



Sociology and the Problem of Description

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Abstract:	<p>Howard Becker's practice of description has been debated, critiqued and reclaimed in a range of fields including sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, STS, drug policy and research and more recently Heather Love's (2015) appraisal of deviance studies. Much of this debate concerns the uses of social research methods and their political effects. Taking up these issues with the construction of social scientific knowledge in Becker's work this article returns to the methodological problem of description in Becker's research on drug use. Focusing on the legacy of Becker's empirical studies of deviance and the critiques of his research methods it addresses the problem of description in the research process. In reviewing the methodological relevance of Becker's problem of description as a tool for thinking sociologically the paper evaluates the contribution of descriptive methods for contemporary sociology and knowledge production. In so doing it demonstrates how description is transformative of objects, problems and disciplinary practices.</p>

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Sociology and the Problem of Description

In his introduction to a special issue dedicated to promoting the discussion and advancement of the contribution of sociological theory and social research methods to the study of drug use and the effects of drug policy in the contemporary period, Alex Stevens foregrounds the discipline's 'commitment to understanding people's actions from their own point of view' (2011: 401). For Stevens, this bottom up approach is what 'most distinguishes the sociological method from other methods for examining drug policy' (2011: 401). Calling attention to the distinctiveness of sociological methods, techniques and concepts for producing situated knowledge of human behavior, Stevens argues sociology provides an alternative to "studying upwards" (2011: 401). In particular, Stevens highlights the uses of Foucault's methods of studying power relations in bodily practices and utterances from 'the top downwards' as 'necessary to study drug policy in all the contexts that it is produced and practiced' (2011: 402). By extending the critical gaze beyond the content of documents produced by politicians and policy makers, sociologists, argues Stevens, provide a broader methodological framework for the study of drug use and drug policy.

Whilst Steven's editorial demonstrates how 'sociology can be brought to bear on issues of drug policy and use' (2011: 402), Carol Bacchi (2009) is more sceptical of the contribution of social science to the study of drug policy and drug use and calls into question the uses and usefulness of sociological concepts and methods in drugs research. By focusing on the activity of social actors as central for meaning making, Bacchi argues social scientists lack a critical analysis of the representation and production of the 'problem' of drugs *within* policies (2016: 8). What concerns Bacchi is that the use of the problem concept and qualitative methods take for granted that 'problems somehow exist in the world in the way these discussions suggest' (2009, p. xi). Calling into question the knowledge making practices of social scientists for normalising the existence of the problem concept, Bacchi (2009, 2015, 2016, 2017) shifts the focus of inquiry from problem explaining and 'problem-solving' to 'problem-questioning' (2009: xvii, emphasis in original). What informs Bacchi's (2016) methodological approach to studying problems upwards is the question of *how* problems are constituted in policies and professional knowledge making practices. Applying Foucault's method of problematisation to the study of public policy and social research, Bacchi's (2009) critical analytic practice challenges social researchers to interrogate the representation, language and description of problems within existing policies and academic research practices. In urging us against going out and describing worlds that we encounter descriptively Bacchi's study of problematisations takes up descriptions as sites for problematisations. From the critical perspective, description is compromised, having too much to do with problems and in need of purification through distancing, not things to be engaged with and reflected upon.

Whilst the methodological shift from thinking about problems to thinking with problematisations in Bacchi's post-structural WPR ('What's the Problem Represented to Be') approach has been taken up and applied by critical drug scholars to examine, recognise and expose the role of policy, the law and treatment in formulating, shaping and making drug problems (e.g. Fraser and Moore, 2011; Fraser, 2017; Lancaster and Ritter, 2014; Lancaster, Ritter & Colebatch, 2014; Lancaster, Duke & Ritter, 2015; Ritter, 2015; Seear & Fraser, 2014), in this article I take a different approach. Focusing on Bacchi's (2017) interrogation of the ways in which the problem concept operates historically in drug policy and social research I want to stay with Bacchi's critical analysis of social scientific knowledge practices.

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3 My contribution to this discussion is motivated by a concern that Bacchi's (2017) questioning of the usefulness of the
4 problem concept and the methodological distinction between problems and problematisation, while intended to clarify
5 the difference between empirical and post structural methods of inquiry, and replace problems with problematisations
6 as 'a more effective political intervention' (2017: 1), introduces confusion in debates around the significance of
7 problems in sociological research.
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11 In demonstrating how problems are produced in a disciplinary setting, Bacchi's (2016) interrogation of social
12 scientific knowledge practices highlights the significance the problem concept has played within the discipline of
13 sociology and the social sciences. But the contrast between problems and problematisation in Bacchi's (2016, 2017)
14 genealogy of governmental and knowledge making practices does not sufficiently address the disputes and deviation
15 over understandings of the relevance of problems for sociology. To trace the history of the uses and role of problems
16 in sociological research this article takes a different turn and investigates the consequences of studying problems up
17 and downwards simultaneously (Nader 1972). To do so I look not to Bacchi's use of Foucault's methods but
18 elsewhere: Howard Becker's research on drug use in the 1950s and Deviance Studies. Whereas Becker's writings have
19 occupied a somewhat marginal position within the field of critical drugs research (see Dennis 2019 for an exceptional
20 engagement with Becker's methodology), Becker's empirical work on deviance remains central to contemporary
21 debates on method and methodology in sociology. Taking deviance studies as an important point of departure for
22 thinking about the contrast between problems and problematisation in Bacchi's poststructural analytic strategy my aim
23 is to evaluate the value ascribed to problems in social research and theory. In so doing I suggest the call to displace
24 problems in Bacchi's problematisation driven analysis as sceptical stance on governmental and professional
25 knowledges overlooks the methodological practices and achievements of social scientists and sociologists to engage in
26 'historical problematology' (Osborne, 2003: 1), problematise knowledge production and imagine a problematic mode
27 of social inquiry which is concerned not with social problems but problematic sociology (Savransky, 2018).
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38 Thinking Sociologically

