



# CRIME AND JUVENILE DELINQUENCY DIVISION SPECIAL ISSUE

SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

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## Special Issue Newsletter

### Lifetime Achievement Award for Howard S. Becker

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## Notes from the Special Edition Editor

At the 2015 SSSP Annual Convention in Chicago, the Crime & Juvenile Delinquency Division sponsored a special award session to honor the lifetime contributions of Howard S. Becker, co-organized by Tim Berard, Lifetime Achievement Award Committee Chair for 2015, and Chris Wellin, who nominated Howie Becker for the award. The session was very well attended and well received. Invited panelists included (alphabetically): Elijah Anderson (Yale University), Marjorie DeVault (Syracuse University), Erich Goode (Professor Emeritus at Stony Brook University), Robert L. Nelson (Northwestern University and American Bar Foundation), Chris Wellin (Illinois State University). This newsletter includes contributions from most panelists, varying from illustrative abridgements to more or less complete renderings of the panel presentations.

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# Howard S. Becker—Lifetime Achievement Award

## Chris Wellin

I was delighted to nominate **Howard S. Becker** for the 2015 *Lifetime Achievement Award* sponsored by the Division on Crime and Juvenile Delinquency of SSSP. It would be difficult to find a scholar who has contributed more, not only to this topical area within social inquiry, but to SSSP itself—serving, as he did, as Editor of *Social Problems* (1961-'65) and as President of SSSP (1965-'66).

Substantively, Howie Becker (his preferred mode of address) has made deep and lasting imprints both on the study of crime and deviance, broadly-defined, but also in the advancement and expansion of theoretical and methodological tools with which scholars, teachers, and advocates explore and address these issues (both through scholarship and advocacy). His imprint on this substantive area is fully matched by that on the fields of education and occupational socialization; qualitative methodology; visual studies; and the sociology of culture. The range and currency of his ideas were reflected in a recent profile in *The New Yorker*, which also conveyed the impact of Becker's career on French and European social research (see Gopnik, 2015). In his calm and uncompromising way, Becker has become a public intellectual whose influence is both pervasive and, always, vitally contemporary.

Early in his career, with the publication of *Outsiders* (1963) and the edited volume *The Other Side* (1964) Becker re-oriented the study of deviance and crime—challenging the dominant functionalist paradigm, and developing labeling and “career” perspectives which built on earlier work in the Chicago School. In this work, and in his Presidential Address, “Whose Side Are we On?” Becker championed a morally-reflective and clear-eyed empirical approach to these topics, which substantially advanced distinctively sociological contributions. The impact of his thinking, not only in academe but in broader policy discourse, can be seen clearly today. One timely example of this is a recent initiative in my own state of Illinois, seeking to reduce rates of incarceration among youthful offenders in recognition of the “secondary” negative impacts on their options in education and employment later in life.

Becker's oeuvre expanded the subject matter of deviance within sociology and related fields, for example in his work on unconventional careers in the arts—linking early papers on jazz musicians and their careers, to the path-breaking *Art Worlds* (1982), and to the recently published *Do You Know?* (2009, co-authored by Robert Faulkner) on the sharing and sustenance of the jazz repertoire. In all of these ways, Becker has placed these issues at the very

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center of social theory and research, always with a fresh, richly-descriptive and lucid voice. (Indeed, through his (2007) book on *Writing for Social Scientists*, Becker produced among the most beneficial and widely-cited sources on how social researchers can communicate our perspectives and findings, in the most effective ways and for the widest audience.)

A final contribution of Howie Becker's career, which is especially relevant to the SSSP and for this award, is his panoramic view of social research as an applied practice. That is, Becker has been an acute and trenchant observer of the contexts in which social research is sponsored, conducted, and received by external audiences. One example of this is the argument in "Whose Side Are We On?," mentioned above, in which he illuminates how a "hierarchy of credibility" has shaped when, and by whom, the findings of social research are critiqued as somehow compromised by bias or sympathy for the less powerful. Another is his article, "Problems in the Publication of Field Studies," from the mid-'60s, which established his enduring interest in how academic work and its impacts are shaped by institutional contingencies and politics at multiple levels. His perspective is never rueful or alarmist, regarding the ultimate impact of sociological work. Instead, Becker offers insight into features of social organization and inter-professional politics that illuminate and contextualize how, and by whom, our efforts may matter. Just as in *Art Worlds*, in which we're urged to see any creative performance or object as the expression of collective action by broad and sometimes contentious networks, Becker places academic research in the broader terrain of social and cultural change. (In this connection, Becker discusses the role that Erving Goffman's book *Asylums* may have played in the shift toward deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, in one of his many published interviews (Becker and Molotch, 2012: 431-2).

Becker's contributions to the conceptualization and practice of qualitative methodologies constitute an essential body of writing, transcending academic sociology, even as it is always rooted in that discipline. More recently, Becker was part of an important published symposium on qualitative research in urban studies, aiming to refute well-rehearsed arguments about the validity of ethnography and other interpretive approaches, aimed at important sources of research funding. Through a lengthy and cogent series of presentations and publications, throughout his career, Becker has expanded the range of voices, methods, topics, representational forms, and institutional arenas in which social research can thrive and contribute to public life.

## Howard S. Becker—Lifetime Achievement Award—continued

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### *Connections to the World(s) of Jazz*

From the outset of his career, Howie Becker has engaged the musical genre of jazz. At times, his references were metaphorical, as in his essay on “Culture: A Sociological View” (1986); at others, he engaged the music, and the careers of the musicians, as a substantive area of study. In the first connection, he reflected on his years playing piano in jazz bands, in which he often showed up for gigs facing musicians whom he’d never met, with only their shared repertoire and a set of intuitive signals to guide them through a professional set. He writes,

We not only began at the same time, but also played background figures that fit the melody someone else was playing and, perhaps most miraculously, ended together. No one in the audience ever guessed that we had never met until twenty minutes earlier. And we kept that up all night, as if we had rehearsed often and played together for years. In a place like Chicago, that scene might be repeated hundreds of times during a weekend.

