

Lowering Social Desirability Bias: Doing Jokes-Based Interviews

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Abstract

Jokes-based interviews can help to reduce social desirability bias of responses on sensitive topics, such as unethical business behaviour or other norm transgressions. The jokes-based interview method is relevant for academic researchers, as well as for practitioner researchers such as consultants, or journalists. The method uses public jokes as invitation to reflect on work experiences related to the jokes, such as pressuring leadership, dirty work, or work-life conflict that tend to be normalised. Illustrated for a critical leadership cartoon, the interview method triggers junior consultants' memories of experiences with pressuring managers, and managers' memories of how their juniors deal with overly high leadership demands. The method creates rapport, as the business jokes not only introduce the topic, but also serve as an icebreaker. When applying the method, joke selection is key, as some jokes introduce the topic better than others. Cartoons are especially good at inviting an open conversation on norm transgressions relating to ethics, aesthetics, or social norms. Interviewees also need sufficient room to freely interpret, associate, and elaborate. Next, follow-up questioning is important, and preparing a topic list may help to do so. Some limitations to this method are that jokes can become leading, and that interviewees do not give authentic answers. Therefore, it is important to use public jokes and to keep distance as a researcher: do not make these jokes yourself. Also consider that business jokes are critical, and that jokes-based interviews initially do not invite reflection on the positive side of business life. However, in the follow up conversations this may very well happen.

Introduction

Social desirability bias is an obstacle in many interview studies. Investigative journalists, policy researchers, consultants, and academics all experience interviewees not opening up, staying defensive, or being unable to reach their memories and talk about relevant details. Creating rapport, and an atmosphere of trust by asking open questions can help (Hermanowicz 2002). Schein (2009) emphasises humble inquiry as a way for consultants to invite clients to talk about what concerns them, instead of suggesting early answers as an “expert” consultant. Alternatively, a journalist might try to provoke answers by asking leading or provocative questions. However, an academic researcher might doubt the truthfulness of the answers that then follow.

Still, despite these approaches, when topics are sensitive, and social judgement is expected to be negative, respondents can be reluctant, or even unable to share, as their memories are blocked. Examples of such sensitive topics are ethical malpractice, or norm transgressions related to aesthetic, social, or habitual norms. Sharing your own role in ethical malpractice, or the role of your organization is difficult, often due to feelings of shame. Likewise, talking about behaviour or characteristics experienced as stigmatized is difficult, such as some forms of work-related illness or extreme workaholicism. Talking about failure and your own role in this can be hard too, for instance with work-life conflict, when the failure to keep balance is yours.

Recently a jokes-based interview method has been developed in academia that can be used by other professions as well (see Bouwmeester 2023, CH 3). Instead of only using a traditional topic list in the interview, jokes, memes, or cartoons on the topic are used to guide the conversation on sensitive topics such as pressuring leadership (cf. Bouwmeester and Kok 2018), dirty work (cf. Bouwmeester et al. 2022), or work-life conflict. There are many business jokes about these topics. When shared in an interview, they invite reflection, and when used appropriately, jokes not only introduce the topic, but neutralize social desirability bias at the same time. Still, much depends on the presentation of the jokes in the interview, the selection of jokes, and the follow-up questions. Therefore, I will focus on the question: how can business jokes be used in interviews on sensitive topics in a way that reduces social desirability bias?

To make the jokes-based interview method assessable to researchers outside academia such as consultants or journalists, I first describe the jokes-based interview method in more detail. The following section illustrates the kind of answers the method generates for an example study in the context of consulting. Typical answers can confirm, add nuance, or provide further elaboration and association. Then I address how social desirability bias has been reduced, and what it means for the kind of answers. The paper concludes with some suggestions on how to realize the possibilities of the method, as well as some limitations the researcher should be aware of, such as humour bias.

How to Study Sensitive Topics with Jokes-Based Interviews

Studying ethical transgressions of investment bankers (Luyendijk 2015) is a typical example of a study where social desirability bias is an obstacle. When doing interviews, researchers such as the investigative journalist Luyendijk have experienced how interviewees do not easily open up. It is hard to share unethical practices that relate to you, or to your organization. We know creating rapport when discussing such sensitive topics is very important, but it is also very challenging to realise (Hermanowicz, 2002). This is how the jokes-based interview method can help.

To break through social desirability bias in a business context, a jokes-based interview starts with displaying critical business jokes as an icebreaker. Jokes help to open up the conversation and to introduce the relevant topics in a semi-structured but rather open interview. To make this work, jokes need to be selected carefully. To illustrate the method, I draw as an example on the study on pressuring leadership by Bouwmeester and Kok (2018). The method has also been used to study other dirty work experiences in consulting (Bouwmeester et al., 2022), and is discussed in more detail in Bouwmeester (2023, CH 3).