39 The starting point for Bacchi's Foucauldian influenced approach to 'studying problematizations' (2015: 5) and 'how
40 problems are constituted (or made to be)' (2016: 60) within governmental policies and knowledge practices is a critical
41 analysis of the conceptual logics that underpin ways of thinking sociologically. What distinguishes Bacchi's WPR
42 approach as an alternative '*way of thinking*' (2017: 4, emphasis in original) is the object of analysis. Scrutinising the
43 meaning of problems within 'existing forms of governmental problematisations' Bacchi (2015: 5) proposes a
44 poststructural method of analysis that departs from social scientific methodologies. Comparing a poststructuralist
45 perspective with positivist, critical realist and interpretivist analyses of drug policy and drug use Bacchi (2015, 2016)
46 and Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) call into question the research methods and knowledge practices of social scientists
47 and sociologists for normalising problems. What concerns Bacchi is the taken for granted 'language of problem
48 definition and problem framing' (2016: 4) in qualitative methodologies and the 'tendency to refer to problems as
49 assumed starting points for reflection, possibly limiting the critical potential of the analysis' (2016: 1). By taking the
50 activity of drug use and behavior of social actors as the object and subject of research, Bacchi argues interpretivists
51 presume the existence of problems as 'separate from interpretative processes' thus 'fixing' the problems meaning and
52 giving it a 'negative' status (2015: 6). Bacchi's methodological skepticism of interpretivism is outlined in greater
53 detail in her analysis of moral panic theory. Whilst moral panic theorists are understood to challenge the labelling of
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3 'underprivileged groups as responsible for the problem' Bacchi and Goodwin (2016: 62) argue that by 'draw[ing]
4 attention to the social, structural factors that cause people...to take illicit drugs' the sociology of deviance 'continues
5 to accept such problems exist and require explanation' (2016: 62). For the critical analyst the danger with sociological
6 studies of deviance is that they are too descriptive. Replacing the paradigm of interpretivism with an interrogation of
7 the language, representation and description of the problem concept in policy and research Bacchi's WPR approach
8 aims to avoid the 'potential dangers and limitations' of 'how social scientists adopt the language of problems without
9 problematizing the term' (2016: 1). Contesting the knowledge practices of social scientists is necessary they argue to
10 avoid the reinforcement of deep-seated 'presuppositions', 'assumptions' and 'unexamined ways of thinking' (Bacchi
11 and Goodwin, 2016: 62) in research settings and 'disrupt modes of governing that install forms of marginalization and
12 domination' (Bacchi, 2016: 12).

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19 In proposing a method on how to think problematically and interrogate the problem concept Bacchi (2015, 2016,
20 2017) and Bacchi and Goodwin's (2016) poststructural intervention involves a set of critical reflections on the
21 limitations of the social scientific paradigm of interpretivism. Defending the aim of the WPR analytic strategy as a
22 'more effective political intervention' (2017: 1) to 'trouble consensus' (2015: 8, emphasis in original), and engage in
23 critique, Bacchi calls for greater scrutinisation of the political effects of the knowledge claims of governmental and
24 social scientific experts, and for researchers to engage in practices of self-problematism to avoid reinforcing
25 dangerous uses of the problem concept (2016: 8). But whilst Bacchi's critical analyses of interpretivism, moral panic
26 theory and social scientific knowledge practices calls into question the sociological study of drug policy and drug use,
27 Darin Weinberg's (2002: 17) call for a rigorous sociology that can formulate more just and theoretically defensible
28 understandings of the addiction problem, and Heather Love's (2015) reclaiming of deviance studies suggests there
29 may be more at play in the sociology of drug use than Bacchi's (2016) historicisation of social research methods and
30 the problem concept suggests. For Love (2015) the danger with focusing on the limitations of the sociology of
31 deviance is that the analytic practice of critical reflection, and the claim that the critical analyst knows best, risks
32 blocking the ethical accomplishments of social research methods as historically significant practices in the production
33 and *interruption* of knowledge. In refusing to acknowledge the legacy of descriptive methods in deviance studies Love
34 argues (2015: 87) critics trained in post structural methods 'fail to recognize the dynamism and complexity of
35 deviance... in sociological work from the period'. By historicising Becker's social research on drug use, not in terms
36 of its object and subject of analysis or use of the problem concept but its methodological achievement of description,
37 Love (2015) challenges the negative status ascribed to social science and the discipline of sociology and the refusal of
38 descriptive methods by poststructuralist critics. In rethinking and revaluing description in response to the critical
39 assumptions of poststructuralist thinking in the humanities (Marcus, Love and Best 2016: 9), Love (2015) identifies
40 the method of description employed by post war deviance researchers including the work of Howard Becker as an
41 accomplishment that situates knowledge. The practice of being situated by the method of description 'within the frame
42 of analysis' according to Love (2015: 87), is one of the most distinctive features of this social scientific work. Whilst
43 description 'can be a way to reinforce the status quo', being a describer Love argues is also 'a way of acknowledging
44 one's institutional position and the real differences between inside and outside' (2015: 90). Doing deviance research
45 according to Love produces sociological ways of thinking that address the role of experts in the description and
46 disruption of knowledge. For Love the promise of Becker's descriptive method 'as something other than a reflection of
47 our own values' 'is to keep open the possibility that one might be surprised or proven wrong' (2015: 84).