What I have just described embodies the phenomenon that sociologists have made the core problem of their discipline. The social sciences are such a contentious bunch of disciplines that it makes trouble to say what I think is true, that they all in fact concern themselves with one or another version of this issue—the problem of collective action, of how people manage to act together (Becker, 1986:11).

More recently, in the (2009) book *Do You Know?: The Jazz Repertoire in Action*, co-authored by Robert Faulkner (another gifted sociologist/musician), Becker returned explicitly to this theme: through field notes by the authors and some 50 interviews with musicians, the authors reveal not only the oral and interactional traditions in which the music is sustained and passed along, but also how individual players cultivate a distinctive, individual voice. They conclude that “Songs get played as the result of on-the-spot negotiations between players at the moment of public performance. All the pressures and constraints of prior learning, present occupational situation, and the organizational context of the performance focused on these players push their negotiations one way or the other, resulting in what actually gets played on any given occasion” (2009: 164).

## Howard S. Becker—Lifetime Achievement Award—continued

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Though most sociological readers will benefit from the account, even if lacking any technical knowledge of music theory or notation, the analysis provides such details as are appreciated by musicologists or, for that matter, professional players or teachers of the music. (Becker wears his erudition lightly, whether in terms of his command of musical, or spoken, languages.)

What is also useful to know about Becker's biography is that his piano teacher, Lennie Tristano, was a truly consequential teacher and artist in the music, who would, in the mid-1940s, move to New York City in order to make his mark on the performing and recording scenes. For those who seek out the literature of jazz, a kind of stern, if not forbidding, aura hovers about Tristano, who lost his sight when young and was a famously demanding and exacting teacher. Becker has spoken about the disciplined study of scales and the requirement to be able to transpose tunes into nearly every available key. By all accounts, Becker while still in his teens, was receiving as rigorous an apprenticeship in jazz piano as could be had in the country. The biography on Tristano's website suggests the nature and range of his lasting influence on the music:

In the mid-'40s, the Chicago-born pianist arrived on the scene with a concept that genuinely expanded the prevailing bop aesthetic. Tristano brought to the music of Charlie Parker and Bud Powell a harmonic language that adapted the practices of contemporary classical music; his use of polytonal effects in tunes like "Out on a Limb" was almost Stravinsky-esque, and his extensive use of counterpoint was (whether or not he was conscious of it at the time) in keeping with the trends being set in mid-century art music. Until relatively recently, it had seldom been acknowledged that Tristano had been the first to perform and record a type of music that came to be called "free jazz." In 1949 — almost a decade before the making of Ornette Coleman's first records — Tristano's group (which included Lee Konitz, Warne Marsh, and Billy Bauer) cut the first recorded example of freely improvised music in the history of jazz. The two cuts, "Intuition" and "Digression," were created spontaneously, without any pre-ordained reference to time, tonality, or melody. The resultant work was an outgrowth of Tristano's preoccupation with feeling and spontaneity in the creation of music. It influenced, among others, Charles Mingus, whose earliest records sound eerily similar to those of Tristano in terms of style and compositional technique. (<http://www.lennietristano.com/>).

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While Tristano's reputation and influence were certainly substantial during his lifetime—he died in the late 1970s—this was probably mostly present among the jazz *cognoscenti*, rather than the broader public who might have followed Dave Brubeck or Erroll Garner, who had “crossed over” to the popular charts. I add this to suggest that his experience with music would have led Becker to be deeply skeptical about accepting any unitary ranking involving commercial, versus aesthetic or more specialized, tastes in his appraisal, not only of jazz but of other endeavors in which institutional authority becomes ossified. This challenge to the *hierarchy of credibility* was, therefore, not only present in his important (1970) SSSP address, “Whose Side are we On?” but throughout his scholarship. Indeed, he introduces *Art Worlds* as follows: “Maybe the years I spent playing the piano in taverns in Chicago and elsewhere led me to believe that the people who did that mundane work were as important to an understanding of art as the better-known players who produced the recognized classics of jazz” (1982: ix).

[Becker is modest about his own achievements in jazz piano, and found disapproval from his folks about the prospect of pursuing such a career, as his academic career progressed. His decision to stick with sociology is understandable given the caliber of his teacher and fellow students, many of whom came from the locally and justly famous Austin High School in Chicago and, in some cases, earned international reputations. And those who strained to hear the music, at the many conferences across the nation where Howie's groups fought the din of chatter and cutlery, might have concluded that the music was only serviceable. I can attest, however, from experience that Becker has the command of harmonic creativity and technique that transforms even an ostensibly trite tune into something very special—as he did in honoring my request to play a solo version of a favorite ballad, *You Go to My Head*.]

Another parallel between jazz and scholarship—which reflects Becker's practical-but-subversive stance—concerns how one treats tunes and theories, respectively. Much of the repertoire of jazz during the post WWII period relied on show tunes or popular *standards* of the day, which were originally aimed at more staid or commercial markets. However, the practice of jazz is to deconstruct and re-imagine the “original” tune (whether known from recordings, filmed performances, or via sheet music with its prescriptive notation), with reference to its essential melodic, harmonic and/or rhythmic qualities; whether in orchestral jazz or in small group, improvisational styles, the tune is respected, but never frozen or deferred



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to. The liberties which jazz musicians take with a tune, far from negating its integrity, reflect a kind of *homage*, honoring and bringing new life to the original impulse.

