Jazz in Social Interaction: Personal Creativity, Collective Constraint, and Motivational Explanation in the Social Thought of Howard S. Becker

Although symbolic interactionist studies are often thought to abandon motivational explanation in favor of a focus on social process, the interactionist tradition has usefully employed two deterministic themes. One is inherent in the appreciation of the actor's inescapable sense of interactional significance for behavior that will be socially witnessed. A second deterministic theme appreciates external constraints on the individual's perception and generation of social acts. The former shapes all work in symbolic interactionism. The latter has been developed most consistently in the work of Howard S. Becker. Without addressing the matter as such, Becker has worked with a series of ideas about constraint on individual motivation, ideas that are harmonious with the interactionist's understanding of personal creativity in social action. His writings invite a reconsideration of the supposed antagonism between the appreciation of interactive process and the understanding of motivational constraint. Becker's work on motivation is also notable for outlining a theory of increasing constraints through the life cycle, constraints which, if appreciated by the actor, carry paradoxically liberating implications. The distinctive interplay of personal creativity and collective constraint in his thought is succinctly captured by the metaphor of jazz in social interaction.

* Direct all correspondence to: Jack Katz, Department of Sociology, University of California, Los Angeles, California 90024-1551.

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Many of the classic theoretical writings on symbolic interaction suggest that explanation must focus on issues of "how" social life works rather than on "why" people act in particular ways. Herbert Blumer's essays frequently criticized writings that portray the social act as the materialization of attitudes or psychological predispositions, the implication of a person's status in an institutional context, or the consequence of temporally prior events. Blumer insisted that close empirical study would always discover a situationally contingent interpretive process within the formation of the social act, a process through which the individual considered alternative courses of conduct by taking into account the likely responses of others who subsequently might perceive and respond to the individual's action (1969, pp. 81, 94-95).

Does an appreciation of the actor's interpretive practices require that the analyst abandon motivational explanation? If we insist that our explanations of behavior remain true to the "how" of social life, must we abandon the quest to explain "why" people interpret certain lines of conduct as more compelling than others?

Many symbolic interactionists have seemed to answer in the affirmative. This is typically expressed not directly but by declaring that one's research objectives should be stated in some form other than motivational explanation. Some of the common rhetorical devices are to pitch the study as: the search for "sensitizing concepts," a preliminary investigation that maps the lived realities of social life so that subsequent studies might more accurately define the independent and dependent variables to be used in explanatory research; or an inquiry in a discovering science that needs no further justification if the author succeeds in locating processes never before described and typified as forms of social interaction.

The view that interactionist research is limited to descriptive objectives seems especially forceful when we consider ahistorical social psychological studies that analyze social action along lines of theoretical universality. Consider the many studies by Erving Goffman on behavior in public places, the foundational works in conversation analysis, and Anselm Strauss' examinations of the negotiated character of social life. Goffman convinces us that if we look at any social act undertaken in face-to-face relations, we will find individuals shaping their conduct to influence the impressions that others will take of them, but Goffman makes no attempt to explain why an individual will adopt any particular form of conduct (1963, 1971). The conversation analysts show us such phenomena as the intricate monitoring of turn taking and the subtle achievement of repairs to potential misunderstandings in face-to-face, or ear-to-ear (e.g., phone) discourse, but they happily build an instructive corpus of empirical findings on universal aspects of conversational practice without a concern to establish the contingencies governing the motivation to enter and sustain conversations (Sacks 1992; Schegloff 1979). While Strauss (1978) reveals much to us by elaborating the forms in which social order is negotiated, his analysis confidently diverts attention from an explanation of "outcomes," and we cannot easily learn from him why people will
sometimes stick to a definition of a situation that they later regard as having been insufficiently flexible, while at other times and in other social circumstances they will readily revise their understandings and produce an unanticipated and unexpectedly rewarding appreciation of their relations with others.¹

In one respect, all interactionist analyses belie the facile critique that they deny determinism. All interactionists in practice take for granted that determinism is inherent in the process of social interaction itself. Interactionists understand the actor as shaping conduct in order to shape the responsive actions of others. Although critics have at times charged that interactionists have an overly manipulative view of the actor, interactionist analyses assume, somewhat to the contrary, that the actor is, in effect, condemned to a manipulative freedom. If one perceives that others may perceive one's own conduct, one cannot but respond to that possibility, whether the response be acquiescence to others' views of oneself or a tactic aimed at avoiding the ability of others to perceive one's presence or conduct. In the interactionist's view, the actor's perception that he or she is subject to other's (immediate or time-delayed) perceptions is self-indicating; inevitably, an awareness of being perceived makes any course of action adopted by the actor emerge as a socially significant response. Should a person not attribute any self-provoking significance whatsoever to his or her awareness that others are aware of him or her, the interactionist would have nothing to say about such a (logically possible) moment.

In the work of most interactionists, this deterministic assumption is taken for granted; implicitly, it is what lends an interactionist cast to sociological analysis; and it is so mild in its substantive implications as to go unnoticed. The actor, perceiving him or herself to be perceived by others, is constrained only to engage in an interactive process, not to take on any particular, much less any persistent, line of action.

The work of Howard S. Becker is virtually unique in using the symbolic interactionist tradition directly to address motivational questions about recurrent lines of individual action. In a series of writings over his long career, Becker has repeatedly contributed to understandings of the processes that motivate personal action and of structural constraints on those processes. Although he has never written a comprehensive reflection on his various contributions to causal analysis, his research has made several interconnected, cumulatively valuable contributions to an understanding of individual motivation that is thoroughly interactionist. Read as a whole, his work offers a genuinely theoretical understanding of motivation, one that is not limited to but crosscuts the individual's participation in highly diverse, indeed in perhaps any, social and institutional context.

In trying to pull out of Becker's work his coherent theory of individual motivation in social interaction, I have found three organizing principles to be especially useful. One is to consider the interplay of personal creativity and collective constraint in his various studies and writings. Becker has contributed an original series of observations on the workings of individual freedom and collective constraint, significantly enhancing
our analytic capacity to appreciate the places of creativity and compulsion in social action.

Second, when Becker's work is considered roughly in its chronological order of publication, an implicit motif appears, one that charts the development of motivation in the adult life cycle. It is striking, for example, that in his earliest writings on motivation—the famous marijuana user paper that has been so compelling to young readers in college—motivations are all in the foreground of social action, as part of a process to be learned, and not at all in the actors' backgrounds or past; that in later work, concepts of "latent culture" and of "commitment" progressively suggest the acquisition of determining resources and constraints in more advanced educational and work careers; and that in still later work, as in his essay of seasoned reflections on social science writing, his advice to the novice writer is in part to take for granted that in fact what one has to write really is not an open matter when the sociologist sits down at the writing desk, but has already been essentially determined. In effect, Becker's work, read over the trajectory of his career, outlines a general theory of a changing relationship between personal creativity and collective constraint in the adult self.

