

# Howard Becker: An Intellectual Appreciation

By

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper summarizes the works of Howard Saul Becker and discusses how his research and findings on many social phenomena have led him to become a renowned sociologist. The paper begins with professional and personal biographies, and then discusses Becker's intellectual trajectory and contributions to society. Becker was among the first sociologists to focus on deviance and inner-city life. He began by exploring marijuana use, which led to his later work around the labelling theory. The paper also discusses how his interpretation of the theory has been expanded and used in studies by other sociologists. His study of the arts shows that its creation is a product of collaborative efforts, rather than the preceding notion of it being a result of individual actions. Becker's comprehensive insights on sociological writing and methodology, including an emphasis on empirical data and logic, have paved the way for advancing future sociologist's research practices. Becker's contributions to the social interactionism paradigm will also be discussed, through which he helped develop one of the leading sociological theories, which states that human behavior is formed through interpersonal interactions.

## PURPOSE

Throughout Howard Saul Becker's entire career, his work has shaped the ways in which sociologists conduct their own work, and his findings have greatly influenced how society is perceived. The areas of society that Becker focused so much of his time and effort on, which are the arts, life in urban and inner-cities, and the modernization of research methodologies, are often overlooked in sociological academia. Perhaps what sets Becker apart even further from his counterparts in sociology is that his main passion was never sociology. He spent his entire career as a professional jazz pianist, though family and peers could not reconcile with him having such an uncertain career, so he was advised to remain in school (Becker and Keller 2016). Fortunately, Becker's music career led him into his revolutionary work on deviance, where he explored drug use, low-income professions and racial division through his regular immersion in jazz clubs. It was inevitable for Becker's research in the art of music to carry into the fine arts, discussing the effects of arts in society and the contributors to art, from the artists, to the critics, to the spectators. In addition, his major role in refining sociological research practices has helped numerous sociologists to better coordinate their

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research, interpretations, and sociological thinking. Becker has not only made an impact in his hometown of Chicago and in the United States, but internationally. He has taught in Brazil, England, and has frequently returned to France to speak at conferences and give lectures (Keller 2016). The tremendous range and significance of Becker's work has allowed him to become one of the foremost figures in American sociology at the height of his career and even today.

## PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Howard Becker is a well-known American sociologist who is most recognized for the research he has conducted in the sociology of occupations, deviance, art and culture, qualitative methodologies, and education (Bernard 2019). While Becker does not identify with the approach himself, he is widely regarded as a leading figure of the symbolic interactionism perspective of sociology. This reputation began to emerge very early in his professional career in one of his first books, *Boys in White* (1961). In this book, Becker employs an ethnographic study of medical students from the University of Kansas who were on their way to becoming doctors. It was an up-close analysis of their daily lives, looking at "their schedules, their efforts to find out what professors wanted from them in tests and exercises, their 'latent culture...', their slow assimilation of medical values through peer pressure and example; their learning how to negotiate a hospital or clinic in all its complexity; and their perspectives on their futures" (Laqueur 2002:721). A large element of the culture that Becker discussed in this book is the differentiation between superior and inferior members of the medical field. This division often took the form of "initiation rituals," which are not as relevant today, but were a very important part of this life during Becker's study. Another finding that he stressed was the significant lack of women in the medical profession at the time, which he believed, among other things, helped imply that men were the universal image of superiority and domination. Becker's assertion on this matter has led to a number of the conclusions reached by feminist theorists today. Lastly, he greatly emphasized the importance of the people in uniforms, and the fact that these workplace uniforms are generally white (Becker 1961). He believed that the white coats that doctors wear symbolize ethical authority and distinction, and found that those who dressed in that attire were often shown more respect.

Along with symbolic interactionism, Howard Becker's professional identity is formed heavily by his connection to the "Chicago School of Sociology" which is defined as a specific group of sociologists at the University of Chicago" in the first half of the 20th century, including Becker, Erving Goffman, Gary Fine, and others (Ackerman and Lutters 1996). Becker is a pioneer of this school of thought for many reasons, but mainly for his use of ethnographic research methods which addressed professional and cultural concerns. The primary theme of the Chicago School is that "qualitative methodologies, especially those used in naturalistic observation, were best suited for the study of urban, social phenomena," while also believing this helped give greater overall depth to their work in any topic (Ackerman and Lutters 1996:3). Becker along with his Chicago School counterparts were also known for their conviction to almost solely study the city of

