

# How to make the most of resistance in research subjects

Boston ethnographer argues that people often disclose more than intended when they close ranks and create obstacles

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For psychotherapists, it is often the things that people shy away from talking about that prove to be the most significant. Something very similar applies to ethnographic research, according to Michel Anteby, professor of management and organisations at Boston University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/boston-university>).

He has carried out projects among clinical anatomists, celebrity ghostwriters, Disney puppeteers, French engineers and even his former colleagues at Harvard Business School. Yet in every case it is by attending to their defence mechanisms – obstructing, hiding, shelving, silencing, forgetting and denying – that he has gained crucial insights into their central concerns, he writes in his wide-ranging new book, *The Interloper: Lessons from Resistance in the Field*.

Different ethnographers adopt different techniques for interacting and blending in with their subjects out “in the field”. One researcher described in Professor Anteby’s book deliberately adopted what she called “a soft-butch lesbian demeanour” when exploring attitudes to sexuality and gender among high-school boys. He also mentions a colleague who worked on anxious white males in positions of power and found it very easy to reassure them because she had been brought up in a traditional Mormon family where women were expected to “validate the power of their male



Source: Getty Images/iStock/Alamy montage

Yet he himself grew up gay in a conventional French family that found it difficult to deal with homosexuality, so he is always alert to the silences and evasions that reveal the anxieties and sometimes paranoia to be found in particular workplaces. “It’s like a detective dealing with clues,” he suggested. “Many are visible, but as many are hidden, invisible, silent and not fully obvious.”

Though ethnographers often describe the difficulties of “gaining access” to the places they want to study, Professor Anteby notes in *The Interloper*, this is usually presented as preparatory to the real fieldwork, though in reality “all the time spent prior to gaining access is also fieldwork” and can prove very illuminating. Furthermore, “whenever I feel access is too easy”, he told *Times Higher Education*, “I become very uncomfortable. Some of my colleagues will run with it and are overjoyed that doors are opening up, but to me it codes as a bit suspicious.”

Since even tiny acts of evasion or resistance can uncover tensions, taboos and hidden histories, Professor Anteby urged his fellow researchers to “keep track of them and understand them as they unfold, rather than just consider them as hurdles or problems”.

While working on a doctorate about a French aeronautics factory, he spoke to a former craftsman about a particular engine that had been developed during the 1970s in partnership with General Electric (GE). Yet the man brushed aside any questions about whether he had himself been to the US or received any visits from American engineers.

Such “forgetting” of interactions that he knew from other sources had been highly significant, as his book explains, was far from accidental – and indeed, in this instance, touched on some crucial existential issues for post-war France.

Since the humiliation of defeat and German occupation in the 1940s, Professor Anteby writes, “the military conquest of the skies has held a special place in France’s national imagination” and it was regarded as essential to “build a ‘French’ aeronautics industry”. As a result, Snecma (the Société Nationale d’Études et de Construction de Moteurs d’Aviation) was constantly required to “prove its patriotism”.

In reality, however, Snecma incorporated a pre-existing manufacturer that had collaborated closely with the Germans, needed to recruit many German and Austrian engineers in the period up to 1970 and then formed a partnership with GE for the next three decades. This troubling past was disguised by the huge French flag outside the factory and “the sea of French cars parked on the plant lot”, which helped create a “vast patriotic tapestry – one that, almost unconsciously, omitted any hint of foreignness”.

 he realised some of this, Professor Anteby made a point of mentioning only his loose

affiliation with Sciences Po (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/sciences-po>), the school of political science based in Paris, and not that he was a doctoral student at New York University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/new-york-university>). Even this simple step opened up doors that had been closed to him before. On the one occasion when he had to borrow a friend's Japanese car, he made sure it was as inconspicuous as possible in the car park. Though his dissertation and the book based on it referred only briefly to the plant's complex history, he later returned to his data and co-authored an article ([https://www.michelanteby.net/\\_files/ugd/878856\\_288624c1c8024253aa18255d3248a04a.pdf](https://www.michelanteby.net/_files/ugd/878856_288624c1c8024253aa18255d3248a04a.pdf)) exploring the hidden and still sensitive German and Austrian connections he had stumbled upon almost accidentally.