Selecting Business Jokes on the Topic

The purpose of the jokes-based interviews in the example study is to steer the conversation to morally tricky leadership issues in ways that engage and trigger memories. To do so, we selected two cartoons that illustrate different aspects of unethical leadership behaviour, which were found on the Internet. We also selected a text joke that indicated a more general dirty work experience due to working as a consultant. Such variation within the scope of the topic gives interviewees room for choosing to talk about a joke that resonates best with their own experiences or feelings. The text and the web addresses of the selected jokes can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Jokes Used to Start Interviews on Sensitive Leadership Issues

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) <ul style="list-style-type: none">Retrieved from: https://www.cartoonstock.com/cartoon?searchID=CS167077Last 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.' <i>Financial Times</i> , 20 May 2013. <ul style="list-style-type: none">Retrieved from: https://www.ft.com/content/41f990f0-b955-11e2-bc57-00144feabdc0#axzz2U2zMvxmpLast 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.' <ul style="list-style-type: none">Retrieved from: https://ronspace.org/consult.htm

- Last accessed: 26 April 2021.
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Using the Business Jokes in the Interview

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. Both junior and senior consultants indicated they were willing to share or tell their family and friends about their work, and were even proud to do so.

All interviews started with a brief introduction to explain that the interview topic would be about the manager/employee relationship, but without sharing the leadership issues we knew already from the literature, our experience, or the jokes. After this short introduction we showed the three jokes, and interviewees could indicate if they recognized the messages of the jokes, or how well they illustrated what happened in their own work context, given that jokes may exaggerate or include irony etc. Next the interviewer facilitated a broad discussion related to the jokes, including questions regarding experiences with over-demanding managers as in the first cartoon and what it means being employee or manager in such a work context. Starting point for the conversation were the leadership topics addressed in jokes. The jokes partly replaced the topic list, which we had prepared as well for asking follow-up questions.

To prevent the jokes-based interview questions become leading (Alvesson, 2003, p. 20), interviewees could talk about the cartoon they considered most relevant in their work context, and they could freely associate, illustrate with related experiences, or elaborate and add nuance. The interviewer asked follow-up questions related to the experiences and memories that were shared. If a joke got little attention, it was not sufficiently related to relevant experiences on the topic that could be shared.

Answers Triggered when Discussing a Critical Leadership Cartoon

Interviewees in the Bouwmeester and Kok (2018) study involved 12 managers and one of their junior employees for each. This dyadic approach secured we could hear the story from two sides. The 24 interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes, ranging from 30 to 60 minutes. We offered anonymity, requested permission to record, and transcribed all interviews. Interviews have been analysed based on open and axial coding (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Gioia et al., 2013). For more method details see the published article (Bouwmeester and Kok, 2018). The next section illustrates typical answers generated when interviewees were interpreting cartoon 1 (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Cartoon Illustrating Pressuring Leadership
www.CartoonStock.com

Confirming and Nuancing Answers

When interviewees reflected on cartoon 1, the interpretations from both junior 7 and manager 12 indicated it was 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 of 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 consultants face pressuring managers and demanding clients, junior 11 confirmed the message in 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 laughed 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 was thus taken up on by junior 10. The challenges and the interesting work were seen as motivating as suggested in the cartoon, whereas at the same time the long workweeks up to 80 h were also felt as something quite bad.

Further Elaborations

The cartoon sparked recognition and some nuancing, but also inspired 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 do managers need to be satisfied, so do 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 did junior 10 report illness when reflecting on the leadership style illustrated in the cartoon, managers also recognized 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 illustrated 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 reported that management requiring 80 hours 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 focused 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 not only confirmed, added nuance, or explained how the cartoon covers their daily reality They also discussed what comes before the cartoon by detailing the work culture, the client demands, and the high standards. They also illustrated what happens next, like the effects for their health and wellbeing, not directly covered in the cartoon, but clearly related in the experience of the respondents. Leadership responses to support juniors

were discussed as well, and the coping strategies of juniors (see Bouwmeester and Kok, 2018).

