

Conceptualizing Resistance¹

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Recently, there has been a rapid proliferation of scholarship on resistance but little consensus on its definition. In this paper, we review and synthesize the diverse literatures that invoke the concept of resistance. This review illuminates both core elements common to most uses of the concept and two central dimensions on which these uses vary: the questions of whether resistance must be recognized by others and whether it must be intentional. We use these two dimensions to develop a typology of resistance, thereby clarifying both the meaning and sociological utility of this concept.

KEY WORDS: resistance; agency; protest; everyday resistance; interaction.

Resistance is a fashionable topic. In sociology, as in many other disciplines, attention has recently expanded from issues of social control and social structure to issues of agency. As a result, we are now experiencing a flood of research and theory which purports to speak to the issue of resistance. This new attention spans many subdisciplines in sociology. At the 2001 annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, for example, papers on resistance were presented in sessions on social movements, gender, sport, technology, and political sociology, among others. This is true across disciplines as well; resistance has received increasing attention in disciplines such as anthropology, cultural studies, geography, political science, and women's studies.

Although this rapid proliferation of scholarship on resistance is both exciting and productive, different authors who use the language of resistance

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may not in fact be talking about the same thing. Scholars have used the term *resistance* to describe a wide variety of actions and behaviors at all levels of human social life (individual, collective, and institutional) and in a number of different settings, including political systems, entertainment and literature, and the workplace. Indeed, everything from revolutions (Goldstone, 1991; Scott, 1985; Skocpol, 1979) to hairstyles (Kuumba and Ajanaku, 1998; Weitz, 2001) has been described as resistance. Given this variation, it is not surprising that there is little consensus on the definition of resistance. The term is defined variously as, for example, "acting autonomously, in [one's] own interests" (Gregg, 1993:172); "active efforts to oppose, fight, and refuse to cooperate with or submit to . . . abusive behaviour and . . . control" (Proffitt, 1996:25); "engaging in behaviors despite opposition" (Carr, 1998:543); or simply "questioning and objecting" (Modigliani and Rochat, 1995:112). What is more surprising is that most published work on resistance has displayed a decided *lack* of attention to definitions. Indeed, many writers seem to invoke the concept of resistance in their titles or introductions but then fail to define it or to use it in any systematic way in the remainder of their writing. As Weitz (2001:669) writes, "the term resistance remains loosely defined, allowing some scholars to see it almost everywhere and others almost nowhere."

This paper was motivated by our own frustration with the diverse, imprecise, and seemingly contradictory uses of the term *resistance* in the sociological literature. In what follows, we review and synthesize the cross-disciplinary literature on the concept of resistance with the aim of focusing and enriching work on resistance in sociology. We begin by documenting the diverse phenomena that have been referred to as resistance. We then summarize these varied treatments by describing both the common elements and the dimensions of variation in how scholars have used this term. In particular, we focus on two recurring issues in discussions about the definition of resistance: recognition and intent. We use these two issues to develop a typology of resistance, identifying seven distinct types. The typology also helps identify some of the important sociological themes which run throughout the literature on resistance, and we conclude with a discussion of these. Finally, we have observed that some disciplines, especially anthropology and political science, have a longer history of thoughtful attention to resistance as well as more explicit definitional debate. We discuss some of their insights here, with the goal of bringing these issues to the attention of a sociological audience.

By presenting a typology of resistance, we hope to clarify the substantive issues that underlie the sometimes contentious, but more often unstated, scholarly disagreements about this concept. Rather than adjudicating between different definitions of resistance, we aim to move beyond definitional

debates—which, we fear, may ultimately be futile—and focus instead on the analytically important aspects of resistance. Although we do not necessarily agree with all uses of the term, we believe that the discipline will be better served by bringing to light the underlying lines of dissent than by suggesting yet another definition. Our goal is to clarify these debates, not resolve them.

We believe that this endeavor is useful for two reasons. First, given the vast increase in attention to the topic of resistance, we see a need to clarify the concept on which this work rests. The multiple, often implicit definitions of resistance currently used in the literature serve only to muddy the conceptual waters; as Brown (1996:730) writes, “The indiscriminate use of resistance and related concepts undermines their analytical utility.” Second, we suggest that this conceptual clarification is beneficial not only for empirical work on resistance, but also for sociology more broadly. For example, studies of the circumstances under which resistance occurs can contribute to core areas of sociological inquiry such as power, inequality, and social change. Again, however, before such studies can be usefully applied to these broader discussions, more careful attention must be paid to the conceptual parameters of resistance.

THE DIVERSITY OF RESISTANCE

Our discussion focuses on social scientists’ published work on resistance. In order to examine this body of work, we searched the Sociological Abstracts database for all articles and books published since 1995 whose titles included the word *resistance*. We then read abstracts for all of these works and chose a subset to read in more depth. In selecting this sample we attempted to be as inclusive as possible, reading a variety of pieces across topics (e.g., gender, organizations, political sociology) as well as disciplines (e.g., sociology, political science, anthropology). Our sample also included selected influential works published prior to 1995. The following is therefore based on a review of several hundred books and articles for which resistance was a central theoretical or empirical topic. Because of limitations of space, we cite only a subset of the pieces that we read.

