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Introduction

“CATCH,” HE CALLED OUT LOUDLY. I was in the rather dark office of the director of the Maryland State Anatomy Board. I couldn’t fully distinguish what he had thrown at me. From afar, it seemed the size of a baseball and soft to the touch. Regardless, I wanted to be a good sport. After all, I was an outsider trying to get the director to agree to let me enter—and study—his professional world. He oversaw the handling of human cadavers donated to his program for medical education and research. I caught the object awkwardly but nonetheless managed not to drop it. He smiled and told me I was now holding in my hands a bull’s plastinated testicle.

It was in that moment that I finally felt I had paid my dues and should be granted access. I can only guess that he was trying to test my commitment to the field.¹ I also knew this director was my last chance of entering the world of whole-body donation. This business of securing cadavers intrigued me as a field researcher because of its moral ambiguity. But by then, and after a year of attempting to study US donation programs, so many doors had been slammed that I was starting to consider changing research topics. People all over the country had

politely declined my request to even begin a conversation on the possibility of conducting research with them.

So, I was nervous, and for a good reason. This director was my only remaining contact who had not yet officially turned me down. I had flown to Baltimore to meet him. The visit included a memorable drive in his convertible across the Chesapeake Bay, where he quizzed me on my motives and more. I felt good about my handling of his questions. The clear sky and shining sun made for a promising occasion. Alas, no access materialized during the drive. Nor did he commit to access after I caught, with relief, the well-preserved testicle. Instead, he went on to explain his technique of using liquid polymer to replace water and fat in body parts and even bodies.

The catch felt like the culmination of a series of tests he had put me through. Despite succeeding at all of them, I still could not predict whether he would say “yes.” When the phone call came a few days later inviting me to study his archives of donations, I felt elated. I remember clearly the bliss and excitement of finally obtaining a green light to enter the field.² As I hung up the phone, I started planning my next trip to Baltimore. The waiting was over. At last, my journey, it seemed, had finally begun.

Most field researchers can recount the exact moment when the mythical door finally opened for them. And several report a sense of bliss and relief, much like my own, after being granted access to a field. When the anthropologist Paul Rabinow, for instance, embarked on his fieldwork researching the tribal area surrounding a walled market town in Morocco, access was not a given. It took him months to finally settle in the nearby village, which only then was he able to begin studying. Along the way, a flurry of encounters, missed connections, and

wrong turns hindered his access, as he strikingly recalls in *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (1977). But halfway through his account, a break occurred: “Finally, word came from the village: I could move in,” he reported. “The next week was joyously spent in making preparations, buying provisions, and feeling relieved. So what if my Arabic was weak and I was entering a hostile situation; the ‘real’ fieldwork was finally under way.”³

These experiences are far from unique and in fact are shared by many field researchers. Whether “the fate” of a project lies in a gatekeeper’s hands⁴ or in alternating for months between a “foot in the door” and “door in the face” strategy to find access,⁵ the sudden relief is immense. Tellingly, many articles, book sections, and even entire books are devoted to this precise topic within the general subject of accessing a field. Titles such as *Gaining Access: A Practical and Theoretical Guide for Qualitative Researchers*⁶ and “The Social Psychology of Access in Ethnographic Research”⁷ point to the anxiety associated with each failed attempt.⁸ Unsurprisingly, and as the sociologist Diane Vaughan concludes, “getting access to a research setting is often described in text-books as a glorious moment when the gates open and you are in.”⁹

Perhaps this is why it might seem, as Rabinow’s above use of quotation marks suggests, that the “real” fieldwork starts only once access is gained. But that is far from the case. In fact—as this book will demonstrate—all the time spent prior to gaining access is *also* fieldwork. Moreover, even once “in” the field, all attempts by others to *prevent* researchers from conducting their inquiries remain part of fieldwork. For most field researchers, the boundary between being in and out is never really settled.¹⁰ Gaining and maintaining access is therefore a dynamic process that’s best envisioned as continuously

walking down “a hallway with many doors,” rather than simply opening the proverbial single door.¹¹