Chicago to learn about deep social interactions, because they found it to have a strong “balance of geography, land value, population and culture” (Ackerman and Lutters 1996:4). Becker was also a key figure in the re-development of the Chicago School’s social worlds model. For years, interactions had been viewed as middle-range social phenomena, which was established by the work of William Foote Whyte (1955). Another strand of sociological theories, exemplified by the work from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, led Becker to believe that his large-scale outlook on interactions did not focus enough on individuals. Becker claimed that “people in Bourdieu’s field are merely atom-like entities” (Gopnik 2015). With Becker’s new model, social world interactions began being viewed “on a much more micro level... individuals were inhabitants of many, complex and overlapping social worlds each with varying entrance and exit barriers” (Ackerman and Lutters 1996:5). This shift provided a path towards a stronger focus on ethnographic-based research for most other scholars who were also a part of the Chicago School.

### **PERSONAL BIOGRAPHY**

Howard Becker was born in Chicago, Illinois on April 28, 1928. He grew up in the city, and he decided to remain there and study at the University of Chicago. After obtaining his bachelor’s degree in 1946, he intended to be a full-time musician, but then he read the book *Black Metropolis* by John H. St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton. (2015[1945]). In this book, St. Clair Drake and Cayton write about race and urban life in the 20th century, focusing specifically on the African American community on Chicago’s South Side. It persuaded Becker to continue his studies for another three years for a master’s degree in either anthropology or sociology, ultimately choosing sociology. While Becker was working on his master’s thesis, he met the illustrious American sociologist Everett C. Hughes. Hughes was known for his studies of occupations, fieldwork and research methodologies. Hughes was impressed by Becker’s field notes for his graduate thesis, which focused on marijuana use by musicians and audiences in jazz clubs, because at the time, Hughes found it quite challenging to find people who would study low-level occupations (Debro 1970). Becker spent most of his time as a graduate student in Hughes’ department, who later helped him get research money for his Ph.D. thesis that he wrote on public schooling in Chicago. He moved through his education very quickly, obtaining his Bachelor of Arts, Master of Arts, and Doctor of Philosophy degrees in seven years.

Becker then spent most of his professional career as a professor of sociology at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, teaching from 1965 up until 1991. During this time, he also held a number of significant positions and claimed several awards in the field of sociology. In 1965, he was named president of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, which is a community of scholars, students and advocates who research social problems and develop social policy. In 1974, he spent a year at the globally renowned University of Manchester as a visiting professor. Two years after his return to the United States, Becker was named President of the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction, coincidentally the sociological perspective that his work is largely

based on. Becker received his first major award among many in 1980, the Charles Horton Cooley Award, for his major contributions to the study of symbolic interactionism. He also claimed the Common Wealth award the following year, which recognizes outstanding achievement in eight major fields of work, including sociology. Perhaps his most notable award is the Award for a Career in Distinguished Scholarship, which he received from the American Sociological Association in 1998. The award has been given to other esteemed sociologists such as George C. Homans, Robert K. Merton, and Everett C. Hughes, and was re-named in honour of renowned sociologist W.E.B Du Bois in 2006. After leaving Northwestern University, he took another position as a professor of sociology at the University of Washington, where he taught for another eight years before retiring. At the University of Washington, he was also an adjunct professor in their school of music, as he has been a jazz musician for the majority of his life.

In his retirement, Becker has been awarded six honorary degrees from various institutions, ranging from the Degree of Scientiae Doctorem Honoris Causa from the University of Edinburgh to the Degree of Docteur Honoris Causa from l'Université Pierre Mendes-France, Grenoble. Even in his retirement, Becker's voice in sociology remains relevant. Whether he is in San Francisco or Paris, he continues to write, mainly about sociological methodology and research, as well as perform jazz music as a pianist, which he claims is his real life's work.

## **INTELLECTUAL TRAJECTORY AND IMPLICATIONS OF HIS WORK**

### **Sociology of Deviance**

Howard Becker began his research studying marijuana use. In "Becoming a Marijuana User" (1953), Becker discusses a study that used interviews to identify the sequence of changes in individual experience and attitude that leads to the pleasurable use of marijuana. Becker concludes that an individual will use marijuana for pleasure when smoking will produce real effects, when the effects can be recognized and connected to drug use, and when the individual learns to enjoy the perceived sensations. Becker claims that individuals will form new meanings for an activity through experiences with other people that lead to a new conception of marijuana use. The significance of this article is the focus on a sequence of communicative experiences that lead to drug use rather than predisposing traits. This article challenges the predispositional theories which propose that individual psychological traits predetermine the engagement in marijuana use. Becker claims that these theories cannot account for the marijuana users that do not have the predisposing traits and that they cannot account for the variability of experiences that are able to shift an individual's conception of a drug (Becker 1953). This article marks the beginning of Becker's renowned study of deviance through which he explores how various social phenomena shape human behavior.

