The serious business of jokes: an interview with Onno Bouwmeester

Abstract

This article is a transcript of an interview with Onno Bouwmeester, Professor in the Department of Management and Marketing, Durham University Business School, UK, and the Department of Management and Organization, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. The interview focused on his new book *Business Ethics and Critical Consultant Jokes. New Research Methods to Study Ethical Transgressions*, Springer, 2023.

>*Author: Onno, please start by giving me a brief synopsis of your career.*

ONNO: My academic career started with the two programmes I studied. I did philosophy and economics. After that I moved to KPMG as a consultant, in the area of economics. I did that for six years. But I also started to work on a PhD when I was a consultant – I was interested in the rhetoric of consultants. And I did that with Arjo Klamer, an economist also interested in rhetoric and philosophy.

After my consultant years I moved on to university because I had already prepared for this PhD. It was not ready at the moment that I made the transition. So, I finished it when working at Vrije Universiteit, and I've been there for 20 years now. I changed to the area of business administration, with a specialization on consultants. I also teach in a Masters programme on management consulting there.

Recently I moved to Durham for half of my time. And that is where I am Professor of Consulting and Business Ethics. So, that is where we are now.

>*Author: Thank you. So, the particular publication that we're looking at is* Business Ethics and Critical Consultant Jokes*. We understand the reason for the focus on consulting. So, let's turn to jokes. Where did your interest in jokes and the use of jokes in research come from?*

ONNO: Related to the profession, I learned already about jokes on consultants when I was a consultant. Then, when I started to read on consultants, sometimes there were also jokes used in articles to illustrate the lack of knowledge of consultants. And one of the things that I wondered about was that in the literature the angle was so critical. You see the critical element from the outsider, suggesting that consultants are not so good in doing what they do. So, they lack expertise – that is what you often read in the jokes. But I read them more as coping jokes. So, a lot of elements in these jokes are about the struggles of consultants.

So, I hit a bit of a different angle on what you could do with jokes, compared to what I had read in the literature. And that is, I think, where it comes from. But also the fascination that there's more truth in the jokes than you would assume.

>*Author: Sure, and explain to us what it is about jokes that enable you to open up conversations and therefore lead to new knowledge.*

ONNO: What I believe you see in the jokes, and that then links to the topic of ethics that I found very prevalent in the jokes, but also work-life balance, is that they move into an area of things you are not so proud of. So, the things you don't easily discuss, or where there are taboos or social desirability bias. Jokes push in that direction. And that is then a help to open up a conversation, and to get that knowledge more on the table. Jokes also activate your memory. So, it helps you to remember things you don't want to remember. So, in that sense, I think it helps. It opens doors.

Author: And you say that the jokes focus on the daily forms of unethical behaviour in the business world rather than on the kind of extreme cases which are of more interest to journalists, for example. So, am I right that the focus the book and research methods is on is the mundane, but therefore relatively frequent, moral transgressions in the corporate world?

ONNO: Yes, that is my interpretation, and it relates to how you can understand humour theoretically. First, that humour shows norm violation, but that this shouldn't be too extreme. So, if a joke is very aggressive or very harsh, then we feel anger instead of the humour that should be triggered. And secondly, when the illustrated norm violation doesn't happen at all, or only once in 12,000 years, then it also doesn't trigger laughter in a larger audience. So, the humorous event should be recognizable for the people you are presenting the joke to. The norm transgression should be somehow existent. And that is the normality condition of humour, that it should be recognizable.

And these two elements of humour make it a good means to focus on the more mundane in the transgressions. But it doesn't necessarily mean that they are never serious or that they cannot be to a degree that you really don't want to be responsible for it. So, it's not the very extreme transgressions but they still would be serious enough to be concerned about.

Author: For example, the literature that you summarize on consultant ethics identifies themes such as consultants' incompetence leading to recommendations that can have a damaging effect on their clients, their bluffing, their overconfidence, the overcharging of clients. But to really get into these, empirical research needs to overcome, as you mentioned, the social desirability bias, the moral disengagement, the sheer denial that will inevitably occur. And that's where jokes come in, I think – is that right?

ONNO: Yes, this is absolutely right. And I think that is also why jokes can be these triggers. So, it is the things that we don't want to talk about, but by starting for instance an interview or conversation with a joke and by reflecting on the joke, it opens doors. That's where the jokes come in.

Author: And as you've already mentioned one of the things you say in the book is that "jokes are only perceived as funny, if audiences can recognise the ridiculed behaviour. Moreover, jokes play with what is right and wrong, normal or absurd, and timely or outdated. They activate common norms and standards including ethical ones, by showing norm violation" (p.7). So, jokes have to be good jokes to work. Is that right?

