jokes-based research approaches are the data and their analysis: jokes can be seen as biased data, and like metaphors not always easy to understand (Cornelissen & Kafouros, 2008). In several ways they are more biased than the stories respondents may tell in interviews. The good thing is that we *know* that jokes carry fiction, abstraction, irony, exaggeration, distortion, stereotypes, etc. A joke signals this, which makes the interpreter alert. In contrast, a lie or an inaccurate memory reported in an interview does not. A good way to filter out fact from fiction is data triangulation. In the first method: compare the jokes-based illustration carefully with the reported transgression; in the second method: compare the presented illustrative jokes carefully with the interpretations and experiences shared by interviewees; in the third method: carefully compare results from the mixed method survey approach; with the method of jokes-based content analysis: make the sample size big enough by doing extensive internet searches that the sample allows for data triangulation. While fictional elements may vary a lot between jokes on the same topic, the factual elements may present a pattern. The better a transgression is grounded in various jokes, the stronger the pattern and the more valid the basis for interpretation. Existing studies on the topic can also be a point of reference for interpreting the jokes, next to context knowledge and relevant experiences interpreters possess. Jokes are not only biased, as stated before they are also limited in their scope. They only represent common, stereotypical, middle of the road ethical transgressions that can be joked about. To avoid that jokes may have a leading influence on what people say in jokes-based interviews, it is important to let the conversation move towards respondents' own experiences after a while by asking follow-up questions. To reduce bias related to the messages carried by the selected illustrative jokes in interview settings, respondents can also be asked to choose from more jokes, which is similar to working with a more open topic list (cf. Hermanowicz, 2002). In both the second and third method it is also important to make clear the jokes do not represent the researchers', but a public opinion.

A third source of bias relates to study participants, as noted in the second and third method. We have discussed this as social desirability or memory bias. Participants sometimes just don't remember or cannot tell. Here the jokes were of great value to reduce this bias by creating better rapport, a safer space to talk about ethical transgressions, and also as a trigger for memories. As respondents are involved in joke interpretation, context knowledge on their side is important to. With interviews respondents are selected for their context knowledge, and this can be checked during the interview. For survey respondents this check is more difficult to realize, but some diagnostic questions may be added for this purpose.

A fourth source of bias might come from audiences like reviewers and readers (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Especially with jokes-based content analysis, the audience that reads the results of an content analysis needs sufficient context knowledge to be able to follow the interpretation of the researchers. Not all audiences might be able

to. One solution is to target the right audience via the journal you want to publish in. Another option is to provide sufficient context when introducing a joke, much like the way I do in Chap. 2. Here jokes are illustrating interviewee experiences that were shared first, to provide some context knowledge. How serious the audience problem can be is illustrated by my teaching experiences with fresh students in the MSc management consulting at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. When I confront them with consultant jokes in the first weeks of the program, mostly none out of a group of 50 or more students is able to provide a reasonable interpretation. They come up with a lot of ideas and associations, but they just miss the context knowledge needed to interpret the joke well.

6.4 Wider Applications of Jokes-Based Research Methods

6.4.1 Using Jokes-Based Research Methods in Wider Contexts of Norm Violation

The four jokes-based research methods discussed here are developed in the context of management consulting, with a focus on ethical transgressions. The method can also be applied in other business contexts where actors behave unethically. Other professions under humorous attack are lawyers with many published jokes expressing unethical lawyer practices (Galanter, 1997), and there are many jokes about politicians (Benson, 2020; Lukes & Galnoor, 1985; Wilde, 1984), bankers (Young, 2011), etc.

Jokes-based research methods are not only useful in contexts where common transgressions are ethical, but also in contexts where other norms or traditions are mildly violated as with technological innovations that go beyond our comfort zone, with new fashions where people cannot keep up, with foreign, old or new traditions, or other common developments that may feel emotionally absurd. Joking extends into various domains of life, and may provide valuable data on the illustrated and recognizable norm transgressions.