Perhaps the culmination of Becker's work on deviance came with the publication of his book *Outsiders* (1963). The purpose of this book was to define deviance by examining

the processes of rule-breaking and rule-enforcement, such as the interactions between a criminal and a police officer, that shape society's understanding of deviant behavior. In order to formulate a new understanding of deviance, Becker studies marijuana users and dance musicians, groups that are often viewed as outsiders in society. Becker begins by evaluating the existing views of deviance. The first view he evaluates defines deviance as anything that strays from the average, which Becker claims is too simple and unrelated to rule-breaking.

The next view shares similarities with the medical model as it interprets deviance as pathological, indicating the presence of a disease. This view is limiting because it solely focuses on individual traits and ignores the societal, often political, forces that cause judgment and influence the rules that define deviance. The last view discussed by Becker identifies deviance as the failure to follow the rules of a group. While Becker deems this view to be closest to his own, he claims that it fails to address the ambiguity that arises in determining which rules, when violated, constitute deviance.

Becker (1963:9) describes his own definition of deviance as one that acknowledges how "social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders." According to Becker, deviance is a consequence of other people responding to a behavior and labeling it as deviant. This view of deviance suggests that individual factors cannot sufficiently explain the presence of deviance. Becker (1963) identifies four types of deviance: conforming, pure deviant, falsely accused, and secret deviant. Conforming is behavior that obeys the rules and is perceived as obeying the rules. Pure deviance disobeys the rules and is perceived as disobeying the rules. Falsely accused behavior occurs when others assume an individual has disobeyed the rules when he has not. Secret deviance is a behavior in which an individual disobeys the rules, but the deviance goes unnoticed.

In the next portion of *Outsiders*, Becker discusses deviance as it relates to marijuana use, which includes his work in the article "Becoming a Marijuana User." He also discusses how marijuana use as a deviant behavior is affected by social control. Every society has a form of social control that works to uphold cultural norms and deter behavior that threatens social order, often considered deviant behavior. In his work *Outsiders*, Becker (1963:60) suggests that "the control of behavior [is] achieved by affecting the conceptions persons have of the to-be-controlled activity... Such situations may be so ordered that individuals come to conceive of the activity as distasteful, inexpedient, or immoral, and therefore do not engage in it." Becker therefore conceptualizes a non-punitive form of social control that points to societal and interpersonal interactions as the forces that shape human behavior. Becker's theory of social control enabled contributions to the study of deviance and the imposition of cultural norms.

There are many types of social control, some of which directly enforce sanctions through the use of power or subtly control behavior through social norms, and all of

which reward valued behavior and punish deviant behavior. Becker (1963:61) states that the major kinds of control in relation to marijuana use consist of “(a) control through limiting supply and access to the drug; (b) control through the necessity of keeping nonusers from discovering that one is a user; (c) control through definition of the act as immoral.” The first form of control limits supply through the use of sanctions to enforce fear of engaging in marijuana use. The second form of control uses secrecy to shield nonusers from marijuana use and prevent them from becoming users. The third form of control uses notions of morality to enforce the attitude that marijuana use is immoral, thus deterring this behavior. Becker concludes that marijuana use will occur if an individual forms his own perception of the activity and replaces this with the conventional conceptions imposed by society.

After discussing marijuana use, Becker (1963:82) investigates the culture of the dance musician, which he defines as “someone who plays popular music for money.” Becker (1963:81) explains that “people who engage in activities regarded as deviant typically have the problem that their view of what they do is not shared by other members of society.” While the lifestyle of dance musicians is not illegal, it is often viewed as unconventional, which creates the perception of deviance. Subcultures form when people who engage in the same deviant behavior interact and build a community based off of their shared problems. The purpose of Becker’s research was to study the conflict that arises from the conceptions that musicians have of themselves as well as the nonmusicians who employ them. Becker focuses on the reactions of musicians to this conflict as well as how musicians experience and create their own isolation from society. The main conflict that permeates the musician subculture is the need to reconcile the desire to express their personal beliefs with the reality that outside forces, involving the nonmusicians, may force the musician to sacrifice his authenticity for financial stability or popularity in the industry. The musician’s reaction to this conflict often manifests as segregation from the audience and larger society. This occurs through the inherent isolation of the musician from the audience during performances as well as the selective social groups that musicians maintain, mostly consisting of other musicians.