Importantly, as we go down these hallways and attempt to open doors, we inevitably stop being simply outsiders and become something else: “interlopers.” By interlopers, I mean individuals who intrude into places, situations, or activities and disrupt the status quo by examining other people’s affairs, even when trying to blend in. Fieldworkers are typical of the figure of the interloper; but any change agent, such as a labor organizer or advocate for an issue using a social movement’s parlance, is also an interloper.¹² Consequently, other field participants commonly engage in elaborate resistance efforts to push interlopers back.

I know this firsthand, since I have gone down many of these intricate hallways in search of an elusive access and have encountered such pushback. These are forms of *resistance*—or the social mechanisms deployed by groups (such as organizations, professions, families, etc.) to maintain the status quo—and it is with such resistance that this book is concerned. Here, I argue that the forms of resistance that interlopers face are much more telling than usually acknowledged. All this pushback might seemingly be discounted as “non-knowledge,” yet it constitutes very rich data.¹³ Put simply, such resistance offers a mostly overlooked yet powerful lens to grasp social worlds.

To illuminate these dynamics, *The Interloper* brings together stories and insights from several instances of resistance that I encountered or witnessed when entering or progressing in a field. The book analyzes, for instance, what happens when an ethnographer is voted out of a meeting of clinical anatomists intent on maintaining their professional jurisdiction, or when a doctoral candidate appears at the gates of a French factory that refuses to acknowledge its Nazi past. The

book also examines what occurs when labor organizers try to unionize Disneyland puppeteers, as management aims for the show to go on. (I will explain later the traction gained by including this seemingly distinct case.) In addition, the book explores what transpires when a junior researcher gets stalked by Transportation Security Administration (TSA) staff while trying to observe their operations; a newly hired Harvard Business School (HBS) professor gets silenced for asking the wrong questions; and ghostwriters deny they are ghostwriters in interviews despite clear evidence suggesting otherwise. Across all these diverse contexts, I show how fieldworkers can benefit from resistance.

Many field researchers, regardless of how they enter, end up becoming interlopers and eventually face the resistance detailed in this book. Despite their aspirations to blend in and their hopes of being considered insiders, they embark on a very different trajectory than those they talk to, observe, often joke with, and get to know. Even in settings where they are initially invited into a field¹⁴ or were field participants themselves before they started their study,¹⁵ I suspect that the person's invited or insider status rapidly morphs into something more nebulous and occasionally even more threatening.¹⁶ And that means that many researchers need to deal to some extent with resistance to interlopers, like themselves, in the field.¹⁷

My own awareness of the hurdles thrown up before field researchers was undoubtedly heightened by my research interests in morally tainted topics and secretive settings. Over the years, my studies have included factory workers producing illegal artifacts with company materials and time, ghostwriters drafting the memoirs of those they refer to somewhat cheekily as the "talent" (i.e., the person *not* writing), and of course, clinical anatomists trying to secure human cadavers for their

medical schools. None of these topics were easy to pursue. Also, several of the organizations I examined—TSA, Disneyland, and HBS—were quite secretive about the conduct of their work.¹⁸

In most instances, fieldworkers do not think twice about these obstacles and simply continue attempting to find alternate ways to do their work.¹⁹ They carry, at best, a vague imprint of these bumps along the way and occasionally remember them when similar interactions or situations occur. In some cases, the bump is suddenly made visible and becomes quite salient. At one point, even after settling into his field, Rabinow found a delegation of villagers at his door informing him that they could no longer work with him because they suspected that the government did not approve of his pursuit. Until the issue was resolved, no one would talk to him.²⁰ Yet such stumbling blocks are not always so clear. Instead, in most fields and organizations, reactions to interlopers' tentative intrusions are less overt.