Becker, always an astute observer of the philosophy and practice of science, broadly conceived, takes seriously the spirit of theoretical development and questions regarding ontology and epistemology. His stance is wary of *convention* in terms of how people study the world and make truth claims. In an important (Becker 1986) essay (later expanded into a book of the same name), “Telling About Society,” he advances an eclectic and inclusive argument regarding how questions about, and accounts of, social life might be accepted in terms *not* of rigid criteria but, rather, of the practical interests and needs of particular audiences. Just as a jazz player deconstructs a tune in order to reveal new avenues for development and expression, Becker argues that social science theories and findings should be interrogated and extended in what can only be seen as a spirit of independent inquiry.

When, in *Outsiders*, Becker engaged Robert Merton’s then-dominant functionalist view of deviance and social disorganization, he was both respectful and concise in stating that perspectives on the matter were ultimately multi-perspectival and, thus, political questions (Becker, 1963: 7-8). In this, he cleared the way for new conceptual and empirical attention to deviance and criminality—instigating an enduring debate which has been as stimulating for sociology as it appears to have been surprising for him.

In any case, Becker’s experience as a working jazz musician depended on and revealed a *community of practice*, in which a shared set of understandings, skills and objectives allowed those involved to sustain a going concern, and both to derive and provide gratification in the process. Similarly, in his study of sociology at the University of Chicago, Becker found himself among a broad and distinguished group of faculty members (including anthropologists) who had in different ways been shaped by the tradition of pragmatism and field study dating back to Robert Park and, during his training, embodied by Herbert Blumer, Louis Wirth, Everett Hughes (his most important advisor) and others. Blumer, in particular, would go on to name, crystallize and represent the symbolic interactionist tradition, not only at Chicago but, in later years, at U.C. Berkeley. Mind you, while Becker has explicitly rejected the notion of a unified “Chicago *School*,” (Becker, 1999) he has spoken in his many published interviews, and written about the fact that there was a generally congenial and expansive climate in the social sciences at the University of Chicago during this period. And, of course, a widely influential journal, the *American Journal of Sociology* was housed in the department.

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My sense is that, in drawing together strands of Becker's life and career, the affinity between jazz and his approach to sociology rings true.

In closing, I can say that as a former student and friend of Becker's, I have been among the countless beneficiaries of his generosity as a mentor and editor. He has had an exceptionally *generative* career. In addition to his work with SSSP, Becker was executive editor of a critical and important series with *Aldine* books (a series later acquired by *Transaction*), and has recently served on the Editorial Boards of the *American Sociological Review*, and *Contexts*, roles in which he has promoted and helped expand the publication of critical scholarship of the kind that is central to the sustaining mission of the SSSP.

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**Chris Wellin** is a sociologist whose teaching and research interests focus on critical gerontology; the study of work and occupations; and qualitative/interpretive research methods. Wellin has done ethnographic studies in diverse settings including technical theatre, factory work, and paid care-giving, especially for older people facing chronic illness and disability. Drawing on first-hand experience as a care-worker, as well as on field work, Wellin has sought to document and theorize the skill and implications of gendered care-work, both for the quality of life available for disabled people, and for the care-workers themselves, who represent the largest and fastest-growing segment of the service economy in the U.S. His publications have appeared in *Current Research on Occupations and Professions*; *Qualitative Sociology*; *Teaching Sociology*; *Journal of Aging and Social Policy*; and the *Handbook of Ethnography*. A 2008 report summarizing ethnographic research on paid care-giving was commissioned by a committee of the National Academy of Sciences. After earning a B.A. in sociology at the University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee, Wellin took graduate degrees from Northwestern University, and held post-doctoral fellowships at the University of California. He is currently Associate Professor of Sociology and Coordinator of Gerontology Programs at Illinois State University.



Marjorie DeVault, Robert L. Nelson, Chris Wellin, Erich Goode, and Elijah Anderson, with the plaque representing the Lifetime Achievement Award for Howard Becker. Photo was taken by Art Jipson and used with permission.

# Howard S. Becker

Elijah Anderson

The first sociology department in the United States was established at the University of Chicago in 1892. In the early years, its faculty included Albion Small, Charles Henderson, George E. Vincent, and W. I. Thomas. Later, at the University of Pennsylvania, W. E. B. DuBois conducted the groundbreaking research that resulted in the seminal work *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899). After Robert Park moved from Tuskegee, Alabama, to Chicago in 1914 and attracted other researchers interested in urban life, immigration and migration, race and ethnicity, the “Chicago School” emerged in the 1920s and 1930s. Its emphasis on sociological fieldwork resulted in a succession of now-classic field studies that included *The Taxi-Dance Hall*, *The Ghetto*, *The Gold Coast and the Slum*, *The Jack-Roller*, *Hotel Life*, and *Black Metropolis*. Everett Hughes taught at Chicago during the 1930s and 1940s and was Becker’s mentor, guiding his field studies of schoolteachers as well as of dance musicians, marijuana smokers, and other “deviants.”

Throughout his career, Becker has been concerned with rule making and rule breaking, an aspect of social organization that permeates his works, from *Outsiders* to *Art Worlds* and *What About Mozart? What About Murder? Reasoning from cases*. He has been particularly intrigued by the perspectives of those who occupy the lower rungs or outer edges of society and committed to giving marginalized actors a voice that is too often missing in the sociological literature, which raises fundamental questions. Researchers tend to take the built-in order of society for granted. Becker’s concept of a “hierarchy of credibility” in his well-known piece “Whose Side Are We On?” (1967), exposed the way uncritical sociologists are so often taken in by a top-down approach.

