



Boys in white: a classic of qualitative research turns 50

Everardo Duarte Nunes

Professor, Faculdade de Ciências Médicas/
Universidade Estadual de Campinas (Unicamp).
Rua Tessália Vieira de Camargo, 126
13083-887 – Campinas – SP – Brazil
evernunes@uol.com.br

Nelson Filice de Barros

Professor, Faculdade de Ciências Médicas/Unicamp
Rua Tessália Vieira de Camargo, 126
13083-887 – Campinas – SP – Brazil
nelfel@uol.com.br

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Abstract

This article analyzes *Boys in white: student culture in medical school* by Howard S. Becker, Blanche Geer, Everett C. Hughes and Anselm Strauss, considered a model of qualitative research in sociology. The analysis investigates the trajectories of the authors, the book, qualitative analysis, and the medical students, emphasizing their importance in the origins of medical sociology and the sociology of medical education. In the trajectory of the authors, bibliographical information is given. The trajectory of qualitative research focuses on how this methodology influences the construction of the field. The investigation of the students' trajectory shows how they progress through their first years at medical school to build their own student culture.

Keywords: *Boys in white*; medical student; qualitative research; medical sociology; sociology of medical education.

Howard Saul Becker (1928-) was 27 when, in the fall of 1955, he moved to Kansas to start some fieldwork at the University of Kansas School of Medicine as part of a project about medical education. One of his partners in this work was anthropologist Blanche Potter Geer (1920-1993), who would play an important role because of her experience in education research.

Reporting on his initial lack of experience in researching education at a medical school, Becker (2007, p.194-202) notes that “[w]hen I showed up at the school that fall, I knew I had to research medical students and medical education, but to be honest I had very little idea what I would do apart from ‘walking around with the students,’ observing the lessons and whatever else was presented.” He adds that he did not know what the “problem” was, but that at that time social scientists used the concept of “socialization” as applied by Merton, Reader and Kendall (1957) to understand how medical students learnt their function as a physician, which did not fulfil his task of “describing what they were going to do.”

Surely, the weight of this research was provided by the presence of two sociologists whose work has gone down in the history of sociology: Everett C. Hughes (1897-1983), who from the early 1950s had been researching occupations and professions, and Anselm L. Strauss (1916-1996), who in the same decade was already doing research in psychiatric hospitals. Both provided the groundwork for the intensive field research (participant observation, interviewing), in association with quantitative data and sharp analysis, that in 1961 resulted in *Boys in white* (Becker et al., 1961).

The book would become a classic of qualitative research, and revisiting it now is not just a chance to pay tribute but also an opportunity to highlight some of the trajectories that crossed paths: those of the authors, of the research effort itself and the final report, that of qualitative research, and that of the students at the medical school. These trajectories begin in the context of the 1950s/60s during the development of sociological research in the United States and the methodological and theoretical issues of the School of Sociology at the University of Chicago, which became part of the history of the social sciences in health. The primary goal of revisiting this work here was to make available to new readers a very well rounded text and authors who helped set the foundations of general sociology and the sociology of health.

Trajectory of the authors

Howard Saul Becker

Although he was not yet 30 when he began his research at a medical school, Becker had already obtained his master's (1949) and PhD (1951) from the University of Chicago, where, in 1946, he had also earned his bachelor's degree. The title of his doctoral thesis, *Career problems of the Chicago public school teacher*, reveals his interests at the time. He stayed on at the university as a researcher and lecturer in sociology and social sciences until 1953. He spent the next two years as a Ford Foundation postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Illinois, then in 1955, as already mentioned, he went to Kansas as a researcher and director of Community Studies projects, staying there until 1962.

An interview Becker gave to Ken Plummer in 2002 reveals not only the first years of research he was involved in, but the broader context of his project in the field of education. Upon reviewing his work, he says, "I feel that it is completely continuous." He goes on, "I mean I don't think I've changed the way I do things very much. You know, I've added things, quite a lot of things, cause I'm kind of a magpie – you know, I just pick up new things, but they always get incorporated into the way I do stuff" (Plummer, 2003, p.22). Becker recalls that his work is made of a set of different topics, but "always the same approach, basically." However, he is often identified as a "specialist" in deviancy. He notes that his first work was about a piano jazz band, which overlapped with his own activity because, as he said in an interview to Brazilian anthropologist Gilberto Velho in 1990, "while I was at the University of Chicago I also entered the world of jazz" (Velho, 1990, p.115). He also told that he started to "play piano around age 12 ... I played by ear, and only later did I have some lessons with a famous jazz musician called Lennie Tristano." Becker went on to become a professional musician and music scholar (Becker, 2003; Faulkner, Becker, 2009). Not only music, but art in general and photography in particular would later become objects of interest in his sociological work.