A third organizing motif is the concept of jazz music playing. If the examples just given suggest contradictory impulses with regard to freedom and constraint, the model of participating in a jazz ensemble indicates how to comprehend the resources and constraints of traditions and conventions in shaping conduct even as the individual plays with unfolding possibilities and innovates his or her line of action. There is textual evidence in Becker's work that his adolescent vocational and subsequent avocational experience as an ensemble piano player has been related substantively to several of his lines of sociological insight. The biographical connections indicate that a jazz metaphor would work nicely to capture his distinctive "take" on how personal flexibility and the constraints of collective context are related in the formation of individual motives. In order to respect the way the metaphor has operated in Becker's own career, I will keep the jazz metaphor mostly implicit in the current text, bringing it out directly only to provide a celebratory note for the conclusion.

**MOTIVATIONAL APPRENTICESHIP**

Becker wrote "Becoming a Marijuana User" about forty years ago (1953). Largely ignored when first published, the essay subsequently became world famous when republished in the 1960s in the writings he collected under the title *Outsiders* (1963). The context of youth was essential to the character of the essay in several senses. Becker's introduction to marijuana use developed through his participation in the social worlds of professional musicians, a setting in which he occasionally had to lie about his age in order to work in establishments serving liquor. His youth in the 1940s and early 1950s was a fertile context for being struck by the perception of middle-aged
musicians engaged in this still-hidden and myth-laden practice. In the 1960s, the playful character of the marijuana user's experience enabled "pot" to serve as a common denominator, creating a deviant identity shared by users with widely varying degrees of political awareness and militancy, and Becker's essay became popular reading in college courses, trailing behind the spread of marijuana smoking as an international youth movement developed.

The youth theme also played a key, if unstated, role in the perspective on motivational explanation that Becker introduced with the essay. As David Matza has long since noted in his rich reflections, the piece was deceptively simple in style and modest in tone (1969, p. 109). Becker starts the article by setting it in the tradition of Alfred Lindesmith's theory of opiate addiction (1947), as a demonstration that motivational explanation need not impute deterministic force to background factors. Strategically, Becker framed the matter to be explained not as individual instances of smoking but as "sustained" use; experiences of first use were swiftly placed outside the scope of explanation. With this move, Becker dispensed with the need to account for relationships between initial use and prior events or predispositions. The only necessary background conditions for becoming a marijuana user were an interest in experimentation and the happenstance of being in a setting in which others were accomplished users.

The relevant explanatory factors were expressed through a youthful metaphor, as three different stages of "learning": of distinctive techniques of respiratory control, of the ability to identify the effects of smoking as related to marijuana, and of a perspective in which the effects were experienced as enjoyable. The entire process was treated as nothing more than a kind of educational accomplishment, as the sort of "learning" to which a student should already be open.

Other potentially useful metaphors for describing and analyzing marijuana use were not exploited. Trained at Chicago by (among several important interactionist sociologists) Everett C. Hughes, Becker might have treated the experience as material for an ironic sociology of "work." Ethnomethodologists would later apply a "work" perspective to the "construction" of a wide variety of everyday social acts that are not formally activities of "work" (e.g., Sacks 1984), and Becker himself was at about this time engaged in his doctoral studies of the work careers and work worlds of Chicago public school teachers.

Another potentially useful metaphor, that of the symbolic appeals of deviance, was likewise ignored. Indeed, Becker treated the novice pot smoker as essentially indifferent to the public status of marijuana as an outlawed substance. But an arguable case could be made that the location of marijuana in social worlds that had been publicly defined as deviant, in the minimal sense of disreputable and exotically secretive, was significant to the user's motivations in the jazz music worlds of the 1940s and 1950s, much as it was to become in the "anti-Establishment" youth movements of the 1960s. By Becker's own account, sustained use is developed not through an
autodidactic process but through a process guided by others, in settings of collective use. At least in a minimal sense, one would have to be comfortable identifying with others whose use was somewhat secretive; and marijuana use offered a sense of being "wise" in knowing something valuable about which the "straight" world remained foolishly ignorant. If one were looking for necessary conditions to be included in a causal explanation, a version of the following formula would seem plausible: identifying with others who anticipated that they would be identified as deviant, were they discovered by conventional members of society. There was an opportunity for at least considering the possible influence of the romantic appeal of marijuana's deviant status to those who find themselves at the opening stage of the process, even if symbolic appeals were irrelevant to experienced users who sustained use privately and independent of the deviant social contexts in which the initial learning took place.

But Becker ignored the metaphors of adult work and of the seductions of deviance in favor of an image of novice students, some of whom would be avid learners while others would be more haphazard in their attentions to training. Like the metaphor of the young person in the equal opportunity society, the determinants of career, here the career of marijuana use, lay all in the future, in motivations to be acquired, not in resources or handicaps conferred by family background, social status, or geographical location. Could we say anything theoretically and empirically consistent about the motivating causes of marijuana use before the three learning tasks were taken on? No. Could we predict that, having learned the three lessons of marijuana use, users would indefinitely sustain use? Yes, but only to the extent that they continued to "enjoy" use. What that enjoyment consisted of lay beyond Becker's efforts (a gap later filled by Matza [1969, pp. 117-142]), and while the explanation formally expressed prediction, the contingencies of sustained enjoyment were treated as essentially open. The accomplished user was neither blessed nor condemned to continue use indefinitely. He (it seems that "she" would less often fit) was essentially free at the start of the process of acquiring the motivation, and remained essentially free at the end. At least, no environmental constraints were created in the process, certainly no "addiction," not even the inertial force of habit.

During the 1950s, Becker made implicit connections between his work on marijuana smoking and his work on deviance, connections which became partially explicit when he compiled the papers he had written on marijuana and on dance musicians and published Outsiders (1963). His infinitely quoted statement on the nature of deviance, that it should be considered not as a quality of an act but as a quality conferred on an act by others, appeared in the introduction to that book. As in the marijuana user essay itself, in his "labeling" perspective on deviance, Becker was denying determinism and sustaining an image of the individual in society as essentially free from the influence of acts he had conducted and statuses he had occupied earlier in his life. In a sense, his early work was a celebration of youthful freedom in the face of shibboleths that would foolishly deny it.
LATENT CULTURE

In studying how students change in college and in medical school, Becker shifted his focus to a later stage in the life cycle and discovered the causal relevance of background factors. The title used for his collaborative study of medical students, *Boys in White* (Becker, Geer, Hughes, and Strauss 1961), reflected an interest in personal change in adult life. This interest, somewhat masked in the medical student study itself, became explicit in the college study (1968), when he found that undergraduates had, as their initial perspective on the meaning of the college experience, a concern to assess and promote their development as adults. And “personal change in adult life” appeared in the title of analytic writing he published in the 1960s (1977).

Becker found that virtually all medical students confronted an institutionally provoked existential dilemma. The dilemma was created by their initial, idealistic aspirations to heal the sick and their respect for the vast medical learning that the faculty expected them to acquire. There was too much to learn and, in order make the learning demands manageable, choices had to be made as to what to study. But for the would-be doctors, it was premature to limit their learning to a medical specialty and, in any case, the curriculum did not initially encourage that expedient solution.

Becker’s analytic appreciation of the issue was a pristine example of the pragmatist tradition: the students, both in college and medical school, faced real, practical problems in shaping their personal efforts and lives to meet institutional demands that were seemingly oblivious to the personal adaptations that the students would have to make. In a way that John Dewey would have found compelling, Becker found culture emerging to solve practical problems. The result of the students’ dilemma was their creation of a shared perspective to guide their allocation of effort.