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5 In switching the focus of analysis from the problematisation of the problem concept in interpretative studies of drug
6 research and policy to the method of description in Becker's social scientific research on drug use Love's appraisal of
7 Deviance Studies alludes to the methodological achievements rather than limitations of social research methods and
8 problems. The question of *how* to address the problem concept in social research is addressed through the practice of
9 description rather than deconstruction. Whilst diverging, these approaches raise important questions about the politics
10 and practices of knowledge production. On the one hand, Bacchi's poststructural method of critical inquiry prescribes
11 a way of how to think problematically with the problem concept and interrogate the disciplinary and interpretive
12 practices of social scientists and sociologists. On the other, Becker's concern with professional bias of knowledge
13 makers encourages sociologists and social scientists to engage with the method of description as a political
14 intervention to challenge privileged disciplinary ways of thinking. At issue in Love's (2015, forthcoming) appraisal of
15 the methodological and political value of descriptive practices in the deviance paradigm is not just the superiority of
16 interpretation over description or the expertise of social scientists and sociologists but a scepticism towards taken for
17 granted agreements about the value and effects of descriptive research methods and social scientific knowledge
18 practices. In highlighting the distinctiveness of social science and the methodological value of description in mid-
19 century deviance studies Love (2015, forthcoming) reclaims social research methods from the critical academic and
20 refuses to keep the world safe from sociology. Whilst Love's analysis re-evaluates the professional and political
21 contribution of sociological studies of deviance for the humanities, in what follows I address the achievements and
22 controversies surrounding descriptive methods in Becker's empirical work on drug use for sociology and social
23 science.
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33 Taking Sides

34 The methodological implications of Becker's study of deviance for the discipline of sociology cannot be
35 underestimated. In his presidential address to the Society for the Study of Social Problems in 1966, Becker (1967)
36 poses the challenge more clearly, 'Whose side are we on?'. Responding to the accusation that studies of deviance are
37 overly sympathetic towards subordinates, and condemning of respectable citizens 'who have made the deviant what he
38 is' Becker (1967: 240) argues 'the problem of taking sides as it arises in the study of deviance' (1967: 239) cannot be
39 avoided. 'We must always look at the matter from someone's point of view' (1967: 245). Devoting his address to the
40 sociology of knowledge production Becker (1967: 245) embraces the accusation of bias. Whatever point of view we
41 look at a situation from argues Becker we must 'avoid sentimentality' (1967: 246) distorting our research and
42 rendering our results invalid. Whatever side we are on Becker argues 'we must use our techniques impartially enough
43 that a belief to which we are especially sympathetic could be proved untrue' (1967: 246). The trick to thinking
44 sociologically with 'the problem of taking sides as it arises in the study of deviance' according to Becker (1967: 239),
45 is 'to investigate some matter that should properly be regarded as problematic' (1967: 246), rather than choosing not to
46 know what is going on. The problem we should be working on Becker insists, 'consists of trying to create data that
47 will serve as trustworthy evidence, capable of carrying the weight we put on it, for the ideas we want to explore'
48 (2017: 55).
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58 Becker's contribution to thinking sociologically is explained in greater detail in 'Becoming a Marijuana User',
59 published in 1953. Based on an analysis of fifty qualitative interviews with marijuana users Becker challenges the
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3 conservatism of researching deviance from the point of view of superordinates. Switching his focus from the internal
4 to the external behavior of marijuana users, Becker develops a thick description of drug use from the actors point of
5 view. Situating knowledge of marijuana use from the drug user's perspective Becker makes the practice of drug use,
6 rather than the deviant individual the focus of his empirical research. The problem for Becker is not identifying the
7 individual traits that cause behavior, instead he argues '*the problem becomes one of describing* the set of changes in a
8 person's conception of the activity of the experience it provides for him' (1953: 235, my emphasis). Describing the
9 changes in meaning and concepts towards objects and practices, rather than the social or psychic problems that cause
10 addiction as *the problem* for social scientists is both methodologically and epistemologically significant. On the one
11 hand, Becker's empirical approach highlights the politics of social scientific methods for challenging epistemological
12 definitions of the drug problem. On the other, Becker's developmental theory of marijuana use as an achievement that
13 emerges through interactions with others engages the methodological problem of description in sociology. What's at
14 stake in Becker's deviance studies is not knowledge of the problem but the problem of situating knowledge of drug
15 use. Deviance for Becker is not a social problem that exists requiring explanation, the problem of deviance he argues
16 involves the development of social scientific tools and techniques of studying up from a position of not knowing
17 (Becker 2015). Addressing the methodological problem of describing deviance sociologically *within* the study of drug
18 use Becker highlights the significance of descriptive methods for sociologists.