Perhaps the most powerful, and notable, expression of Becker’s position was his masterly *Outsiders*, whose title, devoid of an article, indicates the equal interest with which he approaches those who are labeled “deviant” and those who label them so. This juxtaposition conceptually turns the tables on traditional approaches to the study of society, while giving influence to the typical underdog—subjects who have been unheard, understudied, and misunderstood. In short, Becker often privileges the “other side.”

I am proud to say that I was a graduate student of Howard Becker, who mentored me during my dissertation fieldwork, which was begun at the University of Chicago under Gerald D. Suttles and completed under his direction at Northwestern, and then published by the

## Howard S. Becker — continued

Elijah Anderson

University of Chicago Press as *A Place on the Corner: A Study of Black Streetcorner Men* (1978).

While trying to understand the men who frequented Jelly's, a Southside Chicago ghetto bar and liquor store, I once presented Becker with my field notes and gave him my initial account of the social order there as being made up of "the respectables," "the disrespectables," and the "non-respectables." After carefully reading my notes and listening to my interpretation, Howie gently responded, "But, Eli, what do they call themselves?" Then, after carefully considering his question and consulting my field notes, I could see immediately what he was getting at: how the men thought of themselves mattered to the sociological meaning I would make of their society.

Considering what the men called themselves—"regulars," "wine heads," and "hoodlums"—revealed their own social organization. Through carefully considering the labels and "folk" categories the men applied to themselves and one another, I could better comprehend how they understood themselves and their relationships, their sense of where each of them stood, in relation to whom, and in whose estimation. In other words, through a kind of "distinctive opposition," the men came to know "who they were" by whom they opposed, to invoke a formulation of the late anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard in his work *The Nuer*. Through Becker's careful mentoring, particularly the questions he raised, I learned to make sociological sense of the men at Jelly's. Howard Becker was a remarkable mentor, not only to me but also to many other sociologists.

**Elijah Anderson** is the William K. Lanman, Jr. Professor of Sociology at Yale University. He is one of the leading urban ethnographers in the United States. His publications include *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (1999), winner of the Komarovsky Award from the Eastern Sociological Society; *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community* (1990), winner of the American Sociological Association's Robert E. Park Award for the best published book in the area of Urban Sociology; and the classic sociological work, *A Place on the Corner* (1978; 2nd ed., 2003). Anderson's most recent ethnographic work, *The Cosmopolitan Canopy: Race and Civility in Everyday Life*, was published by WW Norton in March 2012. Professor Anderson is the 2013 recipient of the prestigious Cox-Johnson-Frazier Award of the American Sociological Association.

## Marj DeVault on Howie Becker (August, 2015)

I'm delighted to be part of a panel that celebrates an extraordinary lifetime of achievement—and of unceasing activity. As I mused about what to say—reading a bit, writing, reading more, coming back to writing—what I became most interested in celebrating is Howie's omniverous curiosity and the playfulness of his approach to sociological work. I don't mean that he is unserious, but that he works playfully and succeeds by doing what is interesting enough to keep him engaged. And he is still so fruitfully engaged!

Like several others on the panel, I had the great good fortune to study with Howie at Northwestern University; I was there in the late 1970s and early 80s. I wrote about his fieldwork seminar in an autobiographical essay about my formation as a feminist scholar (DeVault, 1999: 10). Here's how I remembered it:

[Howie] began each class as if he had no plan at all: "So what's been happening?" he might ask. And from whatever we had to say, he would make a lesson in fieldwork. Some people were frustrated by this style of pedagogy, feeling that nothing much was happening, but I found these sessions utterly enchanting. [In fact, I was so enchanted that I went on to take three more seminars with Howie—one on writing, one on documentary photography, and a special topics seminar on the social organization of knowledge, which focused on the "paradigm shift" of labeling theory.] As the weeks went by [in the fieldwork class], we could see projects developing, analyses arising from our confusions in the field. Howie pushed us; there were simply no excuses for not getting started. He conveyed a tremendous respect for the work we were doing, finding the seeds of significance in our beginners' attempts at observation. He insisted that it was all very simple: we could just figure it out and write it down. And he pointed out that no project was really complete until it had been written up for publication... [That important lesson has left me with some considerable guilt about small (and some larger) projects over the years that I've never quite finished.]

Howie taught by modeling ways of looking and thinking and also by his deep interest in what we found in the field. He taught us that fieldwork was more than rules and procedures of method, and he gave us confidence to follow our intuitions about what we found—but really to follow them, never to stop with that first intuitive insight. He also taught us a sense of ancestry, telling stories and developing ideas from his teacher, Everett Hughes.



