

# Sociology and the problem of description

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**Nicole Vitellone** 

Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology,  
University of Liverpool, UK

## Abstract

Howard Becker's practice of description has been debated, critiqued and reclaimed in a range of fields including sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, Science & Technology Studies, critical drug studies 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.

## Keywords

Problems, problematisation, sociology, description, Howard Becker, Deviance Studies, drugs research

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, Stevens (2011: 401) foregrounds the discipline's 'commitment to understanding people's actions from their own point of view'. 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 behaviour, Stevens (2011: 401) argues that sociology provides an alternative to 'studying upwards'. In particular, Stevens highlights the uses of Foucault's methods of studying power relations in bodily practices

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## Corresponding author:

Nicole Vitellone, Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology, University of Liverpool, School of Law and Social Justice Building, Chatham Street, Liverpool, L697ZR, UK.

Email: [N.Vitellone@liv.ac.uk](mailto:N.Vitellone@liv.ac.uk)

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 Stevens’ editorial demonstrates how ‘sociology can be brought to bear on issues of drug policy and use’ (2011: 402), 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 (2016: 8) argues that social scientists lack a critical analysis of the representation and production of the ‘problem’ of drugs *within* policies. What concerns Bacchi (2009: xi) 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’. 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 researchers to interrogate the representation, language and description of problems within governmental and knowledge 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 problematisation. 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 poststructural WPR (‘What’s the Problem Represented to Be’) approach has been taken up and applied by critical drug studies scholars to examine, recognise and expose the role of policy, representation and the law in formulating, shaping and making drug problems (e.g. Fraser and Moore, 2011; Fraser, 2017; Lancaster and Ritter, 2014; Lancaster et al., 2014; Lancaster et al., 2015; Ritter, 2015; Seear and 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 research, I want to stay with Bacchi’s critical analysis of social scientific knowledge practices. My contribution to this discussion is motivated by a concern that Bacchi’s (2017) questioning of the usefulness of the problem concept and the methodological distinction between problems and problematisations – while intended to clarify the difference between empirical and poststructural methods of inquiry, and replace problems with problematisations in drugs research as ‘a more effective political intervention’ (2017: 1) – introduces confusion in debates around the significance of problems in sociological research.

In demonstrating how problems are produced in a disciplinary setting, Bacchi’s (2016) interrogation of knowledge practices highlights the significance the problem

concept has played within the social sciences and the discipline of sociology. But the contrast between problems and problematisations in Bacchi's (2016, 2017) genealogy of governmental and professional knowledges does not sufficiently address the disputes and deviation over understandings of the relevance of problems for sociology. To trace the history of the uses and role of problems in sociological research, this article takes a different turn and investigates the consequences of studying problems upwards and downwards simultaneously (Nader, 1972). To do so, I look not to Bacchi's use of Foucault's methods but elsewhere: Howard Becker's research on drug use in the 1950s and deviance studies. Whereas Becker's writings have occupied a somewhat marginal position within the field of critical drugs research (see Dennis, 2019, for an exceptional engagement with Becker's methodology), Becker's empirical work on deviance remains central to contemporary debates on method and methodology in sociology. Taking deviance studies as an important point of departure for thinking about the contrast between problems and problematisations in Bacchi's poststructural analytic strategy, my aim is to evaluate the value ascribed to problems in social research and theory. In so doing, I suggest the call to displace problems in Bacchi's problematisation driven analysis as a sceptical stance on governmental and professional knowledges overlooks the methodological practices and achievements of social scientists and sociologists to engage in 'historical problematology' (Osborne, 2003: 1), problematise knowledge production and imagine a problematic mode of social inquiry which is concerned not with social problems but problematic sociology (Savransky, 2018).