Our review of this work shows clearly that scholars have recognized resistance in a tremendous diversity of behaviors and settings. Perhaps the most commonly studied *mode* of resistance is material or physical, involving the resisters’ use of their bodies or other material objects. “Resistance” is most readily thought to refer to social movements (or the even broader categories of “protest” (Jasper, 1997) and “contentious politics” (McAdam *et al.*, 2001)); therefore, many activities traditionally associated with these phenomena, such as marches, picketing, and the formation of organizations,

fall into this category (Dunaway, 1996; Hughes *et al.*, 1995; McAdam, 1982; Morris, 1984; Rapone and Simpson, 1996; Robinson, 1995; Rupp and Taylor, 1987; Silva, 1997). Other acts of physical resistance include behaviors as dramatic as violence or as subtle as working slowly, feigning sickness, wearing particular types of clothing, or stealing from one's employer (Carr, 1998; Prasad and Prasad, 1998; Scott, 1985).

Beyond the physical and material, many authors have described resistance that is accomplished through talk and other symbolic behavior, such as when Hawaiian women published traditional stories in newspapers, spoke their native language, and practiced dance in order to resist Hawaiian annexation (Silva, 1997). Other writers suggest that silence can also be a form of resistance, as when Northern Ireland women remained defiantly silent during police raids (Pickering, 2000). In other cases, *breaking* silence is characterized as a form of resistance, as when rape victims speak about their experiences (Hughes *et al.*, 1995).

As the preceding discussion illustrates, the *scale* of resistance is also variable: acts of resistance may be individual or collective, widespread or locally confined. Related to scale is the *level of coordination* among the resisters, that is, the extent to which they purposefully act together. While revolutions and other organized protest activities clearly require coordination, other acts of resistance (such as hairstyle choice or workplace confrontation) can take place with little or no coordination among actors (Prasad and Prasad, 1998; Weitz, 2001). The *targets* of resistance also vary, from individuals (as when a woman resists a would-be rapist) to groups and organizations (as when workers resist their employers' attempts at control) to institutions and social structures (as when revolutionaries resist state power, or individuals resist gender expectations).

Another source of diversity is the *direction* or *goals* of the resistance. While resistance is most frequently understood to be aimed at achieving some sort of change, in some cases, the behavior described as resistance aims to curtail change. For example, "cultural resistance" in minority communities attempts to preserve the minority culture against assimilation to the host culture (Moghissi, 1999). Further, the change which resistance demands is often assumed to be progressive or at least prosocial; it is generally the wrongly oppressed who are viewed as resisting domination from above. However, a number of writers point out that resistance can also come from those who—structurally, at least—have more power, such as whites who resist residential desegregation (Hirsch, 1995) or army men who harass military women, even those with higher rank (Miller, 1997). Others suggest that resistance can also come from the Right as well as from the Left (Starn, 1995), and can be antisocial, as in the case of drug trafficking and tax evasion (Merry, 1995), racist harassment (Hirsch, 1995), or even rape (Kellett, 1995).

Finally, while resistance is generally understood to be a *political* action, some writers suggest that resistance can also be *identity-based*. An example is Howe's (1998) discussion of the discursive strategies used by long-term unemployed men in Belfast to resist being labeled as "scroungers" or "cheats." Here, what is resisted is not (or not only) political or social conditions but also the resister's expected or attributed identity. Helman's (1999) study of Israeli conscientious objectors provides another example: because military participation is a core feature of citizenship and national identity in Israel, such acts of refusal can be seen as resistance against that identity.

RESISTANCE: CORE ELEMENTS AND DIMENSIONS OF VARIATION

This brief summary illustrates the remarkable range of actions identified by various scholars as resistance and serves as the starting point for our analysis: How can all of these phenomena be described with the same term? Further, as we note below, there is considerable scholarly disagreement about whether all the actions described here are, in fact, resistance. These disagreements have occurred most clearly among anthropologists (e.g., Brown, 1996; Hoffman, 1999) and political scientists (e.g., McCann and March, 1996; Rubin, 1996). Sociologists, in contrast, have largely discussed resistance without explicitly engaging these definitional issues, fostering ambiguity and discontinuity in this area (for exceptions, see Leblanc, 1999; Weitz, 2001). Rather than simply contributing another salvo to these debates and confusions, our analysis illuminates the often veiled issues that lie at the heart of these varied understandings of resistance. In this section we draw on the published work on resistance to identify two core elements common to most discussions of resistance. We then describe two key dimensions of variation which we suggest underlie the definitional disputes. Regardless of how an author defined resistance or dealt with other substantive topics, he or she nearly always took a position (sometimes implicitly) on these issues.

Together, these dimensions suggest a seven-part typology of resistance, which shows the differences and the relationships among varied uses of the term. This typology is inductively derived from our reading of the literature and represents what we found to be the consensual core elements and the most significant dimensions of variation in the scholarly uses of the term *resistance* by social scientists. We were aided in this project by the explicit debates which have occurred within political science and anthropology; these debates focused on those dimensions of variation that we found to be most frequent in the literature. Our analysis was also guided by themes from research on social movements, which understands protest behavior in terms

of interactions between protesters, their targets, and third parties such as the state and the general public (see Barkan, 1984; Burstein *et al.*, 1995). As we demonstrate further below, we draw on these insights by codifying types of resistance in terms of the perceptions of the resisters, their opponents, and other observers.