Something else that attracts attention is the fact that Becker always refers to his Hughesian roots, referring to Everett C. Hughes (1897-1983), in his sociological education after his degree, as in the following passage:

I stayed at the University of Chicago for my graduate training and so met Everett C. Hughes, who became my adviser and, eventually, research partner. Hughes was a student of Robert E. Park, who could be considered the 'founder' of the 'Chicago School' of sociology. Hughes taught me to trace my sociological descent, through him and Park, back to Georg Simmel, the great German sociologist who had been Park's teacher. I am still proud of that lineage (Becker, 2007, p.7).

He says that Hughes did not like abstract theory, or indeed "theory in general." Recollecting his mentor's lessons, Becker says, "All his classes were the same, whatever he called them. One class would be called 'Race and Ethnic Contacts,' another would be 'Institutions,' and the other one he taught a lot was 'The Sociology of occupations and professions.' They were all the same class, and usually dealt with whatever he was reading that week." He went on to say, "[h]e started one of these classes I took by saying, 'Everything that happens in society is somebody's work,' so you could always study what's going on someplace by looking at it as somebody's work. That's probably the most basic thing about everything I do" (Plummer, 2003, p.23).

Becker reports that Hughes believed it was a mistake for interest to be given exclusively to certain professions considered of a higher caliber, like law, medicine, priesthood, and that this was "a very partial view of the world of work." So "[w]hen I came to him and told him I would like to do my research for my master's thesis on musicians in bars, well, he was looking for people like me who would study things that did not have so much prestige or honour" (Veziat, Pilms, Peretz, 2011, p.4).

When we look back at Becker's output from 1951 to 1961, the former being the date of publication of his first work and the latter the publication of *Boys in white*, we find that of

the 26 papers published, nine refer to occupations/professions (elementary school teachers and their careers, issues of professionalization, identification with an occupation, careers, personality and adult socialization, teacher-pupil relationships), six are on methodology (participant observation, inference and proof in participant observation, participant observation and interviewing, interviewing tactics, freedom and responsibility in research); two are on the professional dance musician, two are on marijuana (becoming a user and social control and use), three are on medical education and medicine students (fate of idealism, student culture, interviewing medical students), and four are on various subjects (latent culture, concept of engagement, radio as an art form, the relationship between schools and systems of social status).¹ Many of the themes were directly related to the work he was doing in Kansas, and counted on the collaboration of Anselm Strauss and Blanche Geer, as we will see later.

These were the early years of Becker's intellectual trajectory, and in this essay we will not go beyond the 1960s. The first recognition of his work came in 1961, when he was appointed editor of the journal *Social Problems*.

In one of the analyses of his work, Pessin (2004, p.12) writes that in his research, Becker was not seeking his "ultimate theoretical results, which could be generalized and isolated from the collective *démarche* from which they were obtained."² He goes on to say that he would analyze Becker's output "taking this word in the American sense: work, referring primarily as labor, activity. ... [as] a constant endeavor of interrogating the world, of casting into doubt the sociological reflections, the problematizations made that covered up and penetrated the way sociologists interrogate the world" (p.12; emphasis in the original).

One aspect worth remembering is Becker's association with symbolic interactionism (one of the hallmarks of the second generation of sociologists from the Chicago School). In his interview with Plummer (2003, p.23), in response to the comment that "there's a sense in which you are also a symbolic interactionist, yet I never see you use the term," Becker answers, "No. I don't know what it means. I mean it's like all those 'school' titles, you know, labels – they're appropriated by all kinds of people for all kinds of reasons. So when I look at the journal *Symbolic Interaction*, I don't recognize what's in there as being remotely connected to anything I'm interested in." When Plummer pushes the point, "[b]ut I mean you are firmly located in symbolic interactionism by other people whether you like it or not," he answers, "I can't help what other people think." Without overstating the issue of his association with this "school," we should recall that Becker and McCall (1990) edited *Symbolic Interaction and Cultural Studies*, and in the introduction (p.1-15) they refer to the ideas on symbolic interactionism proposed by Robert Park, Herbert Blumer and Everett C. Hughes, and recognize the impact of community, work, class, family etc. on ethnographic studies and on the sociology of art, science and deviancy. For Becker and McCall (p.4) "[s]ymbolic interaction is an empirical research tradition as much or more than a theoretical position, and its strength derives in large part from the enormous body of research that embodies and gives meaning to its abstract propositions." This putative distance from symbolic interactionism seems very strange to us.

Blanche P. Geer

Blanche Potter Geer (1920-1993) worked alongside Becker in this trajectory of investigating and constructing an empirical research process from immersion in the real world of a medical school. They produced many works together in the form of articles that culminated in books, especially *Boys in white*, then in 1968, *Making the grade: the academic side of college life*, also in collaboration with Everett C. Hughes. Blanche was born in New York, and served in the navy during the Second World War. She later finished her anthropology education at the University of Columbia. She defended her PhD in education at Johns Hopkins in 1956, with the thesis *A statistical study of the class origin and social participation of teachers*.