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27 Whilst social problem research produced a shift in thinking about the situation's researchers found themselves, Becker
28 (1998) argues the study of deviance from below did not constitute a radical or revolutionary paradigm shift in the
29 production of social scientific knowledge. On the contrary, studies of deviance according to Becker mark a
30 'conservative return to a strand of basic sociological thinking that had somehow gotten lost in the discipline's practice'
31 (1998: 38). In failing to think about all the people involved in the situation, sociologists according to Becker 'defined
32 problems in ways that left out some of the most important actors in the drama of deviance' (1998: 38). The problem of
33 taking sides was not allowing the activities labelled as deviant 'to become an object of investigation' (1998: 38). What
34 was left out of sociological research argues Becker were the deviants' viewpoints and 'how the situation looks to the
35 actors in it' (1998: 36). In order for sociology to make a political contribution to the study of deviance Becker argues
36 the social scientist must find out what the actors think is going on 'so that we will understand what goes into the
37 making of their activity' (1998: 37). What is distinctive about Becker's (1963) sociological study of drug use is the
38 way the definition of the problem is composed not in terms of interpretative practices but involves composing
39 techniques and methods that address the problem of description as it arises within the study of deviance. Treating
40 Becker's problem of description as a methodological trouble internal to sociological inquiry and the management of
41 research practice according to Greiffenhagen, Mair and Sharrock provides an alternative starting point for thinking
42 about social scientist's research practices and the 'practical accomplishment of method' in situ (2015: 462). Taking
43 Becker's response to the problem of description as central to the enterprise of sociology forces us to rethink the
44 meaning of the problem concept not in terms of what experts say and think about problems but what they do with
45 them. In what follows I consider what can be opened up by focusing on how problems are encountered and resolved in
46 Becker's research practice and what is at stake when we engage Becker's methodological troubles as phenomena to be
47 addressed in sociological literature.

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3 Investigating Becker's social scientific research practices from within Hammersley (1999, 2001, 2011) highlights the
4 methodological troubles that inform Becker's sociological studies of deviance. In describing how deviance comes to
5 be defined through historical and social processes Hammersley (1999, 2001) defines Becker's approach as both
6 constructivist and realist. On the one hand, Hammersley argues Becker's constructivist perspective takes up the
7 sociology of science and examines the ways knowledge of deviance is constructed through the process of labelling.
8 The focus here according to Hammersley is not on 'whether the knowledge it focuses on is sound' but 'how it came to
9 be accepted as knowledge' (2001: 103). On the other hand, Hammersley points out Becker's commitment to social
10 science, with its emphasis on 'the scientific pursuit of objective knowledge' (2001: 102), involves a methodological
11 argument that 'abandons the sociology of knowledge' (2001: 104). The incompatibility of Becker's sociology of
12 science approach and social scientific practice argues Hammersley is not inconsequential but a strategic
13 'methodological device to open up the whole field of deviance to sociological analysis' (1999: 77). By taking the
14 'point of view of the people studied' (1999: 72) and their 'particular social situation' (2011: 553) seriously,
15 Hammersley argues Becker was not simply concerned 'with providing a voice for those on the margins' (1999: 77) or
16 with making ontological claims about the true character of the deviant, but how the discipline 'was not living up to its
17 commitment to scientific rigor' (1999: 72). The achievement of Becker's social scientific method according to
18 Hammersley was to show how sociological work 'had failed to incorporate what could be learnt from looking at the
19 world from the viewpoint of those outside the mainstream' (1999: 72). The political radicalism of Becker's deviance
20 studies argues Hammersley (1999) is located not in taking sides with the marginalised but Becker's belief that a
21 rigorous scientific methodology avoids the bias of professional conceptualisations of problems. Becker's practice of
22 producing social scientific knowledge from the drug user's perspective 'erodes the power of those at the top by
23 undermining their control of knowledge' (Hammersley, 1999: 74) *of the problem*.