## Thinking sociologically

The starting point for Bacchi's Foucauldian influenced approach to 'studying problematizations' (2015: 5) and 'how problems are constituted (or made to be)' (2016: 60) within governmental policies and knowledge practices is a critical analysis of the conceptual logics that underpin ways of thinking sociologically. What distinguishes Bacchi's WPR approach as an alternative '*way of thinking*' (2017: 4, emphasis in original) is the object of analysis. Scrutinising the meaning of problems within 'existing forms of governmental problematisations', Bacchi (2015: 5) proposes a poststructural method of analysis that departs from social scientific methodologies. Comparing a poststructuralist perspective with positivist, critical realist and interpretivist analyses of policy including health and drug policy, Bacchi (2015, 2016, 2017) and Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) call into question the research methods and knowledge practices of social scientists and sociologists for normalising problems. What concerns Bacchi is the taken-for-granted 'language of problem definition and problem framing' (2016: 4) in qualitative methodologies and the 'tendency to refer to problems as assumed starting points for reflection, possibly limiting the critical potential of the analysis' (2016: 1). By taking the activity of drug use and behaviour of social actors as the object and subject of research, Bacchi argues that interpretivists presume the existence of problems as 'separate from interpretative processes', thus 'fixing' the problems meaning and giving it a 'negative' status (2015: 6). Bacchi's methodological scepticism of interpretivism is outlined in greater detail in her analysis of moral panic theory. Whilst moral panic theorists are understood to challenge the labelling of 'underprivileged groups as responsible for the problem', Bacchi and Goodwin

(2016: 62) argue that by ‘draw[ing] attention to the social, structural factors that cause people. . .to take illicit drugs’ the sociology of deviance ‘continues to accept such problems exist and require explanation’ (2016: 62). For the critical analyst, the danger with sociological studies of deviance is that they are too descriptive. Replacing the paradigm of interpretivism with an interrogation of the language, representation and description of the problem concept within policy and research, Bacchi’s WPR approach aims to avoid the ‘potential dangers and limitations’ of how social scientists often adopt the language of problems ‘without problematizing the term’ (2016: 1). Contesting knowledge practices is necessary, Bacchi and Goodwin (2016: 61) argue, to challenge conventional ways of thinking about the assumed nature of problems and ‘disrupt modes of governing that install forms of marginalization and domination’ (Bacchi, 2016: 12).

In proposing a method on how to think problematically and interrogate the problem concept, Bacchi (2015, 2016, 2017) and Bacchi and Goodwin’s (2016) poststructural theoretical intervention involves a set of critical reflections on the limitations of the research paradigm of interpretivism. Defending the aim of the WPR analytic strategy as a ‘more effective political intervention’ (2017: 1) to ‘trouble consensus’ (2015: 8, emphasis in original), and engage in critique, Bacchi calls for greater scrutinisation of the effects of governmental and professional knowledges, and for researchers to engage in practices of self-problematization to avoid reinforcing dangerous uses of the problem concept (2017: 8). But whilst Bacchi’s critical analyses of interpretivism, moral panic theory and social scientific knowledge practices call into question sociological approaches to the study of drug policy and drug use, Weinberg’s (2002: 17) call for a rigorous sociology that can formulate more just and theoretically defensible understandings of the addiction problem, and Love’s (2015) reclaiming of deviance studies suggests there may be more at play in the sociology of drug use than Bacchi’s (2016) historicisation of social research methods and the problem concept suggests. For Love (2015), the danger with focusing on the limitations of the sociology of deviance is that the analytic practice of critical reflection, and the claim that the critical analyst knows best, risks blocking the ethical accomplishments of social research methods as historically significant practices in the production and *interruption* of knowledge. In refusing to acknowledge the legacy of descriptive methods in deviance studies, Love (2015: 87) argues that critics trained in poststructural methods fail ‘to recognize the dynamism and complexity of deviance. . . in sociological work from the period’. By historicising Becker’s social research on drug use, not in terms of its object and subject of analysis or use of the problem concept but its methodological achievement of description, Love (2015) challenges the negative status ascribed to the social sciences and the discipline of sociology, and the refusal of descriptive methods by poststructuralist critics. In rethinking and revaluing description in response to the critical assumptions of poststructuralist dominated thinking in the humanities (Marcus et al., 2016: 9), Love (2015) identifies the method of description employed by post-war deviance researchers including the work of Howard Becker as an accomplishment that situates knowledge. The practice of being situated by the method of description ‘within the frame of analysis’, according to Love (2015: 87), is one of the most distinctive features of this social scientific work. Whilst description ‘can be a way to reinforce the status quo’, being a describer, Love (2015: 90) argues, is also ‘a way of acknowledging one’s institutional position and the real differences between inside and

outside'. Doing deviance research, according to Love, produces sociological ways of thinking that address the role of experts in the description and disruption of knowledge. For Love (2015: 84), the promise of Becker's descriptive method 'as something other than a reflection of our own values' 'is to keep open the possibility that one might be surprised or proven wrong'.