If, in his study of “learning” to become a marijuana user, Becker found an educational metaphor useful for explaining an informal process of personal change, then conversely and ironically, in his studies of personal change among young people in formal educational settings, Becker adopted an analytic stance derived from the sociology of work. College students developed a focus on obtaining good grades, in effect their pay, that often overwhelmed their intellectual interests. Grades were important, not simply as measures of academic achievement or intellectual ability but as indicators of students’ abilities to face pressing career challenges as adults—for example, by managing the competing demands of public institutional and private social life. Although Becker did not characterize the medical students as “oppressed” workers, he understood their sense of the pressure to study, not simply as an intellectual problem but as a series of recurrent problems imposed by superiors, such as how to budget time, what to emphasize in studying and what to neglect, and how to know that one had studied “enough” for a particular exam. He might as well have been writing about dilemmas of the working class.
For medical students, the faculty’s limitless demands led to a search for nonintellectual bases for setting priorities in studying, and these bases, when they were discovered, were found in “latent” commonalities in their backgrounds. Fraternity brothers, married students, medical students from the same towns or who had maintained personal ties in college life, worked out a joint perspective on how much and what should be studied. Like factory workers, the medical students created informal relations that supported study-quota restrictions.4

Perhaps to avoid suggesting psychological explanation, Becker’s analysis did not highlight the emotional dimensions of the medical students’ solution. Their study demands were clearly experienced as provoking intense anxieties and, thus, the latent identities might be expected to offer solutions by providing emotional resources that could be relied upon in a nonrational way. The solution to the study dilemma was produced not through an explicit analysis by which the students formally assigned priorities to study demands but through their acquisition of a sense of comfort based on the fact that others whom one trusted as like oneself and who provided informal support in marital or fraternal relations, were handling the demands in a similar fashion.

The way that Becker glossed over the emotional dimensions of the process was represented in a memorable phenomenon, the reference by medical students to certain patients as “crock,” a pattern that Becker drew upon both in the monograph and in analytic articles. “Crock” suggested malingering but had a meaning more precisely related to the students’ dilemma. It was an emphatically disparaging term applied to patients who, although perhaps genuinely ill, presented complaints that were not useful to students in their efforts to learn medicine. The emotional parallel between the collective ridiculing of patients as crocks and the students’ anxieties is present in the data, but no effort is made to explicate the connection as a notable finding in the sociology of emotions.

A brief review of my study of poverty lawyers (Katz 1982) may clarify Becker’s implicit appreciation of how “latent” background factors emotionally motivate processes of personal change. Beginning in the 1960s, neighborhood law offices were funded by the federal government to provide legal assistance within the close reach of poor people. Typically staffed with between three and five highly idealistic new law-school graduates, the neighborhood poverty law offices exhibited a phenomenon closely analogous to the dilemma faced by students in medical school. As soon as a new neighborhood office would open its doors, poor people would come in such numbers, and each with so many legal problems (housing, welfare, consumer contract, family disputes, etc.) that the novice lawyers typically felt overwhelmed. The result was very high turnover: it was rare for new staff lawyers to last a year in a neighborhood office; many left in the first weeks of their employment; and exceptionally few became aggressive advocates for the poor and remained on the job for more than two years.
Instructed by Becker's findings, I found that latent culture was the key factor in the careers of the twelve young lawyers who, out of a pool of about one hundred who had worked in the Chicago poverty neighborhood law offices in the 1960s and 1970s, were the rare success stories. The twelve were associated in six dyads. Like many of those who left quickly or became depressed and passive ("burned out") on the job, in a few of the pairs, the members had known each other before starting legal assistance work, but most met on the job.

Notably, the common ties they found in their backgrounds were most often surprising discoveries to the young lawyers themselves. In one case, two office mates had lived and "partied" together as fraternity brothers in college, and while they were now married and more distant in their off-work social lives, on the job they would continually weave a combination of humor and "macho" mutual ribbing into the daily work routine. In another pair, the two met each other on the job and built a unique rapport based on idiosyncratic background commonalities, such as an appreciation of Chicago in juxtaposition to their childhoods in small rural Illinois towns and unusually strong postures of privacy about their personal lives, that was related to a shared sense of being outsiders (one was a white male married to a black woman and the other was homosexual, facts that were largely unknown within the liberal organization). In another case, both members of the pair were from financially and socially elite families, he from northern California and she from New York City; in contrast to the other dyads, their personal interaction was related less directly to their legal work than to after-hours socializing. In still another case, two raw, white, law graduates opened a new office on the South side and desperately sought guidance that neither could provide the other. They floundered on the verge of quitting until an elderly black lawyer came on staff as the head of the office. Then, they quickly began a tutelage under his direction, a relationship in which they were fascinated as much by his familiarity with the area and Chicago history as by his court experience in small matters.

These relations were rich in a variety of emotional dimensions—most prominent were raucous humor and fraternal affection—that transformed "impossible" demands into a relish for the challenge of working in a setting universally regarded as absurdly understaffed. As a practical matter, what the members of the pairs uniquely provided to each other was not technical advice on limiting client demands; the techniques for limiting work demands were widely known: closing doors during certain hours, specializing and referring matters outside the chosen specialties to other offices, lobbying the central organization for additional resources. In offices without a strong local culture, young middle class lawyers, many with "elite" law educations, could not make sense of developing these innovations and sustaining restrictions on work demands in the face of the routinely heart-rending problems presented by their clients. With a strong local culture based on shared features of earlier biography, the pairs became cohorts, experiencing their common challenge as a unique opportunity to
develop diffuse features of their personalities to meet the demands of an extraordinary experiment in American legal history. Work became exciting, quite often fun; relations at work spilled back and forth over the boundaries between life on and off the job; and the quality of the experience itself provided the motivation to sustain involvement.

Becker’s concept of latent identities offers a unique way to appreciate the essential role of biographical background factors in the causal process of personal change, without in any way implying a determinism that would obscure the situationally contingent and personally creative nature of the process. “Latent” culture does not imply that the sociologist can, in any individual case, predict the prior experiences that will become resources as individuals adapt to new institutional challenges. As indicated by the careers of poverty lawyers, the fertile resources for creating a local culture are too idiosyncratic and too indirectly related to the technical demands of institutional challenge to suggest a predictive table of independent variables out of the range of commonalities that may plausibly be located in pre-organizational biographies. When applied to novel research settings, one of the chief appeals of the concept of latent identities is its utility in guiding the researcher to appreciate, in a genuinely “humanistic” way, the surprising creativity with which people can themselves discover shared, practically relevant resources in what had previously been occupationally irrelevant corners of their personal histories.