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35 Whilst the accomplishments of Becker's empirical research and its contribution to the sociology of knowledge is
36 understood to have political implications for challenging taken for granted definitions of drug users as individualised,
37 pathological subjects, the radicalism of Becker's sociological description is not without its critics. Rehearsing Becker's
38 particular problem of describing the set of changes in a person's conception of an activity as concerning a 'collectively
39 achieved perception-interpretation' and 'accomplishment' Emile Gomart (2002: 102) highlights the achievement of
40 Becker's constructivist approach. Like those in science studies, Gomart argues Becker's research on drug use poses
41 the question of what gets constituted through these knowledge practices 'rather than the inherent qualities of the
42 person' (2002: 100). And yet, Gomart argues, a 'nagging problem remains' (2002: 101). Becker's constructivist move
43 into deviant behaviour as a '*developing* behavioural pattern' (2002: 103 emphasis in original) that concerns group
44 practices, techniques and settings is ambivalent about the 'ontology of substance' which 'is given and constant. It is
45 only what people do, know or claim which can vary' (2002: 96). The problem that gets erased from Becker's
46 description of the changes that take place through emergent practices of interpretation according to Gomart is 'the
47 substance itself' (2002: 96). By not allowing substance to become an object of investigation, Gomart (2002) argues
48 Becker's symbolic-interactionist analysis of drug use fails to address the empirical question of 'how the drug and its
49 user, nonhuman and human, act' (2002: 96).

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58 Gomart's criticisms of the limits of Becker's 'symbolic interactionist take on objects' (2002: 131) echo Pearson and
59 Twohig's (1976) earlier interrogation of Becker's constructivist ethnography. Comparing findings from their own
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3 empirical study on drug use with Becker's observations of marijuana use Pearson and Twohig (1976) find a
4 discrepancy between Becker's description of the experience of drugs as situated and relational and the accounts of
5 drug users in their study. Becker's 'sociological emphasis on setting' they argue is too 'one-sided' (1976: 123). What
6 concerns Pearson and Twohig is how to account for this discrepancy and 'understand how [Becker's] ethnography is
7 passed down by sociologists as gospel', 'how...a particular piece of research which contains some puzzling
8 assumptions becomes reified (and deified) by the professional practice of sociologists' (1976: 124, my emphases). The
9 erasure of pharmacology, biology and technology and the chemical effects of different technologies and methods of
10 ingestion from Becker's sociology of drug use according to Pearson and Twohig, 'encourages sociological imperialism
11 (where the important thing is not to engage in critical research but defend the methods and principles of sociology) and
12 the blind spots of abstract sociological whimsy' (1976: 124). In calling into question the methodological value of
13 Becker's descriptive activity and the practice of professional sociologists, Pearson and Twohig's critique, as Weinberg
14 (2009) points out, discredits Becker's empirical research by removing it from its context. What's at stake in Pearson
15 and Twohig's criticisms of Becker's sociological study of deviance is not sociological imperialism but what Woolgar
16 and Pawluch (1985 cited in Weinberg, 2009) describe as ontological gerrymandering where the goal is to replace one
17 set of claims making practices with a more superior objective description. Rather than engage in the practice of
18 debunking or defending Becker's descriptive practices and reifying and deifying Becker's empirical research on drug
19 use, in what follows I consider the legacy of Becker's deviance studies in terms of how the methodological problem of
20 description has been passed on by Becker, taken up and applied by sociologists and others, and its uses for responding
21 to sociological problems that refuse to go away.

