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Denials, Obstructions, and Silences

Lessons from Repertoires of Field Resistance (and Embrace)

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Introduction

What do factory craftsmen, clinical anatomists, and business school professors have in common? Not too much, you might think, but think again. All these individuals share the ability to exhibit resistance when faced with a field inquiry into their working lives. And how can we not understand them? Few people really want to be studied—let alone by a field researcher like myself, claiming to follow an inductive research approach that might lead me to become intrigued by aspects of their lives that they do not get (ex–ante) to pick or might not want (ex–post) to discuss. Field resistance under such circumstances is understandable given that many scholars seek to "infiltrate" rather than access a field (Douglas, 1976, p. 167). By *field resistance*, I mean any reaction that field participants collectively deploy to resist a research inquiry into their social worlds. My main argument is that we can also learn a lot from capturing, analyzing, and qualifying field resistance.

Forms of field resistance teach us as much about a given field's tensions as other more traditional data sources (such as archives, interviews, observations, and surveys). For instance, moments when a field researcher is being denied access to a field call for reflexive analysis (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). As Gary Alan Fine reminds us when discussing the art of field research, "the limits of the art are also part of the data" (1993, p. 289). I will illustrate this point with three examples taken from field projects I conducted involving, respectively, factory craftsmen, clinical anatomists, and business school professors, and then I will broaden the scope of my argument by detailing instances of field resistance in other scholars' works (involving sex workers and couples in transition) to showcase the analytical power of such resistance. Finally, I will argue that a similar logic can apply to the "opposite" of field resistance, namely field embrace, and I will review two examples of field embrace (involving urban poor and former Ku Klux Klan members) to illustrate my point. Before doing so, however, I would like to take a small detour via the crop world to jumpstart our discussion.

Resistance is common in many of our field pursuits: Scholars trying to penetrate new social worlds or to make sense of unchartered terrains often approach field participants to gain a better understanding of the field. Not all participants welcome such an inquiry. And even if they do, they tend to resist (consciously or not) some parts of the investigation. As field scholars, we invariably encounter overt and covert resistance. Yet the term *field resistance* barely registers throughout the social sciences. (A Web of Science search conducted in 2015 on the topic of "field resistance" yielded

1,449 hits in science versus only 8 in social sciences.) Other scientific domains, by contrast, treat field resistance with much more depth and interest. Indeed, the term is widely used, for instance in physics and agronomy. I will focus here on agronomy.

In the context of agronomy, field resistance refers to a species' ability to resist threats such as pests, disease, or suboptimal environmental conditions. When faced with field intrusions, crops react in many strange, yet telling ways. An article from the *Annals of Botany* notes that crops' responses to field intrusion are "complex," but also involve "adaptive changes" that can be "modified by the superimposition of other stresses" (Chaves et al., 2002, p. 907). That last insight matters a lot for my argument. Put otherwise, the article's authors suggest that a crop's response to a given stress depends, in part, on other stress factors it faces. This has important implications for organizational scholars. Let me explain.

In the crop world, an outside stress can, for instance, be the intrusion of a new organism into a corn field. Corn can modify its shoot ratio or the accumulation of reserves in its stem in reaction to the intrusion. But corn can also grow longer husks. Also, the photosynthetic process in its leaves can be modified. In brief, the corn's responses vary widely and they all depend on other important, often evolving, "stress factors" that the crop is experiencing, such as high temperatures or insufficient water. We can translate this insight from agronomy to social sciences.

A field researcher conducting an inquiry generally constitutes an intrusion into a field and often induces some kind of disturbance. Field participants' resistance is in part conditioned by other stress factors they face. These factors, I would argue, are key field tensions: exactly the ones that inductive researchers want to uncover. Forms of resistance and their evolution therefore echo the drama of participants' daily lives. For instance, how field participants silently run you out of town or insult you to your face matters because their reactions say as much about them as about you. I learned this first-hand when studying factory craftsmen, clinical anatomists, and business school professors. The often varied and changing forms of field resistance constitute invaluable data points for field inquiries.