## Marj DeVault on Howie Becker — continued

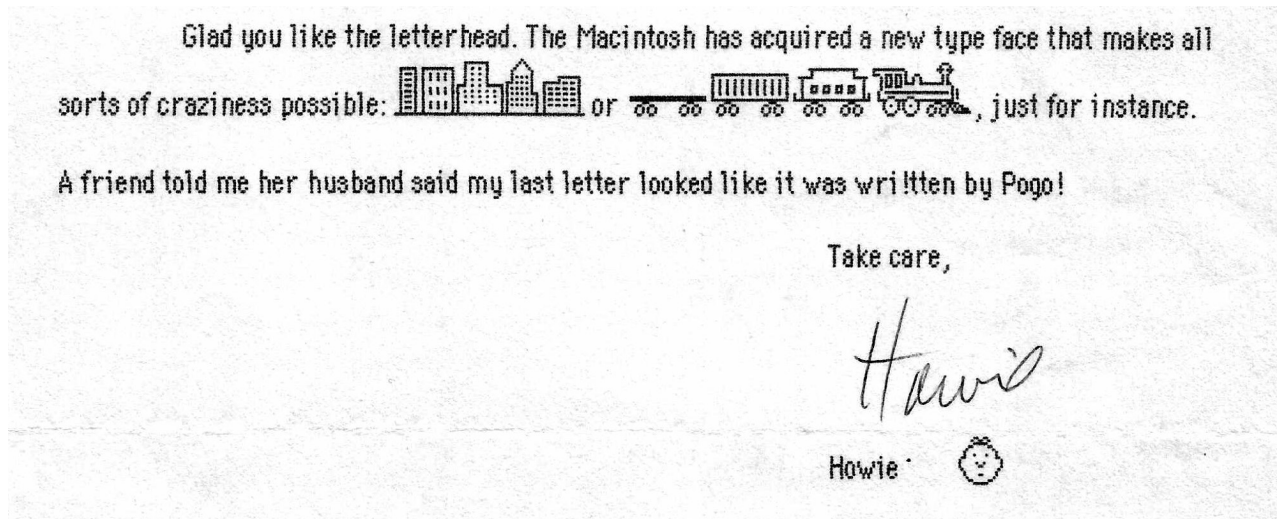
Of course, the core idea was that of collective activity: people “doing things together” (Becker, 1986)—building careers as schoolteachers, smoking marijuana, making art, representing society, and more. As Howie insisted in his wildly popular (and extremely useful) book, *Writing for Social Scientists* (Becker, 2007a), there can be no passive voice; it’s always people—sometimes many people—who do things, and the researcher has to figure out who’s involved, and how. This core principle combined nicely with Everett Hughes’ insistence on studying both “the humble and the proud” (Hughes, 1971), with an even-handed combination of respect and skepticism. That attitude is developed, I see (more clearly) now, in Howie’s essay, “Whose side are we on?” (Becker, 1967). We’re on the side of the “underdog,” and that’s because we accord the underdog the same kind of respect as the top dogs (and the powerful usually don’t appreciate that readjustment of the hierarchy of credibility).

These ideas and attitudes have been essential to my formation as a sociologist—they’ve helped me become an observer with a deep interest in the details of human interaction—but before I go on, I’d like also to make note of my frustrations along the way and what might be missing, for me. I came to graduate school intent on becoming a feminist sociologist. Howie’s approach left some room for that—it was consistent with my interest in (and Arlene Daniels’ writing about) women’s “invisible work.” But Howie didn’t seem interested in gender as a pre-existing concern and he had disdain, I think, for a vocabulary of “oppression.” If one were to ask (then or now), “where are the women?”, I think Howie would shrug and say, “well, go find them then.” That’s fair, I guess—but it also always felt a bit disappointing. These days, I don’t think he’d have much patience for terms such as (heaven forbid!) “neoliberalism.” He certainly sees the phenomenon—I’ve often heard him rail about “what’s happening in universities these days”—and in the writing book’s “more final words” (2007a), he provides an explanatory sketch, based on a demographic analysis and the useful idea of the “corruption of indicators” (from Donald Campbell, 1976). That all seems right, but it doesn’t get at the large shape of a political movement, with actors (a group of moral entrepreneurs, perhaps?) who have been making intentional changes. It’s not that I’m so attached myself to jargon-y labels like “neoliberalism,” but they do sometimes provide a way of pointing to some of the larger historical formations that make the context for people’s collective activities, and I sometimes miss those larger dynamics in Howie’s work.

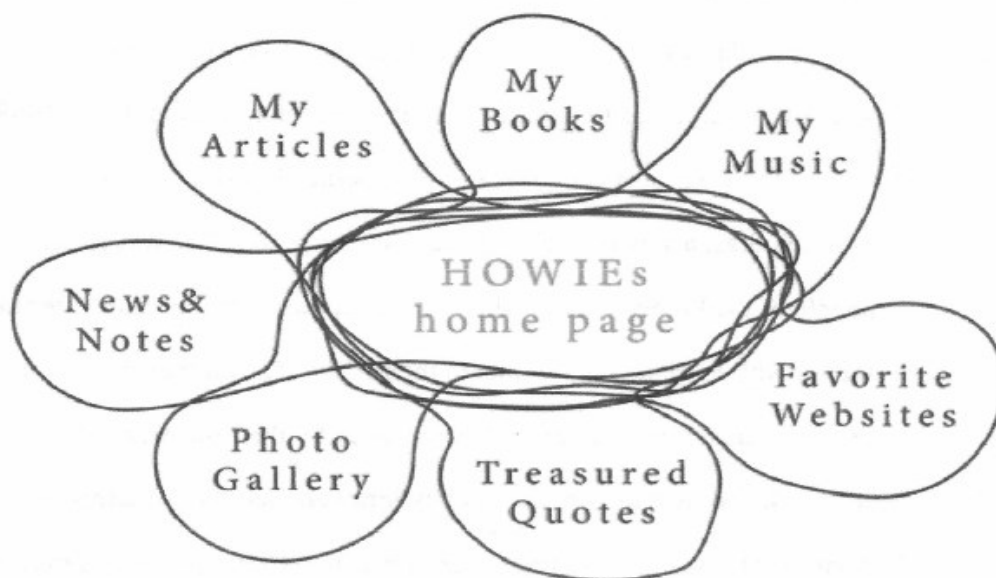
I’ve recently retired, and when I cleaned out my office this past spring, I found a number of letters from Howie—comments on my qualifying paper and dissertation—and they reminded me of his characteristic mode of advising. They’re also rather adorable documents.

## Marj DeVault on Howie Becker — continued

Howie was an early adopter of the Apple Macintosh (back when the personal computer was a box that sat on one's desk), and he was playfully exploring its capacities:



If you compare this early effort with Howie's elegantly designed personal webpage (at [howardsbecker.com](http://howardsbecker.com)), you'll get a glimpse of how our technological capacities have changed in 30 years:



Both images suggest the sense of playfulness I'm interested in. It's a kind of creativity that doesn't take itself too seriously (or at least, doesn't present as "serious"), but is always at work, not only in the academic work but in life's other pleasures and in mundane moments as well. It's all grist for the Becker mill.



