
Criminology 321 / Week 3

Notes on Becker's "How I Learned What a 'Crock' Was"

Becker's article is a rare glimpse into the processes that went on in an eminent researcher's head as he was trying to figure out what the focus of his research would be. It's very much in the classically inductive and emergent tradition of qualitative research and reminds us that it's okay to have only a general and fuzzy idea about what our research will involve when we begin. If we truly believe that it is important to understand people's perceptual worlds, then we must give them a chance to show us what those worlds involve, what concepts they use that give it structure, and what motives/objectives they have that make it run. His account is not the 'only' way to do qualitative research – indeed, providing formulas would in itself be very "un-qualitative" – but it is one way and there is no better model than Becker for that approach. Here are some highlights:

1. Note how he starts starting off open-minded and perhaps naively. He has a general idea of what they will be studying, but he is looking for a conceptual door that will allow him to enter the students' worlds.

"We were going to study medical students and medical education but, to be truthful, I had very little idea of what I was going to do beyond 'hanging around with the students,' going to classes and whatever else presented itself. ... As far as I had gone in conceptualizing my problem was to say to myself that these kids came in one end and four years later came out at the other end, and something must certainly have happened to them in between. ... I knew next to nothing about the organization of medical education, and consoled myself about my ignorance with the 'wisdom' that told me that therefore I would have no prejudices either."

2. The place to start is simply to get the lay of the land, i.e., the basic story (people, activities). Remember that qualitative research emphasizes the idea that behaviour, and meaning, have to be understood in context, so step number 1 is often simply finding out more about what that context involves.

"With no problem to orient myself to, no theoretically defined puzzle I was trying to solve, I concentrated on finding out what the hell was going on, who all these people were, what they were doing, what they were talking about, finding my way around and, most of all, getting to know the six students with whom I was going to spend the next six weeks."

3. Note also how Becker actually listens to people and pays particular attention to the words that they use to explain things. Very often it is especially useful to pay attention to the more evaluative and emotive words that people use because these are especially informative in opening the door to the constructs that frame their worlds.

“One morning, as we made rounds, we saw a very talkative patient, who had multiple complaints to tell the doctor about, all sorts of aches, pains and unusual events. I could see no one was taking her very seriously and, on the way out, one of the students said, “Boy, she’s really a crock!” I understood this, in part, as shorthand for “crock of shit.” It was obviously invidious. But what was he talking about?”

4. Very often we hear people’s words and take for granted the accuracy of what they are saying. We hear someone say that so-and-so is a “real jerk,” for example, or that someone is a “great hockey player” or that a course that they took was a “waste of time” or a “mind-altering experience.” For Becker, however, the thing to do is not to look at the person and figure out how much of a jerk they are, or at the hockey player to determine how great s/he is, but rather to focus on the person doing the evaluating and try and figure out what led to that evaluation. What, in the person’s view, led to him/her labelling the other person “a great hockey player”? By getting them to explain their evaluation, you start to find out what, in this person’s eyes, contributes to greatness, which in turn tells you something about how they view the game of hockey, which in turn will tell you something about the connection they have to the game and the place it has in their lives.

Note, therefore, how Becker’s first inclination after hearing the patient referred to as a “crock,” was to start figuring out what the person meant by that term. So he pursued the point and tried to work out a definition.

“I ... came up [in a flash] with this profoundly theoretical question: “What’s a crock?” He looked at me as if to say that any damn fool would know that. So I said, “Seriously, when you called her a crock, what did you mean?” He looked a little confused. He had known what he meant when he said it, but wasn’t sure he could explain it. After fumbling for a while, he said it referred to someone with psychosomatic illness. That let him off the hook for the moment by partially satisfying my curiosity, though I still wanted to know what interest of his as a student was violated by a patient with psychosomatic illness.”

5. That was a good starting point, but then the next step would involve both refining the definition and applying it because, if Becker understood both the meaning of the term and how it was applied, then he should be able to use it in a way that his respondent would agree with.

The next patient happened to have a psychosomatic illness. After the examination, on the way out, Becker asked, “Crock, huh?” The intern looked at him as if he were a fool. “No, he’s not a crock.” “But why? He has a psychosomatic disease, doesn’t he?”

Other sessions followed where Becker and the interns discussed what a ‘crock’ was, generated new definitions, and tried them out until they agreed on one, i.e., where Becker could look at any patient, say whether s/he was a crock or not, and the interns would agree. Note also here how Becker is starting to involve the other students as well. Part of the reason for doing this is to discover just how broadly shared the concept is, and how much diversity there is in the way that it is applied. To the extent you see consensus on things, you may be seeing the result of the “socialization” and shared norms/values that a socialization process entails and produces. To the extent that you see diversity, you are also getting a window into the different ways that a given event or person or phenomenon can be perceived. For example, take a look at the

movie reviews that people produce at <http://www.cinematiclock.com/clock/bri/Vancouver.html> or talk to your fellow students about how they view a particular professor or course. Some people will like the movie/professor/course; others will dislike it/him/her. The goodness or badness of the thing lies only partially in the thing itself; some part of it also lies in the person doing the evaluating.

6. It's that next step that's particularly important, however. Noticing the words that people use – and particularly their evaluative words – is important, but it only means that you have found a door; the next step requires you to walk through: If the concept is important, what difference does it make in the lives of participants, i.e., how is it used, and how is it reflective of interests/action?

“...My problem was only half solved. I still had to find out why students thought crocks were bad. What interests of theirs was compromised by a patient with many complaints and no pathology?”

7. Becker then outlines how the concept of ‘crock’ relates to the interests and aspirations of the medical students, their views of medicine, their relationships with patients, and with each other. Not bad for a tiny little concept. The lesson here is that insights are an important starting point, but not very useful until you unpack them and their implications:

“Intuitions are great but they don't do much for us unless we follow them up with the detailed work that shows us what they really mean, what they can really account for.”