Evidence of Field Resistance

Factory Craftsmen's Denials

My first encounter with resistance unsurprisingly started with my first field inquiry. The research project's site was a French aeronautics plant in which craftsmen produced on the side, but on company time and with company materials, illegal artifacts (known as "homers"), such as toys for their kids, cutlery for their kitchens, or window frames for their homes (Anteby, 2008a, 2008b). As part of my research design, I conducted a survey of retirement gifts since I knew many of these artifacts were given to retirees upon their departure. The survey yielded intriguing findings, most significantly by showing that certain plant employees (namely, craftsmen) were more likely than other employees (e.g., supervisors and unskilled labor) to receive a homer as a retirement gift. One survey reply, however, froze me for days.

The anonymous respondent who identified as a craftsmen wrote directly on the survey sheet, "C'est pas beau de demander de dénoncer mes petits copains. T'es un enculé." ("It isn't nice to ask me to rat on my friends. You're a bastard."). I recall reading his reply and being quite distraught, thinking that he might be right and that I had no business meddling into their lives and affairs. (That some others had refused to meet me did not bode well.) A few weeks later, I was scheduled to interview another plant craftsman in a small-town café, sufficiently far from the main plant to give us some privacy. Upon arrival, he asked to see my ID before agreeing to talk. (All French citizens are required to carry a national identification card.) In both cases, these craftsmen's reactions were alerting me that some people might view them as thieves. They were articulating a key field tension I would only later discover, that is, the craft/theft dichotomy so central to their occupational identity.

Since homer-making was done only with scrap materials and always after completing official jobs, craftsmen never saw themselves as thieves. Yet management sometimes tried to leverage that perception to keep them in check. Thus, denying being a thief proved crucial to the craftsmen's identities. The field's main form of resistance—participants' denials that they were thieves after suggesting that I could "rat on" them to managers—embodied their key concern and provided invaluable data points into their own world.

Clinical Anatomists' Obstructions

My second encounter with field resistance occurred in a very different setting: whole-body donations programs in New York State. The clinical anatomist I met and interviewed in these programs resisted in a very different way. The project looked at the commerce in human cadavers for medical education, and clinical anatomists were often the ones entrusted with obtaining cadavers to supply anatomy classes and other medical research needs (Anteby, 2010). Increasingly, however, independent ventures were offering similar services, and the anatomists could have resisted by telling me that they were not "thieves" like the "body-brokers" (a pejorative term they used to characterize ventures) who were encroaching on their jurisdiction. That is not, however, how anatomists resisted. Instead, they tried to obstruct access to the field.

Anatomists tried to physically prevent me from accessing their field. After attending a first meeting of New York State anatomists, I was barred from returning to subsequent ones. Also, when visiting donation programs, I was often offered a small desk in a separate room—outside the program's perimeter. Interestingly, the anatomists' form of resistance against the inquiry (i.e., preventing physical intrusion) was similar to the one they deployed against independent ventures. Though anatomists mainly tried to distinguish themselves from ventures via contrasted work practices (e.g., refusing to dissect a cadaver prior to use, while ventures often did so upon receipt of the cadaver and then distributed parts to multiple users), their initial line of defense was to physically seal the state borders from out-of-state cadavers (generally procured by ventures). Again, their form of field resistance echoed the drama of their daily lives: a deeply rooted need to distinguish themselves from the "unethical" trade in cadavers promoted by independent ventures. The repeated attempts to obstruct field access ended up being a very telling data point to illuminate clinical anatomists' lives.

Business School Professors' Silences

My third encounter with field resistance occurred much closer to home, in the institution that employed me at the time. The project was an ethnography of faculty socialization at the Harvard Business School, and it was built on historical research suggesting that some elite U.S. business schools were created with an imperative to moralize business conduct (Abend, 2013; Khurana, 2007). Assuming such an imperative still existed, the project asked how it might be transmitted to new faculty members (Anteby, 2013a). The study was an (auto)ethnography of life as a rookie faculty member in a setting with traces of a moral mission in its organizational DNA. The form of field resistance here initially proved harder to pinpoint.