## Marj DeVault on Howie Becker — continued

Howie read student work *very* quickly and he sent back musing comments—appreciating what was there, pointing to possibilities for extension, mentioning things he didn’t “get” (but allowing that perhaps there was something there), and usually ending with an admonition to get it done that was somehow both low-key and urgent. He introduced a 3-page commentary on one of my chapter drafts as “thoughts your work provoked” and added, “not for revisions to be made now—**god forbid!**—but for the next rewrite.” Another, shorter note: “One of these days, . . . [not now, he added—get done first!]. . . you will have to write about this style of analysis . . . God forbid, you might even have to make up a name for it, but I hope not.”

One thing we learned in Howie’s writing course was “how to write a book review.” You want to write about the book, of course, but your review should be of more general interest—so once you see what you have to say, you should always begin with a general statement; present an idea that will be interesting and useful beyond the particular book. The strategy is a specific version of a more general approach that characterizes Howie’s thought: Take an interest in the details. Observe and analyze. Spin it out, tentatively at first and then more authoritatively. And then develop more general statements. It’s a comparative method of analysis, and there are touchstone stories that constitute an archive of comparative material (“How I learned what a crock was,” for example [1993], or the lesser-known “One thousand unconsummated marriages” [perhaps specific to my interest in family life, since no-one else seems to remember it now—even Howie]). Analogies are useful in this kind of analysis, but Howie always warned that one must take analogies very seriously; there may be one obvious comparison, but what else does the analogy imply? Don’t stop—follow out *all* the implications.

That kind of comparative analysis is central to what seems to me Howie’s most omnivorous and seriously playful work, *Telling About Society*, published in 2007 and marketed as a “writing guide” though it’s really no such thing (in my humble opinion), and I’ll end with a few comments about that relatively recent work. In that book—an extension of *Art Worlds*, in a way—he ranges well beyond the social sciences to consider a variety of genres of representations (or reports) about society. Whether it’s an ethnography, a mathematical model, a documentary photo essay, or a novel, any kind of report is made within a “world” of makers and taken up and “construed” within an interpretive community. In each world of makers and users, there are conventions and disputes about conventions, concerns with truth and morality, shortcuts to interpretation, and so on. And every kind of representation is right for

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some purpose, so the mathematical model has its moment—but so does the Jane Austen novel, and the hand-drawn map to Howie's house. It's the humble and the proud, all over again.

I suppose I'm especially interested in *Telling About Society*, because I was part of the "modes of representation" project in 1984 (in its earliest incarnation). Reading the book now, what I notice is how far it ranges beyond those initial conversations. I can locate ideas from Howie's early work, from *Art Worlds* and science studies, from a broad familiarity with and respect for sociological work—both qualitative and quantitative—and from an insider's knowledge not only of jazz but also literature and contemporary art. It's a bit daunting for the sociological reader—there's so much to know, and no special regard for *our* way of doing things—but it's also fun to read, and what I think the literary crowd would call a "tour de force." One reviewer commented that "Becker makes you want to become a better sociologist" (Revers 2009). He's done that for me, in many ways, and I'm deeply grateful.

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# The Paradox of Howard Becker's Intellectual Identity

Erich Goode

During the nineteen-fifties, the criminology and sociology of deviance literature was, with a few notable exceptions, a dreary parade of the usual pathological suspects; the approach was neither exciting nor avant-garde. In 1951, Edwin Lemert, widely regarded as a major figure in the history of the sociology of deviance, published the earliest textbook in the field, which bore the jarringly inappropriate title *Social Pathology*. In its favor is that it was not concerned with etiology. Instead, it focuses on how deviance comes to be regarded as wrongful. But the chapters of *Social Pathology* address behaviors or conditions that, for the most part, all of us would consider undesired and unwanted: blindness, alcoholism, mental disorder, speech defects, and crime. The author argued that stigmatizing the bearers of these objectively pathological behaviors and conditions exacerbated their seriousness; hence, he *was* a labeling theorist. But, as Lemert said to me (in a private communication), and as he said in his article "Beyond Mead," published in 1974: *I am not a constructionist*. He believed that the behaviors and conditions he discussed really were objectively negative and infelicitous, hence unviable—in his own words, pathological. Marshall Clinard's *Sociology of Deviant Behavior* (1957) is dominated by the likes of criminals, drug addicts, alcoholics, racists, and the mentally ill—behaviors widely regarded as unrelievedly undesirable. What Clinard lacked was *appreciation* for his subjects and their behaviors and conditions.

Howard Becker's *Outsiders* (1963) was different from anything that came before it; its position represented a radical departure from the pathology orientation. Becker humanized and empathized and identified with his subjects—his "deviants": He *was* a marijuana smoker and a jazz musician himself; in the early sixties, very few deviance sociologists possessed the identity they analyzed. To Clinard, the use of marijuana was often a catalyst for "antisocial behavior" and a "preliminary" to heroin addiction. In contrast, Becker moved the issue *away* from asking what's wrong with the norm violator—or what's wrong with the society that *generates* normative violations—to a very different issue. Howard Becker set aside pathology and etiology—the "Why do they do it?" question—and advanced an entirely different line of inquiry: *How is unconventionality defined and sanctioned by the society, how does the deviator accomplish its enactment, and with what consequences?*

*Outsiders* reconceptualized the sociology of deviance; in fact, it virtually *created* a field of study. And it was an enormous success; the book has been reprinted more than 20 times. Of the 37,000 citations to Howard Becker's work in Harzing's *Publish or Perish*, 11,000 are to

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*Outsiders* alone, and some of the others are to the articles that the author incorporated as chapters in the volume. Among its appeals, the approach of the book blended the notion of cultural relativity with a burgeoning sixties taste for something deliciously unconventional. And it appealed to the growing tendency on the part of young instructors of sociology who smoked marijuana and hence, became fascinated by the book.