When we reviewed the scientific output at the time that *Boys in white* was being researched and published, we found that Becker and Geer jointly penned a number of articles addressing aspects of the lives of medical students during their work at the medical school. We highlight one text that draws a comparison between participant observation and interviewing, in which they state that:

In short, participant observation makes it possible to check description against fact and, noting discrepancies, become aware of systematic distortions made by the person under study; such distortions are less likely to be discovered by interviewing alone. This point, let us repeat, is only relevant when the interview is used as a source of information about situations and events the researcher himself has not seen. It is not relevant when it is the person's behavior in the interview itself that is under analysis (Becker, Geer, 1957, p.32).

In our opinion, one of the texts by these authors that is most interesting and had a major impact on the studies of medical students' careers, published in 1958, is about the fate of idealism during the medical course. They note that the students are disillusioned, for instance, when they find out that they will not have access to patients in the first year, and in the following years their greatest concern is over technical aspects of clinical cases. They say that the students do not lose their original idealism, and when they have the chance, they revive what they thought when they were freshmen and restate it at the end of the course. They suggest that while they first show themselves to be cynical, hiding their idealism, during the course they become more realistic, and put off their idealistic realizations to when they are effectively practicing medicine (Becker, Geer, 1958).

Everett C. Hughes

Everett Cherrington Hughes (1897-1983) was born in Ohio, son of a Methodist minister, Charles A. Hughes. His ancestors were staunchly religious, and progressive farmers who valued higher education, especially for men (Cosser, 1994, p.2). After earning his degree from the University of Wesleyan, he left his home town aged 20 to move to Chicago. He earned a degree in languages (Latin, French and German) and spent five years teaching English to immigrants. He was admitted to the Department of Sociology and Anthropology of the University of Chicago in 1923, but he carried on his language teaching work. In 1928, he defended his PhD thesis, *The growth of an institution: the Chicago Real Estate Board*, his advisor having been Robert Park (1864-1944).

Hughes moved to Canada in 1928, where he stayed for ten years at McGill University, becoming a central figure in the early days of sociology in the country. *French Canada in Transition* is from this period, a work Becker (1996a, p.184) regarded as a “classical community study.” In it, he reports on his research into the economic and occupational structure of a community in the process of industrialization and the political ramifications of this process.

On his return to Chicago in 1938, Hughes’ name was firmly linked to what came to be called the Second Chicago School, where, as Coser (1994, p.1) notes, his role was that of a mediator between those who had founded the school and those who developed teaching at research at the university in the 1940s. He observes that taking one of his mentors, Georg Simmel, as his model, Hughes “displayed a genius for discerning similarities of pattern among social phenomena of the most diverse sort, and for inventing constructs – mistakes at work, routinized emergency, bastard institutions, dilemmas and contradictions of status – that throw new light on everyday happenings by viewing them as instances of such general parts” (Coser, 1994, p.1).

Hughes resumed his study of occupations and professions, but his interests branched out to include relations between different racial and ethnic groups and, in Coser’s (1994, p.1) words, “in the language of present-day sociology, one might suggest that what he systematically depicted was the interaction between human agency and social structure.” For Chapoulie (1996, p.4), “in the word he used to characterize the relation of researchers to their own social origins, Hughes is an emancipated sociologist who uses the latest work in social science, but never forgets what he owes to his predecessors and to the accumulation of knowledge to which they contributed.”

Author of several books and articles as of the late 1920s, a body of work that can be appreciated in part in the collection of essays, *Men and their work* (Hughes, 1958), he often investigated the fields of adult socialization and professions (Bloom, 2002, p.115). However, as Heath (1984, p.218) notes, Hughes “perhaps more than anyone else is responsible for placing medicine and health care on the sociological agenda and his approach continues to inform the study of health and illness.” Heath (1984) stresses that the texts that most influenced the field of the sociology of health were the ones about occupations and professions, namely “The making of a physician,” “Licence and mandate,” “Professions in transition,” “Work and the self,” and “Mistakes at work,” all of which are in *Men and their work*.

Below, we transcribe a passage from Heath’s (1984) very detailed analysis in which he draws attention to some conceptual points that constituted fundamental references for the study of occupations and professions.

Hughes developed the concept of career within the framework of an occupational culture and the forms of occupational socialization through which neophytes pass. ... An essential part of occupational culture is its relationship to mistakes and contingencies which arise within the performance of work and the ways in which occupational members handle emergencies and develop routines. ... A person’s work is central to their conception of self and others and this arises in interaction with both occupational personnel and the ‘outside’ world (Heath, 1984, p.225).

Two other concepts in the study of occupations are licence and mandate. For Hughes (2010, p.287) licence is what “some people claim and are given to carry out certain activities

rather different from those of other people and to do so in exchange for money, goods or services,” while mandate is whatever society defines as being “proper conduct with respect to the matters concerned in their work.”

Without a doubt, a fundamental work for the research of the students was “The Making of a Physician” (Hughes, 1956), “a kind of sociological prospectus” which he wrote during the early days of the Kansas research (Davis, 1968, p.237).