At first, resistance was framed in ever-shifting academic terms, such as the pushback I got from colleagues that by studying my own field I contradicted Max Weber's notion of "axiological neutrality," or the expectation that a social scientist exclude personal bias when analyzing data (Weber, 2004, p. 22).[1] With time, however, another pattern of resistance emerged: one involving silences. For instance, when quizzing a senior colleague about his views of the project, I was once told it was too risky for me to pursue. Assuming I accepted the risk, I asked him, what was the next issue I should address? None, he replied. I pressed him to explain, but he did not elaborate. At first, I did not make much of such (silent) reactions and thought they simply illustrated the "self-protective secrecy of

elites" (Katz, 1997, p. 402). But another discussion with four other colleagues on the study's progress made me pause: one participant barely uttered more than a word during the hour-long collective discussion. I recall thinking, why attend an hour-long meeting in silence? I should have known better.

I gradually came to understand that such silences were part of the socializing process. In fact, they proved very guiding. By not articulating what was right or wrong, the burden of moral "discovery" falls on participants. Rediscovering morals in an apparent (silent) void proved to be the organization's goal. Field participants were enacting with me what I later described as "vocal silence"—the repeated opportunities in which agents are left to make decisions ostensibly alone, but in an organizational context rich with signs that offer guidance as to what might be preferred. Their form of resistance therefore captured the field's main socialization hope and tension. Silence was not anodyne; it entailed what was primarily at stake at the school: a deeply held belief in the possibility for silent "self-discovery" within limits set by the institution. Again, the field's form of resistance was extremely suggestive of its internal functioning.

A Wide and Telling Variety of Field Resistance

The forms of field resistance that I encountered until now ranged from denials to silences via obstructions, but a wide variety of forms of resistance likely exist across social inquiries. Unfortunately, very few scholars report them or treat forms of resistance as pertinent data points. (See Table 19.1 for examples of resistance.) A careful reading of select published studies can start to expand the list of forms of resistance. I will share two alternate forms of resistance I was able to identify in other scholars' published work: field disappearance and conditional interviewing consent. Both forms of resistance proved extremely helpful to the understanding of given fields' dynamics.

When Sudhir Venkatesh started to look into sex work in New York City in 1997, he tried to find a neighborhood where he could observe changes occurring in this industry. Yet each time he tried delving deeper into a neighborhood historically associated with prostitution (e.g., Times Square, Lower East Side), local residents would tell him "everyone moved" (Venkatesh, 2013b, p. 691). Repeatedly, field participants' resistance coalesced into a narrative of disappearance: people left, they relocated, and there's basically nothing here anymore. Venkatesh looked in vain for this "new place" where all these people had moved, but the field's form of resistance was also Venkatesh's main finding: The actual geography of prostitution had migrated off the streets, moved upscale, and often online. More specifically, the elite underground economy's geography was now intertwined with the elite professionals' geography (Venkatesh, 2013a). Being repeatedly told that the field had moved away was participants' way of signaling to him the evolving and radically new geography of their industry.

As the above example suggests, forms of resistance are idiosyncratic to given fields; they capture and tell unique stories. The resistance that Diane Vaughan encountered when studying turning points in partners' intimate relations illustrates this well (Vaughan, 1990). She interviewed more than a hundred people about how their relations started, unfolded, and often ended, though also how they sometimes reconnected with their partners. In the process, she asked interviewees if she could also speak to their (often former) partners; some consented, other refused. She noticed, however, patterns of consents and refusals. The interviewees' conditional consent depended in part on "the nature of their connection to their former partner" (1990, p. 206). People's willingness to consent depended on whether they had been able to construct separate identities. As Vaughan came to understand, "coupling changes us and so does uncoupling. But in most cases relationships don't end. They change, but they don't end. When both individuals develop an identity of their own, they're free to acknowledge the ties" (1990, p. 206). In that sense, an interviewee's resistance to have her interview a former partner could also be read as a data point about the current nature of the relation—whether the partners saw themselves as having separate identities or not. Thus, the form of resistance qualified the relations she studied.

