

Book Review

Tricks of the Trade: How to think about your research while you are doing It by Howard S. Becker

Reviewed by: Anteneh Mekuria Tesfaye,
Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. Email: antenehmu@yahoo.com.

MY PERSONAL IMPRESSION

When I first read the title and the subtitle of the book on its cover, I was thinking that the book would be more or less similar with some other research books which I have read before. But this book is not just like other research books as it does not focus on abstract concepts and theories only. I found this book interesting and thought provoking because it gives valuable practical and theoretical explanations of social science research methodologies. In particular, many of the practical examples from a range of fields such as sociology, art, anthropology, literature, philosophy, music, communication etc give valuable insights for researchers in all social science fields.

The book is written based on what the author has gained from his, his teachers, colleagues, and students practical experience as well as his reading of various old and new books. These make the book rich in providing helpful details on research methodological issues ranging from imagery and taking samples, to that of concepts or the thinking and making of ideas in research and logically analyzing and communicating research results.

Most of all, the book is written in a very readable way. Unlike other research books, the author did not simply illustrate concepts in an abstract way, he rather used practical examples in almost all the points that he raised. Becker has not only identified many of the common practical problems in conducting social science research and indicates possible ways or valuable tricks which help solve those problems, but he has also communicated his ideas to his readers in a very simple, logical and readable way. I believe that the valuable information in this book help researchers to challenge and improve their way of thinking about their research projects and in their communication of ideas to their readers. In spite of these all, I think the book may not be as such important for beginners as it does not start from the simple concepts of research like identifying problems, reviewing related literature, explaining specific techniques of sampling and as it does not give theoretical details on issues in relation to specific research methods such as text analysis, discourse analysis, survey methods etc. However, experienced researchers will be benefited more from the book.

CONTENTS COVERED

The book generally deals with four major areas of research that are imagery, sampling, concepts and logic. Before discussing these four broad areas, the author has provided an introductory unit which is mainly about the social science trade. In this part, he emphasized that the social science trades just like plumbing or carpentry, have their own tricks. He suggested that knowing these tricks which make up the content of the four broad areas of the book would help social science researchers solve problems of thinking at any stage of their work. Becker believes that these tricks are necessary not only to produce objective results but also to familiarize researchers thinking and see some connections they might not have noticed or taken seriously.

The tricks that he suggests, however, do not make things easier. As he states the tricks probably make things harder for researchers because they suggest ways of interfering with the comfortable thought routines academic life encourages by making them the “right” way to do things (p. 6).

In this first part, Becker has also stated his deep suspicion of abstract sociological theorizing; which he regards it as at best a necessary evil. He has pointed out that there is a difference between abstract theorizing and the practical life that we experience in our everyday lives. It is mainly because he believes that this abstract theorizing makes professional social scientists talk about different issues in such a way that they do not understand in their everyday life.

In the second unit, which is the first main section among the four broad areas, the author elucidates about the concept of imagery which I think is the most important part of the book in view of the fact that social science research starts with images and ends with images too. Imagery according to him is the images that the researcher brings to his or her research. It deals with “how the researchers think about what they are going to study before they actually start their research, and how their picture of what that part of the social world is like, and what the work of the social scientists like,

get made" (p. 8).

Becker has seen imagery in two ways. The first is substantive imagery which is an imagery of daily life that we bring to the subject that we are going to study. Although using the knowledge that we have got from our ordinary lives is the major bone of contention among social scientists, Becker argued that the knowledge that we have got from our daily lives is important given that our ordinary life considerably shape our imagery of the world. Consequently, he suggested that researchers need to do their best to advance the character of their ordinary lives in order to improve the quality of their imagery. He further states that the imagery of daily life we bring to a new object of study is not enough no matter how detailed and imaginative it is. Hence, scientific imagery which is a more abstract realm of imagery, based on gathering data and constructing hypothesis and theories is also mandatory.

In relation to the scientific imagery, Becker states that the specialized occupational world gives us many images of the way the social world in general works. According to him, the notion of society as made up of interacting selves, random activity; taking the social world as coincidence; as machine; as organism, and as story are the images which help researchers get at some things and keep from them getting at others. Becker further gives detailed explanations and examples of these all points. He has also suggested some analytic tricks which make the points possible.