Applied in this nondeterministic fashion, “latent identities” is a widely useful concept with which sociologists can explain social processes on various analytic levels. At a collective level, it draws our attentions to the ways that whole societies invent their pasts. No “nation” can exist without some culture that celebrates how a collective past provides resources for contemporary challenges, but the past that a society will invent as it attempts to become a nation is surprisingly unpredictable (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Becker’s own applications have been at the level of personal change in institutional settings, and more broadly to occupational careers. His early work experience as a dance and night club ensemble musician made a personally convincing case for the concept. In his later writings on the social worlds of art, he refers to the surprising facility with which musicians use “conventions” in order to collaborate successfully when meeting each other for the first time at a “gig.” One member of the ensemble will start a line of a few notes, the other members will quickly identify the tune and a number of different ways it may evolve in the playing, and the players may then smoothly integrate their playing with that of the other members. The experience is one of repeatedly discovering that in prior engagements, in listening to others’ performances and in solo practicing, one has acquired a shared background with other musicians, a background that often was not originally appreciated as a resource for meeting the situational demands of work tasks. Becker’s appreciation of the resourcefulness of musical conventions was striking; he notes that they enabled him to play for hours in night clubs while half asleep.
THE EVOLUTION OF EXPECTATIONS

If "latent culture" expressly treats the past in a distinctively nonconstraining fashion—as a resource exploited to meet situational demands rather than as an independently active influence; a contrasting but more implicit theme about latent identity is also present in Becker's writings. The trajectory of Becker's work describes the individual as full of freedom in youth and progressively determined in the age and occupational life cycle. The first hint of a deterministic influence of background in his writings is in his work on college students, and in a provocative, brief comparative essay on college and non-college youth.

Becker characterizes college students as initially searching, in a spirit that virtually celebrates their freedom, for clues to their possible futures. Young people do not typically enter college to prepare for a preselected career or for a particular future that they have already appreciated as designed into their lives.

The chief characteristic of students' [initial] generalized goal ... is an emphasis on college as a place in which one grows up and achieves the status of a mature adult. To manage one's college life properly (whatever meaning is attributed to that vague statement) shows that one has what it takes to be a mature adult, for the problems of college life are seen as much more like those of the adult world than anything that has come before .... [In this perspective, the students regard it as important to have] the ability to manage time and effort efficiently and wisely, to meet responsibilities to other people and to the organizations one belongs to, and to cope successfully with the work one is assigned (1968, p.31).

Confronting the organizational demands of college life from this perspective, students typically become focused on "making grades" with a narrowness and intensity that they often had not anticipated and that their professors frequently (and somewhat hypocritically, Becker implies) bemoan. Given the variety of courses that they take, "making grades" can only indicate the students' future lives in an extremely vague and diffuse manner. Students take grades most consistently as making statements, not about the kind of historian, scientist, lawyer, or psychologist they will become, but as reflecting their capacity to succeed as adults, whatever that will come to mean in particular occupational forms.

Yet in this process—and here we must read between the lines of Becker's texts—college students implicitly shape their occupational expectations in ways likely to influence their evaluations of different work experiences and opportunities. Becker summarizes his findings on college students in an important comparative analysis that he makes with the educational experiences of non-college youth in training schools and courses (Becker 1970, pp. 227-242). Drawing on a range of studies conducted by his students, Becker notes that non-college youth attend trade schools typically while living at home, while college youth more commonly must make new arrangements for meeting their personal needs (doing the laundry, furnishing a
residence, working out new relations with roommates, and developing new routines for eating and sleeping). For students in trade schools, course requirements continue the supervisory style that is characteristic of American secondary schools, with student performance frequently scheduled on a daily basis. Meanwhile college students, for the first time in their lives, often sit passively in large lecture halls for weeks or months before they are required to submit their work for faculty review. Trade schools, in contrast to college life, tend to be single sex environments where dress, casual conversation and social graces in general are much less relevant. And trade school students, motivated to learn practically useful knowledge for particular occupations, often must press for more instruction from teachers who tend to stretch out the corpus of knowledge they have to present, while college students often find themselves faced with seemingly overwhelming work burdens, either because they have indulged their freedom to put off daily work efforts, because their professors are exceptionally demanding, or because they are uncertain as to how much studying is required to obtain "good" grades.

Students implicitly take out of the college experience something significant that is not available to trade school students. In a phrase, they come to expect that their occupational lives will take middle class forms, while trade school students are drawn from and trained for the disciplinary structure of working class life. College students come to take for granted that they will be paid "salaries" in organizations or occupational structures that formally review their performance irregularly or over large spans of time; while trade school graduates are encouraged to anticipate compensation for "piece" or "wage" work, in which remuneration is tied relatively closely to hours spent and quantifiable work products. College students find themselves prepared to move to new locations and set up new personal life routines in order to exploit job possibilities. And college students learn, again implicitly, that they can readily take on and shed any of a large number of intellectual vocabularies, a facility that lays grounds for self-confidence that one can change occupational specialties and move into bureaucratic work worlds with initially "foreign" symbolic systems.

In short, if the college student's focus on "making the grade" is not directly relevant for any particular occupational future, the process of personal change entailed in developing the grade-point perspective is distinctively useful for middle class occupational careers in general. In providing novel challenges for relating personal life to institutional demand, college experience becomes a "latent culture" that college graduates will exploit in innumerable if specifically unpredictable ways in shaping their work careers.

In this version, "latent culture" has a constraining as well as a resource-providing undertone. Becker gently suggests that his analysis may have value in explaining social class differentiation of occupational careers. If college students gain social psychological resources useful for middle class careers, working class students
emerge from trade school courses with significant disadvantages. Moreover, if college
students become adept at a flexible interrelation of personal and occupational life,
they would seem likely to view as unacceptable those job constraints that in effect
treat them as back in secondary school, that is, working class occupations in general.

THE CONCEPT OF COMMITMENT

If there is an extreme image of human freedom in the explanation of motivation as
something acquired through learning, and a liberating view of the relation of personal
history and present circumstance in the notion of “latent identity” as a previously
acquired resource for contemporary problem solving, there is an image of at least
modest constraint on the flexibility of adult personality in the idea that expectations
evolve through higher educational experience to a perspective that will as likely
produce discontents as prepare individuals to seize new opportunities. The sense
of constraint is modest because it is still phenomenological or self-imposed. After years
of focus on “making the grade,” young adults may be more likely to find tightly
supervised work environments unduly constraining, but they are also more prepared
to escape by changing firms, fields or residence.

With the concept of commitment, Becker for the first time squarely finds the
individual’s choices and mobility constrained by the temporally prior actions of
others. In writing about commitment, Becker followed his treatment of marijuana use
and defined the matter to be explained as persisting with a line of action. That might
mean persistence in a formal organizational sense, such as staying on a job or in
a marriage, but persistence would also encompass predictability in sexual interaction
or the routine practice of a profession.

“Persistence,” Becker suggested, may be explained in significant part by
understanding that people commit themselves to an affiliation or style of conduct by
making “side bets” on their lines of social action, often unwittingly. The metaphor of
side bets came from game theory and provocatively suggests an image of adult life
as, wily nily, containing a dimension of gambling. You start on a job for the intrinsic
challenge, for the money, or as a temporary attachment while awaiting an opportunity
to practice your real talents, and several years later, when attractive opportunities arise
elsewhere, you turn around to find that you now have a spouse who has a locally
embedded career, children whom you would rather not counsel through the anxieties
of changing schools and making new friends, and pension rights that would have to
be cashed in at a time when the market is abysmally low. Or you are a middle-aged
public school teacher, relegated in the early part of your career to the classrooms
in ghetto schools that are available for the “last hired,” who now has enough seniority
to move to openings in middle-class areas but who never has revised curriculum nor
developed any disciplinary tactics save those fit for tough kids. Or, for years you have
made good money as a weekend dance and night club musician, and even though
this week you do not need the money and have more attractive options for Saturday night, you know that if you do not respond positively to the booking agent’s call, you risk sacrificing the long-term investments that you have made in a reputation for reliability.