Another notable section of *Outsiders* is Becker’s discussion of moral entrepreneurs, in which he explains that “rules are the products of someone’s initiative and we can think of the people who exhibit such enterprise as *moral entrepreneurs*” (Becker 1963:147). Becker focuses on two types: rule creators and rule enforcers. Rule creators are analogous with moral crusaders, as they spread their own ethics in an effort to correct some perceived evil by any means. Rule enforcers, mainly policemen, enforce the rules regardless of their personal convictions. Rule enforcers not only desire to demonstrate the humanitarian value of their work, but also feel they must justify the existence of their position in society. This encourages rule enforcers to exaggerate the severity of the problems they face, which fosters a pessimistic attitude of human nature that permeates the organizations and institutions that support rule enforcers. Once a rule is established, it is applied to particular people and upheld through legal punishment or marginalization by the rule enforcers, which allows rule enforcers to influence the societal conception of

deviance. Becker concludes that deviance is a product of the interactions between people whose occupations involve committing crimes and the rule enforcers, as the rule enforcers who catch criminals label those who commit crimes as deviant, thus selectively creating a common perception of deviance (Becker 1963).

One of the most significant implications of Becker's work on deviance stems from his discussion of the labelling theory, which posits that individual behavior is shaped by the terms or labels used to classify the individual (Becker 1963). Labelling theory has been applied to the study of a variety of topics in contemporary sociology. In *The Sage Handbook of Criminological Theory*, McLaughlin (2013:146) claims that "labelling encouraged the development of an explicitly political position in the demand that mainstream social scientists acknowledge and address the issue of the correctionalist bias in their research." Labelling theory, when applied to criminology, provided a means for sociologists to shift their perspective from preventing deviant behavior to studying the construction of deviant behavior and the power structures involved. McLaughlin (2013:146) states that the use of labelling theory marked a "radical reconstitution of criminology as part of a more comprehensive sociology of the state and political economy, in which questions of political and social control took precedence over behavioural and correctional issues." Thus, Becker's contribution to the development of the labelling theory not only helped to shape the sociology of deviance, but expanded the sociological perspective and the study of contemporary criminology.

### **Sociology of Art**

Following his study of deviance, Becker turned his focus to art and contributed to the sociology of art through multiple works, including his notable book, *Art Worlds* (1982). Becker proposes that all works of art result from the cooperative activity of many individuals, rather than a single artist. Becker thus claims that art is a product of collective action, which refers to the cooperation of many individuals to achieve a common objective. Art as collective action assumes that a multitude of factors are required for the creation of art, including the mobilization and manufacturing of resources, the distribution of art, the critics, editors, audiences, and consumers (Becker 1982).

Becker references Émile Durkheim's theories on labor division (Durkheim [1893]1984). Durkheim ([1893]1984) proposes that labor is divided to give specialized tasks to every individual, effectively encouraging solidarity in support of a larger social system. The division of labor helps to explain how a large number of individuals with varying professions can achieve the collaboration necessary to produce art. The motivation required for many individuals to achieve a common goal of producing art is often dependent on the status of the artist as someone who creates objects of value in society (Becker 1982).

Becker makes the argument, consistent with symbolic interactionism, that shared meanings give value to art. Every culture has distinct values as well as symbols that

represent them. Artists are able to use these shared understandings to give emotional, intellectual, or historical significance to their art, which will be perceived as valuable within a given society. Becker discusses how conventions enable the collaboration of many individuals, making them essential to the creation of art. Conventions serve as a place where artists can make agreements that establish the groundwork for the production of an art piece, which allows for coordination within the group. Becker (1982) concludes that the study of art should focus on the cooperative network of people, the collective actions they take, and the conventions used to coordinate activity. Becker's approach to the sociology of art suggests that collective action can be studied through the examination of social organizations in order to reveal the mechanisms that contribute to the production that occurs within a society.

