RESEARCHING MORAL RESISTANCE

Deborah Stone
Research Professor of Government
Dartmouth College

What is Moral Resistance and Why Study It?

Sometimes people consciously and deliberately violate laws, break rules, or flout moral norms in order to serve what they regard as a higher moral end. For example, a person might violate immigration laws and sneak into another country in order to find work to support his or her family (violating a law). A doctor might write a false or exaggerated diagnosis so that a patient’s insurance will cover tests or treatments the doctor thinks are necessary (breaking rules). Or, a low-income single-mother might work under the table and lie about her income to welfare authorities in order to care for her children in a way that fits her concept of a good mother (violating not only rules but also moral norm against lying). These are situations I call moral resistance.

In social science, resistance usually means an organized or semi-organized movement to disobey, thwart and eventually overthrow a governing authority. Adding the adjective *political* resistance would seem redundant, because resistance is almost by definition resistance to a political regime. This political connotation also inflects the concept of civil disobedience—by definition it means disobeying a governing authority by refusing to submit to laws (such as racial segregation) or taxes (individual monetary contributions to maintaining a regime).

With the concept of moral resistance, I aim to expand our understanding of political resistance by noticing how resistance sometimes occurs on a personal level with no connection to a group or movement. Moral resistance is personal in the sense that people engage in it in order to do right by people they love or care about. The
hypothetical doctor in my example undoubtedly came to care about the disability applicant even in their brief interaction. Moral resisters aren’t motivated by abstract ideology or principles of justice, nor is their aim to help anonymous strangers, such as fellow citizens or future generations. Their resistance might be clandestine or it might be open, but either way, their immediate purpose is to act decently and compassionately to others, not to overturn a rule or overthrow the system.

Nevertheless, even though moral resistance is motivated by personal relationships and begins as a private act, it borders on and merges into the political. Someone who violates a law or rule for a higher moral end implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) contrasts moral law with formal law and rejects the legitimacy of formal authority.

Sophocles’ play *Antigone* perfectly captures the way personal and political resistance are both distinct and related.¹ When the play opens, Antigone’s brother Polynices has been killed in battle. He had been fighting in a civil war against Creon, the King of Thebes—pure political resistance. The king forbids anyone to bury Polynices’ body—on pain of death. By prohibiting burial, Creon punishes the rebels and their families, because in the culture of ancient Greece, burial was essential to ensure the everlasting tranquility of the dead person’s soul. Family members had to observe the burial ritual in order to honor and properly care for their loved ones. Antigone defied Creon’s orders and gave her brother a proper burial as best she could; even her sister refused to help her. Antigone’s act of burying her brother was personal; she cared for him in death as in life. Yet her act was also political. She didn’t merely bury her brother and wait for Creon’s men to arrest and execute her. She went to Creon of her own will, admitted her guilt, and explained to him why she considered his order illegitimate. She told him, in so many words, “Your law is not my law. I answer to Zeus. I answer to a higher law.” But notice: she didn’t go to Creon first to try to persuade him to rescind the order. She helped her brother first to safeguard his wellbeing, then dealt with the politics.

Like political resistance, moral resistance takes place in the context of unequal power relations. Master-slave relationships might be the archetype, but the felt sense of
domination can occur in numerous situations ranging from formal political relationships (e.g., colonialism or the welfare office), to ordinary economic relations (e.g., employer-employee, landlord-tenant, insurer-policy holder) to everyday life (teachers-students, doctors-patients, merchants-customers). Marginalized people—for example, the very poor, the homeless, the incarcerated, and traditional ethnic groups who have been subsumed by a larger polity—might feel a sense of subordination without knowing exactly who subordinates them. By exercising moral resistance, people carve out a zone of freedom inside a coercive situation.

In situations of domination and subordination, writes political scientist James C. Scott, subordinate people tend to develop two ways of being and expressing themselves.\(^2\) Outwardly and to the face of superiors, they enact “public” or “official transcripts.” They act polite and deferential and do what they know superiors expect of them. Beneath the surface, though, they enact “hidden transcripts.” They perhaps mock and disrespect the superior; they imagine honest, angry and reproachful speeches; they fantasize revenge or some external force punishing the superior; and they sometimes act autonomously, stepping outside their official or customary subordinate role. They might pilfer, poach, squat, conceal, deceive, cheat, feign compliance, or, as Antigone did, disobey outright.

Moral resistance warrants study for at least three reasons. First, it is an important part of human experience. Moral identity is a key component of self-worth and ultimately happiness. Social science has been dominated by the idea that humans are fundamentally self-interested and motivated almost entirely by the desire to improve their own wellbeing. Moral resistance expresses the other side of human nature—the concern for others’ wellbeing.\(^3\) By finding and examining moral resistance, we can enlarge our understanding of the altruistic part of human nature and its contribution to human happiness.