A significant part of Hughes’ work was reviewed by Becker et al. (1968) in a collection of 25 articles that cover the great thematic diversity he addressed, which, as the editors say, extended from “such specific problems as the industrialization and development of Canadian society” to many others, such as “race relations in the United States and elsewhere; the organization of medical practice and medical education; and other forms of educational organization” (p.vii).

This work was fundamental for our observations about *Boys in white* and for clearly understanding how much this book owes to Hughes’ approach. Present in it are his “unwillingness to be dogmatic about methodology, his conviction that there are many ways of learning about social reality,” and “special respect for what is known firsthand,” but without underrating the use of demographics (Becker et al., 1968, p.vii). The authors note that for Hughes, the key point was society: no matter what specific subject was being studied, his interest was not restricted to this subject, but covered the “entire field of society,” addressing sociologists, but not just them.

Many aspects in Hughes’ work are worthy of mention, and while we cannot cover them all, we should cite a passage by Geer (1968, p.221) that sums up the two main fields he researched, present in *Boys in white*, which certainly assure his standing in the field of sociology: “Many sociologists are at ease with institutions, others with the person; very few are equally at ease with both, much less dominantly concerned, as he has been, with relationship”.

Anselm L. Strauss

The intellectual trajectory of Anselm Leonard Strauss (1916-1996) was marked by a brilliant, innovative career in sociology, social psychology, and medical sociology. In 1994 in a long interview with Legewie and Schervier-Legewie (2004), Strauss talked about his origins, his German Jewish descendancy (his grandparents migrated to the United States in the nineteenth century), his place of birth, the city of New York, and the family’s move to Mount Vernon, on the outskirts of the city.

Later, for health reasons, Strauss decided to leave the city, and went to study at the University of Virginia, where, in 1939, he earned his degree in biology. He considered studying medicine, but ended up entering the humanities. At the University of Chicago he earned his master’s degree in 1942 and his PhD in 1944, both in sociology. His interest in psychology can be seen in the title of his thesis: *A study of three psychological factors affecting the choice of a mate in marriage*.

He was a member of the faculty at Lawrence College, and later at Indiana University, where he worked with Alfred Lindesmith. Together, they wrote *Social Psychology*, whose eighth edition was brought out in 1999.

In 1952 he was appointed a professor at the University of Chicago, when he joined the group formed by Everett Hughes that became known as the Second Chicago School.

In the 1960s we went to the University of California, where he created the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, remaining there until 1987. It was there that, alongside Barney Glaser, he developed an investigation method he called “grounded theory.” Strauss had set the groundwork for this theory in the 1950s, when he did research in psychiatric hospitals. As Legewie and Schervier-Legewie (2004) sum up, in this first investigation Strauss “coined the term ‘negotiated order,’ a fundamental concept for his later research and which in turn enabled his first impressions about how to develop and ground a theory.”

For Strauss, theoretical concepts must, no matter how abstract they are, be “empirically saturated.” The authors stress that alongside other of his concepts included in the theoretical corpus of sociology and social psychology, it is worth citing the concepts of “context of awareness” and “trajectory.” The former was introduced by Glaser and Strauss in 1965 and refers “to the extent to which those who interact hide or reciprocally show their motives and knowledge” (Legewie, Schervier-Legewie, 2004). Four such concepts can be distinguished: “closed awareness,” “suspicion awareness,” “mutual-pretense awareness,” and “open awareness.” Trajectory was also coined by Strauss and Glaser (1970) to refer to all actions and interactions that make up a social happening, including labor processes.

As Strauss explains in this interview, “social psychology was integrated into the Chicago School project, and furthermore, was not clearly differentiated from sociology.” Social psychology was at the root of his micro-sociological studies of interaction. He explains that he distanced himself from social psychology around 1952, when he returned to Chicago and started producing work under the influence of Herbert Blumer, especially his work on identity, *Mirror and Masks: the search for identity* (Strauss, 1999), originally published in 1959. Considering that this output from 1952 to 1959 is within the time frame of *Boys in white*, we note the analysis that Strauss himself made about this work of his:

I was trying to put together these viewpoints for the first time [social organization and structure], stressing on the one hand the complexity and fluidity of the interrelated collective and individual aspects that form identity, without ignoring the significance of external factors, imprecise structural limitations, and the breadth of the different forms of organization and interaction. The conception of a connection between the micro and macro levels is, you might say, the central thread of that book. At that time I wasn't yet aware that the ideas expressed were obviously grounded in the mode of action of the Chicago School. Certainly, the impression I had was that what I was writing was in contact with the ‘reality out there.’ Today, I'm aware that this book anticipated many of the concepts I expressed and elaborated in later works (Legewie, Schervier-Legewie, 2004).