### **Sociological Methodology**

In the latter part of Becker's career, Becker produced a significant amount of work that focused on the practice of writing and sociological methodology. In one of his books, *Tricks of the Trade* (1998), Becker provides a wide range of tips for solving "problems of thinking," which can be applied to the examination of any sociological question. Becker uses his experiences as a sociologist and professor, knowledge from his colleagues, as well as sources from a variety of fields such as philosophy, literature, and anthropology, to provide useful methods of navigating the complexities of the social sciences.

The book covers four aspects of sociological research: imagery, sampling, concepts, and logic. Imagery refers to the mental images, or perceptions, that social scientists use to frame their research. When in the beginning stage of considering a sociological issue, social scientists rely on preconceived images of the social group or phenomenon being studied. Scientific research requires data and empirical evidence to be credible, but the process of data collection follows from the initial framing of the research question. The dependence on preconceived images to understand a sociological problem can limit the methods of research such as sampling or data analysis.

In the section on sampling, Becker discusses the various problems that can occur when scientists are sampling for research. The goal of sampling is that the sample accounts for every type of the phenomenon being studied. A common complication with sampling is that the intention of research is to have the findings be applicable to everything, but it becomes challenging to make generalizable claims when a limited number of people or cases can be studied. Becker discusses other issues related to sampling, such as bias and the use of other scientist's research, and provides methods for overcoming these pitfalls, such as random sampling.

The next section of the book provides instruction on how to use concepts to summarize data. Becker explains that the common approach of developing concepts through the use of logic and manipulation of basic ideas is not sufficiently empirical. Becker insists on the constant use of empirical data to inform concepts about one's research, and gives tricks for using data to create complex analyses.



The last section focuses on logic and discusses methods for logical thinking. Becker shares the ways in which social scientists can manipulate their current knowledge or data to draw new conclusions. Logic gives us frameworks for considering the variety of possible outcomes or situations of a social phenomenon (Becker 1998). Becker demonstrates ways of maneuvering problems of thinking such as truth tables, which consider all of the logical combinations of various dimensions or characteristics of a phenomenon. *Tricks of the Trade* provides social scientists with a thorough discussion of effective methods that can be used to improve the quality of research, analysis, or thinking in any field.

## CONTRIBUTIONS AND CONTROVERSIES

Howard Becker contributed to different areas of work within sociology including: “sociology of deviance and labeling, sociology of professions, sociology of art, sociology of (jazz) music, sociology and photography, and methodology of sociological research” (Becker and Keller 2016). Becker is best known for his contributions to the meaning of deviance, labelling theory, and criminal sociology. His insights are particularly of importance because he utilized participant observations to create a more individualized approach. He conducted his ethnography in a way that focused on individuals and their impacts on society.

*The Outside Game* (Gopnik 2015), an article published in *The New Yorker*, discusses Becker’s works and his unique understanding of the world that he lends well to his works within sociology. His understanding of the world stems largely from “a sociology that observes the way people act around each other as they really do, without expectations about how they ought to” leading him to study jazz musicians, marijuana users, and medical students among others (Gopnik 2015). The article sheds light on Becker’s understanding of the world in terms of social performance being more like a string of crips, “short phrases that can be combined in a million ways” (Gopnik 2015). This understanding set the tone for his approach to his research while revealing the far reaching impact jazz musicians had on his work.

Becker’s development of labelling theory is a large contribution to sociology. His contributions to this theory offer another perspective from which to view delinquency and its process. First, it is important to define the background of labelling theory. Labelling theory came about through a distrust of “government powers in post-war Britain and the USA in the 1960s and 70s” as it explores why this occurred (Hobbs, Todd, Tomley and Weeks 2016:285). It explores the power dynamics in who determines deviancy and why certain individuals are labelled as such. However, his main contribution lies in the way he shifted the way people view deviance.

Becker was able to shift the study of the sociology of deviance through the way in which he studied it. His individualized approach stemmed from his ability to relate to being a marijuana user, as well as being a jazz musician. In his ability to relate to his subjects,

he offered a sense of understanding and empathy within his book, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. Through his approach, *Outsiders* served as a departure from “the field’s dominant etiological and pathology orientation” that relegated many of the studies in the field to cause and effect (Goode 2018:1). He expanded the sociology of deviance by defining deviant behavior and implications of deviant behavior. Additionally, he focused on who is able to label others as deviant and how they are able to do so.