Core Elements: Action and Opposition

As described above, we reviewed a wide variety of articles and books across disciplines which centered their empirical and theoretical discussions around the concept of resistance. Although some authors explicitly defined resistance, in other cases we were left to extrapolate an implicit definition from the author's use of the term. However, two elements were common to nearly all uses of the term. First, virtually all uses included a sense of *action*, broadly conceived. In other words, authors seem to agree that resistance is not a quality of an actor or a state of being, but involves some active behavior, whether verbal, cognitive, or physical. For example, consider the following, otherwise quite diverse, definitions of resistance:

expressive behavior that inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or prevents alternatives to cultural codes. (Pitts, 1998:71)

actions that not only reject subordination but do so by challenging the ideologies that support that subordination. (Weitz, 2001:670)

either any kind of organized, collective opposition or any subversive action directly intended to damage and/or disrupt the functioning of an organization. (Prasad and Prasad, 1998:226)

actions involving consciousness, collective action, and direct challenges to structures of power. (Rubin, 1996:245)

Each of these definitions presumes some kind of action.

A second element common to nearly all uses is a sense of *opposition*. In the above definitions, this sense appears in the use of the words "counter," "contradict," "social change," "reject," "challenge," "opposition," "subversive," and "damage and/or disrupt." Other definitions also contain this sense of opposition:

conscious questioning of the existing structure of domestic roles and a rethinking of how these roles may be structured. (Brown, 1994:167)

deliberate rejection of values that sustain existing power relations. (Faith, 1993:8)

actively [saying] "No, this is not acceptable, this is wrong and I do not want it to happen" in numerous individual and collective ways. (Pickering, 2000:59)

any behavior or discourse . . . that countered or disrupted the dominant bureaucratic discourse. (Trethewey, 1997:288)

Here too, the sense of opposition is palpable.

These common elements may seem self-evident: of course resistance includes activity, and of course that activity occurs in opposition to someone or something else. Yet it is by identifying these consensual elements that the lines of disagreement become clear. We found that various discussions of resistance differed in their positions on two central issues, which we suggest lie at the heart of many disagreements about resistance: recognition and intent.

Recognition

One issue is the visibility of the resistant act: Must oppositional action be readily apparent to others, and must it in fact be recognized as resistance? Early work on resistance, which focused on large-scale protest movements and revolutions whose members confront their targets directly and openly, took for granted that resistance is visible and easily recognized as resistance. Political scientist James Scott's (1985) research on peasant politics, however, challenged this conceptualization by drawing attention to what he calls "everyday" resistance. According to Scott, powerless people rarely have the resources or opportunity to resist openly against their superordinates, and thus massive protest movements are "flashes in the pan" (p. xvi). In contrast, more common, "everyday" forms of peasant resistance "stop well short of collective outright defiance. Here I have in mind the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth" (p. 29). Such acts are "everyday" because of their commonplace, ordinary nature; as Scott notes, "Everyday acts of resistance make no headlines" (p. xvii). Though less explicitly confrontational than, say, an armed peasant revolt, Scott argues that "everyday" acts still qualify as resistance, to the extent that they "deny or mitigate claims made by appropriating classes" (p. 302). These "low-profile techniques" (p. xvi) can go unnoticed by the powerful, which helps protect the powerless from repression by masking the resistant nature of their activities. For example, while a landlord would notice (and, undoubtedly, seek retribution for) a torched barn, he would be less likely to notice if firewood were illegally gathered from his land.

Subsequent research has located a great deal of resistance in these "everyday" acts. For example, Levi's (1998) research on the Raramuri, an indigenous ethnic group in Northern Mexico, shows how their use of "articles of everyday life" such as traditional weapons and textiles was a means of resistance against the dominant political economy because it allowed them to be self-sufficient. Many additional examples of everyday resistance come from research on work and organizations. For instance, May (1999) uses the

term “banana time” to refer to worker agency in the form of discretionary break times: a worker decides to take a break by going to another’s lunch box, taking out a banana, and proclaiming, “Banana time!” Cultural activities provide further examples of everyday resistance. For instance, Weitz (2001:669) argues that women’s hairstyles illustrate “the ordinary ways in which women struggle daily with cultural ideas about the female body.”

The contrast between “everyday” resistance and more conventional (and more obviously contentious) forms of political mobilization illustrates the ways in which acts of resistance vary in their visibility. Visibility, of course, is a necessary prerequisite for the recognition of resistance. Yet resisters may manipulate their behavior in order to encourage or discourage recognition. Some acts are overtly oppositional, yet unrecognized because they are deliberately hidden from view. For instance, Johnston and Snow (1998) describe subcultures of opposition which created the “free spaces” that gave rise to Estonian nationalism during the Soviet Era (see also McCorkel, 1998). Rochat and Modigliani’s (1995) work on French villagers who hid Jews during the Holocaust provides another example of explicit opposition which, of necessity, had to remain invisible to authorities.

