
Review Essay

Tricks and Reveries

Gary Alan Fine¹ and Christopher Wellin^{2,3}

Tricks of the Trade: How to Think About Your Research While You're Doing It, by Howard S. Becker. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 243. \$13.95 Paper. \$35.00 Cloth.

Genres do not contain Howard S. Becker. His latest book, *Tricks of the Trade: How to Think About Your Research While You're Doing It*, is sui generis. His previous discussion of writing, *Writing for Social Scientists*, so open and friendly, was advice from a favorite, eccentric uncle. Not a handbook of the rules for sentence construction, Becker wanted graduate students, and others, to think about writing as a craft, a challenge, a construction, a way to refine ideas and perceptions.

While *Tricks of the Trade* seems to promise a comparable treatment of theorizing, the two volumes have different tones, likely a function of differences between the problems of writing and of theorizing. While writing is an individual act constrained by audience and stylistic conventions, theorizing is, for Becker, how individuals take part in *cumulative* bodies of knowledge. Even if Becker denied the claim, it was clear that he believed there are certain ways that one should write. Likewise, his new book is only subtly prescriptive. But, readers who recognize Becker's implicit model of theorizing, which he often conveys through stories and references to his teachers, will find in *Tricks* more coherence and complexity than others whose viewpoint is more narrow, who see only a researcher's took-kit.

The volume is divided (oh so simply!) into four major chapters, salient and sturdy images that Becker hopes will come to define the way that we think about research and theory-building: imagery, sampling, concepts, and

¹Northwestern University.

²University of California, San Francisco.

³Direct correspondence to Christopher Wellin, Post-Doctoral Fellow, Institute for Health and Aging, University of California-San Francisco, Box 0646, Laurel Heights, San Francisco, CA 94143.

logic. These we might reasonably describe as the building blocks of any research program. Within these chapters Becker presents strategies for working within each, typically unpacking and transcending all those things that we thought that we understood all along. Becker denies that his ideas constitute “tricks” in the folk sense of short-cuts and make-dos, rather they constitute diverse ways of seeing the world anew: trick glasses for perceiving the world in ways that one had not thought to perceive it before. Using tricks requires creative thinking, rather than defensive uses of existing categories or literature. “Every section of the book,” he writes, “takes up the theme of convention—social convention and scientific convention—as a major enemy of sociological thought” (7).

To understand Becker’s stance, then, as that of a dispassionate outsider is mistaken. Of all Becker’s books, this, written as he approaches retirement, is his most personal. In an odd way it constitutes his intellectual biography, and has the humor and anecdotal richness implied by that term: his persona becomes known through his research. Most of his major projects find a place in this exposition. Thus, the analytic and theoretical toolkit of strategies that he wishes to share is richly-illustrated through his own research life. Since virtually all of Becker’s major empirical studies have markedly influenced thinking in the substantive areas of sociology he was addressing—professions, education, deviance, and culture—his thoughts on these “generic” problems have a special interest for the discipline. Also, though some appeared four decades ago, Becker’s writings—both practical and reflective—on field methods have proven to be so lasting in value that it would be redundant for him to offer much prescriptive advice in the new book.

It should be emphasized that Becker’s form of personalism is very distinct from the kind of post-modern auto-ethnography and self-reflexivity now so commonplace—the current debilitating vogue of navel-gazing. Becker’s experiences are supposed to be generalized to the problems that anyone could find in similar circumstances. While Becker looks backward, sharing those sociological experiences that shaped him, the work is not sentimental, nostalgic, and only slightly elegiac; these sturdy examples serve in Becker’s Puritan modesty as simply the best tools at hand for the purpose.

Biographical the volume certainly is, but it is subtly, perhaps subversively, more than that. In the guise of writing a treatise on methodological concerns, Becker has managed to pen an homage to his teachers, Herbert Blumer and, especially, Everett Hughes. Becker reminds us that these two figures are major contributors to the understanding of substantive concerns central in American sociology at mid-century: social organization, race relations, industrialization, occupations, and the like. But more than this,

these men—Becker’s teachers, his inspiration—provided a means of looking at research—an implicit strategy, consisting in many ways of those tricks that Becker wishes to convey to others. The detailed treatment of their empirical works, and the significance of their underlying model of theorizing, is at the emotional heart of the volume.

What, then, is this image of theorizing? We need to understand Becker’s preferred image, as well as his critique. In his first collection of papers, *Sociological Work* (1970), Becker made short work of defining his view of theory: “I conceive of society as collective action and sociology as the study of the forms of collective action.” He connects his lineage, of course, to Hughes and Blumer, and through them to George Herbert Mead, Robert E. Park, and, importantly, to Simmel, with whom Park had studied. Becker adopts Simmel’s emphasis on generic *forms* of interaction (over their content or their division into substantive fields), and this organizing principle integrates what might otherwise appear to be a loosely-connected set of chapters. Perhaps because this sub-text is not spelled out, and because the volume is not aimed at the students of any one methodological perspective, the logic is sometimes hard to specify.

Central to his logic of analysis is Becker’s suspicion of theory as it has typically been defined and validated within the discipline. Becker comments (p. 4):

Like Hughes, I have a deep suspicion of abstract sociological theorizing; I regard it at best as a necessary evil, something we need in order to get our work done but, at the same time, a tool that is likely to get out of (hand), leading to a generalized discourse largely divorced from the day-to-day digging into social life which constitutes sociological science. I’ve tried to tame theory for myself by viewing it as a collection of tricks, ways of thinking that help researchers faced with concrete problems make some progress.

What could this blast possibly mean? Surely such a statement poses a paradox in a book that is ostensibly *about* theoretical matters. Becker has written a book about theory from the standpoint of one who mistrusts the whole enterprise: one who embraces what he terms the “day-to-day digging into social life.”