The force of Becker’s article on commitment relied not on the wealth of evidence presented—the examples he gives are rich in variety but not deeply detailed, much less statistically backed; nor on analytically engaging comparisons with other explanations of commitment—amazingly, no sociologist seemed to have taken up the question before. The paper is distinctly valuable because of the novel question addressed and the phenomenologically compelling applications that are suggested. We all know that it has worked just like that for us, in relations and lines of action that Becker himself does not address.

The idea is phenomenologically compelling because it points, not to background factors or actions of others which somehow hold the power to constrain an individual’s future action, but to the individual in his moment of turning around and becoming aware of the commitments he has taken on. The concept offers a uniquely pragmatic form of determinism. Strictly considered, it is not what others have done—a reality that is socially and temporally in the background and outside of the actor’s current situation—that constrains him or her; it is what they will probably do: cash out your pension rights at current market value; revise their image of your reliability; complain to their parents, and they to the principal, that you are too heavy-handed in the classroom. In a way continuous with the perspective he took in the marijuana user article, Becker maintains an image of motivation as controlling the individual from his future rather than from his past. Becker’s actor is not pushed around by others and by his past; he adjusts to current situational circumstances through a perspective on possible future courses of action.

But something important has changed since the marijuana user analysis and the studies of student life. Now others enter the motivational world of the actor not solely as guides, teachers, and helpful member’s of one’s cohort. Now they stand on the temporal horizons of one’s current choices as people prepared to act in newly problematic ways. What they will do, if one changes course, is impose new costs. Here, then, is a negative, constraining understanding of how the social environment enters into the actor’s situational adjustments. The actor is still free to persist or alter direction, but either way there will be costs because of the reciprocal adjustments others will make, either direct costs (lost investments, complaints to the principal) or the indirect cost of the opportunities lost if one does not change course.

In several respects, Becker’s concept of commitment reflects a more advanced stage in the adult life cycle. At its time of publication he was about 32, not middle aged but ready to provide a marked contrast to the common adolescent conception of motivation-as-fun in the marijuana paper. Many of the examples describe people in the full throes of established occupational careers, not raw youths, not students.
And many readers will appreciate that in addition to insight there is a large measure of wisdom in the paper, knowledge seasoned by obdurate experience. There is a broader perspective on adult personality development in the commitment paper than in the work directed to earlier stages in the life cycle, because Becker is now, for the first time, considering individual motivation within the context of "collective" behavior.

Symbolic interactionism may be summarized by insisting on two perspectives on social process that might be characterized as the shrewd and the wise. On the level of individual behavior, the symbolic interactionist observes the interpretive process through which the actor anticipates the responses of others to various lines of action that he or she might undertake. On the collective level, symbolic interactionists appreciate that we are constantly embedded in social worlds that will respond to us, not only beyond the limits of any organizational formalities that might describe the others with whom we share mutual responsibilities, but also beyond the limits of our ability to grasp the ways that our actions will be significant for others.

Much of the work of symbolic interactionists, particularly that of Erving Goffman, sticks with the first theme and shrewdly demonstrates the versatility with which actors manipulate the responses of others by controlling the impressions others will receive. Becker's work takes on a dimension of wisdom just where he goes beyond this appreciation of the actor in control of the impressions he makes. Side bets are made, often unwittingly, because at any given moment, one is unaware of the myriad others who are directly, more often indirectly, interacting with oneself: the pension managers deciding on the balance of investments between volatile stocks and stable bonds, the booking agents ranking in order of reliability the piano players they have used, etc. In the marijuana paper, the relevant others were immediately present in the individual's face-to-face environment; in the student studies, the relevant others were faculty and other students, all interrelated within the boundaries of the school as a formal social organization. With the concept of commitment, we begin to appreciate how adult life loses the desultory character of youth as one's actions inevitably enter into collective acts that range beyond one's capacity to grasp fully and continuously the meaning of one's behavior for others, beyond one's ability to shape personal identity according to one's immediately situated intentions, choices, desires.

**THE CHALLENGE TO SUSTAIN MOTIVATIONAL FREEDOM**

In his earliest writings, Becker stressed the individual's motivational freedom within his collectively defined situation. In contrast to the familiar folk belief that young users of illicit drugs are seduced by "peer pressure," against their will or better judgment, Becker characterized the novice user as an eager student engaged in a complex learning process and seeking from others not acceptance or approval but simply fun. No "pressure" of any kind plays a role in his understanding of becoming a marijuana user.
Similarly in his work on the labeling of deviance, Becker's stress was on the individual's freedom more than on the constraints imposed by those who would label him deviant. His central message was that "deviance" should be analyzed by the sociologist, not as a feature of the so-called "deviant's" personality or action, but as a feature of the biographies of those labeling others deviant. Repeatedly, positivist readings of the "labeling school" of deviance have missed this emphasis on the abiding freedom of those labeled deviant. Becker's drug users do not take up illicit practices because they have been officially identified and condemned. His introduction to marijuana users was in the world of adult professional musicians in the 1940s and 1950s, an underground or bohemian world where, in his account, "secret deviance" did not owe its motivations, whether directly or through inverse rejection, to the moral pressures of conventional respectability. His "labeling" view of deviance led him to study the careers of "moral entrepreneurs" who work to institutionalize the legal technology of official damnation (1963, chapter 8); he was not led to suggest that being labeled deviant becomes a determining constraint in the biographies of those so labeled.

Significantly, Becker was more likely to cite Stanton Wheeler's (1961) work on the situationally flexible nature of personality change among prisoners than to cite compelling studies demonstrating how official stigmatization as a criminal constrains a person's future. On the basis of questionnaires completed by inmates at different stages of their prison careers, Wheeler was able to demonstrate that, while anti-social attitudes increased as the inmate became part of the inmate world, they turned conventional as the time approached for release. For Becker, Wheeler's study, which incidentally counters a deterministic reading of labeling, illustrated the situationally contingent nature of personality change.

From an initially sanguine view of personality and motivation as essentially free from abiding collective pressure, Becker's work progressively understands motivational freedom as a challenge to be sustained in the face of determining pressures residing in the inevitably collective dimensions of personal action. With tacit irony, Becker has repeatedly located the contingencies of motivational freedom specifically in the understanding that personal lives are collectively determined.

This theme first appeared early in his characteristically practical perspective on qualitative methodology. Should fieldworkers, in order to facilitate data gathering, practice deception by pretending to be something other than sociological researchers? To some interactionists, the matter has seemed one of great moral weight (e.g., Erikson 1967). For Becker, the problem of deception is that it complicates and often frustrates the practical work of gathering data (cf. Becker 1986a, p. 143). Initially seduced to the pretense of being an indifferent bystander, a novice, or a full-fledged member, in order to avoid creating phenomena of reactivity and rejection by members anxious about how their lives will appear to outsiders, the researcher will often become committed to sustain the false appearance. This may mean not being present at times
when a bystander would not have the right to be present, or not asking crucial questions in circumstances when full-fledged members would implicitly know what to do, or taking on time-consuming, “dirty work” tasks that are often delegated to novices. Moreover, the business of maintaining the pretense can become a complex and anxiety-provoking commitment in its own right, side-tracking if not destroying the researcher’s emotional capacity to sustain the investigation as he or she becomes preoccupied with whether the artifice is being maintained.