In contrast, other acts are observable yet not necessarily recognized as resistant by the powerful. This includes much of what Scott refers to as “everyday” acts of resistance; for instance, the use of humor can be a way for those in lower status positions to covertly express resistance to the more powerful (Griffiths, 1998; Scott, 1985). Similarly, Sanger (1995:179) argues that singing spirituals allowed slaves to “reclaim rhetorical power in their lives” and to “refute the very definitions and assumptions on which this psychological oppression was based,” yet in a way that went unrecognized (and therefore unpunished) by whites. Kanuha’s (1999) work on “passing” among gays and lesbians provides another empirical example. Successful passing requires an individual to avoid making some oppositional claim that would reveal his or her identity; however, Kanuha (1999:39) argues that such behavior is resistant because “the maintenance of a false performance was for the purpose of opposing those forces that would threaten or harm them in specific social encounters.”

As these examples illustrate, recognition depends in part on the goals of the resisters. Some resistance is intended to be recognized, while other resistance is purposefully concealed or obfuscated. Resisters may try to hide either the act itself (as in “passing”) or the intent behind it. Regarding the latter, a woman might resist unwanted sexual activity directly by yelling, striking the assailant, or struggling to get away. Alternatively (and especially if the assailant is an acquaintance), she might attempt some more indirect, diplomatic refusal, such as “trying to distract the man’s attention to preferred activities, jokingly indicating that his behavior is unwanted, [or] giving the

man “the cold shoulder,” (Nurius *et al.*, 2000:6). These indirect strategies are not necessarily intended to be recognized as resistance; the woman may be attempting to preserve the relationship while avoiding a particular activity or experience. However, most central to the dimension of recognition are the perceptions of others. In the present example, for instance, the assailant might correctly interpret jokes or distraction as an attempt at resistance; alternatively, he might incorrectly perceive more direct physical resistance as part of the process of seduction, assuming that her “no” really means “yes.”

The question of whether resistance requires recognition by others has been the subject of considerable contention. While Scott argues that resistance need not be recognized as such (Scott, 1985:xvii; see also McCann and March, 1996), other scholars suggest that a behavior must be recognized by others to count as resistance. Recognition is one basis for Rubin’s (1996:241) critique of what he calls the “minimalist” definition of resistance; he argues that the term should be reserved for visible, collective acts that result in social change, and not “everyday acts . . . that chip away at power in almost imperceptible ways.” Opposition from others is also used by some scholars as a criterion for resistance. Carr’s (1998:543) work on “tomboy resistance” distinguishes between the “active resistance” of girls who engage in tomboy behaviors “despite opposition and/or knowledge that important others deemed such behaviors as inappropriate for girls” and the (presumably nonresistant) actions of those who engaged in “the same or similar behaviors but did not report opposition.” Similarly, Tye and Powers (1998) suggest that negative male reactions to “bachelorette parties” define them as gender resistance. In contrast to Scott’s view that resistance may remain relatively invisible to the powerful, these conceptualizations define resistance as necessarily provoking recognition and even reaction from others.

Finally, some discussions about recognition and resistance hinge on the fact that there are two distinct groups of “others” who may identify an act as resistance: targets (i.e., those to whom the act is directed) and other observers (who may include onlookers at the time of the resistance, the general public, members of the media, and researchers). For instance, Scott’s “everyday” resistance is not recognized by targets but is apparent to culturally aware observers. However, not all scholars agree that different groups of observers can interpret resistance differently; for example, Rubin (1996) argues that the term *resistance* should be limited to situations where targets and other observers are equally aware of the resistant act. Overall, then, a careful examination of scholarly discussions about resistance shows that many disagreements center on the question of recognition—including issues such as whether unrecognized acts should qualify as resistance, and whose assessments are most important.

Intent

The question of recognition is perhaps the most contentious issue in scholarly discussions of resistance. Less heated, but no less central, are discussions about the intent behind resistant acts. In particular, the issue of consciousness has been the focus of debate: Must the actor be aware that she or he is resisting some exercise of power—and intending to do so—for an action to qualify as resistance? Questions about intent often focus on smaller-scale and “everyday” acts of resistance. That is, because scholars generally agree that mass-based movements and revolutions clearly represent resistance, the intent behind such acts is a nonissue. However, with more controversial applications of the term, questions about intent arise.