In switching the focus of analysis from the problematisation of the problem concept in interpretivist accounts of drug use to the method of description in Becker's social scientific research practice, Love's appraisal of deviance studies alludes to the methodological achievements rather than limitations of social research methods and problems. The question of *how* to address the problem concept in social research is addressed through the practice of description rather than deconstruction. Whilst diverging, these approaches raise important questions about the politics and practices of knowledge production. On the one hand, Bacchi's poststructural method of critical inquiry prescribes a way of how to think problematically with the problem concept and interrogate the disciplinary practices of social scientists and sociologists. On the other, Becker's concern with the professional bias of knowledge makers encourages sociologists and social scientists to engage with the method of description as a political intervention to challenge privileged disciplinary ways of thinking. At issue in Love's (2015, 2021) appraisal of the methodological and political value of descriptive practices in the deviance paradigm is not just the superiority of interpretation over description or the expertise of social scientists and sociologists but a scepticism towards taken-for-granted agreements about the value and effects of descriptive research methods and social scientific knowledge practices. In highlighting the distinctiveness of social science and the methodological value of description in mid-century deviance studies, Love (2015, 2021) reclaims social research methods from the critical academic and refuses to keep the world safe from sociology. Whilst Love's analysis re-evaluates the professional and political contribution of sociological studies of deviance for the humanities, in what follows I address the achievements and controversies surrounding descriptive methods in Becker's empirical work on drug use for sociology and social science.

## Taking sides

The methodological implications of Becker's study of deviance for the discipline of sociology cannot be underestimated. In his presidential address to the Society for the Study of Social Problems in 1966, Becker (1967) poses the challenge more clearly: 'Whose side are we on?' Responding to the accusation that studies of deviance are overly sympathetic towards subordinates, and condemning of respectable citizens 'who have made the deviant what he is', Becker (1967: 240) argues 'the problem of taking sides as it arises in the study of deviance' (1967: 239) cannot be avoided. 'We must always look at the matter from someone's point of view' (Becker, 1967: 245). Devoting his address to the sociology of knowledge production, Becker (1967: 245) embraces the accusation of bias. Whatever point of view we look at a situation from, argues Becker, we must 'avoid sentimentality' (1967: 246) distorting our research and rendering our results invalid. Whatever side we are on, Becker argues, 'we must use our techniques impartially enough that a belief to which we are especially sympathetic could be proved untrue' (1967: 246).

The trick to thinking sociologically with ‘the problem of taking sides as it arises in the study of deviance’ according to Becker (1967: 239), is ‘to investigate some matter that should properly be regarded as problematic’ (1967: 246), rather than choosing not to know what is going on. The problem we should be working on, Becker insists, ‘consists of trying to create data that will serve as trustworthy evidence, capable of carrying the weight we put on it, for the ideas we want to explore’ (2017: 55).

Becker’s contribution to thinking sociologically is explained in greater detail in ‘Becoming a Marijuana User’, published in 1953. Based on an analysis of 50 qualitative interviews with marijuana users, Becker challenges the conservatism of researching deviance from the point of view of superordinates. Switching his focus from the internal to the external behaviour of marijuana users, Becker develops a thick description of drug use from the actor’s point of view. Situating knowledge of marijuana use from the drug user’s perspective, Becker makes the practice of drug use, rather than the deviant individual, the focus of his empirical research. The problem for Becker is not identifying the individual traits that cause behaviour; instead, he argues ‘the *problem becomes one of describing* the set of changes in a person’s conception of the activity of the experience it provides for him’ (1953: 235, my emphasis). Describing the changes in meaning and concepts towards objects and practices, rather than the social or psychic problems that cause addiction as *the problem* for social scientists, is both methodologically and epistemologically significant. On the one hand, Becker’s empirical approach highlights the politics of social scientific methods for challenging epistemological definitions of the drug problem. On the other, Becker’s developmental theory of marijuana use as an achievement that emerges through interactions with others engages the methodological problem of description in sociology. What’s at stake in Becker’s deviance studies is not knowledge of the problem but the problem of situating knowledge of drug use. Deviance for Becker is not a social problem that exists requiring explanation; the problem of deviance, he argues, involves the development of social scientific tools and techniques of studying up from a position of not knowing (Becker, 2015). Addressing the methodological problem of describing deviance sociologically *within* the study of drug use, Becker highlights the significance of descriptive methods for sociologists.

