

What About Mozart? What About Murder?: Reasoning From Cases

By Howard S. Becker



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In 1963, Howard S. Becker gave a lecture about deviance, challenging the then-conventional definition that deviance was inherently criminal and abnormal and arguing that instead, deviance was better understood as a function of labeling. At the end of his lecture, a distinguished colleague standing at the back of the room, puffing a cigar, looked at Becker quizzically and asked, “What about murder? Isn’t that *really* deviant?” It sounded like Becker had been backed into a corner. Becker, however, wasn’t defeated! Reasonable people, he countered, differ over whether certain killings are murder or justified homicide, and these differences vary depending on what kinds of people did the killing. In *What About Mozart? What About Murder?*, Becker uses this example, along with many others, to demonstrate the different ways to study society, one that uses carefully investigated, specific cases and another that relies on speculation and on what he calls “killer questions,” aimed at taking down an opponent by citing invented cases.

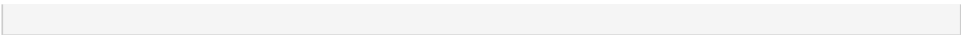
Becker draws on a lifetime of sociological research and wisdom to show, in helpful detail, how to use a variety of kinds of cases to build sociological knowledge. With his trademark conversational flair and informal, personal perspective Becker provides a guide that researchers can use to produce general sociological knowledge through case studies. He champions research that has enough data to go beyond guesswork and urges researchers to avoid what he calls “skeleton cases,” which use fictional stories that pose as scientific evidence. Using his long career as a backdrop, Becker delivers a winning book that will surely change the way scholars in many fields approach their research.



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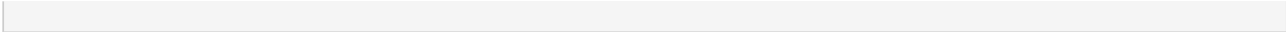
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Editorial Review

Review

“Becker’s gift for storytelling, his uncommon common sense, and his sly, contemporary eye make it clear that sociology, done right, is a liberal art, nimbly situated between philosophy and poetry. Nothing less than a handbook of how to think, *What About Mozart? What About Murder?* is a splendidly written and historically informed multicultural guide to forming questions that help make sense in and of our lives within a networked, global culture or, for that matter, a map of Paris or Chicago.”

(Michael Joyce *Vassar College*)

"Becker is one of the masters of modern social science and each of his works is a much welcome event, not least since they are written in a style that mixes deep insight with wisdom and wit. In this particular volume, which consists of a series of brilliant individual studies, Becker shows how his approach to case studies can help to move social science forward. This is very exciting, especially since Becker always tries to translate his insights into practical rules and suggestions for how to go about things in concrete research. This is definitely a book that social scientists from all disciplines and paradigms will want to study and learn from."

(Richard Swedberg *Cornell University*)

“What about Becker? By word and deed, a unique scholarly life shows us the simplicity of how the best work gets done. This is a 'how to' for the ages.”

(Harvey Molotch *New York University*)

"Though Becker’s arena is the academy, what he writes of is of immediate practical use for anyone trying to make sense of the world in which he or she lives. He writes with wit and grace and the book is a delight to read"

(*The Key Reporter*)

“This book is a delight. Howard Becker is that rarity: an academic writer who brings you into his presence, makes you comfortable, then entertains and educates you from first to last page. . . . It is no small measure of that ability to make analogical reasoning, or argument from cases, into such an engrossing read. Alongside his other essential writing on how to do research, writing it up and getting it submittable, this book is chock-full of good sense and practical advice, laid on a bed of excellent examples in a range of subject areas, and covered in a delicious sauce of personal reminiscence and just great gossip. . . . To all new sociologists, as well as oldies: buy this. You will not regret it.”

(*Times Higher Education*)

Book of the Year

(*Times Higher Education*)

“Both a jocular personal testament of faith and a window into Becker’s beliefs. His accomplishment is hard to summarize in a sentence or catchphrase, since he’s resolutely anti-theoretical and suspicious of ‘models’ that are too neat.”

(*New Yorker*)

“Becker is a sociologist known as much for his dry wit as for his groundbreaking work examining deviancy,

art and music.”

(*New York Times*)

About the Author

Howard S. Becker is the author of several books, including *Writing for Social Scientists*, *Telling About Society*, *Tricks of the Trade*, and *Art Worlds*. He currently lives and works in San Francisco.

Users Review

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