Through *Outsiders* (Becker 1963), he contributes to the idea of deviance by asserting that individual actions do not cause deviance, and it is instead determined by society, especially those who have the power to label certain people as deviant. Thus, through his work, people came to understand deviance as a mechanism of control and a tool for stigmatization, instead of a form of a manifestation of discontent. He coined the label *moral entrepreneurs* to describe those who have the power to label others, such as criminal justice institutions. Becker categorized moral entrepreneurs as rule creators and rule enforcers but were ultimately “people in positions of relative power, who use their power to get their own way by either imposing their will on others or negotiating with them” (Hobbs et al. 2016:284).

Becker also takes into account the processes that take place for one to be labelled as deviant, which depend on the person and their actions. However, he also placed a great focus on the internalization of being labelled as a delinquent. He argues that this occurs not only because of internalization, but also because of the sense of belonging that the labelling creates. The act of labelling someone as deviant can result in the individual leading a life of crime. Additionally, Becker focused his work on these out-groups clinging together in “small bands of misbehavior” (Gopnik 2015). He asserted that deviants were not made up of people who are unable to stick to the rules, and instead, choose to adhere to *other* rules. This is highly relevant today because it focuses on the dynamic of society and the potential to fulfill their label as a delinquent and lead a life of crime.

For example, mass incarceration is raced and classed, appearing to target people of color. Moral entrepreneurs may be contributing to this through who they label as delinquent, creating a cycle of delinquency for certain communities. Becker’s work can be applied to the criminal justice system because the application of labels by moral entrepreneurs leaves groups of people, particularly African Americans and Hispanics of a lower socioeconomic class continually entrenched and stigmatized by the system. The labels placed upon them relegate them as targets of the criminal justice system that perpetuates a cycle of high recidivism rates among these communities, while reinforcing the power of the criminal justice system as a moral entrepreneur.

His ideas contribute to explaining the high recidivism rates in America while shedding light on the problematic criminal justice system. A study conducted by Johnson, Simmons, and Conger (2004) shows the applicability of Becker’s work to the system and examines the variable that contributes to labelling. *Criminal Justice System Involvement and Continuity of Youth Crime: A Longitudinal Analysis*, explores the

relationship between “system involvement, deviant peer association, and crime” with findings that were consistent with Becker’s labelling theory (Johnson et al. 2004:1). The study’s results illustrate the impact of labelling theory through a correlation of involvement in the system perpetuating recidivism rates. The study also looks to further explore the impact of labelling leading to conformity. Thus, the importance of Becker’s labelling theory is highlighted throughout the studies pertaining to leading a life of crime and exposing the flaws within America’s criminal justice system that further perpetuates labelling.

Becker’s work on deviance is also applicable to present day society in other ways, as it uncovers power relationships and justice issues. Labelling causes individuals to become stigmatized, creating a system of power for moral entrepreneurs and a lack of mobility for those stigmatized as they become continually targeted. Other sociologists have expanded Becker’s work and applied it to how racial stereotypes in institutions wind up labelling people of color as deviant. For example, sociologists have applied Becker’s work on deviance within the educational system ultimately leading to the school-to-prison pipeline for those labelled. Their application reveals a “disparity [suggesting] that racial stereotypes result in the mislabeling of people of color as deviant” (Crossman 2019).

Another study, *The Long Arm of the Law: Effects of Labelling on Unemployment* by Davies and Tanner (2003), explores the impact of labels on future employment through a longitudinal study. The study asserts that the strongest impact labelling had on employment were for those who were labelled as ex-convicts because they experienced “the lowest levels of educational attainment, the smallest incomes, and the most checkered work histories” (Davies and Tanner 2003:16). The study’s overall results were consistent with labelling theory because the indirect effect of those who are labelled by authorities like teachers or police officers upon the transition from adolescence to adulthood were “significant and cumulatively damaging” (Davies and Tanner 2003:16). Thus, Becker’s labelling theory extends far beyond a theory itself but is arguably damaging in nature, especially if one is labelled as a criminal.

Becker also contributed to the sociology of art because he felt that the field was underdeveloped and “mostly at the hands of people who were mostly aestheticians... whose work was a thinly disguised way of making and justifying judgements of value in various arts” (Plummer 2003:24). Similar to his study on deviance, he also focused on the process and finding causal relationships, as well as the idea of collective action, people doing things together. Thus, he deviated from previous studies on the sociology of art because he focused on the collective action aspect. His work shifted the focus of the sociology of art because he focused more on the social relations that make the process and production of art possible instead of individual artists.