Baszanger (1992) made a laudable analysis of this “web of relations” in a collection of works she edited on Strauss's output, which she introduced under the title of “Les chantiers d'un interactionniste américain.” The French sociologist begins her introduction by proposing to analyze the work of Strauss from the concept of action (p.11), which, as it is put in its English translation in 1996, “can be seen as the Ariadne's thread which weaves the work of Anselm Strauss together” (Baszanger, 1998, p.353). This idea runs through the works begun

in 1953 and extends throughout several decades, albeit with under a variety of meanings. It appears as action in the sense of taking action; action around a personal and collective identity; action around death; action of different professional and lay groups in negotiating an equilibrium between order and change in an institution; action of negotiation in all forms of social order; action to control the impact of new technologies and of chronic diseases on physicians' work; action about the management of chronic diseases in daily life.

An important point stressed by this author is that Strauss displayed a "constant concern to join the level of individual actor and social micro-process" with "organizational phenomena in the macro-social structural level that influence action." For Strauss, action could not be contextualized on two planes: close (the most immediate) and far (structural conditions) (Baszanger, 1992, p.11, 12). In the words of Strauss and Corbin (1990, p.10), cited by Baszanger, this perspective could be summarized as such: "The global and general conditions that influence action and strategies of interaction, such as time, space, culture, economic and technological status."

Baszanger's (1992) detailed analysis enriches and elucidates many aspects of Strauss's intellectual trajectory and contributions, and in our opinion constitutes a reliable guide for accompanying his complex output. Indeed, it gives an idea of his modesty, when he mentioned *en passant* that in *Boys in white* "the concept of labor was more mine than Everett Hughes'" and that their work "consisted of conducting the structuring and consultancy of scientific work" (Legewie, Schervier-Legewie, 2004), not revealing the fundamental contribution he made to the study.

Baszanger's (1992) comments on Strauss's "theory of action" generally show that it constitutes the cornerstone for the research of the medical students and later the medical residents, with which he entered the field of medicine, "that he would rarely quit thereafter."

Strauss's intense output was only beginning when *Boys in white* was published, and has since stood the test of time as one of the most novel in the field of medical/health sociology. From the first generation of social scientists to penetrate the field of medicine, Strauss received due recognition from his peers in 1981 when he received the Leo G. Reeder Award in Medical Sociology from the American Sociological Association. The same award was given to Everett Hughes in 1978.

The trajectory of the research and the medical students

Boys in white was created in the context which, as of the second half of the 1950s, took medicine as an object of study, creating a sub-field within US medical sociology called the sociology of medical education. It was during the early days of the formation of the field of medical sociology that Robert K. Merton (1910-2003), having organized a seminar on professions (medicine, law, architecture, engineering, social services, religion, nursing and education) at Columbia University in 1949 submitted a project for a sociological study into medical schools to the Commonwealth Fund.

Specifically, the proposal was to study the socialization process at three medical schools: Cornell, Pennsylvania and Western Reserve, which at the beginning of the work counted on the support of the Russell Sage Foundation (Bloom, 2002, p.189). As Bloom notes in a

detailed report on the sociology of medical education, the study by the Bureau of Applied Social Research and Columbia University, “was the first sociological study of socialization in a medical school. It was not only a first in the field of sociology but represented a major departure for medicine in its efforts to understand and improve the education of physicians” (Bloom, 2002, p.190-191).

Bloom (2002) explains that medicine was chosen from the eight professions at the 1949 seminar first because “the professional school represents the single most critical phase in the making of the professional man.” The second reason was that “the medical school, as a social organization and an environment of learning, would afford a prototype for comparable studies in the other professions” (Bloom, 2002, p.191). The people involved in this enterprise were, apart from Merton, a physician called George G. Reader (1919-2005), who, together with David P. Barr (1889-1977), developed the teaching of comprehensive care at Cornell, as well as many sociologists, including Patricia L. Kendall (1931-1990), Renée C. Fox (1928-), and Mary E.W. Goss (1926-2010).

Fox (1989, p.76, 77) analyzes in detail the medical education of the 1950s and recalls that the sociologists from Columbia University “regarded the medical school as training ‘student-physicians’, but University of Chicago sociologists saw it as training ‘boys in white’.” For the former, the years of training constituted “anticipatory socialization” for the role of the physician; for the latter, the socialization process was “dissociated from becoming a physician,” but associated with providing academic training in order to make the students “eligible ... for a good internship.”

In her autobiography, Fox (2011, p.97-104) again comments on the medical education project at Columbia, and reports with clear emotion on the encounter of Merton’s group with the researchers from the Chicago group, remembering that she (Renée Fox), Becker and Bloom were then novices in the field of research. Bloom, who in many works told the history of medical sociology in the United States, also recalled in 1965 the trajectory of the first 15 years of the sociology of medical education: how it became institutionalized and went on to become one of the most important sub-fields of medical sociology (Bloom, 1965, 2002).