ONNO: Yes, that is right. And the good joke then relates indeed to something that people can recognize. So, the expertise of consultants, that is recognized by many audiences. So, from the perspective of the academics you can say their standards are a bit lower than the academic standards, from the perspective of employees they also feel, hey, consultants do all kinds of things, but we are not so happy with it. Do they really know what they are doing? So, there is enough common experience with this element of the consultants.

On the other hand, lack of expertise is to some extent mild norm violation. We never know everything about everything. You have limited knowledge and also the consultant has limited knowledge. So, we can understand that there are degrees, and that they don't have to be perfect, that there's this element of mildness. If norm transgression would be too extreme, then the joke is also not a good joke anymore. So, it should be in this area where we feel uncomfortable, but not too uncomfortable.

Author: Right, thank you. Now obviously the focus of the book is on using jokes in research, so it's about research methods. And you identify four different research methods by which jokes can be used. The first of those is using jokes, as it were, merely as illustrations in theoretical or

in empirical arguments. So, can you say a little bit more about that method and indeed how you've used it?

ONNO: In the articles that I read, that I also referred to earlier, the jokes have been used in theoretical arguments to illustrate lack of expertise, or to illustrate lack of care for employees for instance. So, that is a way that jokes are used. Or also at the front page of an article I've seen a cartoon, just to illustrate the topic of the article. And in newspapers, you often see a cartoon that illustrates something that happened a day ago.

I wanted to check how good jokes are at illustrating a topic or a theme like ethics. And for that reason, I first did many interviews together with students on the more difficult decisions, ethical decisions, that consultants had to make, in situations where they felt uncomfortable, that were the more difficult events in their careers. And I categorized them and made a top 10 list of problematic consultant behaviours. And I tried to see if they are all illustratable, if there are jokes for all of these mentioned ethical transgressions.

And that worked out pretty well. So, I did that in a more systematic way. In the past, I think, jokes have been used more incidentally to make an argument a bit more funny or a bit more readable. So, you can use jokes as an illustration for these kind of topics where norm transgression happens. I did this for the first time in the book. So, I didn't do that in an article before.

> *Author: And the second method is using jokes in interviews, as prompts in effect. Again, can you say a little bit more about that method and how you've used it?*

ONNO: I used it more often, and I published two articles by using this method in the interviews. One article was on moral and dirty leadership within consulting. And then the other was on dirty work – experiences of consultants that go more in a psychological direction like their stress experience or burn outs, or that they feel lonely in the hotel rooms where they stay for a week before they can get home.

So, these kinds of experiences are not the ones you are most proud of. When you are a leader, and you are pushing your junior consultants towards the limits of what they can handle. That is a kind of leadership you don't want to talk about too much.

So, if you start these kind of conversations with a joke on that topic, that works as an icebreaker. It works like what you otherwise would do with a question, that you put a topic on the table and ask for a response. The cartoon is doing the same, or the joke, but you then ask for interpretation. So, do you recognize this situation in your work context? Do you have bosses yourself that ask for so much effort from you, as illustrated in the cartoon? What do they ask from you? And then you get these kind of different responses – that they recognize it or not, and start elaborating on their own situation. So, then the jokes work as a prompt. Instead of the question that you put on the table, you ask for the interpretation of the joke or the cartoon, and so you'll get into the conversation.

> *Author: And then the third method is using jokes in surveys, and here in the book you illustrate the use of jokes by means of an actual example which used both cartoon-based questions and traditional questions on consultants' expertise. And this found that cartoon-based jokes led to responses that were consistent with those from traditional questions. But you argued that the humorous approach can increase response rates, can increase validity and therefore reduce social desirability bias. Can you explain why that's the case?*

ONNO: Yes, the response rate relates to the fun aspect in the survey. If you can look at a cartoon instead of only reading a question, the survey just becomes a bit more attractive. So, I think that helps

with the response rate. And also with the completion rate, that if you have a cartoon you hope maybe for another one, and you finish the whole survey. So that helps also in that sense. And then related to the social desirability bias, I expect something similar happens as with the interviews, that the jokes trigger more memories and that they open up the respondent.

I assume that this will also happen when you sit behind your computer screen and go through a survey. That when you encounter such a cartoon, and the illustrative power of the cartoon, that it also opens up the mind and triggers more memories, just as with the interview. But maybe a bit less than in the interview, I think it works stronger there. But it will also happen when doing the survey. And that increases validity.