For present purposes, it is crucial to appreciate the ironic theory of personal freedom and collective constraint that underlies this seemingly offhand, matter-of-fact piece of collegial advice. Deception is appealing to the fieldworker specifically because it appears to offer a freedom that an admission of researcher identity would compromise. But pretense is discouraged, not because it is morally cheap but because it is sociologically shortsighted. The researcher will develop “side bets” in maintaining the deceptive role that will cut back and against the freedom that the pretense was geared to obtain (for a vivid example, see Johnson 1975, ch. 3). After all, qualitative, participant observational fieldwork is typically justified as a means of discovering social realities with which the researcher is insufficiently familiar to study through methods of fixed research design. Because of the intricate and unpredictable ways in which the fieldworker’s personal identity will inevitably become enmeshed in the collective act he or she enters—because he or she will be taken more seriously and in unanticipated ways really to be the person he or she pretends to be—the freedom to maintain the research perspective is too challenging to be obtained through the simple expedient of deception.

The freedom to maintain one’s motives as a researcher is appreciated here as an ongoing challenge. Admitting one’s role as a researcher, one will usually have to strike some “research bargain” with members, and the bargain, or understanding of the mutual value of the researcher’s presence, may have to be continuously renegotiated. But the openly negotiated constraints imposed on researchers by the collectivity under study will often be more manageable than the constraints that unwittingly evolve from the fantasy that one can define one’s identity freely, depending on the conveniences of the situation.

Extrapolating from the example of the deceptive researcher, Becker here considers motivational freedom, not as something that can be played with, as in learning to use marijuana, nor as flexibly subject to discovery in one’s past, as in his concept of the latent identities used to solve current problems, but as a challenge to be continuously won. The first version of the challenge is to avoid the tempting self-conceit that one will remain free to take on and abandon definitions of self presented to others. A second version of the challenge to sustain personal motivational freedom is implicit in his work on the sociology of art.

The central motif of this work is represented effectively by the photograph on the hard-cover edition of *Art Worlds* (1982). It shows a blue-collar museum worker
carrying a precious Renaissance portrait of a noble personage; the worker's air of indifference is in striking juxtaposition to the exalted social status painted on the canvass that he carries, sideways. Becker invites us to "Think of all the activities that must be carried out for any work of art to appear as it finally does" (p. 2). Considered as a collective act, any musical production, painting, or piece of sculpture is the product of the indispensable efforts of a vast array of intellectual, artistic, craft and manual workers, from those who devised the technologies employed by the artist, to those who collected and shaped the materials used, to those who marketed the piece so that it would become and stay known, to those whose mundane maintenance activities make the current experience of art possible. Others, taking a positivistic perspective that assumes that "artistic accomplishment" is a quality of the artist rather than a quality conferred on an individual's act by the highly contingent, diverse and indirectly related efforts of myriad others, may seek to explain the distribution and incidence of artistic "genius." What interests Becker is to show the historical contingencies that differentiate "art" from "craft"; to demonstrate the observable necessary conditions for a work to become regarded as art, most of which are practical rather than aesthetic contingencies; and overall to turn our sociological attentions from the isolated artist and art product to the vast collective act that constructs imputations of genius and that recognizes given works as exemplary.

In one sense or another, all definitions of artistic genius are examples of "false labeling" (one of the categories from his celebrated table illustrating the social varieties of deviance). If Van Gogh died in poverty, unable to sell virtually any of his work despite his brother's help and access to art markets, while his paintings now can sell effortlessly for millions, his original reputation as an artistic failure was no less nor more valid than his current reputation as an exceptional genius. And if Becker denied the existence of determining motivations in his work on deviance, his work on art similarly denies the suggestion of charismatic individual freedom in attributions of artistic talent.

Far from mocking the artist's pretensions to creativity, Becker points to a key challenge for sustaining artistic freedom. A successful artistic career will inevitably produce a false image of the artist as solely responsible for the worth attributed to his work. Museums will not list the name of the printer who managed the lithographic machinery (and perhaps pencilled in a line or two to cover up inadequacies in his equipment); nor the inventor who produced the ink used; nor the gallery owner who, years earlier, and just because a large number of works by this particular, then-unknown artist were readily on hand, by-passed numerous competing candidates to mount a show for his influential clientele. Should the artist forget all these contingencies, which are fine shades of accidental difference that separate him or her from never-discovered colleagues, it seems likely that some form of self-deception will become constraining. More practically, success means the advent of a set of expectations on the part of agents, dealers and consuming publics that is inevitably
based on the work an artist has previously produced rather than on further innovation. Unless the artist remains sensitive to the fact that the collective acts that embed art are broader than the personalities socially recognized as responsible, he or she risks becoming another version of the brilliant actor who was condemned to reenact continually his success as the Count of Monte Cristo.7

At this relatively late point in his work, Becker has reversed his original expression of the relationship between individual motivation and collective setting. For the would-be marijuana user, others were guides and helpers on the way to acquiring a new motivation, a motivation to a "high" which, as David Matza indicates, itself is a delightful appreciation of convention as absurd. In Becker's work on art, artists are described as taking conventions quite seriously so that their work can become part of a larger collective act (painting pictures so they will fit into frames, using notational devices that other musicians will be able to read, etc.), but by the same token risking in the process the loss of motivational independence. In successful careers, humility about one's own contributions becomes not simply a gracious posture but a foundation for continued originality.

Once Becker introduced the concept of commitment into his work, he could discover illuminatingly complex relationships between the actor's own efforts to shape his or her conduct and its collective determination. In his writing on writings by social scientists (1966b), Becker comes full circle from his early, radical rejection of background determinism, ironically finding personal freedom precisely in the appreciation that what one has to say is already determined. Through years of teaching sociology to fieldwork students, Becker found himself repeatedly struggling with novice writers' pretentious styles and emotional blocks. When asked to describe what was holding them back, students would commonly talk about trying to find "the right way" to express an idea. Becker's sage advice is: your writing style is not that important; just get something down, you will revise it and worry about form and audience impact later; the way you initially express yourself cannot affect that much the value of what you have to say, which is already largely determined at the time you sit down to write. The challenge in writing is not finding an elegant style but in discovering what you already think (1966b, p. 55).

Student "hang ups," he found, hinge on an implicit belief that the style of writing contains an enormous, even magical ability to transform the quality of what one has to communicate. As a mentor, his central battle was against this too-precious conception. By implication, an implication he was perhaps too gentle to press, the data must govern in the end or we are not really social scientists; and while too much concern about correct expression may only delay the realization of a good research project, by the same token, the sociological writer may not as yet have gathered the resources to produce an analysis of much value, whatever the style of expression used.

Whether or not this perspective applies well to nonsociological writing, or even to sociological writing in general, it has special justification in application to the process
of writing up a qualitative analysis of a participant observation fieldwork project. As with Becker's methodological advice on deception in fieldwork, here too the source of his thinking is empirical sociological observation, not moral philosophy or psychological theory. Projects of participant observation fieldwork characteristically begin with a relatively unfocused research objective. If the researcher knew clearly at the start the sociological principles he or she sought to document and test, fixed research designs (surveys, analyses of official statistics, experiments) would usually appear to be more appropriate. Put in other terms, the researcher's substantive sociological intentions are uniquely unclear in this form of research. It is precisely because of this exceptional freedom at the start of the project that the researcher will, when he or she sits down to write, find that what there is to say has already been essentially determined, at least in the sense that the way the writing first takes form will not be decisive. Writing, in this view, is less precisely a matter of creating valuable information and analysis than of realizing the information and analysis one has already created in the process of conducting the study.