Signs of Lowered Social Desirability Bias

When discussing the cartoon, leadership in the context of consulting was indeed assessed as problematic due to overly high work demands. The cartoon sparked such a discussion, invited various responses, and fostered exploration of relevant experiences with such unethical practice. Criticisms apply consequentialist, deontological, and virtue ethical logics. First, while the cartoon suggested ironically only positive wellbeing consequences, when asking consultants, they instead mentioned negative health and wellbeing consequences. For the respondents the irony was not difficult to see, and it triggered a contrasting response. Second, responses included reflections on rules, ethical principles and laws that were not respected. Working 80 hours does not fit within the limits of labour law. Labour law is designed with the intention to keep people healthy by keeping work hours reasonable. Interviewees discussed how staying within these normal limits has a low priority at consultancies. Instead, serving clients and making money were mentioned as the more central management priorities. Third, the management cartoon inspired reflection on virtues and vices. The presented over demanding manager is no virtuous leader. Compassion and being considerate are missing qualities in the managerial character depicted. It is very illustrative that the boss in the cartoon does not understand the complaints. This triggered several associations, memories of similar experiences, and evaluations of the work situation among the respondents.

Starting the conversation with reflection on carefully selected jokes invited deep conversations on unethical business practice related to leadership, covering ground that otherwise may have been clouded by social desirability bias. 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 happened in the conversations between interviewee and interviewer. The process of interpretation that makes the ethical criticism explicit, entails much more than repeating what the cartoon tells. Interpretation means activating the implied norms and visualizing the consequences. An important process for the method is the 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 received a negative moral assessment from most of the interviewees. Overall, there was a shared assessment that work pressures are too high too often. But instead of only sharing this abstract judgement, the various illustrations and stories are what the interviewer was looking for. They substantiate the judgement.

Based on the explorative jokes-based interview method, various sensitive topics could be studied. Recently the method was tested in a study on consultants' work-life conflict experiences with one of my MSc students, by first asking questions based on a normal topic list, and subsequently by showing cartoons and memes to deepen the discussion. In several interviews the cartoons revealed stories that were more truthful. For instance,

first a respondent said something like: “I never work over the weekend. There I draw the line.” When looking at a couple of work-life balance cartoons and memes, more memories were triggered, and the respondent confessed: “Yes, that is funny, and indeed, last month I did work over the weekend”. Barriers of social desirability become weaker by the laughs, and memories hidden behind these barriers become more accessible.

I had a similar experience when teaching my 2023 business ethics course at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Students were asked to apply the jokes-based interview method to generate an ethics case based on mapping the most challenging ethical consulting experience of their respondent. Compared to the years before where only a couple of students wanted to experiment with this approach, case descriptions were much more detailed overall. In previous years students that did jokes-based interviews had rich case descriptions as well, while many of the other students struggled to provide detailed case narrative. Only some could, who were able to create sufficient rapport and detail with other means. These experiences signal that the jokes-based interview method has the potential to open up the interviewee, that more memories become assessable during the conversation, and that the willingness to go down the abstraction ladder improves, and that more details are shared. Like the academics and student researchers who applied the method already, many others involved in studying sensitive topics that have generated public jokes, could benefit from doing jokes-based interviews.

Possibilities and Limitations of Jokes-Based Interviews

Possibilities of Business Jokes to Trigger Reflections on Sensitive Topics

Starting interviews by showing a business cartoon offered a strong statement to start the conversation. The message of the cartoon was initially confirmed or denied, but such responses were only the beginning. What happened next was that the cartoon was nuanced, as such jokes mostly somewhat exaggerate or distort reality. Secondly, when the joke was sufficiently spot on, as with the cartoon indicating 80 h workweeks, it triggered memories and released energy to talk about issues related to the implied criticism. These were the causes and effects of the illustrated situation, but also moral leadership responses not indicated in the cartoon. To get such associative responses, interviewers have 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 and when, what happened next, who were involved and how, etc.

How Cartoons Become Trigger and Starting Point

Cartoons are very condensed in how they communicate, and thus leave a lot of the message implicit. Therefore start a conversation by letting the interviewee look at the jokes, and then let them interpret by relating to their own experiences. The cartoons are a powerful icebreaker to start an exchange on sensitive topics as addressed in the joke, but then they also need a follow-up conversation. Starting a discussion on ethical transgression in work life is an example of crossing the line of social desirability, and here denial is a common coping strategy. Cartoons can help to get beyond this initial

denial by their humorous touch. Next, they stimulate topical associations and memories that create opportunities for further exploration in such areas. Another way to move on is to ask for relevant workplace jokes the respondents know themselves, and that they feel are relevant to share and discuss.