Elsewhere in *The Interloper*, Professor Anteby describes the obstructions he faced when he tried to "enter the world of whole-body donation". While working at the Maryland State Anatomy Board on "the handling of human cadavers" donated for education and research, the director tossed him "a bull's plastinated testicle" as a sort of challenge. More seriously, he was invited to a meeting of clinical anatomists in New York, only for a motion to be passed in his presence preventing him from attending all subsequent meetings. He was welcomed at a glitzy cocktail party in Las Vegas by the American Association of Clinical Anatomists but snubbed as soon as he tried to recruit people for his study.

All this, he came to realise, reflected the clinical anatomists' deep anxieties about outsiders, and particularly the independent "body-brokers" who offended their sense of morality by actively recruiting donors in retirement states such as Florida or who accepted "donations" signed off by next of kin rather than by the individuals themselves while still alive. By refusing to take their obstructive behaviour personally or simply as an obstacle, he learned much about how embattled the anatomists felt.

Since he was working on this project while on the faculty at Harvard, Professor Anteby tried and failed many times to speak to the people involved in the university's whole-body donation programme. A further possible reason for such obstructiveness emerged last year, he reflected, when the former morgue manager was indicted (<https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2023/6/15/hms-morgue-manager-indicted/>) over allegations he stole human remains and sold them on for profit.

Another research project he conducted at Harvard encountered even greater resistance.

Soon after Professor Anteby arrived at Harvard Business School, the Enron accounting scandal ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enron\\_scandal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enron_scandal)) cast a major shadow over it, since the company's chief



executives had trained there. His book describes how he therefore decided to embark on a study – from within – of “faculty socialisation efforts” and “the school’s moral backbone”.

This might sound like a somewhat reckless thing to do, but he pointed out that, “the moment we stepped in as faculty, we’re told that this is a special place, that it has a unique approach to what it does, that it has a storied history, famous alums. It’s hard to argue that it’s special and unique, and then push back on the idea of studying it as such.”

What he discovered was “a form of moral relativism” that led to “a heavy silencing of moral views. When we were taught to give courses using case studies, every discussion had to be open-ended. At best we were encouraged to share our views in the last five minutes.”

A number of attempts were made to get Professor Anteby to fall into line. “By the end,” he recalled, “I knew that were I to publish my book, the likelihood of gaining tenure and staying on there was really low.” In the event, his 2013 book, *Manufacturing Morals: The Value of Silence in Business School Education*, was itself greeted with silence from the school itself, though he is “well aware that a lot of younger faculty read the book and some potential hires have read it before deciding whether or not they want to join”.

The issues raised by this research project came back to him again recently, said Professor Anteby, “when former Harvard president Claudine Gay was testifying in Congress. She was called out in part for not taking a strong moral stand (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/republicans-condemn-us-university-presidents-israel-protests>) [about calls for the genocide of Jews] and instead defaulting to a more legalistic framework...That probably felt right to her, given her socialising within the Harvard silencing environment, but felt very odd to the rest of the world. That incongruence between what felt right inside and what was expected outside is similar to the dynamic that I identified in the faculty when I was there.”

Throughout his career, Professor Anteby explained, he had always focused on “ways in which people relate to their work”. Yet he is particularly attracted to settings where “the work or activity is either stigmatised or illegal or viewed as potentially immoral, or when there are really high barriers to entry...What unifies the fields is that people are slightly uncomfortable or defensive around the topics I want to study.”

Such defensiveness can, of course, be frustrating for researchers. What *The Interloper* demonstrates is that it can also offer a vital tool for uncovering the very things people most want to keep hidden.



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