our postracial era and do a nice job showing how the election of a black president coexists uneasily with persistent structural disadvantage and growing racial inequality. They do this by highlighting how topics that may be familiar and innocuous to readers (auto insurance policies, popular culture) can still serve to reproduce racial hierarchies in insidious ways. *Repositioning Race* goes a step farther by thinking through how this research can be used to improve the deleterious conditions blacks continue to face in a global and international context. Both books could be useful for upper-level undergraduate courses on race because of their potential to get students thinking about the particulars of how racial inequality operates in subtle, easily overlooked ways.

The Sociological Mind at Work and Play

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While living in San Francisco in 1963, having published *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, Howard Becker was invited across the Bay to discuss his work at the University of California, Berkeley. He presented his now well-known approach called “labeling,” in which deviance may be understood in terms of how people jointly affix understandings to one another, rather than as an innate human quality indicative of natural law. Standing at the back of the room was a dubious Philip Selznick, smoking a cigar, who said: “Well, Howie, I see what you’re getting at; it’s very interesting. But after all, what about murder? Isn’t that really deviant?” Years later in Evanston, having published *Art Worlds* (1982), Becker was invited to talk in a new “Dean’s Lecture” series, where he likewise explained how art and artists achieve their notoriety through the definitions assigned to them by an interested community. Fidgeting in his seat was a skeptical dean who felt compelled to ask: “Well, Howie, that’s all very interesting but, after all, what about Mozart? . . . isn’t Mozart really a musical genius?”

These are but two of the examples that abound in a book whose goal is to explain how to reason using cases and, in so doing, to illustrate a mental craft of composing what Becker sees as an authentic sociology. How has Howard Becker gone about his work—on school teachers, medical students, artists, and marijuana users—and how might others think about their own? This book tells that story in a style that is, notoriously, conversational yet clear, and in a tone that is at once beneficent and valedictory. Becker implies a great confidence in what future generations of social scientists can do while expressing an appreciation of what past generations have done for him (and for us). This cross-generational dialogue of greetings and good-byes is magnified by the several memories instructively shared of his own master teacher, Everett Hughes at the University of Chicago, and by the book’s final chapter, “Last Words.”

Hughes obviously left a deep impression on Becker. It is difficult to think of any other person who has had more occasion to recall and write about Hughes. In so many words Becker makes it apparent to would-be sociologists that their work would stand to gain by knowing the Hughes oeuvre (1958, 1971, 1994). It formed Becker’s, whose in turn has endowed the work of sociologists across five academic generations in the United States and, increasingly, abroad, perhaps especially in France (Gopnik 2015). The cross-generational influence is felt most prominently in the work and aspirations of those who, in their study of society, take seriously people and their situated points of view.
In an earlier edited collection with Charles Ragin (1992), Becker tackled this conundrum: “what is a case?” Here, definitional dilemmas are put to the side, and a “case” is treated loosely and variously—as an analytic category, as an instance of something, or even as a thought that can be used to get one to higher conceptual ground. This, though, results in an undiscussed epistemological quandary. One can posit a case a priori (such as the case of undergraduate attrition at a specified university). But most of Becker’s “cases” are demonstrated ex post facto: they constitute a case of something only after having led the researcher on to something else. Like turning points in the life course (Abbott 1997), Becker’s cases acquire meaning after they have occurred. This returns us to the question of the materials with which we actually work.

The recurrent theme is the push of working from a small observation to a large possibility, of getting from the detailed knowledge of one “case” to more general ideas about how some part of society works. As such, Becker has produced a kind of “sociology of the mind,” in which the task is to make explicit and articulable what the human brain does and should seek to do in producing accurate qualitative renderings of society and its varied parts and processes. This is perhaps one of the work’s biggest contributions, because it lays bare how a creative mind goes about receiving, searching, interpreting, and assembling data to tell a persuasive social story. The weight of the book is made of examples that spell out these practices.

Becker does not use language like “grounded theory,” “induction,” “constant comparison,” “negative cases,” and the like in this book, but all of these items are central to the mix. “When I investigate a case, I look for elements that seem to resemble each other in many ways and then look for how they differ, using the differences to uncover new variables and dimensions of explanation. When I’m gathering data, I give up the security of a well-defined problem and plan of research for ways of working that maximize the possibility of running across things I haven’t thought of, things that will bring new possibilities to consciousness where I can deal with them more systematically” (p. 186). This way of working with data, in which the researcher progressively moves from hunches to findings, from specific details to general patterns, by working from the “inside out,” has informed Becker’s work throughout his career, as when, in 1961, he laid out how to think through data that exposed the process by which students become doctors: “If we were to carry on our analysis by successive refinements of our theoretical models necessitated by the discovery of negative cases, we wanted to work in a way that would maximize our chance of discovering those new and unexpected phenomena whose assimilation into such models would enrich them and make them more faithful to the reality we had observed” (Becker, Geer, Hughes, and Strauss 1961:24). Becker’s work on marijuana showed that the experiences of users varied substantially, depending on what they knew about potential effects. Even though users “got high,” the effects were not uniform. There were, in other words, negative cases whose incorporation into a working explanation revealed that experience of a substance depended on prior knowledge about how to recognize effects of the drug. Pushed further, we could identify different types of users based on the intersection of key analytic dimensions.