> *Author: And then the final method is doing content analysis on jokes. And obviously for that you've got a particular theme you're looking at and you need a lot of jokes, I would have thought, to get enough material to do content analysis on. So, isn't that problematic in getting sufficient material on a particular theme?*

ONNO: Yes, I think it is. So, I did it once for one article that I could find enough jokes to build the argument on. But even then I was comparing and contrasting with the literature and tried to find a new angle. So, in a way I was already working with this literature to realize triangulation. And when you do an interview study, you also start with a small sample of jokes on the topic, where you have the different topics you would like to study. And that is another way of triangulation that you combine the limited sample on the topic with another method.

But if you are lucky and you have many jokes on a topic, I believe it is a rich source for content analysis, and that you can get a lot out of it. But there are limits to the number of jokes that are available. Not all the jokes survive, and not all the jokes end up on the internet. We make lots of jokes, but many jokes get lost.

> *Author: Thank you. One of the aspects which will be of particular interest to philosophers, philosophers of management, is the ethical theories which can be studied using this approach. You discuss in the book deontological and consequentialist approaches but in most cases it seems to be virtue ethics that emerges as the most prominent. In other words, it's to do with the character of consultants, their virtues or perhaps more commonly their vices, which seems to explain their behaviour. Is that right as a summary?*

ONNO: I think it is right, but I think it also relates then to the consulting context, where we discuss a profession. And when it is about a profession, there's also professional ethics and you have the character of the professional that is quite central. So, in this context, it does make sense that the profession is criticized on virtues, because you expect some virtues, professional virtues in this case. So, that this link to virtue ethics is so prominent, links back to the consulting context.

You have also these kind of jokes on lawyers. It's also a profession. You have bankers – you also expect some ethical virtues there. Politicians and managers as well. So, there's many of these professions where the virtues are important. And, in my view, that links back to coping humour. So, if it is about you and you are not able to meet up to the standards, or you cannot be as virtuous as you would like to be, it does not feel good for yourself. So, it gets inside you in a way, which is a motivation for making coping jokes about it.

When you talk about consequentialism, I think there is a stronger link with the superiority theory of humour. Then you can laugh about the misfortune of your enemies. So, then you have a bit more distance and it's not about you, but it's about the other. And then the bad consequences can be funny.

It's a different setting. So, then you can imagine that the employee within an organization where consultants work, can laugh about something bad that happens to the consultants, because they just didn't like the consultants so much. Then that can be humorous.

And regarding the principles in a deontological approach, consulting is not so regulated. So there are not so many strong principles or norms or clear regulations. But I expect if you go more towards bureaucratic contexts, that you also find jokes that are critical on the norms, the principles and the formal standards. That can also be funny.

Kafka's writing is humorous in a way. There is some humour in his books. So, when we think about these kind of books we also start laughing a bit, because of these bureaucratic settings that are so impossible. So, I think you could find jokes on these kind of issues, but I didn't find them so much in my studies.

> *Author: You mentioned lawyers, politicians, bankers there and also just briefly managers. Do you think this approach could be applied to managers generically?*

ONNO: I think as well, there's many manager jokes. In my study on dirty leadership, moral or dirty leadership, I was studying managers next to their junior consultants. There the manager was criticized. The cartoon that I used was about eighty-hour work weeks. The managers asked their employees to work that long, because the work was so interesting. It should be a pleasure to do that – even eighty hours a week! In this cartoon the pressuring manager was made fun of. So yes, there are enough critical jokes on managers, that can be used in jokes-based research methods.

> *Author: And again, the focus seems to be on the individual level. Particularly people in these professional roles as it were. So, it's about personal character rather than organizational or institutional levels. Is that right that it's more focused on the individual?*

ONNO: I would say the individual level is important, but it is always about the individual within a context. So, it is the individual as a professional, as a consultant, where there's all kinds of expectations, norms and institutions in that context. And I think that makes it a topic for humour, that you have these norms, these norms that are institutionalized, and then you transgress them. So, you as an individual, you walk around or move around the norms. That gets into the jokes. I think it is this multi-level aspect, that is important for humour. And organizational norms can be criticized as well. Jokes carry enough ambiguity for that. The managerial or organizational norm to work eighty hours a week was criticized in the cartoon as much as the consultants who "enjoyed" it.

> *Author: Thank you. Is there anything else that we haven't covered that you wanted to add into the conversation?*

ONNO: Yes, I wish to encourage scholars in business ethics to try out these jokes-based research methods, that are so much inspired by the humanities. For business ethicists, there is this call, that we should do more empirical research ourselves, and not only stick to the books.