Second, powerlessness is part of the human condition and it contributes to unhappiness. Humans are not omnipotent. We regularly confront our lack of control over situations and other people, even apart from situations of slavery, colonialism,
imprisonment, and other extreme forms of domination. People cope with powerlessness and injustice by carving out spheres of resistance. Their resistance may be secret, or even imaginary at first (the “tell ‘em off speech” you’re rehearsing in your head), but as they begin to articulate their moral stance and then take action to carry out their beliefs, they empower themselves. By finding and examining moral resistance, we can enlarge our understanding of how people cope with and overcome powerlessness.

And last, moral resistance offers a window into the early formation of political resistance. I have defined moral resistance as unorganized, so by most definitions of “political,” moral resistance would be considered apolitical. However, I take a broad view of what constitutes politics, and I include anything that has to do with power relationships. That is also why, I suspect, James Scott dubs unorganized resistance as “infrapolitics.” Until recently, he writes, “much of the active political life of subordinate groups has been ignored because it takes place at a level we rarely recognize as political.” By identifying and examining moral resistance, we can enlarge our understanding of how political consciousness forms and observe how people move from a sense of wrongness to a willingness to act. We can also explore how people move from feeling, thinking and acting as isolated individuals to feeling connected and becoming aware that they are not alone in their moral sense, and that perhaps not in their willingness to act, either.

The Ethical Imperative in Moral Resistance Research

Research on moral resistance must balance two concerns: legitimating moral resistance without harming those who practice it. Moral resisters, like political resisters, aim to make life better for others. They are activists and advocates. As a social science researcher, you come from a culture that often disdains advocacy and exhorts you to search for objective truths. You are supposed to study the world, not act on it. Even if you are working in a more activist scholarly tradition, such as public policy, public health, or participatory action research, most of your social science training biases you toward “staying objective.”
Unlike most academic research, the topic of moral resistance requires you to take a moral stance. When you set out to explore moral resistance, you know in advance that you will learn about people who have broken rules or laws and violated moral norms. Before you begin, search your soul about how you feel about moral resistance. Do you believe that moral resistance is fundamentally moral? Do you believe that people who practice it are sincere ethical actors? If you were to encounter someone who told you about behavior you consider wrong, would you feel that you should do something about it, such as expose them or stop them? Are you committed to protecting people who reveal moral resistance to you?

You can’t do this kind of research, nor should you, if you don’t believe moral resistance is legitimate. You may not agree with every instance of law-breaking or cheating that you encounter, but you ought to accept the fundamental premise of moral resistance: namely, it is sometimes necessary to break laws, disobey rules, and violate moral norms in order to hew to a higher moral law. If you don’t accept this premise, your informants will probably sense your disapproval and be less willing to confide in you. And if you don’t accept this premise, you will likely be less diligent about protecting your informants.

Research on moral resistance is profoundly ethical. It is meant to illuminate and support ethical behavior. But it is also profoundly risky. It can endanger respondents by revealing their behavior and exposing them. Exposure in turn risks subjecting them to punishment, and possibly, interrupting or suppressing their resistance and that of others in their groups or networks.

You should be aware from the outset that by researching moral resistance, you are aiding it, and you should feel right with yourself about doing so. Your research and publication will help reveal and construct moral resistance as a social phenomenon. It can show other people how moral resisters see their corner of the world and exactly why they
feel they must “do wrong to do good.” If your research conveys these two things successfully, it may help gain allies and political support for your informants’ cause.

Publishing can support moral resistance, but it can also inadvertently jeopardize your informants. Qualitative researchers almost always offer informants anonymity and confidentiality, but research on moral resistance warrants extra cautions. In most of my interviewing, even for reporting magazine articles, I offer my informants a chance to read drafts of anything I write about them or quote from them. Not everyone takes me up on the offer, but when they do, the interactions usually prove helpful and clarifying, and sometimes even go into more depth than the original interview. In research on moral resistance, informants can also offer valuable information about their vulnerability and how I can protect them.

One experience taught me that I should never assume that I can judge what’s safe to report. I gleaned a great deal of information about moral resistance from one informant, and wanted to quote an especially eloquent statement she made. I integrated her story with information, including concrete examples about rule-breaking, that I had learned from other informants in the same organization. I sent the woman a draft, because I had quoted her bald statement about her willingness to break rules and wanted to be sure she approved. She left me a phone message saying “Go ahead and use whatever you have to . . . [but] don’t mention about [blank]. Some place you mentioned about that. They might know who that is.” She left a second message a few minutes later saying she wanted to make sure I got the first one, and adding, “Go ahead and use everything but [blank].” I called her back and explained that she had never said anything about [blank]—two other people had told me about that. I believed that because three people had told me about breaking rules, no one could be identified. She then explained to me how the mention of [blank] could get her and the other people in trouble: “We get asked from time to time if we [do blank] and we say ‘no.’ If it comes out in your writing that we do [do blank]. . . .” I got it and didn’t wait for her finish. I said I understood and wouldn’t mention [blank].
How to Find Moral Resistance

Craft a Statement of Your Project That Will Persuade People to Talk to You

In some ways, the hardest part of interview research is explaining the purpose of your study to people whose help you need. Rule Number One: explain your research in terms that ordinary people can understand. If you can’t do that, chances are you don’t have a clear idea about your purpose. Your task here is not to impress potential informants with how smart and sophisticated your project is. Your task is to make them feel smart and that they have something to teach you. Your statement should have two parts: what’s the topic? And why is your research important? Whatever the topic, after stating it simply, explain that you want the potential respondents’ help in understanding the topic from their point of view and experience.