31 32 Sociological Problems

33 The practical and professional implications of Becker's methodology for contemporary sociology and sociological
34 practice are investigated in greater detail by Motamedi-Fraser (2012) in 'Once upon a problem'. Drawing on *Telling*
35 *about Society* (2007), Motamedi-Fraser highlights the particular significance of methods and problems in Becker's
36 work. By posing the question who tells about society, Becker (2007) calls into question the doing of sociology by
37 professional sociologists who claim to be the only ones who can produce sociological knowledge and that sociologist's
38 methods are the only ways of telling about society. For Becker 'there is no best way to tell about society', 'many
39 methods can do the trick' (2007: 285). Examining the problem of describing social life beyond the disciplinary
40 boundaries of sociology, Becker considers the representational work done by 'other kinds of workers' (2007: 6) 'to see
41 what solutions to the *problem of description* one field might import from another' (2007: 4, my emphasis). In
42 considering other ways of engaging the problem of description beyond the professional practices of sociologists and
43 social scientists Becker addresses the methodological problem of telling about society using social scientific and
44 nonscientific methods including photography and photojournalism. By comparing a range of genres Becker's aim is to
45 show that all methods are good enough and no method solves the problems of description 'very well' (2007: 197). The
46 trouble that arises in telling about society for both social science and photojournalism according to Becker is the
47 problem of taking sides 'implicitly or explicitly' (2007: 143). For photojournalists taking sides is defined as a technical
48 problem that involves getting 'the image that best tells the already selected story' (2007: 201), of what readers already
49 know and believe about the "problem" in advance (2007: 200) rather than 'trying to discover things about it they
50 didn't already know' (2007: 200). Similarly, Becker argues social scientists take sides 'easily and too quickly identify
51 the good and bad guys', 'when the real job at hand is to figure out how things work and present an accurate account of
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3 that understanding' (2007: 145). The problem of inadequate description in contemporary social science and
4 photojournalism according to Becker reflects a methodological 'conservatism' (2007: 285) which restricts the use of
5 methods to "the right ways" of doing things' (2007: 286).
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9 By exploring the question of who tells about society and showing how 'sociologists do not have privileged access to
10 social analysis' Motamedi-Fraser argues 'Becker's aim is generous' (2012: 85). What concerns Motamedi-Fraser is
11 'whether Becker might not, inadvertently, be giving away the potential specificity of sociology and sociological
12 practice too quickly' (2007: 85). *Telling about Society* (2012) according to Motamedi-Fraser marks a significant
13 moment for thinking about the 'usefulness' of sociology, not in terms of what it is, but what 'sociology *does*' with its
14 materials and methods and what it is 'uniquely able to do' with the vast diversity of methods and methodologies at its
15 disposal (2012: 102, emphasis in original). In drawing attention to the uses of different methods and methodologies
16 Becker, argues Motamedi-Fraser, highlights the role they play in enabling alternative imaginative patterns of relating
17 in sociological research. Addressing the specificity of sociology and sociological practice as luring materials and
18 methods into posing their own problems, 'without presuming to know what the problem is with the problem in
19 advance' (2012: 101), or deciding what method is best suited, Motamedi-Fraser draws attention to what sociology
20 does with its materials and the doing of methods as the 'gift' (2012: 85) of sociological practice. What defines a
21 "sociological" problem? Motamedi-Fraser argues is not an expansion of methods and materials to discover, imagine
22 and make visible new kinds of representations of the problems of society but the 'extraction of a problem from a
23 research project' (2012: 86). The specificity of a sociological problem Motamedi-Fraser explains is located not in
24 figure of the sociologist, the subject of research or society but 'contingent upon the materials at hand' (2012: 96).
25 What's required to extract a problem from a research project Motamedi-Fraser suggests is 'attentiveness to materials
26 and methods' and a 'willingness to be transformed by them' (2012: 87).
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36 In defining sociological problems not in terms of what they tell about the problems of society but what they can do to
37 'lure those materials and methods into posing *their own* problems' (2012: 85, emphasis in original) Motamedi-Fraser
38 replaces the methodological problem of telling about society with the problem of storying. Storying, according to
39 Motamedi-Fraser 'displaces the privilege that telling has acquired in relation to stories' (2012: 103) and distributes the
40 sociological problem across or within a research assemblage that emerge from 'discursive and non-discursive, human
41 and non-human patterns of relations' (2012: 103). Drawing on Becker's account of belief as the sociologists relation to
42 'what he is telling' (2012: 95), and "the social agreement [by makers and users of a representation] to believe" what
43 a representation is (Becker, 2007: 115, cited in Fraser, 2012: 90), Motamedi-Fraser argues that whilst the concept of
44 make believe is 'less *authoritative*' (2012: 96, emphasis in original) than making up or making-believe, and a
45 'departure from some of the more familiar ways of organizing the relations between facts, truths and fiction' (2012:
46 95) it is more 'methodologically pragmatic' and 'an aid to the sociological imagination' (2012: 96). By engaging
47 Becker's methodological problem of description as a sociological provocation to consider 'the different kinds of ways
48 is it possible to believe in a story, or not believe, and with what consequence' Motamedi-Fraser (2012: 94) leaves open
49 the significance of the materials, the figure of the researcher and the reader in problem-making. In the activity of
50 holding open the question of, and experimenting with, what kinds of experiences different methods give rise to or
51 allow, Motamedi-Fraser suggests 'sociology can make-believe realities imaginatively, without also abandoning its
52 disciplinary distinctiveness' (2012: 102). The more relational human and non-human participants are in the research
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3 process she argues the more likely sociological knowledge will be imaginative and transformative in enabling
4 alternative patterns of relations and experience to emerge within sociological practice.
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7 Motamedi-Fraser's definition of a sociological problem as a solution that transforms or seeks to transform ordinary
8 experience into sociological experience poses some important questions about the usefulness of the problem concept
9 for sociological practice (Fraser 2009: 74). In this final section of the article I address the question posed by
10 Motamedi-Fraser of how possible it is and how is it possible to craft a sociological problem 'across the research
11 assemblage as a "whole" rather than being located in the researcher, in the subject of research, in "society"' (2012:
12 86), or within 'any (single group) of "participants"' (2012: 102). Taking seriously Becker's concerns on the problem
13 of taking sides in contemporary practices of description, I consider the difference between telling about drug problems
14 using nonscientific methods and the sociological problem of storying injecting drug use. In crafting the objects of drug
15 use in sociological practice (see Vitellone, 2017, 2018) my hope is to displace the privilege of telling about the
16 problems of society as the pejorative of the storyteller, interpretive sociologist and problematising critic and make-
17 believe sociological problems that disrupt and transform knowledge of the policy and practice of harm reduction. By
18 remaining attentive to the materials at hand I aim to show how the specificity of a sociological problem challenges
19 more conventional methods of organising relations between truths, facts and fiction.
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28 Storying the Syringe