Field Embrace as Alternate and Telling Data Points

It would be a shame, however, to restrict our focus only to forms of field resistance. Indeed, if the opposite of resistance is embrace, there might be also very good reasons to try to classify forms of embrace and treat them as pertinent data points. (See Table 19.1 for examples of embrace.) While a lot can be learned from field resistance, a lot can also be learned by analyzing field participants' enthusiastic embrace of a research inquiry. Indeed, when a researcher is warmly welcomed by participants, such an embrace might similarly reflect a key tension (and sometimes its resolution) for field participants. As with resistance, a better grasp of forms of embrace can help us gain a better understanding of a given field setting. The form of embrace—for example, whether a researcher is rapidly welcomed into the population studied or gently nudged into perhaps helping participants financially—is always telling. I will illustrate this through two examples.

When the (white female) Kathleen Blee interviewed women in the 1980s who had been part of the Ku Klux Klan, she was surprised by the ease with which she established rapport with them and how little remorse they expressed about their time in the Klan (Blee, 2009). Such a welcoming embrace echoed the one Klan members used to extend to all white Protestant women who grew up and lived around them when the Klan thrived. As Blee later discovered, during the 1920s, close to a quarter million people—or almost a third of the white native-born female population in Indiana (the setting of her research)—were members of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan (p. 125). Their welcome (also a form of embrace) was therefore typical of Klan members trying to enroll a vast number of women into their ranks. Blee's interviewees were as welcoming as the Klan had been. Thus, the form of field embrace was a powerful early data point in this inquiry.

By contrast, when Matthew Desmond studied the urban poor, he did not initially feel welcomed and his field access proved more difficult (Desmond, 2012b). Yet, some urban poor allowed him to follow them around for some periods of time. When he quizzed a person he was following about what she was thinking about, she answered matter-of-factly, "How I gonna feed my kids tonight" (Desmond, 2012b).

Table 19.1 Use of Forms of Field Resistance (and Embrace*) in Qualitative Research

Reference	Research Context	How Innovation Was Used	Outcome of Innovation
Venkatesh (2013a, 2013b)	New York City's underground economy	Tracking a "disappearing" field led to analyze the shifting geography of the underground economy	Reconsider field sites as no longer physically or geographically bound
Vaughan (1990)	Couples in transition	Tracking an interviewee's consent or refusal to agree to his or her former partner being interviewed helped qualify the degree to which partners have developed separate identities	Recognizing that former social ties with intimate partners can only be acknowledged once these partners establish distinct identities
Blee (2009)*	Women members of the Ku Ku Klan in Indiana	The warm welcome extended by former KKK members to the researcher was indicative of the Klan's broad reach	Ability to document how common it was for women in certain communities to be members of the Klan
Desmond (2012a, 2012b)*	Urban poor in the United States	Being embraced by field participants as a person who might help and then never be seen again foreshadowed the notion of disposable ties	Ability to identify and discuss a previously overlooked category of social ties ("disposable ties")

2012a, p. 1307). Her answer was also a form of field embrace and exemplified how urban poor people often need to make do in their harsh living environments. She saw the researcher as a new acquaintance from whom all kinds of resources (including maybe financial ones) could possibly flow. By voicing a financial concern, she was also telling him how he might be able to help. That genuine and fleeting embrace was characteristic of the "disposable social ties" that Desmond later identified in his field, namely ties with strangers (not kin) lasting only for short bursts of time, but ties that helped immensely in difficult times. For this field participant, Desmond (like many others around her) was a disposable tie. Again, the form of field embrace was indicative of what the field setting would later reveal.