Stating the importance of your project is the tricky part. As an academic researcher, you have been primed to put everything in the most pretentious, jargon-ridden prose you can muster, and to inflate your topic’s importance so that someone will publish your research or give you a degree for it. And besides, in academia we take it for granted that knowledge is important for its own sake and that more is better. We don’t need to justify research with a social purpose. “Understanding” is a goal in itself.

As you think about how to explain your research to people in the real world, banish those academic conventions from your head. The speech you make to potential informants ought to be completely different from the statement of purpose in your research proposal or grant application. Instead of thinking of the importance of your project, think of its value to society. How will your research contribute to making the world a better place? You don’t have to right the whole world with your project—just a tiny piece of it. But you need to be able to tell your potential informants how, if they help you with your research, they will also contribute to making the world a better place. If you convey from the beginning that your research is about doing good, you will prime people to think and talk about doing good.
Shed your pre-conceptions about what kind of people are likely to engage in moral resistance.

I studied home health care at a time when Congress had just contracted its major source of funding, the Medicare program. I began the study seeking to learn more about the nature of home care and to understand how the budget cuts were affecting nurses, physical and occupational therapists, and aides as they provide care. I had a strong hunch that home care didn’t work exactly as economists thought it did, and that it couldn’t and shouldn’t be regulated like other less personal economic goods. I didn’t expect to hear much complaining except about lack of funds.

In my very first pilot interviews, some aides talked fiercely and defiantly about breaking rules in order to give patients “the same care I’d give my mother” or “want my mother to have.” Home health aides are at the very bottom of the home care hierarchy. They get the lowest pay, have the least secure jobs, and have the least education (usually a high school degree or an equivalency diploma and only several weeks of practical training). No doubt because of my own stereotypes, these were the people I least expected to articulate critiques of public policy (which they did) or moral arguments about justice, fairness and human decency (which they also did).

I should have known better. One doesn’t need academic degrees or formal education to have a strong moral sense or to express oneself. More to the point, aides are the people who interact most often and most closely with homebound patients. They help with intimate bodily care, they see patients at their most vulnerable, and they spend hours getting to know patients in conversation. Of course they are the providers most likely to understand how rules might interfere with the patients’ best interests, and, as I learned, aides are the providers most likely to develop strong personal attachments to patients.

Be open to seeing moral resistance as you interview people. Before you begin interviewing, read as much as you can on resistance to develop an ear for the language of moral resistance. Begin to create your own dictionary or codebook of verbal cues that
there might be some moral resistance going on. These are expressions and images that you might encounter in any form of discourse—not only interviews but also in speeches, news articles, e-mail messages, and any form of text. They function something like “markers” in Robert Weiss’ terms—clues or hints respondents drop that tip you off that “something is going on.” Here are the main entries in my own dictionary:

*Universal or Human Talk:*

In my research on home care, one woman talked about the professional dictum against getting too close to patients, and added, “but if you’re human, you do.” I noticed that many caregivers used the word human in the sense of universal—everybody does it, or it’s natural and you can’t help it. In fact another woman, talking about the warning not to get too close, said, “You can’t help it—you just do.”

A physical therapist told me that she occasionally made a special trip to check up on a patient separately from her scheduled (and paid) visits, and that she had sometimes sat a neighbor who was a home care patient but not on this therapist’s roster. As she told me these stories, it was clear that each incident was in some way “off the books,” and she justified herself by saying “But I think that’s called being a neighbor.” She came back to that phrase a second time—“I would do that for any neighbor.” This “good neighbor” talk tipped me off that there was some tension between agency staff were allowed to do in their professional and employment roles and what ordinary people do in their everyday family, friend and neighbor roles, which they deem as more important to who they are.

Other expressions that indicate that people feel they are on the side of universal morality:

- It’s the humane thing to do/way to behave.
- It’s only human.
- Anybody would feel as I do.
- Anybody would do what I did.
I wouldn’t do X to my mother (father, child, best friend, dog, etc.)
Maybe you’d treat an animal that way, but . . .