Theorists of resistance have addressed the issue of intent in three ways. Some suggest that the actor’s conscious intent is key to classifying a behavior as resistance: If an actor intends to resist, then her or his actions qualify as resistance, regardless of their scope or outcome. In fact, Scott argues that intent is a better indicator of resistance than outcome, because acts of resistance do not always achieve the desired effect (1985:290). Similarly, Leblanc argues that

Accounts of resistance must detail not only resistant acts, but the subjective intent motivating these as well. . . . In this conceptualization of resistance, an attribution of any type requires three distinct moments: a subjective account of oppression (real or imagined), an express desire to counter that oppression, and an action (broadly defined as word, thought, or deed) intended specifically to counter that oppression. . . . It is crucial that the first two conditions hold before any observational account can be deemed resistant. That is, the person engaging in resistant acts must do so consciously and be able to relate that consciousness and intent. (Leblanc, 1999:18)

However, a second group of authors contend that assessing intent is difficult, if not impossible. For instance, to meet Leblanc’s requirements, the analyst must have access to the actor’s internal states, which may not be as stable or readily available as Leblanc implies. Moreover, even research methods that might seem to gain access to intent, such as interviewing, are not necessarily reliable. Actors may be unable to fully articulate their motivations in terms that would be recognized as resistant by the interviewer. Or actors may intend to resist, but they may lie to an interviewer (Weitz, 2001) or otherwise conceal this intention from others, especially those they oppose. Scott’s (1990) concept of “hidden transcripts” relates to this issue: Oppressed people may be conscious of oppression and may intend to resist it in some fashion, but this resistance may occur privately, because public resistance is too dangerous (see also Schaffer, 1995). Weitz (2001:670) concludes that these problems “leave us no choice but to try to assess the nature of the act itself.” In fact, Scott (1985) suggests that we can reasonably infer intent from actions,

even those that appear to be purely self-indulgent rather than resistant:

A peasant soldier who deserts the army is in effect "saying" by his act that the purposes of this institution and the risks and hardships it entails will not prevail over his family or personal needs. A harvest laborer who steals paddy from his employer is "saying" that his need for rice takes precedence over the formal property rights of his boss. (1985:301)

A third group of writers suggests that the actor's intentions are not central to understanding something as resistance; instead, they argue that the actor may not even be conscious of his or her action as resistance. For example, St. Martin and Gavey (1996:46) say that bodybuilding can be either "an unconscious or purposeful act of resistance." Additionally, Hebdige's (1979) semiotic analysis of styles (e.g., style of dress) as a form of resistance does not consider the intent behind such acts; according to him, resistance can occur "at a level beneath the consciousness" of an actor (quoted in Leblanc, 1999: 15). Determining intent is a particularly difficult issue when researchers and actors are not located in the same culture. Because the same action can have different meanings across cultures, those outside a culture may mistake the resistant import of an action. Thus, issues of intent and recognition may affect one another: an observer (such as a researcher) may fail to recognize an act as resistant if she lacks the cultural knowledge to identify the intent behind the action. Discussions about culture and resistance have been furthered considerably by anthropologists, including Hoffman (1999), whose work focuses on differing cultural conceptions of self in the West and Japan. She notes that the belief that one's public behavior reflects one's inner self is a Western idea, and in non-Western contexts it may not be appropriate to assume that actions always display one's underlying political and ideological tendencies. Although focusing on the Ecuadorian context, Korovkin (2000:20) agrees, arguing that without attention to the specific cultural and historical context in which resistance takes place, the term is "little more than an umbrella for phenomena that are superficially similar yet substantially different."

More broadly, as we noted in our discussion of recognition, a potential problem occurs when different parties (actors themselves, targets, *in situ* observers, and scholars) interpret the intent behind a particular behavior in different ways. Indeed, even those who accept the idea that researchers can recognize resistance often overlook the fact that different researchers can understand the same behavior differently. For example, Groves and Chang (1999) both undertook ethnographic fieldwork with Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong, but the first author (a white man) interpreted the workers' behavior as childish and deferent, while the second author (a woman of Asian descent) interpreted the same behaviors as resistance. Groves and Chang (1999:282) conclude that the power relations between

researcher and informants shape whether a behavior is understood as resistance: "Resistance and control did not exist outside the ever-changing relationships of power that we formed with the women we studied."

Like the issues of visibility and recognition, then, questions about the intent behind resistance—few of which are answered easily—complicate scholarly treatments of the concept (see Healey, 1999; Hoffman, 1999). Yet we suggest that an understanding of these debates is crucial if sociological research on resistance is to be improved. With these core issues in mind, we turn now to a typology of resistance, one that is intended to both summarize and make use of these varied arguments.

TYPES OF RESISTANCE

Our discussion has shown that although the recent attention to resistance has introduced social scientists to a rich set of empirical cases, this diversity has also led to disagreement and confusion regarding the parameters of the underlying phenomenon. Although there is virtual consensus that resistance involves oppositional action of some kind, there is considerable disagreement about whether resistance must be intended by actors and whether it must be recognized by targets and/or observers. Some of this disagreement has been expressed in explicit debate, whereas in the majority of the literature scholars simply extend the core definition in their preferred direction without any explicit discussion.

Where, then, are we left in our understanding of the concept of resistance? We suggest that it is useful to think of resistance in terms of distinct *types*, as presented in Table I. The typology highlights the central issues involved in disagreements about resistance—recognition and intent—and also illustrates the fact that three distinct groups (actors, their targets, and interested observers, including researchers) may judge an act to be resistance. The table presents seven types of resistance, each defined by a different combination of actors' intent, target's recognition, and observers' recognition. The

Table I. Types of resistance

	Is act intended as resistance by actor?	Is act recognized as resistance by	
		target?	observer?
Overt resistance	Yes	Yes	Yes
Covert resistance	Yes	No	Yes
Unwitting resistance	No	Yes	Yes
Target-defined resistance	No	Yes	No
Externally-defined resistance	No	No	Yes
Missed resistance	Yes	Yes	No
Attempted resistance	Yes	No	No
Not resistance	No	No	No

table also includes an eighth category, which describes actions that are neither intended as resistance nor recognized as such by anyone; such actions are not considered resistance.