Becker is intent on “looking for complications” and believes others should be also. This is a colloquial way of referring to negative or deviating cases. The goal is fullness of consideration, not simplicity of explanation, such that rigor in qualitative research becomes the point at which one has duly evaluated all analytic categories relevant to the study of some phenomenon at a given point in time. These proximal issues of quality and rigor in qualitative research form the core of an important essay Becker published in the volume Ethnography and Human Development (1996). It is essential reading for social scientists of every methodological stripe. As for “saturation point,” it will never arrive and, for Becker, is nonsensical. A setting or situation is always in flux and thus susceptible to ongoing influence. Furthermore, we can only be more or less confident, not certain, that the most relevant analytic categories have not escaped our eyes and ears. We are made more confident of our
explanation by the extent to which our story succeeds in persuading others; that is, by our ability to adjudicate validity threats.

Two sub-themes are prominent in Becker’s thinking: the use of analogy and the use of imaginary cases. In the culture and commerce of book publishing, Becker asks, why are books delayed in production or in being sent to reviewers? In some cases, it comes down to staff who do not do their jobs. By analogy with Donald Cressey’s work on embezzlers, Becker understands such cases through the similarities and differences of those who steal money with those who steal “time.” Editorial staff can “borrow” time just as embezzlers “borrow” money by pretending to have already done the things they were supposed to do. When the backlog of work comes to the attention of a boss, the staff member often disappears. The case of the disappearing production manager is similar to the case of the theiving bank teller: each has a “non-shareable” problem and cannot continue to carry on the deception. The utility of analogy lies in providing researchers with analytic categories to consider in seeing how instances of one phenomenon of interest fits with instances of a phenomenon already established and identified as something related to it. As Becker points out, this is how Goffman thought about “cooling out the mark.” Confidence men and women need a member of the team to calm a potentially angry or disappointed mark. Analogues are found in greeters in restaurants, who pacify patrons who want but will not get special treatment, and in the work of psychiatrists, who aid people whom society has disappointed.

All of the above are real cases from which researchers can extrapolate, but there also exist cases that are either hypothetical or not well verified. Imaginary cases are useful for suggesting dimensions of a phenomenon as it could vary under different conditions. The conditions are “theoretical” in that they alter the explanation of the phenomenon by adjusting the characteristics of its manifestation. For example, what are the conditions under which mediocrity is produced and maintained? One can specify a setting in which mediocrity predominates, for example in a particular academic department, and concentrate on the empirical details that situate work, careers, and outcomes in that department in order to infer the cultural creation of mediocrity. Hypothetical cases of other departments in which specified characteristics vary from the empirical case (e.g., where mediocrity is far less prevalent, or where it occurred but was confronted and reduced) help to refine the explanation of the phenomenon and the conditions of its occurrence (Hermanowicz 2013). General ideas and questions generated by the case that is known are applied to a range of other cases encompassed by their definitions.

Work of the kind Becker describes in this book depends heavily on the choices that researchers make about what to compare. Becker chose to compare production managers with Cressey’s embezzlers. But in another case, he found that the work of the editorial team actually got done after higher-ups had been notified of a work problem in the publishing house. Why didn’t Becker pursue some other mode of conceptualization, such as “communication and exchange” or “ethics” or “willful neglect in professional work”? The theoretical situation prompts the question of how choice and problem selection are systematized in working with cases. It is a question that remains to be sorted out.

Part of this issue is informed by the observation, made explicit at one point in the book but implied throughout by the use of smart examples, that reasoning from cases, when done well, relies on a deep stock of knowledge. “It’s hard to imagine,” Becker laments, “many sociologists today who would compare, as Hughes loved to do, prostitutes, priests, and psychiatrists, so discovering the dimension of ‘guilty knowledge’ . . . he found so interesting. I think, rather, that most contemporary sociologists would consult the literature on professions and come up with a list of conventionally defined professions as the basis for a comparative analysis” (p. 39). If that is the case, why? For Becker, “Not only do sociologists often lack the breadth of experience and knowledge it takes to produce unconventional comparisons capable of feeding theoretical reasoning. Worse yet, they have usually learned to ignore the random impulses that
might lead them to unconventional forms of comparative reasoning” (p. 39).

It is a critical commentary on how we teach and transmit to new generations the creative craft of sociological work, a problem that reproduces itself in the kinds of students we are able to attract to the field. Becker, though, has hope that the flowers will keep blooming. This book is testament to that belief. What he has done for us, we can in turn attempt to do through the continuing conversation that this book inspires. Isn’t murder really deviant? Isn’t Mozart really a genius? It depends on how well you reason with cases. To see how Becker does it (and to find the answers), read this book.

References