I should add that it is important to note that field embrace and resistance are not "all or nothing" situations; embrace and resistance can be deeply intertwined, leading to much more ambivalence than the previous idealized examples suggest. Both within and across interactions between scholars and field participants, the pendulum of resistance and embrace can swing quite easily. As an illustration, during a single interaction, a field participant may exhibit resistance for fear of being "rubricized" (Maslow, 1962), namely, rapidly put into a category that only captures part of her or his experience, yet also embrace the scholarly inquiry because of the hope of finally being understood in her or his full complexity. In these instances, the pendulum will prove hard to stabilize between resistance and embrace. In a similar manner, a field participant can welcome an inquiry during a first encounter, but subsequently exhibit lots of resistance because she or he suddenly realizes that too much has been said. Thus, an ambivalent stand should be acknowledged alongside pure resistance and pure embrace.

Conclusion

By showcasing forms of embrace after discussing forms of resistance, my point is to call for closer attention to capturing and qualifying all kinds of interactions between a scholar and the field, whether these interactions entail resistance, embrace, ambivalence, or any other reactions. We can only learn as much as fields teach us, but fields teach us a lot even when we don't think they do—for instance, in moments when we feel frustrated at being rejected by field participants or pleased at simply being accepted by them. The field's reaction to a scholar's intrusion can be viewed as a field-level "social defense" mechanism.[2] Such a mechanism is a collective arrangement—e.g., a prevalent discourse, a typical work practice, or a common form of resistance—created or used by organizational members as a protection against a disturbing affect derived from external threats, internal conflicts, or the nature of their work (Halton, 1994). Put otherwise, the social defense tries to assuage a key tension shared by field participants. For instance, a depersonalizing method of ward rotation and task allocation can help nurses in hospitals deal with the anxiety of working too closely with dying patients (Menzies, 1960). Thus, making sense of the social defense (here, depersonalization) amounts to making sense of the field's key tension (here, dealing with death).

