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

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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