Covert forms of resistance are more common, I suspect, than overt ones or open disagreements in many contexts. In the corporate world in particular, conflicts rarely “escalate into large-scale public disputes or firings.”²¹ In such settings, even in the exact venues that are meant for the purpose of surfacing potential disagreements (such as review or project advancement meetings), as one participant aptly remarks, “No one wants to say no. We’re not good at killing things.”²² The angry group of opponents barging into an office to confront an interloper and the vibrant shouting matches epitomized in heroic corporate sagas are probably outliers. Likewise, few field interlopers can point to a formal and precise trace of a refusal.

Oftentimes, researchers encounter subtle and repeated pushback from field participants, which is more than just annoying. Indeed, on closer inspection, some behaviors can be

seen for what they really are: namely, covert forms of field resistance. Consider the third time a potential informant fails to reply to your outreach attempt on a given topic. An act—or lack of action—that might initially be coded as anecdotal and due to overwork can suddenly take on a new meaning.²³ Also, consider the way an interviewee might systematically forget certain past events (e.g., a contested merger) yet perfectly recall other contemporaneous ones (e.g., a new product launch). Again, what might initially appear to be random acts of forgetfulness slowly coalesce into a pattern harder to ignore. All these and other similar behaviors constitute forms of covert field resistance, which permeate a fieldworker's journey.²⁴

By covert resistance, I mean the ways in which a field resists in non-overt ways attempts by interlopers (most notably field researchers) to inquire about its inner workings. This book discusses these forms of defense or resistance and asks what they can tell us about the given fields that harbor them.²⁵ I will use the terms *resistance* and *defense* interchangeably as they constitute two facets of the same phenomenon. From interlopers' viewpoint, the phenomenon codes as a form of resistance to their inquiries. From participants', it is seen as a form of defense against an outside inquiry.²⁶

Left in a general form, the occurrence of covert resistance might seem like a juicy conversation topic for water-cooler meetings, after-work drink outings, and private exchanges. However, if we collect and analyze more systematically such occurrences across settings, countries, and even time periods, we can transform the puzzling existence of this resistance into a problem for a broader inquiry that allows us to answer some important questions. For example, what are typical forms of covert field resistance, and how can we increase our awareness of their existence? In addition, why are certain forms

found in some fields but not in others? Crucially, what can these forms teach us about these fields? Finally, how might we—as interlopers—be impacted by the repeated experience of specific forms of resistance, and what might they say about us?

These are only some of the questions covered in this book. *The Interloper* is not an exhaustive review of all resistance behaviors. Instead, it builds on several in-depth cases and offers a framework to better understand typical forms of covert field resistance. Moreover, the book also invites field researchers to search for empirically grounded explanations for these and other instances of resistance. I chose to focus on covert forms of resistance because they tend to be easier to miss, but the framework could be extended to overt forms as well.²⁷

The framework presented here anchors forms of covert field resistance in the explanatory power and analytical possibilities that they offer in a given field. It also examines the implications for interlopers in confronting select forms of resistance. Furthermore, the analysis presents six main types of covert field resistance: “obstructing,” “hiding,” “shelving,” “silencing,” “forgetting,” and “denying.”²⁸ *Obstructing* is examined in the context of whole-body donations (chapter 1), *hiding* at the TSA (chapter 2), *shelving* at Disneyland (chapter 3), *silencing* at HBS (chapter 4), *forgetting* in a French aeronautics factory (chapter 5), and *denying* among ghostwriters (chapter 6). Together, these forms of resistance can be combined to make a field researcher’s inquiry unsuccessful, or so it may seem.

I write about these six types because I suspect that they are the most common ones. That said, I can imagine many more resistance or defense mechanisms. As illustrations, interlopers can also be suddenly deemed no longer legally “compliant” with an institutional requirement, put under intensive daily surveillance, or even sexually harassed in the field.²⁹ Such

forms of resistance, though less common, are probably much more troubling from an interloper's perspective.

So, how does field resistance work? And how does its functioning inform us as researchers? There are two main answers, which permeate the whole book.