To return to the *Annals of Botany* article that triggered the writing of this chapter: Corn's field resistance (and possible embrace) can teach us more than botanical lessons; it can also teach us lessons for our research craft. Examining corn's subtle, slow, and recurring forms of resistance (and embrace) can seem irrelevant, yet they matter both empirically and theoretically. By better capturing and listening to evolving forms of resistance (and embrace) alongside more traditional data, we learn a lot from our fields (see Figure 19.1). In doing so, we also clarify our position in the field (Pratt, 2009). Next time graduate students approach us with field dissertation ideas, instead of focusing on whether they already have access to the field and "how long" they have been in the field (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993, p. 601), we should ask them how their field resisted or embraced the research pursuit and push them to try to capture and qualify their field's reaction. In the same way that Charles Tilly and Sarah Soule have drawn our attention to "repertoires" of contention (Tilly, 2006; Wang & Soule, 2012), we need to envision repertoires of field resistance (and embrace) and better understand what they mean for our inquiries. By better capturing and listening to evolving forms of resistance (and embrace) alongside more traditional data, we learn a lot from our fields.
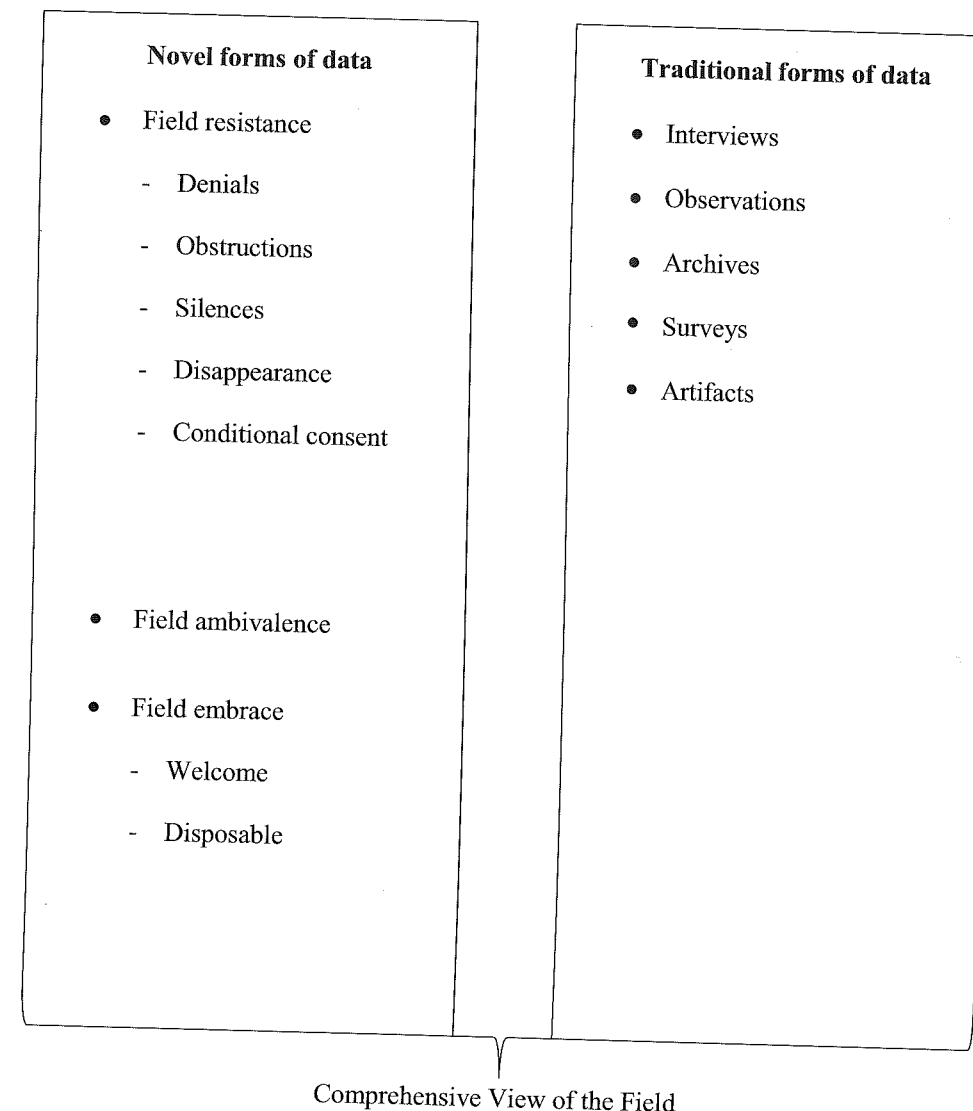

Figure 19.1 Combining Novel and Traditional Data Sources

Moreover, by discounting repertoires of resistance, embrace or ambivalence, we are closing ourselves off from lessons from the field. As an illustration, in Elton Mayo's analysis of the Hawthorne Studies conducted at the Western Electric Plant, workers' occasional resistance to being studied was mainly seen as added evidence for managers' need to pay more attention to their employees. But Mayo's discounting of some alternate analyses, particularly the ones by William Lloyd Warner, who designed the famous "bank wiring observation room" study, led him to miss some key tensions in the field. As John Van Maanen notes, "What Mayo never reckoned with—despite Warner's insistence that there was more to employees' discontent at Hawthorne than simply the way they were treated by their bosses—is that discord in organizations arises from structural and power inequalities as well" (2013, p. 107). The Hawthorne studies are silent about such inequalities.

When ignoring field resistance or embrace, we are not only discounting important data points, but also shutting ourselves off to ways in which field participants try to tell us what matters to them in their social worlds. Assuming our goal is to analyze these worlds, we are missing a lot by ignoring the complex yet telling ways in which field participants try to speak to us and shape the nature of our field inquiries.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1 To address the issue of axiological neutrality, I wrote a piece in defense of field distance *and* involvement (Anteby, 2013b).
2 The "social defense mechanism" concept builds on the psychoanalytic theories of individual defense mechanisms (i.e., operations used by individuals to reduce or eliminate threats to their integrity and stability), but assumes they also operate at the collective level. For more details, see Jacques (1955), Laplanche and Pontalis (1973, p. 109), Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010, pp. 47–48), and Racamier (1970).

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