In *Boys in white* (Becker et al., 1961), the authors themselves note that the focus of the work “was on the medical school as an organization in which the student acquired some basic perspectives on his later activity as a doctor” (p.18). At the base of the organization were the social relationships and the collective forms of social action, which took place in the process of interaction. For the authors, “human behavior is to be understood as a process in which the person shapes and controls his conduct by taking into account (through the mechanism of ‘role-taking’) the expectations of others with whom he interacts” (p.19). The researchers’ stated goal was to analyze the “students’ level and direction of effort” (p.33), and because of the potential complexity such an analysis of interaction, it centered the study around the concept of perspective. Taking the George Herbert Mead’s (1863-1931) concept of perspective as a starting point, the researchers stated: “We use the term *perspective* to refer to a co-ordinated set of ideas and actions a person uses in dealing with some problematic situation, to refer to a person’s ordinary way of thinking and feeling about and acting in such a situation” (p.34). They stressed that they were most interested in group perspectives, especially those of the students seen through the “student culture.”

For Strauss (1987, p.253), the headings of the book's chapters are self-explanatory. The book is split into four parts: 1. Background and methods; 2. Student culture in the freshman year; 3. Student culture in the clinical years; 4. Perspectives on the future. Upon analyzing the three chapters that constitute the field research, Strauss (1987, p.254) shows that each chapter on each topic demonstrates how the three central conditions of the study interrelate: the students' perspectives, the student culture, and the organization; i.e., the medical school and hospital. He comments that the study is structured around "very well integrated" central categories – student culture and perspectives – which are nonetheless "not dense in their conceptualizations" (p.255).

There are many aspects worth highlighting in this research and we have selected a few to show the students' passage through medical school.

In the modifications analyzed under "provisional perspective," thus denominated because it is a "bridge between their initial perspective and their final views" (Becker et al., 1961, p.112), the authors summarize the students' new perspective: "freshmen enter medical school full of enthusiasm, pride, and idealism about the medical profession. For many it is the realization of a dream, a day they have been looking forward to since childhood. They have worked hard to get in, are proud to have been accepted, and find it difficult to imagine themselves anything else but future practitioners" (p.79).

This initial, idealistic perspective stirs them to make a great effort to "learn everything," but this changes as the course of study proceeds, because the students discover that it is unfeasible. This leads them to a new perspective, as set forth in their own statements (Becker et al., 1961, p.111-112): "In spite of all our efforts, we cannot learn everything in the time available;" "We will work just as hard as ever, but now we will study in only the most effective and economical ways, and learn only the things that are important;" "We will decide whether something is important according to whether it is important in medical practice;" "We will decide whether something is important according to whether it is what the faculty wants us to know."

The authors supplement these statements with data in the form of percentages about the students' perspectives. For instance, in selecting what to study, 54% considered the wishes of the faculty, 22% what they deemed important for the practice of medicine, while 24% did not adopt any specific criteria. The researchers recall that even those who said they wanted to study what would be important for the practice of the profession ended up studying what the professors wanted them to. Interestingly, the students' stated positions can be grouped into their peer groups: the "fraternity men" would first decide to study what the professors wanted, while the "independents" would study what they deemed useful for their future practice.

It is important to stress how the students characterized the pragmatic perspective they adopted even at the end of the first year of medical school: "We selected the important things to study by finding out what the faculty wants us to know. This is the way to pass examinations and get through school;" "We continue to study hard and in the most economical and efficient ways;" "We try to find out, in every way we can short of cheating, what questions will be on the examinations and how they should be answered and share this information with other members of the class" (Becker et al., 1961, p.161).

It can be seen that the students took on the professors' perspectives, but at the end of the first year they were disappointed because they would have to study what was set in the exams and not what they thought would be useful for the practice of medicine; they felt that the operative word was "student" and not "medicine." This situation did not change, even when it was contextualized in the medical culture at work in the hospital.

Unlike the previous stages, in the clinical years the students were more homogeneous and no sub-groups were formed (Becker et al., 1961, p.217). Although the students did not resolve the problem of deciding what to study and what direction to pursue, in their hospital activities two notions were presented emphatically and persuasively both by the professors and by the structural characteristics of the medical school and the hospital organization. These notions are "medical responsibility" and "clinical experience."

The way physicians and students understand these notions were found to be different. For the physicians, responsibility was "something he has and must exercise." Clinical experience was "something he has and uses." For the students, responsibility was "something he wants but is often denied, as is clinical experience." It was in these situations that teachers and students formed relationships that differed from those formed during the years of basic study: they were now relationships with "doctors in medicine," and were closer to what the students themselves had idealized.

Finishing the analysis of the extensive material, the authors return to the most salient points concerning student culture, student autonomy, pragmatic idealism, situation and context. They stress that it was in the daily life of institutional practices that students collectively elaborated their perspectives. A summary of the main points would be: (1) school is seen as a field of interactions where perspectives are redefined and created; (2) school is a unit of investigation, also considered an institution whose characteristics permit it to be compared with other types of "total institutions," as Bloom (1963) recalls; (3) at medical school the students develop a set of dilemmas: idealism vs. the demands of clinical work, fear and anxiety vs self-assurance, identifying oneself with the faculty vs. taking medical responsibility and clinical experience, within their limits.