Becker has shown his disagreements with other social scientists who believe that researchers imagery need to be always accurate. He stated that "Inaccurate images of things as long as they are eventually checked against reality can be very useful showing us how things would be if they were a certain way we are pretty sure they are not." He has also suggested that researchers' imagery should be broad enough to recognize all features of social life, and be constructed in a way that increases the number and variety of features that researchers know.

Sampling is the other point that the author comprehensively deals with. It is all about proper sampling of cases, that is, what to include and what not. In this part, the author argues that random sampling will not always be helpful to produce variety in the data and to get most compelling result. He also emphasized that sampling is one of the major problems for any kind of research. He has brought several common problems of sampling and gives tricks which can help researchers solve the problems. Some of the major problems of social science researchers that he mentions are: The problem of failure to know how much detail and how much analysis is needed for a specific subject, researchers problem of thinking as they know the answers already, problems of categorizing samples, problem of decisions on taking samples for example taking other people's idea, considering authorities as they are credible while ignoring potential samples at a lower status, wrong assumptions like everybody knows that etc.

Becker also draws attention to the question of "why them?" in taking samples. He argued that certain people or organizations are not really important to study at all. According to him, in most cases, researchers have problem of studying either successful social movements or spectacular failures. Becker is not totally against this practice but he suggests that the better way is that researchers need to consider all the marginal cases. He underscores that "researchers ought to deliberately look for extreme cases that are most likely to upset their ideas and predictions. They ought to choose them as samples of their study for their reasons and not because other people think they are something special" (p. 95).

Owing to the fact that sampling is one of the major problems in any kind of social science research, it is essential to give a detailed analysis like this. Despite the detailed analysis of the problems and suggestions of sampling, he did not specifically raise different methods of sampling like cluster sampling, systematic random sampling, stratified sampling etc.

In the third main section of the book, Becker sheds light on concepts or the making of ideas or ways of summarizing data. He specifically deals with the making of general statements using what has been gained from imagery and sampling that can work to people and organizations universally. In making ideas, Becker is critical of deductive approach which is treating concepts as logical constructs that can be developed by the manipulation of a few basic ideas. He is not in favor of this approach despite the fact that many social scientists are supporting this method. He argues that such methods are too separated from the emotional world. He rather suggests that developing concepts in a continuous dialogue with empirical data is the best way.

He further gave various tricks on how to use data "to create more complex ideas or well developed concepts that would help find more problems worth studying and more things about what has been studied worth thinking about and incorporating into the analysis" (p. 109). He identified researchers' common problem of defining concepts as opposed to discovering their true nature and he also suggested different tricks like letting cases define the concepts, seeing concepts as empirical generalization, describing the finding of the study with no broad terminologies specific to the actual case, putting terms in the full set of relations they imply etc.

The final chapter of the book is about logic. This last but not least part gives researchers suggestions concerning ways of manipulating ideas through methods of more or less formal logic so that the manipulations produce new things. He emphasized on the importance of focusing on a diversity of cases rather than on variation in variables in analyzing data (p. 146).

According to Becker, studying society is the process of back and forth, looking in the world, thinking about what you

have seen, and going back to have another look at the world. Therefore, the possibility logic gives is that it tells researchers as there are more things and more places to look for them.

In this chapter, he has specifically given a detailed explanation of two major tricks which help to generate lists of possible combinations. The first trick is looking the implicit major premises of arguments. In relation to this, Becker states that it is important for researchers to ask people to explain what they do not understand, and check it against what they see and hear. This helps researchers to find the missing premises in the arguments they routinely make to explain and justify what they do (p. 157). One of the examples that Becker used is his own experience on how he had come to know the missing premise in relation to the word "crock" while he was studying medical science students at the University of Kansas Medical School. He came to know the different meanings of the word "crock" by asking and having discussions with medical science students who were his subjects.

The second trick is the use of truth tables which are some mathematical analysis methods that can be used in specific circumstances for a particular research projects. These are property space analysis, qualitative comparative analysis, and analytic induction. Although the three methods seem to differ considerably, Becker suggested that there is a common logic and method beneath the superficial differences. He further suggested that combining these methods help to get the most out of a set of ideas or categories.