First, when navigating fields, our simple presence can trigger defense mechanisms.³⁰ These dynamics can happen whether we want them to or not. This “field reactivity” is integral to our endeavors.³¹ For example, a mere expressed interest in a topic or the most benign question can quickly lead others to cast us in an interloper role, even without our knowledge. Those of us a bit less polished in our self-presentation (and I include myself among them) might more frequently trigger such typecasting and a range of possible associated defensive reactions among field participants.

Unsurprisingly, key gatekeepers in any field are often reluctant to have an interloper tell their story.³² They prefer circulating a more practiced narrative that they can control—one that usually best reflects on them. This baseline resistance to the dissemination of competing stories is a way for them to patrol the varied ecology of storytelling that directly shapes their lives.³³ Frequently, however, the pushback does not end there. Above and beyond it, layers of field-specific cultural understandings can inform field participants' (including gatekeepers') reactions to interlopers.

Many such forms of added resistance are retrospectively useful.³⁴ As the sociologist Japonica Brown-Saracino remarks, these “methodological stumbles” can yield “substantive insights.”³⁵ They help us discover what matters most to participants and what is really at stake in any setting. Defense mechanisms, particularly when covert, are not only indicative of something else happening; they often *are* the main data

points. They offer “leads” to what is especially valued, sacred, or central in a context.³⁶ As such, they can illuminate key field dynamics and help us see how participants make sense of their world. Like other forms of apparently odd field phenomena, covert defenses are routine products (*not* by-products) of the fields and organizations themselves.³⁷

Second, there is nothing more frustrating for a field researcher than feeling enmeshed in a social web without fully understanding it. For instance, we can catch ourselves repeatedly glossing over certain aspects of our background, such as our ethnicity and nationality, to facilitate data collection, without quite grasping why we do that. Thus, being able to recognize the flavors of defense we ourselves might exhibit is key to helping us realize what we are going through, despite ourselves. It is precisely because covert defense mechanisms are collective habits so difficult to pinpoint, and so easy to mimic, that they prove hard to decipher.

We are all social beings, and most of us aim for some degree of acceptance in the communities we join or study; we are therefore quick to pick up on what makes our lives in these collectives smoother.³⁸ A good fieldworker strives “to get as close to a set of individuals as possible” and “to see that they are aligned against some others that are around.”³⁹ Those others include field researchers, and we can therefore unintentionally end up defending a field *against* ourselves. By this, I mean that we can develop field-specific habits that buffer us from seeing potential patterns that we would otherwise intuit in a field.

Our learned field habits (including mimicking field participants’ covert defenses) render us social, yet they can also prevent any genuine social inquiry. Taking the process of research itself as a concomitant object of inquiry in any scholarly pursuit becomes a necessity. The ethnographer Florence

Weber captures this necessity when rhetorically asking, “When you watch yourself work, do you still work the same way?” She then adds, “this kind of splitting is a necessity for ethnographers or sociologists, it’s even a constitutive element of their craft.”⁴⁰ We cannot omit that step of self-reflection if we want to fully grasp field dynamics.⁴¹

By splitting, analyzing, and categorizing experiences of resistance, I hope this book will better equip field researchers to do their work. It is important for us as fieldworkers to know about the flavors of these defenses, both to identify them in a field and to recognize them in our own behaviors. In short, a stronger fluency in these forms of defense can serve as a diagnostic tool in our scholarly explorations and a developmental strategy for ourselves.

Many examples discussed in this book come from my own field experience. Without a doubt, I found it easier to develop the cases I knew best and could contextualize, rather than relying on other sources. “Confessional tales” therefore hold an important, though not singular, place in this book.⁴² Such a choice also allowed me to see better how resistance has been a persistent theme throughout my research.