As is typical in Becker’s career, he does not wish to present a prescriptive view of theory, but rather a sensitizing view. Of course, ultimately it is not all theory that Becker mistrusts, but the abstract, formal, and often balkanized kind that has developed along with the various fissures in academic sociology. Once a sub-field becomes established, it has the power to regulate academic work and careers through a phalanx of arbitrary rules, capable of drawing artificial and misleading distinctions. Becker abjures systems that see the same social processes as fundamentally different if they occur in a hospital, as opposed to a jail or a corporate boardroom, as he

suggests in considering “concepts as relational.” Once a process is discovered, or, better, uncovered, its scope conditions need to be explored without regard to the political boundaries within the discipline—or for that matter in the social world itself. For Becker theory should never be far-removed from empirical distinctions and comparisons should be of the kind that he is forever modeling in this book, connecting, for instance the absence of skill at drawing to other forms of “mental retardation,” wondering why some weakness are sufficient to gain one a pejorative label while others are not.

Becker’s approach to building theory is derived from an image of what theoretical accumulation in social research looks like. In his introduction to the classic life-history of a delinquent boy, “The Jack Roller,” (reprinted in *Sociological Work*) he defines this image as a “mosaic,” consisting of the contributions of variously, locally-produced data sources to understanding of recurring processes of social organization. He sees the role of life history, for example, as being a “touchstone,” useful for assessing the empirical relevance of more abstract or grand theoretical propositions.

Though social research has become vastly more specialized and subject to disputes about method, Becker rejects this trend and so continues to operate with his earlier image of the object of theoretical growth. Indeed, since he devotes an entire chapter in *Tricks* to imagery, it’s only reasonable that readers be reflective about those images that shape Becker’s project.

Becker argues that the way that we have come to define and use theory blinds us to ideas that might expand and explode our conceptions of sociological processes. In the chapter, “Sampling,” Becker includes the sub-heading, “Everybody Knows That,” to refer to how prior research if read superficially, has the tyrannical effect of undermining people’s confidence in the merits of their own research, to make us assume that these gatekeepers should provide us with our starting point. He then argues that such superficial thinking leads to a learned incapacity to think creatively about concepts. Similarly, Becker’s discussion of imagery serves as a lament (following Blumer) that abstract theory creates cognitive barriers to the nuanced interpretation of social life. Still, an important feature of this volume is the institutional critique of contemporary sociology that Becker proposes.

Perhaps it is the character of Becker’s own research, with its themes that extend from earlier efforts to more recent formulations (from the dance band to *Art Worlds* [1982]) and its expansive range (the importance of labeling, the collective construction of meaning, the role of cooperative networks in achieving social ends, creation of work ideologies), but the message of *Tricks of the Trade* is that when researchers develop and extend ideas from empirical research, they are likely to discover continuities across settings—similarities when least expected. While extracting and testing the

implicit ideas is a challenge, it is an essential part of crafting research and worth doing in its own right. Ultimately, although Becker is better known for his work in various substantive domains than for any “theoretical” achievements, his guiding principle is that sensitizing concepts do not respect such substantive or conceptual divisions as now clutter the map of sociology. Further, he suggests, to pursue these concepts to better understanding of the social world is a plenty good enough criterion for theory to meet (a position that is also held by the many teachers who continue to assign *Outsiders* [1963] in theory courses).

To this straightforward way of theorizing, Becker adds a subversive sensitivity to the underdog, a recognition that the organization of society (including the organization of ideas) typically serves the interests of elites—a critical Millsian sociology; a sociology of the left that downplays the power of economic hegemony and identity politics in favor of cognitive and managerial control.

Perhaps most significant is the clear desire to expand his account beyond the boundaries of qualitative research, incorporating lengthy sections on Ragin’s qualitative comparative analysis, Lazarfeld’s tables, as well, of course, as Glaser and Strauss’s grounded theory—demonstrating that these three distinct analytic tools share a powerful and profound logic that permit researchers to see and describe commonalities and differences.

Through it all, with all the tricks and strategies, Howard Becker has shared a distinctive rendition of how to conduct research, a set of elegant essays on how sociology might admirably be done. Yet, despite its pleasures, it must be confessed that this volume contains its share of frustrations. Unlike some theorists and thinkers, Anselm Strauss as a case in point, Becker does not have an organized or disciplined soul (and wants it precisely this way). However, as a consequence, the volume tends to drift. It is a mosaic of many vibrant shards. While it is possible to stand back to observe the totality of Becker’s perspective, the beauty is most notable close up.

As a technical primer, while the pieces are surely inspiring, they do little for the novice researcher wondering what to do tomorrow. Consider the problem, perhaps, in light of the subtitle. A reader might expect to learn the *stages* that permit the doing of research: first, one does this; then, that. Becker’s mind does not work well in an sequential fashion. The material is quilted together, and much is left to the very same reader who is ostensibly having so much difficulty with their project. Imagine a “tool-kit” in which obscure implements were casually jumbled together, a cookbook with only ingredients and no instructions.

So, we are left with a book that burns with insight: A firecracker of a volume. Without doubt Becker has well-chosen the blocks of a research project. Research without imagery, concepts, logic, and a sample of the

world would be no research at all. Yet, unlike *Writing for Social Scientists* this seems to be a work more useful for those scholars with some research experience. If this book is not a roadmap, one can still learn a lot from the places that Becker would take us.

REFERENCES

- Becker, Howard S. (1963). *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York: Free Press.
- Becker, Howard S. (1970). *Sociological Work: Method and Substance*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Becker, Howard S. (1982). *Art Worlds*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Becker, Howard S. (1986). *Writing for Social Scientists*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.