29 On the 12th May 2000 Rachel Jayne Whitear's death from a heroin overdose at the age of 21 was captured by a police
30 photographer. Photographs of Rachel's bloated discolored body bent over her last hit clasp a capped syringe in her
31 bedsit in Dorset, were released to the press by her parents in 2002 to educate children about the effects of drugs. The
32 iconic photographic image of Rachel's body with a capped syringe lying next to her was included in the antidrug
33 school education prevention campaign *Rachel's Story*, a 22 minute video dedicated to building up a picture of
34 Rachel's life through the eyes of her family and friends, made available to every secondary school child from ten
35 upwards in the UK. *Rachel's Story*, told primarily by her parents, focuses on Rachel's achievements as a piano player
36 and her ten GCSE's followed by her acceptance into Bath University and slow gradual decline. This personalised,
37 individualised configuration of the drug problem in drug prevention campaigns according to Kane Race (2009: 64)
38 involves the concerned subjectivity of the parent and the appearance of aspirational middle-class youth as the
39 privileged object of anti-drug discourse. The problem of how to describe injecting drug use is spoken for. In order to
40 avoid imposing the meaning of the drug problem through official regimes of knowledge and address the problem of
41 experience, Race (2009: 169) calls for 'something a little more different'.
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49 The challenge of telling about society through visual images of injecting drug use is explored in greater detail in the
50 work of John Fitzgerald (2016). Investigating syringe imagery in the media and news reports, Fitzgerald examines
51 how the photographic method generates different problems for telling about society than social research methods.
52 Compared with the problem of description in Becker's (2007, 2015) empirical study of drug use, where the linguistic
53 intervention of naming 'deviants' drug users is deployed to interrupt conventional ways of thinking, the task of
54 inventing other ways of telling about injecting drug use through photography, according to Fitzgerald (2016) and
55 Rhodes and Fitzgerald (2006) requires generating different visual descriptions of drug users and the object of the
56 syringe. What concerns Fitzgerald is how a dominant reading of syringe imagery as danger, drugs, addiction and death
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3 continues to be 'cited and recited?' (2016: 30). The problem with the photographic method of telling stories about
4 injecting drug use in the news media according to Fitzgerald is the representation of faceless and voiceless drug users
5 as 'unknowable and illegitimate' (2016: 106). The solution to the problem of invisibility he argues requires the
6 'recasting of actors in the storyline' (2016: 54). Recasting the syringe user 'in relation to the syringe' for Fitzgerald 'is
7 critical' (2016: 54). By casting the handler and the object in the storyline Fitzgerald encourages drugs researchers to
8 produce a different 'way of knowing the world through drugs' (2016: x) which does not limit how the syringe is
9 connected to stories. Describing the dominant uses of syringe imagery Fitzgerald explains sometimes 'the syringe is
10 plugged into stories that do not support its existential weight'. Sometimes 'its existential weight is so powerful' 'that it
11 provides the perfect punch for those using its image' (2016: 50). It is the combination of young person and the syringe
12 that 'most clearly evokes a sense that the handler is not quite right' and 'something improper must be going on' (2016:
13 46). The most revealing image of how the syringe image functions as danger in news media reports is the
14 representation of woman as 'the most improper handlers of syringes' who have no right to handle the object (2016:
15 47). By showing the limited ways the syringe is combined with stories about society Fitzgerald's descriptive practice
16 of contextualisation encourages drug researchers to craft different stories which 'recombine the narratives to which it
17 can connect' (2016: 54). Such a thick descriptive orientation Fitzgerald argues 'could be beneficial' for reducing the
18 fear associated with the syringe and provide support for harm reduction policies (2016: 53).

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21 In describing the representation of the syringe in photojournalism metonymically rather than metaphorically
22 Fitzgerald's aim to link syringe imagery to the 'sociocultural context' (2016: 49) is far from conservative. His radical
23 approach replaces conventional ways of interpreting syringe imagery as a sign of danger, addiction and death with a
24 thick description which explores 'how the syringe is combined with parts of other stories' (2016: 30). Focusing on the
25 combinatory elements of the syringe foregrounds the practice of description as a critical intervention that transforms
26 research on harm reduction. Contextualising the syringe challenges conventional research methods of interpreting the
27 object as a social problem and the disciplinary practices that conceptualise it in this way. The problem of the syringe is
28 a problem of thought. Fitzgerald's methodological provocation of 'reconstituting the syringe into a more productive
29 context' (2016: 54) highlights the uses of descriptive methods for enabling alternative patterns of relating within the
30 research assemblage which problematise ways of thinking. Whilst Fitzgerald's concern is to see the syringe as an actor
31 in drugs research and drug policy, there is also a case for thinking about it in the context of sociology (Vitellone 2017).
32 In what follows I examine the uses of descriptive methods for thinning and thickening the storying of the syringe in
33 *Rachel's Story*, and the specificity of sociological practice for remaining attentive to the sociological problem at hand.