It is often hard for us to provide coherence to our “puddle jumping” academic trajectories as they unfold.⁴³ This is even truer when conducting studies, like I do, in field settings that are often located at the margins of the mainstream and can separately be viewed by my colleagues as strange.⁴⁴ But my trajectory makes increasingly clear sense to me. Twists and turns, as well as haphazard encounters, are certainly partly responsible for what I do. Nonetheless, like for other fieldworkers, there are recurring reasons which “sustain my attention long enough to see a study through,” despite “never show[ing] themselves in print.”⁴⁵

The Interloper surfaces some of the reasons or threads that have sustained, and continue to sustain, my focus. As the sociologist Brooke Harrington writes, “beneath the unique features of each researcher-participant relationship lie social psychological regularities . . . in which researchers continually explore variations on core interpersonal themes.”⁴⁶ In many cases, I suspect that melting down field defenses is part of the reasons and recurring themes that infuse my assorted inquiries.

Without drawing causal inferences too directly, I speculate that growing up and identifying as gay in a mostly straight family positioned me well to have to repeatedly melt down an ever-shifting set of defenses (see coda).⁴⁷ Like the historian Allan Bérubé’s constant need to “cross boundaries” as a gay youth, I too faced social barriers that I needed to push.⁴⁸ Being frequently at the margins (also as a religious minority and the child of foreign-born parents) probably provided me with a fluency at juggling defense mechanisms.⁴⁹ Thus, explaining how this grappling with field resistance is woven throughout my various pursuits helps tie them together while, importantly, shedding light on the broader significance of such resistance for other fieldworkers in their own settings.

Ultimately, the goal of this book is not to provide an exhaustive typology of field defenses, their comprehensive implications for interlopers, or what they universally mean to field participants. Instead, my goal is to draw other field researchers’ attention to forms of resistance, and to do so by detailing ideal types of defenses, the unique challenges and opportunities they create for fieldworkers, as well as both what they can teach us about the fields that give rise to them and about ourselves.⁵⁰ Studying defense mechanisms aimed at preventing interlopers’ access highlights not only that our research pursuits can

be bumpy. It also shows that we should document, relish, and reflect (not merely complain) when stumbling over these bumps.⁵¹ Even if they seem to sometimes stall our progress, bumps are what make us realize the relief of the terrain.

Finally, this book is not written for method fanatics or academic gatekeepers.⁵² My reviewing and editorial experiences suggest that the casualties of what is sometimes labeled the “methods police” are way too costly to justify its continued existence. Of course, ensuring that studies are properly designed and conducted are preconditions of their acceptance and dissemination. Yet a study’s methodological scaffolding should rarely be the sole center of a general readership’s attention; the findings per se are what make studies so intriguing to most of us. In that sense, rather than a methodological blueprint for conducting proper field research, this book is meant more as a travel companion for all fieldworkers, in academia and beyond.

While I can imagine the book’s main audience being aspiring and established ethnographers, organizational scholars, and sociologists, I can also see many other readers relating to its materials. Whether we study fields as part of our academic lives, immerse ourselves in them simply out of curiosity, or navigate foreign settings by necessity, we all are to some extent fieldworkers at heart. Regardless of the contexts we inhabit, most of us are curious about our environments and the societies we live in. This book is an invitation to all fieldworkers and fellow interlopers to continue finding ways to examine other people’s lives and pause a bit more when presumably “failing” to succeed.

Many published field accounts just summarize in one or two sentences the resistance encountered in the field. Yet overcoming field obstacles is inherent to any field inquiry and analyzing such obstacles can deliver key lessons.⁵³ While some

researchers acknowledge explicitly the value of these obstacles, few delve extensively into such resistance.⁵⁴ The rare researchers who do reflexively analyze such resistance along the way or retrospectively see immense benefits in the exercise.⁵⁵

My hope is that this book will offer the impetus and framework to start analyzing field resistance as it unfolds—even before “access” materializes—as well as provide solace and companionship to all derailed, misguided, seemingly lost, and even bruised fieldworkers. Field inquiries are often more rewarding and, ultimately, worthwhile when we don’t just overcome hurdles but also understand and make sense of them.

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