Justice Talk

One home health aide talked about two of her patients with chronic, debilitating illnesses who were about to lose their Medicare eligibility because of new, more stringent rules that denied long-term services to people with chronic illness. “It’s not right. It stinks,” she said. At another point she said, “It’s too bad the people that really need are the ones that are going to get cut.” The same aide told me she understood that the recent crackdown on home care was prompted by investigations of corruption. “I understand there was fraud, but it’s too bad to hurt the people that need it for somebody was greedy.”
When people make comparisons of need or deservingness as this aide did, they are talking justice.

Sometimes people will come right out with clear justice language, and this should be a clue to explore why they feel as they do, and what, if anything, they do to act on their feelings. Key words of justice talk include rights, fair, unfair, right, wrong, and deserve.

It’s wrong.
It’s unfair/not fair.
It’s not right.
He/she/they deserve X (or don’t deserve to be treated like that).

He/she/they earned X. (As one aide said, “They [the elderly] paid in. It’s their right [to get the home care they need].”)

He/she/they have a right to X. (In one focus group I conducted, the aides were incensed about the requirement that patients must be homebound to be eligible for services. Therefore, aides weren’t allowed to take them outdoors in their
wheelchairs. “There’s a human right to fresh air,” declared one aide, as though it were to be found in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Several members of the group acknowledged violating the rule and taking their clients outdoors.)

_Dignity or Identity Talk_

On the basis of her interviews with people who helped Jews during the Holocaust, Kristin Renwick Monroe postulates that people engage in moral resistance primarily out of sense of their own identity. Her respondents didn’t deliberate or calculate whether to help. Rather, they acted impulsively because they were simply acting out their identity. They behaved as they did to preserve their sense of self—and self-worth.

Some examples of this kind of language:

It’s who I am.
It’s the kind of person I am.
It’s how I was brought up to be/behave.
I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t do X.
I couldn’t face myself if…
I couldn’t look myself in the mirror if…

_Pressure or Coercion Talk_

People engage in moral resistance when they feel powerless. A boss, an organization, or a system of rules demands that they behave in a way that contradicts their sense of right. People often use metaphors of “traps”—being caught, unable to maneuver—or say they lack “freedom” or talk about others who have freedom that they don’t have.
James Scott refers to “hydraulic metaphors”—people talk about “exploding,” “blowing off steam,” “going off” or “built-up” emotion that just had to “get out,” “be released” or “escape.”

Another clue that people feel some coercion can be found in talk about how others “just don’t care about what’s important to me.” When sociologist Lisa Dodson was researching how the conditions of low-wage work hinder mothers, one woman referred to jobs and employers that “don’t give a rat’s butt about family.” Sure enough, many of these women confided ways they break rules to care for their kids.

Some expressions that tip you off to the sense of powerlessness:

You can’t do nothing.
I felt trapped.
There was no way around it/ out of it.
I was in a bind.
It was impossible.
You have no choice.
I had to do what they said or something bad would happen (e.g. I’d lose my job).

If I did what they wanted/followed the rules, then something bad would happen, (e.g. my kids would go hungry, my patients wouldn’t get the care they need).

“They” (bosses, politicians, superiors, organizations) don’t care about people (e.g. you, your needs, your children, the homeless, addicts etc.).
Priority Talk

“You have to choose. . .and what mother’s choosing this job over her child?”

Moral resisters often justify themselves by stating their clear sense of priorities. In the U.S., low-income mothers are under huge pressure to hold full-time jobs. This pressure is especially strong on those receiving public assistance, because since 1996, almost all mothers are required to work in order to receive any assistance. Because the vast majority of middle-class women work, even through the childrearing years, there is a strong social expectation that low-income mothers should work, too. But from most mothers’ perspective, taking good care of their children overrides earning higher pay. Mothers can explain this weighing with almost arithmetic precision. For example, “I have had better paying jobs than I have now, but none of them understood that my kids come first.”

Some examples of priority talk:

X comes first.
I put X above Y.
It’s more important to me than . . .
I care more about X than anything.

Sometimes priority talk takes the form of what philosophers call consequentialist reasoning. People anticipate the consequences of different courses of action, weigh the costs and benefits of each choice, and choose the course with the best (or least bad) consequences. Moral resisters sometimes expressly state that they knowingly chose a course of action with a very bad practical outcome in order to fulfill their higher moral duty or sense of self. One mother who had battled her office supervisor over time off told Dodson, “Look, I don’t care about ‘do I have sick time, do I have vacation time?’ I’m not coming [to work] because I’ve got a sick child. If you can’t understand that, fire me. My child comes first.”
Look for statements of the general form: “I don’t care if (something bad will happen), because this is more important to me.” In Dodson’s research with low-income mothers, women who felt their child’s day care was harmful expressed this idea of “consequences be damned.” For example, one mother said, “I don’t care what . . . I am not going to have [my daughter] be in a situation like that.” Another mother, after relating some bad incidents that she had seen at the day care center, said, “I decided in that moment she was not going back there and whatever else happens . . . she was not going back.”