The first type, which we have called *overt resistance*, is behavior that is visible and readily recognized by both targets and observers as resistance and, further, is intended to be recognized as such. This category includes collective acts such as social movements and revolutions as well as individual acts of refusal, such as women's resisting domestic work (Healy, 1999) or fighting back physically against sexual assault (Nurius *et al.*, 2000). This category is the consensual core of resistance; virtually all scholars would agree that acts of this type should be classified as resistance.

There is less agreement, however, on other types of resistance. While overt resistance is understood as resistance by all parties, the remaining types illustrate the fact that actors, targets, and observers may differ in their assessment of an act as resistant. We use the term *covert resistance* to refer to acts that are intentional yet go unnoticed (and, therefore, unpunished) by their targets, although they are recognized as resistance by other, culturally aware observers. Examples of this type of resistance include gossip, "bitching," and subtle subversion in the workplace (Griffiths, 1998; Prasad and Prasad, 1998; Scott, 1985, 1990; Sotirin and Gottfried, 1999; Wickham, 1998). Acts of withdrawal, whether avoidance of a particular individual or self-imposed exile from a particular context, also fall into this category.

The typology also includes several types of unintentional resistance. *Unwitting resistance* is not intended as resistance by the actor yet is recognized as threatening by targets and other observers; such acts may include "tomboy" behavior by girls (Carr, 1998) or daydreaming at work (Prasad and Prasad, 1998). While an unintentional act cannot truly be said to have a "target," the point here is that some individuals might object to or feel threatened by such acts, whether or not the actor intends to provoke such a reaction. In some cases, such self-defined "targets" may be the only ones who recognize a behavior as resistance; we label these kinds of behaviors *target-defined resistance*. An abusive husband, for example, might judge his wife's behavior to be resistance, though she does not intend it that way, and other observers do not perceive it as such. A separate category exists for *externally-defined resistance*, or those acts of resistance that are neither intended nor recognized as resistance by actors or their targets, but are labeled resistance by third parties. For example, women who watch soap operas may not see this activity as resistance, nor may others in their social environments, yet some scholars have described this behavior as resistance to traditional gender expectations (Brown, 1994). Indeed, to identify as resistance an act that is neither intended as resistance nor seen as such by those whom the act may oppose requires a heavy burden of proof. Nonetheless, such acts

become “resistance” by virtue of others’ assessments (e.g., the scholars who study them and deem them as such).

Two final types of resistance refer to intentional acts that escape the notice of others. If recognized by their target but unrecognized by third-party observers, we refer to these as *missed resistance*. Such acts may be “missed” if, for example, they take place in settings that are known and accessible to the actor and target but are inaccessible to others (e.g., secret societies). Finally, if an actor’s intentional act goes unnoticed by both targets and observers alike, it may be classified as *attempted resistance*.

This typology summarizes the central disagreements in the ways social scientists have conceptualized resistance and helps to clarify the conceptual fuzziness that has surrounded this term. Two additional points are worth noting here. First, not all scholars agree that all of the behaviors summarized in Table I should be referred to as “resistance.” For some writers, it is inconceivable that seemingly apolitical hairstyle choices, for instance, could be considered in the same category as an expressly political march on Washington, or that watching soap operas could be analogous to workplace subversion. Second, this typology helps illustrate the fact that these disagreements do not focus on the central core elements of resistance: virtually everyone would agree that resistance involves oppositional action, and that intentional action recognized by others would qualify as resistance. Rather, the disagreements stem from the authors’ attempts to *extend* this core definition in a particular direction. Hairstyle choice, for example, may extend it along the dimension of recognition, while soap opera watching may extend it along the dimension of intent.

More broadly, we suggest that by clarifying the issues that underlie these disagreements, this typology can help move the field forward. Recognizing different types of resistance can help eliminate the fruitless aspects of definitional disputes and may be useful as a first step toward agreement. For example, to those debating whether “everyday” acts can be considered “resistance,” agreeing that, say, singing slave spirituals is qualitatively different than taking up arms against the state may also help scholars identify what these two acts have in common. Acknowledging different types of resistance can therefore help move social scientists beyond these debates and on to other inquiries, such as examining the conditions under which actors choose one type of resistance over another (or, in the case of unintentional acts of resistance, the conditions under which certain types of resistance emerge).

We should note, however, that there appear to be some limits to scholarly extensions of the concept of resistance. Although our typology identifies seven different types, more empirical work has been done on some types of resistance than on others. Notably, we did not come across any published work on either “missed resistance” or “attempted resistance.” This finding is

understandable, given the definition of these types as resistance that goes unnoticed by third-party observers (such as researchers). Furthermore, scholarly discussions have not yet delved much into the different perspectives represented by the diverse “others” whose views help to determine whether an act is resistance (for exceptions, see Brown, 1996; Groves and Chang, 1999). For instance, researchers who study resistance from afar may have much different views than other onlookers who might be directly affected. This issue is ripe for further research.