In addition to the contribution listed above, Becker’s work contributed to symbolic interactionism and may be considered as one although he considers himself solely as a sociologist. His education at the University of Chicago influenced his work because the

university's main contributions to sociology consists of the definition of community and symbolic interactionism. He follows the traditional Chicago School of Sociology of thought because he focused on how society categorizes certain behavior, especially deviance. Becker, along with sociologists Blanche Geer, Everett Hughes, and Anselm Strauss, spent time conducting first hand research in medical schools. They examined the effects of medical students putting on "white, the color symbolic of modern medicine" while capturing the realities of medical education in relation to society, much in the fashion of symbolic interactionism (Becker et. al 1961:4). Becker observed the symbolism in wearing the white coat as a form of authority and the overall culture of medical students in relation to society. Becker contributed to symbolic interactionism through his influence from the university that he brought forward throughout his sociological career.

Finally, Becker also published works in and influenced sociological writing and methodology. In terms of methodology, his contributions are evident in the way he studied deviance that focused more on the symbolism and rituals while also focusing on how to properly frame the question and the mechanisms used to define things. Becker's research methodology largely consists of participant observations that made his writing and research style relevant to symbolic interactionism which was more personal and engaging. In terms of the applications of his work on methodology, as an influential contemporary sociologist, his input in terms of sociological writing may be of high importance to those looking to enter the field.

In terms of the critiques to Becker's work, his research on labelling theory and deviance has been criticized for its failure to acknowledge the influence of other biological, genetic effects, and other personal responsibility. Critics such as Alvin Gouldner also challenged Becker on the basis of free will, "people frequently fight back in their own defense: free will is far stronger than Becker's work implies" (Hobbs et al. 2016:285). Gouldner asserts that Becker assumes that deviants passively accept their label without acknowledging their free will and capacity to fight back. However, Becker responds to his critics by arguing that sociologists should use individualized cases to reach a macro perspective, instead of looking too closely at the issue. Becker asserts in the new edition of *Outsiders*,

I prefer to think of what we study as *collective action*. People act... *together*. They do what they do with an eye on what others have done, are doing now, and may do in the future. One tries to fit his own line of action into the actions of others, just as each of them likewise adjusts his own developing actions to what he sees and expects others to do. (Becker 1973:182)

On the other hand, critics have also accused Becker of "romanticising the underdog" to which he argues "unconventional sentimentality... is the lesser evil" (Hobbs et al. 2016:285). Becker argues that a bias towards those that are not in power or moral entrepreneurs is beneficial, especially in his case, towards understanding society.

## CONCLUSION

While Becker studied a multitude of topics including alcohol dependence and professional training, his major contributions were to the sociology of deviance and art, as well as sociological methodology. Through his empirically based research, Becker made groundbreaking conclusions related to culture, societal norms, criminology, and social control. His works have paved the way for the development and widespread use of various theories and methods of studying social phenomena such as deviance. Becker also contributed to symbolic interactionism through his constant study of the social interactions, processes, and norms that influence individual and group behaviors.

The implications of Becker's work are extensive, and have been applied to the study of issues related to education, racial injustice, and the criminal justice system. His study of labelling theory and deviance continues to be highly applicable in highlighting the impacts of modern labelling in education, employment, and recidivism rates while shedding light on structural flaws within the criminal justice system. Other sociologists have made these connections and expanded his work, showing how labelling theory directly connects to the struggles of upward mobility through continually becoming involved in the prison system and the issue of unemployment. He is viewed as an innovative thinker who demonstrates the subversive abilities of sociology. In his interview with Reiner Keller, Becker illustrates his intention to question the roles of powerful institutions by stating that "deviance is a kind of co-production of all those people. Not just the police and the marijuana smoker. The legislator who makes the law, the administrator who organizes. You know, all of them" (Becker and Keller 2016:16).

Becker's work often sides with the "underdog" and questions authority within institutions or larger social structures. In the case of the sociology of art, he successfully shifted the focus from the art itself to the processes – the "underdog" – of the field. Thus, he also worked towards expanding the field itself. Becker's significance as a sociologist lies in his effort to challenge our current conceptions of society and to uncover truths. Becker was a keen interpreter of everyday socialization as the basis to derive meaningful hypotheses that provide an alternative interpretation of society. Becker's commitment to empirical studies and his determination to formulate new methods for the framing and analysis of social issues has allowed him to have a transformative impact on the field of sociology.

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