How to Move on to the Respondents' Experiences

In the case of confirmation, nuancing, or association, it is important to relate the business jokes' critical messages to the experiences of the interviewees in their work context. Jokes can be a starting point for further exploration in follow-up questions like: how did it happen in your work context, what did it mean to you when it happened, etc. When the conversation has started, common open interview techniques can follow, including using a topic list and preparing for some follow up questions you could ask (cf. Hermanowicz, 2002; Legard et al., 2003). The illustrative leadership cartoon has been an invitation to talk about leadership experiences that could illustrate the cartoon and vice versa. Due to the normality condition of humour, popular jokes relate to such experiences, as audiences need to be able to recognize a joke and its context to be seen as funny (Veatch, 1998). That is why popular jokes are a perfect starting point for a conversation on the topics addressed in these jokes. The subsequent associative process of referring to experiences in the interviews, can be assessed as very open and explorative.

How to Select the Jokes that Work Well in an Interview

Cartoons can be used very well in an interview setting, often more so than text jokes. Cartoons work with visual expression and limited text, and can transfer their message quite fast. Still, the topical match is important for selection as well, as this helps to steer the conversation in the right direction. Sometimes a text joke or meme might do this better. However, any joke is only the beginning, and everything needs to be told and illustrated by the interviewee's memories of experiences. In the end only little is said in a joke, and what is said is overly general, provocative, sometimes ironical, partly fictional etc.

As a genre, a joke needs interpretation similar to a metaphor, and only those with sufficient relevant experiences can do well. It makes the match between the interviewees' experiences and the joke's content of great importance. If there is not much of a link, as with the strip joint joke, few 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 variation or 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 for one interview, ten might be too many. Then it would be good to let the interviewee focus on three to five jokes, out of these ten.

How to Find Jokes on the Internet

When searching for "cartoon", "meme", or "joke", and the topic of "study", you will find many public cartoons or jokes to choose from related to the search topic. If these are not sufficient, the website www.cartoonstock.com or www.knowyourmeme.com are

good sources as well, within which you can search per topic. In Bouwmeester (2023, p. 43) you can find more websites that might be useful for the search.

Managing the Method Limitation of Jokes-Based Interviews

Avoid that Jokes-Based Interview Questions Become Leading

A first limitation to consider is that jokes contain strong statements that could be perceived as leading, by suggesting critical judgements like a leading question could do (cf. Alvesson, 2003). There is also the risk that jokes can have a stereotyping effect. However, this has not been my experience when doing jokes-based interviews. One explanation could be the fact that the leading or stereotyping element in jokes or cartoons such as with the over demanding leaders, is so provocative and part of the genre, that it does not take the interviewee by surprise. Secondly, it is not the interviewer who makes the joke, or who is suggesting the stereotype. It is a public joke that is shared and discussed. This is important, to keep such distance and to not make the joke yourself as the interviewer. 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 resonate less well.

Consider that Jokes Entail "Humour Bias"

This second limitation means that not all forms of ethical transgression or norm violating behaviour has fun potential. Only the mild offense of ethical norms or social expectations can feel as emotionally absurd, and will be appreciated as funny, not the very brute violations of ethical principles (McGraw and Warren 2010; Veatch 1998). In addition, these mild norm violations focus on the negative, not the positive. That is a bias as well. Therefore, when selecting jokes, the interviewer needs to be aware of the fact that the positive business behaviour, as well as the very serious norm transgressions may not be addressed in jokes, memes or cartoons. This limitation makes them the perfect start for an interview on various kinds of norm violation (underperformance, distastefulness, being old fashioned, being unethical etc.), but probably not a sufficient source of knowledge on the very serious transgressions hidden by social desirability bias. Still, to start explorations with the lighter transgressions is good practice, as the personal risks related to the bigger issues will only increase, and they are not the best topics to open an interview with.

Mind that Jokes are Condensed and Abstract

A third limitation is that jokes do not offer much rich description themselves. They mostly focus on key aspects indicated by some funny details. The illustrations given in jokes need follow-up questioning to tap into the interviewee experiences, and to arrive at rich descriptions. Therefore, cartoons or small text jokes are a good starting point for triggering memories and stories, and to subsequently explore these remembered cases further based on follow-up questions.

Conclusion

Jokes-based interviews can help researchers involved in interview studies get better access to their interviewees' memories. Management consultants, investigative

journalists, policy analysts, and other practitioner researchers will benefit as much from the method as academic researchers. The method helps in particular when studying sensitive topics, where social desirability bias may create obstacles to share experiences, that are difficult to get around. When the topic of study is subject to public jokes such as business jokes, some of them can be selected and then used in the early stages of the interview conversation. When the method is applied well, and the interviewer is skillful in asking follow-up questions, the jokes-based interview approach is a great addition to the traditional open- or semi-structured interview. The interview approaches can be combined, and used in iterative sequences, for instance, by referring back to jokes later in the conversation, and then adding a new layer to the earlier interpretations. Due to the jokes, more experiences will be shared.

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