How to Elicit and Probe Moral Resistance in Interviews

Don’t Ask Directly

Chances are that moral resistance isn’t the central topic of your research. Rather, you’re interested in some aspect of social life, culture, or politics and you might stumble upon some moral resistance mixed in with a lot of other rich material. Either way, whether moral resistance is your main topic or only a secondary one, don’t ask directly about it: “Do you ever break the law?” “Have you ever disobeyed your boss?” Few people would answer these kinds of questions to a stranger, and coming from someone with high social status, these kinds of questions will likely seem threatening. (Remember, no matter how low you might perceive yourself in the academic hierarchy, to the rest of society you are the elite, or at the very least, elite-in-the-making.) In qualitative interviewing, you must work into your topic gradually and build a sense of trust with respondents before you can expect them to open up about difficult, possibly incriminating or stigmatizing material.

In qualitative interviewing, you become a listener and a student. The general question underlying all your questions should be something like “Would you tell me
about your experience?” or “I’d like you to explain to me how something in your world works.” That ‘something’ is your research topic, or a small piece of it.

**Ask a Personal Background Question**

After explaining my research interest, I usually being with a background question that’s easy to answer and helps put the respondent at ease. “How did you get into this line of work?” How did you get interested in such-and-such?” “How did you come to be in your current role or situation?” “How did you first learn about or hear about [the respondent’s situation that is the topic of your research]?” These kinds of questions don’t have right or wrong answers, and they automatically make the respondent into the expert—only he or she can answer them. They’re personal, but not intimate. They begin to establish a warm relationship.

Sometimes you will get a clue to moral resistance in the answer to one of these seemingly innocuous and factual background questions. The respondent might indicate some dissatisfaction, powerlessness, or even resistance from the beginning. One home health aide answered my question, “How did you get into home health care?” by saying she had worked in a nursing home and seen how “bad” the care was. The home was understaffed, so the aides simply couldn’t give good care. She said she went into home care because she would have more freedom to take good care of patients. In home care, she explained, an aide is rarely under direct observation by a supervising nurse. Another aide answered this question by saying she had been a homemaker before becoming an aide. (In the jargon of U.S. home health care, homemakers are paid to do housekeeping tasks for home health clients, but they are not allowed to provide any “hands on” care—meaning they may not touch a patient, not even to brush her hair, wash her face, or help her go to the toilet.) This aide told me in the first few minutes:

> [W]hen I did homemaking, I went into a lot of hospice homes and always kind of went that extra mile, but I was never able to do any hands on care. That doesn’t mean that I didn’t always obey it, but…[laughs] I did whatever was asked of me.
But legally I couldn’t do it, so I went to school [to become a certified home health aide].

The woman seemed a tad uncomfortable telling me this right off the bat. I immediately stopped the recorder and told her I shut it off because she was talking about things legal and non-legal. Her next words fairly shouted moral resistance:

Aide: “I’m a terrible person for you interview. “
Me: “Why?”
Aide: “I care more about the people. I went into this because I love people. . . . I hate stupid rules.”

Then she told me that she had let her supervisors know from the beginning that she will “do what’s best for clients, no matter what the rules.”

Ask for a Success Story

Early in interviews, I ask about what parts of the situation (whatever the topic is) respondents find satisfying or rewarding. I ask them to tell me about a specific time that they felt successful, or effective, or good about themselves, or that they had done an especially good job or achieved a good outcome. This is another type of question that is personal but not intimate and helps establish a good relationship. It gives respondents a chance to put themselves in a good light and to reminisce about something very positive. In addition—here’s the content payoff—these “success questions” are ways of getting at respondents’ definitions of goodness. Between the lines of their concrete stories, they reveal their conceptions of good quality, good policy, good rules, and good people.

In some of my very first interviews with home care providers, I asked point blank, “Could you tell me how you define good care?” Sometimes I got some specific answers, but more often than not, I made people flustered—they had to stop and think, and at least one turned the question back on me, asking “Do you mean when a client thanks you?” I
quickly realized that the question “How do you define X?” sounds too much like a school test. That question might work if you’re interviewing lawyers, scientists or policymakers, but it’s apt to make most people feel insecure. In general, asking for a story about a time when... is a much more effective way to get at people’s conceptions of an abstract idea than asking for a straightforward definition.

Several aides answered my success question with a story about a patient whom they had cheered up. “I got her to smile.” Or, “I had this one woman who was very depressed. After a few weeks of my going, she wasn’t so depressed.” At first I was disappointed by these answers. I thought the aides had missed the point, because my own preconception of success was pegged to clinical standards of cure and rehabilitation. But when several aides gave answers about improving the patient’s mood, I realized they were telling me something important and indeed rebellious: their standards of success had nothing to do with the official standards. From an agency’s point of view, an aide does a good job when she performs all the tasks on a nurse’s care plan for the patient. The tasks are physical and instrumental—helping people stand, walk, or go to the toilet; fixing meals, bathing, dressing and observing symptoms. Making people smile or feel happy is nowhere to be found in the aides’ formal job description. From an insurer’s point of view, aides, nurses and all the other home care providers do a good job when they cure patients or get them to the point where they no longer need home care, so that they come off the insurer’s budget. In these low-level care jobs that formally allow aides little discretion, aides have written their own definitions of success and set their own priorities. They see their most important task as befriending patients, making them feel cared for, and giving them some joy and happiness. This insight helped me understand a great deal of the moral resistance I later found.