Finally, this typology helps call attention to the sociological aspects of resistance—aspects that are obscured when definitional debates take center stage. We conclude by discussing these sociological issues and by returning to the question of why resistance has become, as we noted at the beginning of this paper, such a fashionable topic.

CONCLUSIONS: SOCIOLOGICAL ISSUES CONCERNING RESISTANCE

Recently, there has been an outpouring of research using resistance as a central analytical concept. We have argued that while this increased attention to resistance is both provocative and promising, much of this work uses the concept of resistance in an unfocused way. In many works, resistance seems to be as much a symbol of the writer’s political stance as an analytic concept. Such vagueness limits the utility of this potentially powerful concept.

We have attempted to draw out some of the most contentious issues regarding resistance with the aim of spurring a more focused conversation about what resistance might be. To this end, we have turned to a broad variety of literatures to discern the parameters of how the concept is currently used. Our review and synthesis has found considerable agreement about two core elements of resistance (action and opposition) and about what we have called “overt” resistance, which is intended by the actor and recognized by both targets and observers. We found disagreement, however, about the limits of the concept, prompted by various writers’ attempts to extend the concept in different ways. We have argued that two issues—recognition and intent—lie at the heart of these disagreements. When opposition is not recognized by its targets, or when it is described as being unintentional, there is much less consensus that it qualifies as resistance. We have used these two dimensions to define seven distinct types of resistance: overt resistance, covert resistance, unwitting resistance, target-defined resistance, externally-defined resistance, missed resistance, and attempted resistance. Although not all writers would agree that each of these types warrants the label *resistance*, this typology may help them to more clearly articulate their lines of disagreement, furthering the conceptual development of this topic.

Our typology also brings several additional properties of resistance to light. First, a typology of resistance centered on the core issues of visibility and intent highlights *the interactional nature of resistance*. Resistance is defined not only by resisters' perceptions of their own behavior, but also by targets' and/or others' recognition of and reaction to this behavior; the intersection of these three perspectives defines the seven types of resistance. Understanding the interaction between resisters, targets, and third parties is thus at the heart of understanding resistance.

Examining the interactional nature of resistance also highlights *the central role of power*, which is itself an interactional relationship, not a characteristic of individuals or groups (Tomlinson, 1998), as expressed in Foucault's (1978:95) well-known dictum, "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power." As a result, resistance and domination have a cyclical relationship: domination leads to resistance, which leads to the further exercise of power, provoking further resistance, and so on (Faith, 1994; Flowerdew, 1997). In some cases, resistance may contribute to the exercise of power. For example, Flowerdew (1997:334) observed that during a controversial speech by the governor of Hong Kong, audience members' resistance at times facilitated the governor's display of power "by providing him with a platform from which to launch into demonstrations of his own superior language power." Thus "in situations of conflict, it may be the case that strategies of dominancy can only be understood within the context of the resistance strategies with which they are confronted and which they seek to overcome" (Flowerdew, 1997:318). Analyzing the interactions within which resistance occurs directs attention toward such power dynamics.

The wide range (as well as the mutual contradiction) of the definitions of resistance summarized by the typology above illustrates the fact that *the concept of resistance is socially constructed* (Gal, 1995; Prasad and Prasad, 1998) and that resisters, targets, and observers all participate in this construction (Gordon, 1993:142; Hollander, 2002). This challenges the reification of resistance present in much published work: Many authors seem to assume that at least some kinds of resistance are readily apparent and consensually identifiable as resistance. However, even if different observers agree about how resistance should be defined, they may disagree about whether a particular action fits that definition. What one observer (or participant) sees as resistance, another may see as accommodation or even domination. Kellet's discussion of rapists makes this flexibility painfully clear: the rapists he studied constructed accounts of their behavior that cast themselves as oppressed victims rather than victimizers. As Kellet (1995:143-144) asks, are these accounts "the legitimate utterance of an oppressed person trying to reclaim his voice in the order of things, a perspective often favored by

rapists? Or has this rapist learned (perhaps unconsciously), like a sort of rhetorically savvy terrorist, that to present rape as an act of resistance—an attempt to assert voice in the face of his own experience of devalued otherness—is probably the best way to have the act accepted as defensible and even reasonable?”

Finally, by calling attention to different types and dimensions of resistance, the typology also illustrates *the complex nature of resistance*. Although many writers have treated resistance as though it were easily identified and unproblematic, there is considerable disagreement and ambiguity about what, precisely, this concept denotes. This is not due simply to lack of attention. Resistance is inherently a complex concept—and indeed, a complex set of thoughts and behaviors. In particular, two forms of complexity are evident throughout the literature.