Whilst social problem research produced a shift in thinking about the situation’s researchers found themselves, Becker (1998) argues the study of deviance from below did not constitute a radical or revolutionary paradigm shift in the production of social scientific knowledge. On the contrary, studies of deviance, according to Becker, mark a ‘conservative return to a strand of basic sociological thinking that had somehow gotten lost in the discipline’s practice’ (1998: 38). In failing to think about all the people involved in the situation, sociologists, according to Becker, ‘defined problems in ways that left out some of the most important actors in the drama of deviance’ (1998: 38). The problem of taking sides was not allowing the activities labelled as deviant ‘to become an object of investigation’ (1998: 38). What was left out of sociological research, argues Becker, were the deviants’ viewpoints and ‘how the situation looks to the actors in it’ (1998: 36). In order for sociology to make a political contribution to the study of deviance, Becker argues that the social scientist must find out what the actors think is going on ‘so that we will understand what goes into the making of their activity’ (1998: 37). What is distinctive about Becker’s (1963) sociological study of drug use is the way the

definition of the problem is composed not in terms of interpretative practices but involves composing techniques and methods that address the problem of description as it arises within the study of deviance. Treating Becker's problem of description as a methodological trouble internal to sociological inquiry and the management of research practice according to Greiffenhagen, Mair and Sharrock (2015: 462) provides an alternative starting point for thinking about social scientist's research practices and the 'practical accomplishment of method' in situ. Taking Becker's response to the problem of description as central to the enterprise of sociology forces us to rethink the meaning of the problem concept not in terms of what experts say and think about problems but what they do with them. In what follows, I consider what can be opened up by focusing on how problems are encountered and resolved in Becker's research practice and what is at stake when we engage Becker's methodological troubles as phenomena to be addressed in sociological literature.

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

Whilst the accomplishments of Becker's empirical research and its contribution to the sociology of knowledge are understood to have political implications for challenging taken for granted definitions of drug users as individualised, pathological subjects, the radicalism of Becker's sociological description is not without its critics. Rehearsing

Becker's particular problem of describing the set of changes in a person's conception of an activity as concerning a 'collectively achieved perception-interpretation' and 'accomplishment', Gomart (2002: 102) highlights the achievement of Becker's constructivist approach. Like those in science studies, Gomart argues that Becker's research on drug use poses the question of what gets constituted through these knowledge practices 'rather than the inherent qualities of the person' (2002: 100). And yet, Gomart (2002: 101) argues, a 'nagging problem remains'. Becker's constructivist move into deviant behaviour as a '*developing* behavioural pattern' (2002: 103 emphasis in original) that concerns group practices, techniques and settings is ambivalent about the 'ontology of substance', which 'is given and constant. It is only what people do, know or claim which can vary' (2002: 96). The problem that gets erased from Becker's description of the changes that take place through emergent practices of interpretation, according to Gomart, is 'the substance itself' (2002: 96). By not allowing substance to become an object of investigation, Gomart (2002: 96) argues that Becker's symbolic-interactionist analysis of drug use fails to address the empirical question of 'how the drug and its user, nonhuman and human, act'.

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



## Sociological problems

The practical and professional implications of Becker's methodology for contemporary sociology and sociological practice are investigated in greater detail by Motamedi-Fraser (2012) in 'Once upon a problem'. Drawing on *Telling about Society* (2007), Motamedi-Fraser highlights the particular significance of methods and problems in Becker's work. By posing the question who tells about society, Becker (2007) calls into question the doing of sociology by professional sociologists who claim to be the only ones who can produce sociological knowledge and that the sociologist's methods are the only ways of telling about society. For Becker (2007: 285), 'there is no best way to tell about society'; 'many methods can do the trick'. Examining the problem of describing social life beyond the disciplinary boundaries of sociology, Becker considers the representational work done by 'other kinds of workers' (2007: 6) 'to see what solutions to the *problem of description* one field might import from another' (2007: 4, my emphasis). In considering other ways of engaging the problem of description beyond the professional practices of sociologists and social scientists, Becker addresses the methodological problem of telling about society using social scientific and non-scientific methods including photography and photojournalism. By comparing a range of genres, Becker's aim is to show that all methods are good enough and no method solves the problems of description 'very well' (2007: 197). The trouble that arises in telling about society for both social science and photojournalism, according to Becker, is the problem of taking sides 'implicitly or explicitly' (2007: 143). For photojournalists, taking sides is defined as a technical problem that involves getting 'the image that best tells the already selected story' (2007: 201), of what readers already know and believe about the "problem" in advance rather than 'trying to discover things about it they didn't already know' (2007: 200). Similarly, Becker argues that social scientists take sides 'easily and too quickly identify the good and bad guys', 'when the real job at hand is to figure out how things work and present an accurate account of that understanding' (2007: 145). The problem of inadequate description in contemporary social science and photojournalism, according to Becker, reflects a methodological 'conservatism' (2007: 285), which restricts the use of methods to "'the right ways" of doing things' (2007: 286).