This advice makes sense to the extent that researchers have in fact implicitly shaped their analysis in the field. The empirical claim that observational fieldworkers will have in practice analyzed their data, or made up what they have to say about their research, before sitting down to write it up, needs explication. In one of his earlier methodological writings, Becker argued for giving more "weight" to observations made of members when they are interacting with other members than when the researcher is observing or interviewing them in isolation (1958). Generalized, the idea is that the researcher's methods are more valuable (more protected from "reactivity") when they are shaped by the contours of the member's world rather than by the researcher's distinct provocations. In effect, the researcher is advised to allow the patterning of the data being gathered to develop implicitly rather than in response to the researcher's expressed, and thus self-consciously formed, questions; research provides a less rigorous test of theory when it simply cumulates examples of issues that the researcher uses expressly to guide his or her observing eye. By following their distinctive methodological mandate to shape methods to the contours of the scenes studied, observational fieldworkers make their behavior in the field responsive to practical constraints which, in the conduct of qualitative participant observation fieldwork, give implicit shape to the researcher's analytic objectives.

Consider the distinctive shape commonly given to "rapport" in the conduct of ethnographic interviews. While formal questionnaire studies often address rapport in an initial phase, or try to build rapport-enhancing features into question protocol, the fieldworker who poses questions while observing members engaged in their "natural" settings is constantly haunted by issues of rapport. When asking questions, fieldworkers typically try to time, shape and minimize their provocations in order to induce members to express themselves within a "natural" sense of their familiar situations. This means avoiding the sense that "an interview" is taking place, a sense
that threatens to arise when pre-arranged questions are being imposed unilaterally, and seeking to sustain an implicit mutual arrangement of turn taking that may convey a sense of being in a natural conversation.

Consider also the way that fieldworkers shape their focus as they attempt to "trail along" or observe as "flies on the wall" in members' natural settings. If one is observing lawyers and clients talking in a court anteroom, for example, one must move with them as they move away or one will lose touch with the common focus that is keeping them coherently interacting with each other. The researcher's challenge is not so much to "decide" what he or she is interested in as to keep involved in an evolving interaction. If several pairs of lawyers and clients are engaged in discussions in a given setting, the researcher could drop a focus on one pair and move to observing another, but in order to accomplish such shifts gracefully it will often not be possible to "decide" such moves according to pre-formulated concerns.

In ethnographic interviewing and observation, the qualitative researcher is usually preoccupied with sustaining his or her own common sense understanding of what is transpiring; self-conscious reflections on analytic significance compete with the felt demands to shape questioning and presentation of an observing self in a spontaneously responsive manner. In effect, the researcher must make an infinite number of "decisions," choices of which interview themes to elaborate and which to abandon, and choices for tailoring the shape of the observational perspective, without planning, usually without experiencing "choices" or "decisions." When the time comes to "write up" such a study, the researcher will confront a mass of data which, if they have been coherently recorded, implicitly contain a systematically generated analysis. In effect, the fieldworker, by keeping a focus on rapport, on an unobtrusive stance for observation, and on common sense coherence in fieldnotes, allows the analysis to develop as a series of "side bets." By the time the researcher leaves the field, he or she will have made heavy commitments in the project's analytic structure, and the task of writing then becomes one of revealing the outline that has tacitly taken shape.

In one sense, Becker's perspective on writing is emphatically liberating. If thought has already been essentially formed while gathering the data and must only be discovered in writing, the writing process should be conducted in a relaxed spirit of inquiry and can only precede on the assumption that there is something worth finding. The central risk in writing is in obscuring, not in failing to create what one has to say. Becker's specific pieces of advice are craft-like techniques that can be applied independently of subject matter, such as using active versus passive constructions, editing to remove surplus language, avoiding any "fancy" style, writing introductions and conclusions after writing the empirical body of a text, and starting with one's single most compelling piece of data and working out and around from there. The very fact that these writing strategies are useful across substantive projects means that in applying them, the sociologist joins a professional community and rests on universal craft principles, even when working toward a distinctive substantive statement.
Ironically, while his symbolic interactionism emphases the creative freedom of actors in constructing their social realities, Becker's perspective on writing takes a significantly deterministic view of the fieldworker's identity as a writer. The traps that novice writers fall into are largely due to their false belief in their freedom, that they are free to transform the quality with which they have accumulated and shaped their data by discovering a kind of alchemy in writing style. If their minds are already made up when they sit down to write, observational fieldworkers only confuse and inhibit themselves by assuming that their fate will be decided at the keyboard; in fact, their fate has already been largely decided, for better or worse, by the commitments made by engaging in collective acts in the field. What remains to be discovered in writing is the nature of one's practiced sociological eye, or the kind of sociologist one has been and the kind of relationship with audiences of members that one has established in the field. The challenge of freeing oneself to overcome writing blocks is to avoid the temptation to imagine that one is free to create a sociological persona.

JAZZ IN SOCIAL INTERACTION

Becker's work on the contingencies of individual motivation has played continually with the relations between symbolic creativity and collective constraint in social life. I have reviewed roughly four different stages or emphases in his work. Notably, for each, jazz ensemble playing offers a useful metaphor for his sociological vision on personal motivation.

In his early work, he stressed the acquisition of motivation in the foreground rather than the background of his conduct, and the actor's motivational independence from attributions of deviance. The provocative thrust of this work is opposed to formal categories for explaining social life, whether personality characteristics, demographic variables, or official designations of one's identity. In Becker's social band, there is no single conductor and no set score, but only a few familiar notes at the start and then a process of innovation based on a readiness to "fake it" until one picks up how others are playing their roles and learns how to make one's own play parallel theirs.

In his work on "latent culture," Becker finds institutionally situated students confronting demands that they had not anticipated and that initially they are not prepared to master. Their recourse, if they are to keep themselves in play in the collective setting, is to discover some motif that they had already practiced in some earlier period of life, to signal this background relevance subtly to colleagues, and to search for cues that their traditions are shared by others. Innovative lines of action that resolve ambiguous moments are ironically accomplished through the discovery of shared traditions.

In his work on commitment, Becker finds his subjects, who are usually at a later stage in life than those of his youth-focused research, discovering not freedom in their futures or fertile resources in their past, but haunting influences in earlier phases of
their careers. Having started to play a given social role, perhaps on a whim and without intending a long-term development of a life-theme, the individual finds that others have taken cues from him and have based the roles they are playing on the continuation of his. His initially casual, relatively unselfconscious experimentation with an involvement has occasioned their responsive lines of play, and now he must either sustain the line so that they may sustain theirs, or work out transitions in ways that will minimize disruptions for others.