Becker didn't define deviance as the failure to comply with mainstream society's rules, as did most deviance researchers and authors at the time. Instead, his approach relied on outsiders mingling with an unconventional set of companions and following a different rule-book. Yes, Becker's vision was influenced by Edwin Sutherland's theory of differential association—but with an important twist: Becker's pot-smokers and jazz musicians preyed against no one. Turning to Lemert's *Social Pathology*, unlike being blind or a chronic alcoholic, having a speech defect or a mental disorder, smoking marijuana and playing jazz music imparted a cool cachet. Becker's endeavors were sufficiently edgy and daring to violate some of conventional society's norms but, at the same time, represented viable, acceptable behaviors.

### Howard Becker's Deviance Paradox

So, wherein lay Howard Becker's deviance identity "paradox"? In a 2002 interview with Ken Plummer, Becker says: "*A lot of people think of my early work as mainly about deviance, but it's not. I never really did work on deviance as such*" (my emphasis). With respect to *Outsiders* and *The Other Side*, he said, "that was my involvement with deviance." Apparently, after having completed two books on deviance, his involvement in the field was over. But to Becker, the "it" wasn't even deviance in the first place.

Why does Becker say such a thing? In the second volume of his collected writings, *Doing Things Together* (1986), Becker refers to his "involvement in the deviance field" as "minimal"—clearly a paradox since Becker is almost universally *known* as a deviance specialist and *Outsiders* is by far his most popular book. Why would Becker object to being identified as a deviance researcher?

His statement makes two seemingly contradictory points: One, Becker says, it is true, I studied deviance—briefly—in the past, but it happened by accident, and now I don't; two, the

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research on deviance that I conducted in the past wasn't even *about* deviance—it was focused on something altogether different; and three, if we add up the time, effort, energy, and commitment that I devoted to the deviance enterprise, all that is substantially outweighed by other research and intellectual endeavors. Let's examine these points more closely.

### Fortuitousness

Becker describes the construction of *Outsiders* as following along an ad hoc, fortuitous, serendipitous process. In the early fifties, he scribbled 90 pages of notes on deviance. In the meantime, during the 1950s, he had also published two articles on being a jazz musician, and two on marijuana use. *A decade later*, he pulled these scribbled notes on deviance out of his files and thought, "Hey, this isn't bad," and showed them to a friend and fellow researcher on a previous project. "You ought to publish this. You ought to make a book out of this, this is pretty interesting." So he *sandwiched* his marijuana and musician articles in between parts of the rediscovered essay on deviance, *conceptually retrofitting* the articles to a more "deviance" orientation, and: *Voila!* A book! A "sandwich" book! One of the manuscript's reviewers, Kai Erikson, told him there was a "certain lack of coherence in this volume," which, Becker says, "was absolutely right."

### Deviance as an Analytic Concept

It's important to realize that Becker did not consider deviance an analytic category. Ernest Burgess, one of his instructors at Chicago, told him that his work on jazz musicians really belonged in the field of occupations and the professions. One of the marijuana articles that became a chapter in *Outsiders*, Becker argued, was really about "the way social interaction affected the interpretation of individual experiences," processes he later stressed in his books on students in medical school and students in college—while the other was on social logistics—*overcoming* or *sidestepping* conventional society's social control of the use of the drug to be able to buy it and use it. In the first *three* of these articles that became the chapters in *Outsiders*—one published in 1951 and two in 1953, the *actual word*, "deviant," appears only *twice*; in "Marihuana Use and Social Control," published in 1955, the word appears five times. In contrast, in the four chapters in *Outsiders* derived from those articles, "deviant" and "deviance" appear 24 times (and, of course, in the book's title as well). Originally, Becker did not consider the *very articles* that eventually constituted the core of *Outsiders*—the meat of the sandwich—as being "about" deviance; later, he repositioned the slant of

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those articles to fit the template. Ten years after the initial publication of *Outsiders*, Becker wrote and tacked on “Labelling Theory Revisited,” the afterword or Chapter 10 for the reissue of *Outsiders*, gluing the articles more firmly to the field of deviance.

In his 1967 article on history, culture, and subjective effects, Becker emphasizes that while naïve users may be unsettled and disturbed by the florid effects of LSD and feel that they are having an anxiety attack or a psychotic episode, the in-the-know members of the psychedelic collectivity will impart a benign interpretation to the experience, thereby talking these users down from a possible mental outbreak requiring hospitalization. What are the relevant factors determining this outcome? Social interaction and sharing in the drug subculture, yes—but *not* deviance. The fact that taking LSD was widely condemned and became illegal played virtually little or no part in the process. Likewise, Becker’s 1973 essay “Consciousness, Power and Drug Effects” follows the same pattern—it falls under the domain of *knowledge*, he explains—that is, “ideas or beliefs about the drug, knowledge of whether to take a drug, how to take and what to expect of it.” *Knowledge* is the relevant analytic concept; deviance doesn’t come into play here: Drug effects result from knowledge-communication. In his volumes of his collected articles, deviance appears either not at all or only briefly. For him, “deviance” is too vague, amorphous, and omnibus to be of much use to most of what he investigated.