First, resistance is not always pure. That is, even while resisting power, individuals or groups may simultaneously support the structures of domination that necessitate resistance in the first place. This dual role may be especially likely with “everyday” and externally defined resistance whose true purpose goes unnoticed by its targets. Various authors have referred to this complexity as *accommodation* (e.g., Sotirin and Gottfried, 1999; Weitz, 2001), *ambiguity* (Trethewey, 1997), *complicity* (Healey, 1999; Ortner, 1995), *conformity* (St. Martin and Gavey, 1996), or *assimilation* (Faith, 1994). These authors stress that a single activity may constitute both resistance and accommodation to different aspects of power or authority. For example, women’s bodybuilding simultaneously resists the expectation that women will be delicate and not muscular and conforms to the gender expectation that they will be thin and concerned with bodily “improvement.” (St. Martin and Gavey, 1996) Similarly, secretarial “bitching” both provides a way for secretaries to resist expectations that they will be “professionally dispassionate and appropriately feminine” and, ultimately, devalues women (Sotirin and Gottfried, 1999:59). Actors may also challenge their own positions within a particular social structure, while not challenging the validity of the overall structure. For example, in the act of denying the identity of “scrounger,” chronically unemployed men simultaneously support the attribution of this identity to others (Howe, 1998). Similarly, transsexuals resist their own gender assignment while accepting the gender system as a whole (Gagne and Tewksbury, 1998). Individuals may also resist in some situations but choose not to resist in others. Often these choices are linked to the web of relationships in which any individual is embedded; some of these relationships may sustain resistance, while others may not. As Leblanc (1999:17) writes, “Resisters, after all, remain within the social system they contest.”

A second, related source of complexity is that neither resisters nor dominators are monolithic: inevitably, there is variation in both groups (Ortner,

1995:175). Miller (1997:32) argues that most studies of resistance are problematic because "they begin by dividing the population into the powerful and the powerless." Yet dichotomizing resisters and dominators in this way ignores the fact that there are multiple systems of hierarchy, and that individuals can be simultaneously powerful and powerless within different systems.

Our discussion of the complexity of resistance may seem at odds with our overall goal in this paper, which is to clarify the concept of resistance rather than to introduce more confusion on the topic. However, recognizing the complexity of resistance is in keeping with our aims, because only when the parameters of the concept have been laid out can the more complex characteristics of resistance be addressed. Although our comments in this regard are necessarily brief, we hope that future sociological research will both recognize these complexities and continue to explore them.

The often-ignored complexity of resistance, the tension between resistance and accommodation, and the social and interactional nature of resistance are profoundly sociological issues, joining debates about power and control and the relationship between individuals and social context. Identifying the central elements of resistance, in other words, allows us to see the sociological importance of the concept. In closing, we speculate that the sociological issues raised by resistance help account for its increasing popularity in sociology. For instance, because many sociologists have an interest in studying the distribution of power in society, some scholars may focus on resistance in order to debunk the idea that ordinary people are duped by the powerful and prevailing ideologies and to show that people can think for themselves (McCann and March, 1996). A similar pattern has occurred in feminist work. According to Fisher and Davis (1993:6), because many feminist writers have focused on women's oppression, "albeit unintentionally, they run the risk of victimizing women by representing them as the passive objects of monolithic systems of oppression. . . . This presentation leaves little conceptual or political space for uncovering the subtle and ambivalent ways women may be negotiating at the margins of power, sometimes constrained by but also resisting and even undermining asymmetrical power relations." Studying resistance may therefore help restore the balance between oppression and agency.

The potential connection between resistance and social change is another likely reason for the increasing attention to resistance in the past decade. Noticing the places where resistance occurs may provide hope to those who support the resistance that positive social change will result. This is particularly compelling when other avenues for change have disappeared: "Attention to resistance has increased as revolutionary dreams have lost their luster" (Brown, 1996:729). Furthermore, writing about resistance signals political solidarity with the oppressed and downtrodden; it permits

the writer to choose sides in the power struggles that are interwoven with social life. Thus resistance has become “an important rhetorical tool,” giving scholarship moral meaning (Brown, 1996:729).

More cynically, some authors have also suggested that studying resistance serves the interest of the scholar; as Brown writes, it “carries with it certain professional advantages.” By casting some behavior as resistance, “I [Brown] would demonstrate my familiarity with and sympathy toward woman-centered approaches to social phenomena while implicitly registering my opposition to the hegemonic forces. . . . My subjects. . . are thus magically transformed into heroic soldiers in the antihegemonic struggle, and I, by extension, into their worthy scribe” (1996:732). Certainly, labeling something as resistance may give legitimacy to otherwise marginal work. For example, characterizing the popularity of tough female television characters (such as Xena, Warrior Princess, or Buffy the Vampire Slayer) as “gender resistance” may provide more legitimacy than labeling this popularity “successful corporate marketing of entertainment.” This is analogous to practices in the study of social movements, where calling something a “movement” gives it a certain amount of legitimacy that it might not otherwise have and might help foster future mobilization (Oberschall, 1989).

Regardless of the reasons for its popularity, it is clear that resistance is a deeply sociological concept. In addition to being invoked throughout the discipline, it involves issues and debates that are at the heart of the sociological perspective, including power and control, inequality and difference, and social context and interaction. Our aim in this paper has been to clarify the core issues that underlie the ongoing debates about resistance. We hope that future work will continue to examine these issues, for only through a more systematic understanding of resistance will its promise as an important sociological concept be fulfilled.

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