Find a Way to Ask about Powerlessness or Coercion

Once you have established some rapport and found out something about how the respondent defines goodness, rightness, or justice, you can ask gently about obstacles to doing right. “Are there times when you want to do something but feel you cannot?” “Do
you ever feel prevented from doing what you think is right?” If the respondent has told you a concrete instance of “goodness,” then instead of jumping right to the language of morality (“doing what you think is right”), you can refer to the specific behavior using the respondent’s words. If the respondent gives you any kind of opening, then you can ask for a story about such a time. And another story and another. You can also enter this topic sideways by asking, “Have any of your friends [co-workers, neighbors, acquaintances] told you about a time they felt a conflict between what they were supposed to do and what they felt was right?”

In general, you shouldn’t raise this kind of question until you have established that the respondent indeed perceives some kind of moral conflict and powerlessness to do the right thing. However, if you are interviewing organized resisters who openly acknowledge their resistance and the reasons for it, then you can get right to the point.

*Treat revelations of resistance with care and respect.*

When you plan to interview about moral resistance, your task—and your ethical obligation—is to make respondents feel comfortable and safe wandering into illicit territory with you as company. It’s a good idea to remind them that their interview will be confidential and that they may ask you not to write or publish any part of what they tell you. If people tell me something I think might be dicey—they could get in trouble for what they said, or they might feel uncomfortable if anyone found out what they said—I wait until the emotional heat has subsided, then ask them directly if they feel comfortable with me using that particular story. I reiterate that I won’t use it if they don’t want me to.

As you sense someone beginning to talk about resistance or even conditions that might lead to resistance, be extra sensitive to privacy and confidentiality issues. Either offer to turn off the tape recorder, or just do it. The same goes for times that a respondent gets emotional, choked up or teary. In any of these situations, after turning off the recorder, this is a time to *listen attentively and look respondents in the eye.* Don’t pick up
your pen and start scribbling furiously to compensate for the loss of your recording. When respondents make themselves vulnerable, they deserve your empathy and full attention. Chances are you’ll remember their words quite well, because emotional moments etch themselves in our brains.

By definition, when people acknowledge moral resistance, they admit that they are violating norms, rules or laws. They might feel strongly that they are in the right and express their moral certainty to you, but never forget that they are doing wrong in somebody else’s eyes and that they are keenly aware of that. They might also feel guilt or shame because they were trapped between two bad choices, each of which involved doing something wrong. For example, a divorced mother of three saw her lifestyle plunge from upper-middle-class to poverty as her ex-husband withheld more of his child-support payments. She volunteered in her synagogue and eventually was asked to run its food pantry. As her situation got dire, she explained, “I began to take, I mean to borrow, some of the scrip that belonged to the synagogue. . . . I’m a mother. These are my children, my babies we’re talking about. Am I really going to make them eat peanut butter for weeks on end when I have access to all this food scrip?”

We can hear this woman wrestling with the painful choice between stealing and letting her boys go hungry, and we can hear both self-condemnation and self-justification in her switch from “take” to “borrow.”

When respondents acknowledge moral resistance, interviewers should be especially careful not to condemn them in any way. Even if you don’t think you’re being judgmental, your disapproval could come across through a surprised question (“You did?”), through overt language as you try to clarify (“So you stole from the food pantry?”), or through a follow-up question that implies wrongdoing (“Did you ever pay the pantry back?”).

When revealing sensitive material about moral resistance, people often swath themselves in vagueness, ambiguity and evasiveness. Allow them these self-protections and don’t force the issue. By this point in your research, you are attuned to moral
resistance and don’t need to press anybody to talk bluntly or sign on the dotted line. You can indicate you understand by finding a euphemism or vague phrase of your own. For example, a department store supervisor told Lisa Dodson that the sales clerks were so poorly paid that one of them couldn’t afford to buy a prom dress for her daughter, named Edy. The supervisor said she thought it was unfair, that both mother and daughter worked very hard, and that the mother didn’t make “what she deserves.” The supervisor talked for a while, mentioning that the store sells prom dresses. “Let’s just say we made some mistakes with our prom dress orders last year. Too many were ordered, some went back. It got pretty confusing.” Dodson picked up the supervisor’s cues and leapt right over her actions to ask indirectly, “So . . . Edy looked good at her prom?” The supervisor laughed. “She knocked them dead.”