In his later work on art worlds and sociological writing, Becker addresses challenges for maintaining motivational freedom after periods of immersion in collective acts have significantly designed a person's future. One challenge for sustaining freedom entails the difficult choice of resisting others' explicit expectations that one will continue to play familiar and rewarded roles. Another, compatible, more pleasant option is to appreciate previously undetected implications of one's lines of action that have created new audiences and new possibilities of collaboration with others who had been responding to one's roles on the fringes of one's perception. This may entail a posture of humility as one listens for new interpretations of one's conduct, interpretations that may not initially appear continuously connected with the lines of action one has learned to play out competently.

As suggested by Robert Faulkner in a personal communication, Becker's instrument, the piano, puts the musician at a distinctively heuristic nexus of collective constraint and personal creativity in a jazz ensemble.

First, the piano player is positioned between the horns and the rhythm section. The piano player typically plays continually, just like the drums, but [also] solos ... like a trumpet. Next, the piano player ... must be centrally located in terms of conventional understanding of the wide range of tunes. The number of tunes known by any one horn player may be typically fewer than those known by a piano player. Thus the number of two way demands faced by a piano player may be something like an exponential of the number of possible tunes known by all the other "cats." This means the piano player is in a position of dependency and power simultaneously.... This centrality has something to do with identity. Piano players are typically the most reflective, something of the "intellectuals" of the "cats;" and since they often known chord changes, they are placed in the position of being constrained to provide the basics for others and their improvisation.... Having hung out with Becker and Piano Genius [sic] Bill Evans (on separate occasions, of course), I will say they had remarkably similar personal styles: sweet, reasonable, articulate, "deep," put up with no bullshit.

The mix of personal creativity and background constraint depicted in Howard Becker's varied sociological analyses invite a reconsideration of the theory of symbolic interactionism. We may note two principles of determinism that are implicit in empirical studies of the situationally contingent, innovative interpretive processes through which individuals shape their lines of social action. Theoretical writings on symbolic interactionism have been preoccupied with emphasizing the interpretive processes
that intermediate between a person's background or social context and his or her conduct. For this reason, the deterministic themes that frequently bring interactionist analyses to life and account for their insight have remained somewhat implicit.

At the level of individual action, interactionists imply that one's perception of how he or she is perceived by others and his or her response. One can fail to perceive that one is perceived by others; one can work in myriad ways to block other's abilities to perceive one's conduct; one may respond to others' perception of oneself in various and specifically unpredictable ways; but when a person sees him or herself seen by others, he or she will incorporate in his or her conduct some effort to shape that social perception. Perhaps most clearly in Erving Goffman's work, but more generally as well, symbolic interactionist studies are enriched by the deterministic assumption that, when one perceives that one will be perceived by others, one is always "presenting a self," a version of one's identity geared to shape the impressions that others will receive.

At the level of collective behavior, interactionists imply determinism in their appreciation that one is never fully aware of the social meanings of one's conduct, and thus one is constantly implicitly structuring the background that will form contexts constraining one's future conduct. If Goffman's work, which focuses on the individual level of analysis, shows the versatility with which people block others' appraisals of their "backstage" maneuvers, Becker's work develops an understanding of the limits to a person's capacities to comprehend fully the "latent" identities he or she is accumulating and the "commitments" or "side bets" he or she makes. Social life is in part a process of managing the impressions others take of oneself, and in part a process of discovering how one's past conduct has been incorporated into the actions of others and has become structured into situations to which one will now have to adjust. Much of the provocative character of social life—the pressures of others' actions that compel our responses—owes its force to our natural ignorance of our manners.

I would suggest that Becker's unique theoretical contribution to motivational analysis derives from his career-long play with the relationship between personal creativity and collective constraint. Whatever the empirical relationship between his life-long music playing and his sociological work, the jazz metaphor indicates his unique achievement of harmoniously appreciating the challenges of sustaining individual innovation within the constraints and resources provided by group settings and traditions. His work also shows the way to move theoretical consideration of the potential of symbolic interactionism beyond stale and artificial oppositions of description and explanation, freedom and determinism, background analysis and phenomenological validity.

NOTES

1. With respect to "why" questions, interactionists have been more successful in explaining collective events as contrasted with forms of individual action. Interactionist
studies are particularly successful in addressing "why" questions about phenomena that have an historically and politically established basis of interest. If a work convinces us that it explains why a community persecuted some of its members as witches over recurring historical intervals (Erikson 1966), or why a highly publicized community development effort came to be seen as betraying the people it was initially geared to serve (Gans 1962), the work may be deemed effective whether or not it contributes to social theory in a more general and cumulative sense. On the other hand, if the phenomena addressed are exclusively interesting to social researchers, it will face more persistent questioning about the adequacy of its explanations. Readers frequently emerge from ahistorical, apolitical interactionist texts with a shrug, "So what?" and with nagging concerns to understand "why" the people studied worked in such detail to manipulate the impressions they produced in public or maneuvered so ingeniously to begin, sustain and artfully end conversations.

2. Actually, Becker's studies of Chicago public school teachers, who were older and at a later career stage, were conducted before he studied college and professional students. I am taking the liberty of rearranging the chronology of his work to track, not precisely the chronology of his publications but, in part, the typical life course, and more directly, an increasingly deterministic trajectory in his work. In fairness, I should also note that, because of the limitations of my knowledge, I will no doubt unfairly slight the contributions of his co-workers on the studies of higher education.

3. In essays published independently of his monographs on college and medical students, Becker produced forceful critiques of the intellectually alienating nature of formal educational institutions (see his "School is a Lousy Place to Learn Anything In" and, with Bernard Beck, his "Modest Proposals for Graduate Programs in Sociology," in Becker 1986a, chaps. 10, 11).

4. Notably in his writings during this period, Becker was fond of citing Donald S. Roy's studies of quota restriction by factory workers (1952, 1954).

5. Without a jointly sustained local office culture, the job was rarely compelling even to those who were seasoned lawyers before coming on staff. In a fifth pair, both lawyers had practiced in personal injury law firms; what they shared was not a lack of self-confidence but a euphoric release from mercenary work worlds in which success was measured too precisely and with a depressingly visible career trajectory.

6. For an example published in a volume edited by Becker, see the Skolnick and Schwartz (1964) article describing how, in a quasi-experimental design, they mailed job applications with differing biographies to employers and found a strong discriminatory reaction against those with criminal records.

7. This theme was drawn from his father's biography and employed by Eugene O'Neill in Long Day's Journey into Night. While Becker did not directly focus on the implications of his work for the preservation of motivational freedom, I take part of my justification for elaborating the theme from his apparent delight in making his points with such satirical artists as Marcel Duchamp, who put a moustache on Mona Lisa and thus, in Becker's scheme, made de Vinci "support personnel," and by citing such experiences as Charles Ives' discovery of liberation as a composer when he realized that the technical and social requirements of performance meant that his music might never be played.

8. Although not reflected in the title of his book, Becker's advice on writing has somewhat less utility for those writing up statistical research. For example, one of his key recommendations, to transform passive constructions into active descriptions, is difficult to follow when working with the cross-sectional data and ecological variables
that are commonly used in quantitative sociology. For a useful discussion, see Andrew Abbott (1992).

9. Much of the teaching effort in graduate fieldwork training consists of providing comments on students’ fieldnotes that point out the reader’s inability to comprehend what is going on, that is, what the members described are trying to do. The reviewer’s questions often suggest that the student began description too late, shifted focus too soon, or muddied the description by imposing his or her own analytic interests.

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