By exploring the question of who tells about society and showing how 'sociologists do not have privileged access to social analysis', Motamedi-Fraser argues 'Becker's aim is generous' (2012: 85). What concerns Motamedi-Fraser is 'whether Becker might not, inadvertently, be giving away the potential specificity of sociology and sociological practice too quickly' (2007: 85). *Telling about Society* (2012), according to Motamedi-Fraser, marks a significant moment for thinking about the 'usefulness' of sociology, not in terms of what it is, but what 'sociology *does*' with its materials and methods and what it is 'uniquely able to do' with the vast diversity of methods and methodologies at its disposal (2012: 102, emphasis in original). In drawing attention to the uses of different methods and methodologies, Becker, argues Motamedi-Fraser, highlights the role they play in enabling alternative imaginative patterns of relating in sociological research. Addressing the specificity of sociology and sociological practice as luring materials and methods into posing their own problems, 'without presuming to know what the problem is with the problem in advance' (2012: 101), or deciding what method is best suited,

Motamedi-Fraser draws attention to what sociology does with its materials and the doing of methods as the ‘gift’ (2012: 85) of sociological practice. What defines a “‘sociological” problem”, Motamedi-Fraser (2012: 86) argues, is not an expansion of methods and materials to discover, imagine and make visible new kinds of representations of the problems of society but the ‘extraction of a problem from a research project’. The specificity of a sociological problem, Motamedi-Fraser (2012: 96) explains, is located not in figure of the sociologist, the subject of research or society but ‘contingent upon the materials at hand’. What’s required to extract a problem from a research project, Motamedi-Fraser (2012: 87) suggests, is ‘attentiveness to materials and methods’ and a ‘willingness to be transformed by them’.

In defining sociological problems not in terms of what they tell about the problems of society but what they can do to ‘lure those materials and methods into posing *their own* problems’ (2012: 85, emphasis in original), Motamedi-Fraser replaces the methodological problem of telling about society with the problem of storying. Storying, according to Motamedi-Fraser, ‘displaces the privilege that telling has acquired in relation to stories’ (2012: 103) and distributes the sociological problem across or within a research assemblage that emerge from ‘discursive and non-discursive, human and non-human patterns of relations’ (2012: 103). Drawing on Becker’s account of belief as the sociologists relation to ‘what he is telling’ (2012: 95), and “‘the social agreement [by makers and users of a representation] to believe” what a representation is (Becker, 2007: 115, cited in Fraser, 2012: 90), Motamedi-Fraser argues that whilst the concept of make-believe is ‘less *authoritative*’ (2012: 96, emphasis in original) than making up or making-believe, and a ‘departure from some of the more familiar ways of organizing the relations between facts, truths and fiction’ (2012: 95), it is more ‘methodologically pragmatic’ and ‘an aid to the sociological imagination’ (2012: 96). By engaging Becker’s methodological problem of description as a sociological provocation to consider ‘the different kinds of ways is it possible to believe in a story, or not believe, and with what consequence’, Motamedi-Fraser (2012: 94) leaves open the significance of the materials, the figure of the researcher and the reader in problem-making. In the activity of holding open the question of, and experimenting with, what kinds of experiences different methods give rise to or allow, Motamedi-Fraser (2012: 102) suggests ‘sociology can make-believe realities imaginatively, without also abandoning its disciplinary distinctiveness’. The more relational human and non-human participants are in the research process, she argues, the more likely sociological knowledge will be imaginative and transformative in enabling alternative patterns of relations and experience to emerge within sociological practice.