What about conveying approval? Some researchers advise interviewers to be as neutral as possible, and even to refrain from simple conversational affirmations such as “ok,” “ah-huh,” “yes,” and “I understand.” Such ordinary conversational niceties could be taken as approval and encourage the respondent to pursue a topic, distorting the interview. I agree that it’s best not to voice your opinion, even when it’s supportive or you feel like congratulating the person. However, if a respondent has taken a risk by telling me about moral resistance and then asks me what I think or whether I understand (“Do you know what I mean?” “Do you know what I’m saying?”), I will always err on the side of empathy by saying something like, “Yes I do,” or “I understand.”

Conceivably, a respondent might ask you for agreement (“Would you do the same thing if you were in my position?”) or even for absolution (“Do you think I was wrong to do what I did?”). I have never been put in either of these positions, but it’s a good idea to anticipate such questions and think through how you will answer so you don’t flubber on the spot. If I were sure that I would act as the respondent did in the same position, I would say so. If I didn’t have a strong gut reaction, I might say something like, “I’ve never been in that situation, so I’m not sure what I would do,” or “I haven’t really thought about it, but listening to you, I certainly see why you did what you did.” If I were asked to judge whether the respondent had acted well or badly, I would be careful
not to give a negative verdict (in the unlikely case that I actually did think the person acted badly), and I would probably indicate approval by saying something like, “I haven’t been in exactly your shoes, but it sounds like you thought it through carefully and reached a decision that accords with your values. That’s all we can ask of each other.”

*Explore Moral and Emotional Responses to Resistance*

In qualitative research, we’re seeking to understand how people experience some aspect of life. Once you have found an instance of moral resistance and the respondent has described its factual circumstances, you can explore how he or she thought and felt about it. It’s better not to feed people suggestions such as “Were you afraid?” or “Were you worried about getting caught?” or “Did you feel badly or rather relieved?” Rather, ask open-ended questions that let the respondent direct the narrative. For example, “What was going through your head at the time?” or “How did you feel?” or “You said earlier that you debated with yourself. What made you finally decide to do what you did?”

It’s easy to approach an interview with preconceptions about how most people feel in certain situations, so this is another area where it’s important to shed your ideas and listen carefully. Be open to being surprised.

Jason De Parle, a *New York Times* reporter, interviewed a twenty-three-year old mother who had trouble supporting her two children on a low-wage job. She took a second job as a cashier at a university bookstore and was jailed after she was caught having pilfered $11,000. She explained her theft matter-of-factly: “I couldn’t buy my kids milk and Pampers—that’s why I did what I did. I wasn’t able to put clothes on their back the way I should have.” De Parle asked her how she felt at the time. “It felt good. I felt like now I can take care of my kids the way I want to.” Even though she was a criminal to the rest of the world, and even though she had wound up in jail, De Parle noted that she “recalls the moment as a rare time of inner peace.”
This story has all the elements of moral resistance: a sense of moral duty (“put clothes on their back the way I should have”); a sense of freedom denied (“I couldn’t buy my kids milk and Pampers” and “put clothes on their back”); and then a sense of freedom gained (“now I can take care of my kids the way I want to”). At the same time, it’s a classic tale of crime and punishment, yet one whose emotional punch line is pure, simple and unexpected: “It felt good.” This woman’s moral and emotional experience puts a different face on crime.

*Explore How Moral Resistance Becomes Political*

If your research topic lends itself to this direction, you might want to explore whether respondents think they are alone, abnormal or unusual, or whether they have some sense that other people share their beliefs and feelings, and perhaps also engage in moral resistance. That movement from feeling unique to sensing oneself as part of a group, even an unorganized group without a name or any collective existence, marks the beginning of political consciousness.

In my home care research, an aide I call Nina was very reluctant to talk about special favors she does for clients that are beyond the nurse’s care plan. As soon as I sensed her discomfort, I shut off the recorder for the rest of interview, and she opened up about her anger and her resistance. Nina told me about several of these special favors, most of which involved shopping or errands, and each time she added, “I guess I’m guilty.” Puzzled about her sense of guilt, I asked her why she felt guilty about “doing nice things for people.”

“They tell you you’re not supposed to have contact with patients outside of work,” she answered.
I later learned that everyone who worked for the agency (and other agencies as well) was told they could lose their jobs if they visited patients outside their scheduled hours. Although other nurses and aides had already told me about doing special favors, none of them had been hesitant to talk. I was puzzled.

*Me:* “Have you talked with other aides about this? Others have told me they do all kinds of things off hours for clients? Do you talk about this with others?”

*Nina:* No we don’t talk. But we all know we do it.”

In this exchange, I learned that the health care providers in this agency shared at least tacit knowledge that they engaged in breaking rules to give good care. There was nascent group consciousness here, if not exactly strong. In hindsight, though, I realized that by asking the question about talking with each other and spreading the knowledge that other people engaged in the same behavior, I had been something of a political instigator. I hadn’t meant to influence group consciousness, but I probably did increase it beyond what Nina expressed—“we don’t talk but we all know we do it.” And my interviews themselves might have been another stimulus to group consciousness, if some of the staff talked together about their interviews with me.