6.4.2 Jokes-Based Research in Course Assignments

Apart from application in academic research, jokes-based research methods can be applied in courses on business ethics that prepare students for a professional role as teacher, doctor, nurse, banker, lawyer, manager, consultant etc. When students prepare for a professional role, it is very educational to study the ethical challenges in the profession based on newspaper cases, but in addition also based on content analysis of humorous accounts. Next, students can move to having a conversation with professionals in the field, using the jokes-based interview method. What are

the real-life challenges these professionals experience? Is it part of daily life, or are these more incidental challenges? Are there ways out? The position of a novice to the profession may create some goodwill, and starting a conversation with some jokes on the profession will add to breaking the ice.

Without sharing some jokes during a conversation on ethical challenges in the work life of consultants, many of my students have met defensive professionals who explain what great measures there are in place to prevent unethical practices from happening at all, and how well organised their professional practice is. A way to prevent such defensive conversations is the use of humour, thus creating a critical outsider (the cartoonist, the anonymous joke author), and reflect on the context or situation referred to in such a joke, and then start the conversation. Interviewees may get better access to their relevant memories and experiences this way, and feel less in need to defend their own ethical position. Jokes help to create a play frame, and make the issue less threatening, which may further reduce social desirability pressures (Sturdy et al., 2008).

6.4.3 Further Sources to Explore in Jokes-Based Research Methods

Text jokes and cartoons are not the only humorous genres. There are humorous pictures, short videos, longer films, series, plays, etc. Jokes have an advantage over other genres that they are very concise, especially cartoons. That makes that they can easily be integrated in an interview or survey, as reading them does not consume much time. Still, other humorous genres might also offer good material for ethical reflection. Genres that might fulfil this role are comical plays, movies, TV series, recorded acts of comedians, comics or humorous novels and stories.

How these other genres could be used needs to be tried. When time to read or watch them is limited, one option is selecting quotes: text quotes, video quotes and other short extracts. Context knowledge based on earlier scenes in a story or movie is missing then, so it should be possible to provide the audience with sufficient background knowledge. Especially with TV series, much pre knowledge is assumed, so this might not always be possible. Maybe sub narratives within a larger story can be used. Short videos might also focus on relevant themes like unequal gender relations, diversity issues, problematic manager-employee or consultant-client relations etc. See for instance this short and funny YouTube video on ethics in a publisher-author relationship: <https://youtu.be/dx71U3u--qU>.

There would be a few novels on consultants to explore, and there is a well-known TV series called *House of Lies* based on a novel by Kihn (2012). On marketing advisers there is the famous series *Mad Man*. Elements of the North American business culture and business ethics of the 1960s can be found here, whereas *House of Lies* refers to business culture and ethics 50 years later, showing many similarities but also differences in the illustrated ethical transgressions.

In three of the discussed methods there is a serious time or space limit for the humorous genre to be used (jokes-based illustration, interview, survey). However, for content analysis there is no such strict time limit. Humorous TV series, novels and plays may then offer rich materials for content analysis. The downside may be that background research done by novelists, movie makers and comic writers is usually not of the same quality as the studies of business historians or journalists. As with jokes, what they present does not need to be true due to fictional elements. Some more sources need to be used at least. Still, the work of Nussbaum (1995, 2001) is inspirational here.

The potential in terms of data on ethical (mal)practice in novels, plays, movies, series etc. is substantial, especially related to more long standing professions. While consultants have a relatively low representation in these literary genres, judges, lawyers, medical specialists, nurses, teachers, police officers, managers, soldiers and other economic or political characters are all much better represented in these genres, with more possibilities for content analysis related to their ethics.

6.5 Analytic and Normative Value of Jokes in Business Ethics

Humour theory as articulated by Veatch (1998) has indicated how two conditions simultaneously apply to various expressions of humour. Expressions of humour can be text jokes, cartoons, memes but also comedy, and daily forms of humour that develop between colleagues, between friends etc. The normality criterion explains why ethical transgressions referred to in critical business jokes should be common enough to be recognizable for audiences familiar with the context. The condition of emotional absurdity due to mild norm violation helps to explain why humour is able to express moral criticism. Critical business jokes that survive on the Internet or get shared elsewhere, must meet both conditions.