The trajectory of qualitative research – from the 1950s to 1970

Many important facts could be recalled to contextualize the sociology of the 1950s, but without doubt the I World Congress of Sociology, under the auspices of the International Sociological Association (ISA), created in 1949 in Zurich, Switzerland, is an important moment. Organized by René König (1906-1992), it took "Sociological Research in its Bearing on International Relations" as one of its umbrella themes. It attracted 154 participants, and constituted the first Executive Committee of the ISA, whose first president was Louis Wirth (1897-1952), a noted sociologist from the Chicago School, and vice-presidents were Fernando de Azevedo (Brazil), Morris Ginsberg (UK), and Georges Davy (France). The decade kicked off with a topic that underlined the importance of sociological research on the international plane. Twelve years later, the congress was held in Washington, D.C., attracting 1,196 participants (Platt, 1998).

In the 1950s and 60s, the institutionalization of sociology in the United States was completed. The key representatives of these periods include Parsons, Mills, Park, Coser, Dahrendorf, Merton, Schutz and Blumer, who, taking different theoretical and methodological perspectives at different universities (Harvard and Columbia), took over the academic leadership which had until then belonged to the University of Chicago. It is worth remembering that this university had enjoyed its heyday between 1915 and 1940, under the First Chicago School of Sociology, running on to the 1960s under the second generation of sociologists, such as Everett Hughes, Anselm Strauss, Howard S. Becker and Erving Goffman, who emphasized the study of human behavior in small groups. As Becker (1996a, p.186) pointed out, “the basic unit of study was social interaction, people who got together to do things in common.” In his account, Becker wrote that

after the Second World War, the Chicago School somehow left Chicago; the department itself turned, institutionally, to a perspective more linked to the survey and to quantitative research, becoming less open to studies with an anthropological approach. Nevertheless, authors like Goffman, myself, Eliot Freidson and many of Hughes’, Warner’s and Blumer’s students left for other centers in the country and started to teach (Becker, 1996a, p.187).

Although qualitative research was not yet systematized, it had been used in the nineteenth century by Henry Mayhew (1812-1887), for example, in his work on the street dwellers of London, and Frederic Le Play (1806-1882), in his work on French workers. It started to be used more systematically in the early decades of the twentieth century by anthropologists, such as Malinowski and Mead, and the sociologists from Chicago, such as Thomas and Znaniecki, Park and Burgess. With William Foote White (1914-2000), participant observation penetrated the field of urban ethnological studies.

For Denzin and Lincoln (2011, p.xv), qualitative research went through different phases in North America: traditional (1900-1930), modern, or the “golden age” (1950-1970), blurred genres (1970-1986), crisis of representation (1986-1990), post-modernism (1990-1995), post-experimental research (1995-2000), the methodological contestation of the present (2000-2004) and a fragmented future (2005-). These authors suggest that these periods overlapped and coexisted.

Another way to trace the trajectory of qualitative research is to see it within the research traditions within whose methodological body this perspective is carried out. Jacob (1998) suggests these are: human ethology, ecological psychology, holistic ethnography, cognitive anthropology, ethnography of communication, and symbolic interactionism.

Taking these two perspectives, we could say that *Boys in white* is a product of the golden age of qualitative research and the ethnographic studies of the school of symbolic interactionism, and that it was the golden age that saw the biggest proximity between qualitative and quantitative research, the best example of which being that of Becker et al. (Denzin, Lincoln, 2011). For Becker et al. (1961, p.19): “[w]e decided to work with a theory based on the concept of symbolic interaction, the theory first enunciated by Charles Horton Cooley, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead, and since used and expanded by many others [Blumer, Foote, Lindesmith, Strauss].”

From the perspective of the study done in the 1950s, we could say that it foreshadowed much of what was done later in qualitative research. In this sense, its methodological proposal is perfectly framed in what many years later would be the keynote of qualitative studies, as can be seen in a text by Denzin and Lincoln (1994). For these authors, qualitative research is seen as “multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalist approach to its subject matter” (p.2). They stress that researchers “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.”

Final considerations

In 2001, 40 years after the publication of *Boys in white*, Brenda (2001) Beagan began her analysis with a passage from the book in which Becker et al. (1961, p.60) noted that the socio-demographic characteristics of the students (sex, race, culture, social class, sexual orientation, religion) had little or no impact on their experiences in the face of the “overwhelming medical student culture” (Beagan, 2001, p.584). It should be recalled that when the research was done, just 5% of the students in any class were women, and 5-7% were non-white. As Beagan (p.584; highlights in original) explains, “[t]hey really were ‘boys’ in white – in fact they were ‘white’ boys in white.”