Motamedi-Fraser’s (2009: 74) definition of a sociological problem as a solution that transforms or seeks to transform ordinary experience into sociological experience poses some important questions about the usefulness of the problem concept for sociological practice. In this final section of the article, I address the question posed by Motamedi-Fraser of how possible it is and how is it possible to craft a sociological problem ‘across the research assemblage as a “whole” rather than being located in the researcher, in the subject of research, in “society”’ (2012: 86), or within ‘any (single group) of “participants”’ (2012: 102). Taking seriously Becker’s concern with the problem of taking sides in contemporary practices of description, I consider the difference between telling about drug problems using non-scientific methods and the sociological problem of storying

injecting drug use. In crafting the objects of drug use in sociological practice (see Vitellone, 2017, 2018), my hope is to displace the privilege of telling about the problems of society as the pejorative of the storyteller, interpretive sociologist and problematising critic and make-believe sociological problems that disrupt and transform knowledge of the policy and practice of harm reduction. By remaining attentive to the materials at hand, I aim to show how the specificity of a sociological problem challenges more conventional methods of organising relations between truths, facts and fiction.

## Storying the syringe

On 12 May 2000, Rachel Jayne Whitear's death from a heroin overdose at the age of 21 was captured by a police photographer. Photographs of Rachel's bloated discoloured body bent over her last hit clasping a capped syringe in her bedsit in Dorset were released to the press by her parents in 2002 to educate children about the effects of drugs. The iconic photographic image of Rachel's body with a capped syringe lying next to her was included in the anti-drug school education prevention campaign *Rachel's Story*, a 22-minute video dedicated to building up a picture of Rachel's life through the eyes of her family and friends, made available to every secondary school child from 10 upwards in the UK. *Rachel's Story*, told primarily by her parents, focuses on Rachel's achievements as a piano player and her 10 GCSEs followed by her acceptance into Bath University and slow gradual decline. This personalised, individualised configuration of the drug problem in drug prevention campaigns, according to Race (2009: 64), involves the concerned subjectivity of the parent and the appearance of aspirational middle-class youth as the privileged object of anti-drug discourse. The problem of how to describe injecting drug use is spoken for. In order to avoid imposing the meaning of the drug problem through official regimes of knowledge and address the problem of experience, Race (2009: 169) calls for 'something a little more different'.

The challenge of telling about society through visual images of injecting drug use is explored in greater detail in the work of Fitzgerald (2016). Investigating syringe imagery in the media and news reports, Fitzgerald examines how the photographic method generates different problems for telling about society than social research methods. Compared with the problem of description in Becker's (2007, 2015) empirical study of drug use, where the linguistic intervention of naming 'deviants' drug users is deployed to interrupt conventional ways of thinking, the task of inventing other ways of telling about injecting drug use through photography, according to Fitzgerald (2016) and Rhodes and Fitzgerald (2006), requires generating different visual descriptions of drug users and the object of the syringe. What concerns Fitzgerald (2016: 30) is how a dominant reading of syringe imagery as danger, drugs, addiction and death continues to be 'cited and recited?' The problem with the photographic method of telling stories about injecting drug use in the news media according to Fitzgerald (2016: 106) is the representation of faceless and voiceless drug users as 'unknowable and illegitimate'. The solution to the problem of description, he argues, requires the 'recasting of actors in the storyline' (2016: 54). Recasting the syringe user 'in relation to the syringe' for Fitzgerald (2016: 54) 'is critical'. By casting the handler and the object in the storyline, Fitzgerald encourages drugs researchers to produce a different 'way of knowing the world through drugs' (2016: x),

which does not limit how the syringe is connected to stories. Describing the dominant uses of syringe imagery, Fitzgerald explains sometimes ‘the syringe is plugged into stories that do not support its existential weight’. Sometimes ‘its existential weight is so powerful’ ‘that it provides the perfect punch for those using its image’ (2016: 50). It is the combination of the young person and the syringe that ‘most clearly evokes a sense that the handler is not quite right’ and ‘something improper must be going on’ (2016: 46). The most revealing image of how the syringe image functions as danger in news media reports according to Fitzgerald is the representation of woman as ‘the most improper handlers of syringes’ who have no right to handle the object (2016: 47). By showing the limited ways the syringe is combined with stories about society, Fitzgerald’s descriptive practice of contextualisation encourages drug researchers to craft different stories which ‘recombine the narratives to which it can connect’ (2016: 54). Such a thick descriptive orientation, Fitzgerald (2016: 53) argues, ‘could be beneficial’ for reducing the fear associated with the syringe and provide support for harm reduction policies.