### Time, Effort, Energy, Commitment

Early in his career, during his “research bum” phase, Becker collaborated on a major research project on “student culture in medical school” and coauthored the book, published in 1961, which issued from it, along with a trail of cognate academic articles. The next project, which followed soon after, a study on “the academic side of college life,” likewise resulted in a volume-length exposition of the study. And finally, Becker worked on a third study, of students at a barber college, explicating the careers, in a sense, of academic failures socialized into a vocational occupational slot. These works weigh heavily in his self-identity as a sociologist. To him, *these* projects are what defined his early work, not *Outsiders*. They supported him, they engaged his time and effort and energy, they were full-time commitments, they entailed conducting collaborative research, and they focused on careers, professions, and socialization and cultures. But these books didn’t get the same attention as *Outsiders* did. To Howie himself, *they* defined who Howards S. Becker was and what he was doing at an early stage of



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his career—*Outsiders* did not. To the outside world, it was the reverse: *Outsiders* received the recognition and the applause—and the citations. If that was a paradox, Becker replied with another: I am not and never was a deviance researcher. At the time, his *profession* was conducting the student socialization research; his *hobby* was deviance, the fun stuff that produced *Outsiders*.

Hence, we have one small pastiche book, *Outsiders*, published in 1963, reissued a decade later, based on four essentially repositioned articles as its central chapters, one 1964 anthology, *The Other Side*, which flowed from his editorship of *Social Problems*, and, except for a few brief ancillary statements, that was that.

### Concluding Observations

What does all this add up to? It's this: In spite of his objections, *Outsiders* worked. Becker's view of deviance evoked a substantial response in his audiences. The creation of *Outsiders* is *miraculously serendipitous*. In the historically contemporaneous context of *deviance as pathology*, fortuitous as it was, this was a *remarkable* achievement. Becker's *Outsiders* struck just the right note; to express this thought as a mixed metaphor, it was a seed that landed on and took root in the fertile soil of the early sixties.

Hints, suggestions, and statements by Frank Tannenbaum and Edward Lemert pointing to labeling as a reinforcer of crime, delinquency, and deviation, had insufficient traction, resonance, and continuity; apparently sociology was not ready for, nor did it develop, their insights. John Kitsuse may have made the first fully articulated statement spelling out the constructionist approach to deviance, first in 1960 at a conference and two years later in an article, but he didn't produce a body of work—a book, a monograph—a chariot that pulled a display case loaded with illustrative trophies, that could have dazzled audiences who would have crowned him with gilded accolades of recognition. Howard Becker did that and no one else did.

"The author is dead," says critic Roland Barthes; Becker doesn't get to say what his work is *about*. Academic recognition is particularly out of the hands of the author—that has to do with resonance, *not* with how the author feels. Howard Becker did a great deal of interesting work on a lot of interesting subjects but he doesn't want to be narrowly confined to a

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single—relatively low-prestige—field. *Outsiders* blew a breath of fresh air into the field—however “the” field is defined—because it offered a fresh approach that sociologists could use to investigate an array of behaviors and phenomena that, superficially, appear to be very different from one another. Howard S. Becker is forever labeled as the progenitor of the contemporary sociological approach to the study of deviance and he will always be regarded as a deviance researcher.

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## Howie Becker

This is really a great honor and particularly meaningful to me for a variety of reasons.

The first, and perhaps biggest, reason is that I was a minor (very minor) participant in what was probably the founding moment of the SSSP: a meeting of interested parties in a dimly lit hotel room during a convention of the Midwest Sociological Society in, if I'm not mistaken, Minneapolis. I think I had just recently gotten my Ph.D. and was no one of importance, just there to add a little bulk to the group. The heavies were Ernest W. Burgess, Herbert Blumer, Arnold Rose and Alfred McClung Lee (all the way from Brooklyn). As I remember, the air was heavy with conspiracy theories about the "Eastern Establishment," a favorite target of the more excitable members of the Midwest organization. I have no memory of what "we" decided or what was discussed. But it was clear that something was in the air.



A second reason is that I became one of the early editors of the SSSP journal, *Social Problems*, and got to do all sorts of things that weren't actually 100% kosher (I solicited articles from people I knew, for instance, which was pretty much a serious no-no) and even published a piece by the legendarily difficult Harold Garfinkel (who actually was a very cooperative and helpful author, acceding gracefully to the heavy rewriting Blanche Geer, Stan Wheeler and I subjected his work to). Because I solicited articles from the people I knew well, the journal became a sort of incubator for what came to be called "labeling theory." And I also got to further the aims of the founders—irritating the "eastern establishment" by the simple device of printing as "official business" the reports of Al Lee about his experiences as SSSP representative to the ASA Council. Al Lee loved to stir things up (and his experience in left wing politics taught him how to do it), so his reports were lengthy, filled with juicy details, and often very irritating to the ASA Secretary, Talcott

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Parsons, who suggested to me that it wasn't appropriate for our journal to print these indiscretions. I played dumb—I knew what our organization wanted!—and said I had no choice in the matter, he would have to deal with Professor Lee (under my breath I added “Lots of luck”). This helped with a primary goal of the original organizers, which was to ensure that the ASA would never be able to speak for *all* of sociology, there would always be at least one (in the end, more than that) voice ready to dissent from what any establishment might want sociology to say.

And a third reason was that my fellow SSSPers did me the honor of electing me president of the organization way back when, and so I had a big soapbox from which to broadcast my thoughts about “whose side we were on.” An article which excited more comment than it perhaps deserved, but what do I know?

The organization has gone on to bigger and better things but it has always done its job of being an independent voice making sure that no one has a monopoly on what Sociology (with a capital S) thinks. I'm proud to have been part of its story.

*Howie Becker*

[Howie Becker was not able to attend the panel in Chicago; however, this prepared statement was read by Chris Wellin at the event.]