In the 40 years that followed, the state of affairs changed. In 1993, 43% of medical students were women, and in 1991-1992, around 27% were African American, Native American, Hispanic and Asian (Beagan, 2001, p.584). More recent statistics show that of the 42,742 applicants to medical school in 2010-2011, 52.7% were male and 47.3% were female. In 2009, 48.8% of the graduates were female and 35.7% were non-white; 34.9% of the full-time faculty at the medical schools were women, and 25.9% were non-white (Qi Liu, Alexander, 2011).

In fact, these comments are pertinent, but, as Thomas Laqueur (2002, p.721), professor of history at the University of California, writes in his review of *Boys in White*, “it remains a remarkable ethnographic study.” In his sharp observations, he writes:

Much of this is still pertinent today, but my overwhelming sense in rereading this book is the same one I get rereading classic anthropology: the tribe is gone and with it many of its initiation rituals; and the anthropologist who can isolate his tribe from the surrounding world is gone too. The world that Becker and his colleagues report is not quite as distant as 19th century Paris or Vienna, but it is fading fast. The relatively comfortable, professionally self sufficient world of late 1950s’ medicine in the United States is more and more a memory (Laqueur, 2002, p.721).

Without doubt, the half-century that has passed since the publication of *Boys in white* has seen great changes in the United States with regard to medical education and the medical profession if compared with the time when Becker and his colleagues were at work. This is not to detract from the groundbreaking nature of the book in methodological terms; it remains a classic of qualitative research and the sociology of medical education to this day. Levinson (1967, p.253) considered this work one of the leading investigations of medical education, adding that “[i]ts aims extend beyond medical sociology into other areas of inquiry such as the sociology of large-scale organizations of education, and of the professions.”

Bloom notes that although there may be similarities in the methodologies and findings of this research and that done at Columbia, especially by Renée Fox, “[i]n the interpretation of findings, however, the Kansas study separates itself very distinctly from the Columbia group” (Bloom, 1963, p.85). He regards the idealism that the neophyte carries upon entering medical school as not being supported by the faculty, and the “medical school, in other words, is more school than medical,” while in his/her adaptation process, “the individual student finds that it is most helpful to join hands with classmates” (p.86). Bloom returns to one of the central ideas from the findings, which is that of the “collective solution to their common pressing problem.” He also stresses how the student culture is separate, distinct and secret from the faculty culture: “students present one face to their masters, acquiescence and co-operation, in the interests of academic survival; in their own culture, they are more independent and critical” (p.86).

From a methodological point of view, it is important to stress how Becker analyzed, years after *Boys in white*, the issue of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, taking the position that Robert Park defended.

Park was a great advocate of what we now call ethnographic methods. But he was equally a proponent of quantitative methods, particularly ecological ones. I follow him in that, and to me the similarities between these methods are at least as, and probably more, important and relevant than the differences. In fact, I think that the same epistemological arguments underlie and provide the warrant for both (Becker, 1996b, p.53).

In this same work, of the three studies he cites to illustrate the possibility for research to combine qualitative and quantitative methodologies, he stresses that the one done at the Kansas medical school “relied on observation and unstructured interviews to generate data, but presented the results both in an ethnographic form and in simple tables which were, somewhat to the surprise of qualitative zealots, ‘quantitative,’ though we did not use any tests of significance, the differences we pointed to being gross enough to make such tests an unnecessary frill” (Becker, 1996b, p.67).³

Generally speaking, one point in common we would highlight regarding the authors of *Boys in white*, which we believe to be the main reason for the longevity of this work, is the issue of methodology, specifically qualitative research. As Gobo (2005) points out, it was only in the 1950s that this perspective came to the fore, breaking theoretical, technical and political barriers. We believe that the significance of the work we have analyzed lies in its breaking with the Parsonian/Mertonian tradition, illuminated by the perspectives introduced by sociologists who were opening the way for research into occupations – Hughes – and setting the foundations for interaction theory – Strauss. The special inheritance left by these two sociologists remains alive and has been revived in many publications.

Like many classical texts from the sociology of health, *Boys in white*, reaching its 11th print run in 2009 in the United States, has still not been translated into Portuguese. It may be for this reason that it has been ignored in reviews about the sociology of health, in works on the sociology of medical education, and in graduate courses in public health in Brazil. Without doubt, this delay in its publication is not exclusive to *Boys in white*, because another classic,

The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research, by Glaser and Strauss (1967), has also not been translated into Portuguese, although *Mirror and masks: the search for identity*, by Anselm Strauss, from 1959, was finally brought out in Brazil in 1999.

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NOTES

¹ The list of the articles can be found on *Howies' home page* – “news & notes” at <http://home.earthlink.net/~hsbecker/vita.html>.

² This and the other citations of texts in other languages are free translations.

³ The two other works cited by Becker are *Black Metropolis*, by St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton (1945), and *Labeling the Mentally Retarded*, by Jane Mercer (1973).

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