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

In 2008, the Independent Police Complaints Commission published their final report into the death of Rachel Whitear (IPCC 2008). The investigation is established in response to complaints made by Rachel’s parents about the police handling of the case. The investigation includes a case summary, witness statements and statements to the press. The first inquest into Rachel Whitear’s death in December 2000 returned an open verdict with no cause of death established. In 2003, the police opened a re-investigation into the circumstances surrounding Rachel’s death, following complaints from Rachel’s parents, Pauline and Mick Holcroft. The photograph of the syringe in Rachel’s hand as something improper is used by her parents as evidence to suggest that Rachel’s death was suspicious and recast her as a victim of her drug-using boyfriend. The iconic image of Rachel’s body with the syringe next to her in the news media anti-drugs awareness and education campaign becomes plugged into a story not of the social problem of drug use but intimate abuse and domestic violence. In the second inquiry, new evidence about the

syringe was uncovered that led to the arrest in 2003 of Rachel's boyfriend Luke Fitzgerald and his brother Simon Fitzgerald on suspicion of tampering with the scene of her death (IPCC, 2008). This particular combination of the syringe with a scene of a crime is so believable that her parent's application to the High Court in 2006 for an additional inquest into the causes of Rachel's death was accepted (IPCC, 2008). At the second inquest into Rachel's death in 2007, a witness claimed Rachel's boyfriend, Luke Fitzgerald gave her the fatal dose of heroin and that his brother cleaned up the scene and replaced the syringe Whitear had used with a new one. In her testimony, the witness, who was once a girlfriend of Fitzgerald's brother Simon, said Simon told her that Luke and Rachel had been arguing and he had been trying to have a hit when he gave her an injection. She was told that Luke stormed out and later returned to find Rachel on the floor (Morris, 2007a). Rachel's parents told the inquest they believed the witnesses version of events. But the jury sitting with the coroner at the second inquest decided there was insufficient evidence to bring a criminal case against them. Describing the absence of heroin in the barrel of the syringe as 'very puzzling and deeply perplexing', the coroner concluded 'it is not possible to say one way or another whether that needle was used or whether Rachel used it herself or was injected by a third party'. The coroner also added 'at the same time, we do know that drug users will help each other and inject each other and that is where we enter the area of criminality. It is an unsatisfactory position and there are many things we are unable to explain' (Morris, 2007b). In the absence of clear evidence, the inquest recorded a verdict of death by opiate intoxication but was not able to answer whether Rachel injected herself and whether a third party was present.

What is unsatisfactory in the inquest and IPCC Investigation report, I want to suggest, is the storying of the syringe. In confirming the link between Rachel's death and heroin, the police superintendent in charge of the inquest stressed that the anti-drugs prevention education video *Rachel's Story* told by her parents should not be questioned (IPCC, 2008). 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 evaluating the evidence deficit in the case, the coroner in his verdict extracts the syringe as a problem of description and not a social problem. The specificity of the problem is contingent on the material at hand. The methodological problem of describing the syringe in the photo of Rachel's death becomes the focus of the inquiry. In trying to let the 'puzzling' problem speak, the coroner attempts to recast this particular actor in the storyline. Describing *Rachel's Story* relationally, with other participants, the syringe is lured into posing its own problem. Storying the syringe disrupts the authoritative telling of *Rachel's Story* in the school anti-drugs education campaign. Drawing attention to the specificity of the syringe as a sociological problem reveals the limitations of epistemological and methodological frameworks to provide answers to social problems and respond to problematisations. Paying attention to the descriptive materials and methods at our disposal questions conventional knowledge practices. If paying attention to the many things we are unable to explain is central to how sociologists contribute to the storying of the world as a situated accomplishment which does not take problems, methods, materials, policies or sides for granted, it is critical for sociology to renew its commitment to the methodological problem of description as a provocation for intervening in the politics of knowledge and the crafting of problems that matter. Whether Love's provocation of thinking back into sociology's practices of

description can get us where we need to go, her analysis of sociological studies of deviance reveals the uses of Becker's research in a new light, not as a source of solutions or problems, but an urgent call to take our descriptive practices and sociological problems seriously.

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## ORCID iD

Nicole Vitellone  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0826-5973>

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## Author biography

Nicole Vitellone is AF Warr Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Liverpool.