My disclosure to Nina about what others had told me violated a social science norm that says researchers should be observers, not actors. As a researcher, you shouldn’t play the role of go-between and information-spreader, because you don’t want your interviews to influence people’s thinking or behavior. Realistically, any interview influences respondents, if only because it gets them thinking and concentrating on questions that they haven’t pursued so deeply themselves. Merely talking about something develops a person’s thinking and so changes it.

If you are interviewing several people in an organization or social group, your respondents might actively recruit you to help them learn about each other. This happened to me early in my interviews at the first home care agency I studied. At the end of an interview with an aide, I wanted to give her a chance to bring up anything I hadn’t
asked about. “Well, I think that’s all my questions,” I said. “Is there anything else that occurs to you about any of this?”

_Aide_: We probably all say the same thing, don’t we?

_Me_: Pretty similar, but you’re only the third aide I’ve talked with. I’ve talked with more nurses so far.

_Aide_: How do the nurses feel? Do the nurses get attached to the clients as much as we do?

_Me_: Yes, they say so. [At this point I shut off the tape and told her than I’m hearing the same stuff from nurses about getting attached despite professional warnings against it.]

Obviously, I wasn’t prepared for this line of questioning and I said much more than I should have. I should have answered that all my interviews are confidential and so I cannot repeat what others have said. But I learned two important things about group consciousness from this interchange.

First, this aide didn’t _know_ how other aides and nurses felt about attachment to patients, in spite of working together with the same patients. The aide’s lack of knowledge told me that aides and nurses didn’t talk about this kind of thing. Later, I realized that—light bulb!—nurses supervise aides, so they probably profess the professional dictum about not letting yourself get too close to patients, even though they don’t observe it themselves. And aides, wanting to make a good impression on their supervisors, probably don’t admit to getting close to patients. Hierarchy prevented the nurses and aides from sharing their experience and making common cause for a more realistic and humane acknowledgment of the importance of personal relationships in home health care.
Second, this aide’s line of questioning told me that she was hungry for knowledge about how others in the agency felt. I sensed that the agency was ripe for more open discussion of conflicts between the experience of caregiving and some rules and norms. And as my research continued, I heard and observed several of these issues come out into the open. I also learned that the senior managers, having come up through the ranks of nursing, were attuned to these issues. They were aware, for instance, that staff sometimes visited clients off hours. They generally asked the staff to “be careful” and then looked the other way. They were engaging in their own moral resistance. They were also active in policy advocacy at the state level, trying to change some of the rules and policies that made home care so morally perilous. At the management level, moral resistance had already grown into political resistance.

**Research as Moral Resistance**

Speaking personally, I’m glad if my academic slips supported moral resistance in home health care. If I had done too much of that, it might have jeopardized my future access to staff in an agency, but I don’t regret having done it once or twice. This tension between my guilt and my gladness for violating academic norms illuminates the more general tension in doing research on moral resistance. As long as one does this kind of research within an academic setting, and as long as one expects to publish in scientific venues, one faces an inevitable conflict between acting as a scientist and acting as an advocate. Indeed, researching moral resistance forces you to recognize that you are a moral agent, however much you might try to be neutral scientist. Ultimately, I don’t believe my slips in spreading information among my informants were wholly accidental. I think doing research on moral resistance is itself of a form of moral resistance against the academic pressure to remain neutral, objective, and apolitical.
ENDNOTES


3 Some might argue that when people act on their moral principles, even if that means helping someone else, they ultimately fulfill their own self-interest because they derive satisfaction from helping someone else, or more cynically, because they enhance their reputation as a good person. I have argued elsewhere that a die-hard rationalist can reduce all altruism to self-interest, and that a more sensible view of human nature sees self-interest and altruism as inseparable. Deborah Stone, The Samaritan’s Dilemma: Should Government Help Your Neighbor (New York: Nation Books, 2008), esp. pp. 93-97.

4 James Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance, op. cit., p. 98.

5 Here, we’re not talking about abusive behavior or actions that immediately harm other people, behavior that you may be ethically and/or legally required to report. See for example Robert Weiss, Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies (New York: Free Press, 1994), pp.131-34; and Irving Seidman, Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences (New York: Teachers College Press, 3rd ed. 2006), pp. 70-72.

6 Robert Weiss, Learning from Strangers, pp. 77-78.


8 James Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance, op. cit., p. 9.


10 Lisa Dodson, “Wage-Poor Mothers,” ibid, p. 258.


12 Dodson, “Wage-Poor Mothers,” op. cit., p. 270.

13 Dodson, “Wage-Poor Mothers,” op. cit., p. 265, emphasis added.