The normality condition indicates why jokes can become the eyes and ears of business ethics. Business jokes address ethical transgressions that happen, that those who laugh can recognize. Jokes that do not refer to what happens in reality, lack funniness or might be considered an insinuation. However, as soon as audiences recognize a joke's truth and start laughing, they admit they know what is meant. The normality condition guarantees that popular business jokes cover something real, which gives them diagnostic qualities. Therefore, business jokes can help the scholar in business ethics to identify what ethical transgressions happen in the field.

The condition that requires mild norm violation and feelings of emotional absurdity enables the bridge from humour to ethics as topic. As emotional absurdity is triggered by a mild offense of norms, principles or common expectations, common ethical transgressions are fitting the second condition. Business jokes can draw on ethical transgressions that are experienced as emotionally absurd or unexpected. Ethical transgressions are very popular joking material, next to situations that are

seen as ugly or out of fashion (aesthetic transgressions), behaving foolishly or impractical and other common ways of stepping out of line. As McGraw and Warren (2010) have confirmed empirically, humour flourishes especially in the grey zone of benign violations in ethics, where norm violation is mild as argued by Veatch (1998) and transgressions are not too extreme. Still, what is seen as funny in a business context, can already feel extreme and less funny for outsiders with more ambitious moral standards (cf. Carr, 1968). However, by framing moral transgressions in a business context as humorous in an interview or survey, it may help to lower the pressures of social desirability bias. Jokes frame them implicitly as benign violations, which may help respondents to open up.

Using critical business jokes in research on ethical transgressions has the potential to bridge positive research traditions in moral psychology and normative traditions in philosophical ethics. Psychologist study for instance moral disengagement; bystander effects and demoralizing effects of social systems (Alzola, 2008; O'Mahoney, 2011; Schaefer & Bouwmeester, 2021), while philosophical studies on normative ethics refer to moral intuitions, moral emotions and normative principles (Ten Bos & Willmott, 2001). Due to the two humour conditions jokes relate to both this positive and normative tradition: they assess behaviours as unethical, as well as that they illustrate such common behaviours and describe key characteristics. Jokes can thus illustrate and support theoretical arguments that go in normative directions by articulating absurdities, as well as illustrate empirical claims about unethical behaviours as being common and recognizable practices. Jokes thus powerfully integrate positive and normative content. Both content elements can be analysed via jokes-based content analysis or discussed in jokes-based interviews. Similarly, both sides of jokes can be reflected on in surveys.

Using jokes-based research methods in business ethics may also create bridges between predominantly positivist and more engaged or critical research traditions that are coexisting in moral psychology, several social sciences, critical management studies and business ethics. Whereas psychologists mostly study individual level behaviours, social scientists also study the influence of social systems on ethical behaviour, as well as organisational level actions and responsibilities. Business jokes discuss such interactions, and illustrate how the individual, their scripted roles and the wider social context influence each other. By illustrating such interactions business jokes exploit several kinds of emotional absurdities, like meeting system demands at the cost of personal work-life balance (which is made fun of), or creating a very profitable business practice at the expense of moral leadership (which is made fun of), etc. In addition, there are bridges to methods of the humanities. Various narrative methods have found their way into the social sciences already (cf. Czarniawska, 1997). Jokes-based research methods could be added to this project. Not only can wider social critiques be expressed in jokes and thus analysed this way, business ethics scholars may also invest in jokes-based research methods to study organisation level or occupational phenomena. Humour then may have a liberating effect, for instance by loosening the pressure of giving social desirable answers in interviews. This

property of freeing up the mind is what Watson (2015) values, when advocating the use of humour and irony in social science research.

Finally, joking can be seen as an art. Cartoonists will consider themselves artists for sure, given the visual expression and their artistic signature. Jokes mostly are collective art, including many anonymous artists, showing gradual development and travel between outlets and audiences. It is not considered museum art, or high standing literature such as poems, but still a form of artwork with elements of emphasis and expression. Although being a work of art, jokes can bridge towards science by their strong diagnostic qualities. Like science has many implied normative elements, for instance by the selection of what is studied and what not, critical business jokes appear to be very accurate in illustrating common processes and practices that society would assess as immoral. These characteristics make jokes powerful in business ethics as illustrations of an empirical or theoretical argument, very motivational as triggers in an interview conversation, very clear and pronounced as statements to assess in a survey, and very rich as data sources for interpretative content analysis.

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