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36 In 2008 the Independent Police Complaints Commission published their final report into the death of Rachel Whítear
37 (IPCC 2008). The investigation is established in response to complaints made by Rachel's parents about the Police
38 handling of the case. The investigation includes a case summary, witness statements and statements to the Press. The
39 first inquest into Rachel Whítear's death in December 2000 returned an open verdict with no cause of death
40 established. In 2003 the police open a re-investigation into the circumstances surrounding Rachel's death following
41 complaints from Rachel's parents Pauline and Mick Holcroft. The photograph of the syringe in Rachel's hand as
42 something improper is used by her parents as evidence to suggest that Rachel's death was suspicious and recast her as
43 a victim of her drug-using boyfriend. The iconic image of Rachel's body with the syringe next to her in the news
44 media anti-drugs awareness and education campaign becomes plugged into a story not of the social problem of drug
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3 use but intimate abuse and domestic violence. In the second inquiry new evidence about the syringe was uncovered
4 that led to the arrest in 2003 of Rachel's boyfriend Luke Fitzgerald and his brother Simon Fitzgerald on suspicion of
5 tampering with the scene of her death (IPCC 2008). This particular combination of the syringe with a scene of a crime
6 is so believable that her parent's application to the High Court in 2006 for an additional inquest into the causes of
7 Rachel's death is accepted (IPCC 2008). At the second inquest into Rachel's death in 2007 a witness claimed Rachel's
8 boyfriend, Luke Fitzgerald gave her the fatal dose of heroin and that his brother cleaned up the scene and replaced the
9 syringe Whitear had used with a new one. In her testimony, the witness, who was once a girlfriend of Fitzgerald's
10 brother Simon, said Simon told her that Luke and Rachel had been arguing and he had been trying to have a hit when
11 he gave her an injection. She was told that Luke stormed out and later returned to find Rachel on the floor (Morris,
12 2007a). Rachel's parents told the inquest they believed the witnesses version of events. But the jury sitting with the
13 coroner at the second inquest decided there was insufficient evidence to bring a criminal case against them. Describing
14 the absence of heroin in the barrel of the syringe as 'very puzzling and deeply perplexing', the coroner concluded 'it is
15 not possible to say one way or another whether that needle was used or whether Rachel used it herself or was injected
16 by a third party'. The coroner also added 'at the same time, we do know that drug users will help each other and inject
17 each other and that is where we enter the area of criminality. It is an unsatisfactory position and there are many things
18 we are unable to explain' (Morris, 2007b). In the absence of clear evidence, the inquest recorded a verdict of death by
19 opiate intoxication but was not able to answer whether Rachel injected herself and whether a third party was present.
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29 What is unsatisfactory in the inquest and IPCC Investigation report, I want to suggest, is the storying of the syringe. In
30 confirming the link between Rachel's death and heroin, the police superintendent in charge of the inquest stressed that
31 the anti-drugs prevention education video *Rachel's Story* told by her parents should not be questioned (IPCC 2008).
32 But in the hands of the coroner the syringe is not the end of *Rachel's Story*. Nor is it combined with other stories. In
33 evaluating the evidence deficit in the case, the coroner in his verdict extracts the syringe as a problem of description
34 and not a social problem. The specificity of the problem is contingent on the material at hand. The methodological
35 problem of describing the syringe in the photo of Rachel's death becomes the focus of the inquiry. In trying to let the
36 'puzzling' problem speak the coroner attempts to recast this particular actor in the storyline. Describing *Rachel's Story*
37 relationally, with other participants, the syringe is lured into posing its own problem. Storying the syringe disrupts the
38 authoritative telling of *Rachel's Story* in the school anti-drugs education campaign. Drawing attention to the specificity
39 of the syringe as a sociological problem reveals the limitations of epistemological and methodological frameworks to
40 provide answers to social problems and respond to problematisations. Paying attention to the descriptive materials and
41 methods at our disposal questions conventional knowledge practices. If paying attention to the many things we are
42 unable to explain is central to how sociologists contribute to the storying of the world as a situated accomplishment
43 which does not take problems, methods, materials or policies for granted, it is critical for sociology to renew its
44 commitment to the methodological problem of description as a provocation for intervening in the politics of
45 knowledge and the crafting of problems that matter. Whether Love's provocation of thinking back into sociology's
46 practices of description can get us where we need to go, her analysis of sociological studies of deviance reveals the
47 uses of Becker's research in a new light, not as a source of solutions or problems, but an urgent call to take our
48 descriptive practices and sociological problems seriously.
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