

Chapter 16

Resisting the Ruling Relations: Discovering Everyday Resistance with Institutional Ethnography

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Abstract

Resistance is a concept that may seem out of place in studies of Nordic welfare societies. However, several studies depict how people in these societies act in ways that, whether explicitly or not, question the current state of affairs in ways that may be understood as resistance. This chapter explores how insights developed within the field of everyday resistance studies can inform IE studies in the Nordic countries in ways that sensitize us to discover acts of resistance. With reference to two empirical studies, we argue that resistance can be traced in oppositional or critical talk, in tacit acts of non-compliance or in the ‘twisting and bending’ of regulations, as well as in acts that are explicitly aimed at opposing ruling.

Key words: Everyday Resistance; Oppositional Talk; Work/Work Knowledge; Ruling Relations; Transformation

Introduction

The universalist and egalitarian policies of the Nordic model have historically been foundational for societies characterised by social stability, relatively equal distribution of resources, and financial success (cf. Chapter One in this book). As a consequence, the Nordic welfare states still enjoy relatively strong support among their citizens in spite of growing inequality. Within this context, the concept of resistance might seem out of place. What is there to resist if people agree with the ideology of the welfare states? Yet, as several of the chapters in this collection bear witness, the perception of the welfare state as a good agent is indeed challenged. This is particularly manifest in professional practice and the “impossible mission” (Bourdieu 1999) of professionals who find themselves squeezed between the well-being of the citizens and the requirements to abide by the rules and regulations imposed as a part of the neo-liberal turn and the introduction of principles from new public management. In addition, the users of the services provided by the welfare state might resist in various ways, which makes it interesting to ask what resistance looks like when the power you oppose is a power with intentions to do good?

In this chapter, we address how insights from the field of *everyday resistance* may inform IE studies in a way that sensitizes us to discover acts of resistance when they are tacit, subtle or unexpected. Our argument is that, within the Nordic context, resistance can be traced in oppositional or critical talk, in tacit acts of non-compliance, or in the ‘twisting and bending’ of regulations, as well as in acts that are explicitly aimed at opposing ruling. Below, we first introduce resistance studies and present an outline of the concept of everyday resistance. Next, we look at similarities between everyday resistance and

IE before we explore what resistance may look like in the context of the Nordic welfare states, drawing on empirical examples from two IE studies. Finally, we discuss the potential, as well as some of the challenges and paradoxes, of incorporating the perspective of everyday resistance in IE studies in the Nordics.

Everyday resistance

Resistance studies is an emerging cross-disciplinary field where researchers work to uncover the nuances and complexities of resistance. While the study of power has a long history and has been debated for centuries, inquiring into resistance has not been equally common. Traditionally, *resistance* has been associated with highly visible phenomena such as organised protests, social movements, revolutions, and riots, but with the growing interest in resistance there has also been an increasing interest in less obvious forms, such as *constructive resistance* (Sørensen 2016) and *everyday resistance*. The latter refers to the ways in which people resist dominance in unorganised and hidden ways. James Scott, who coined the term, writes about it as “infrapolitics”, the politics that usually goes unnoticed and unrecorded, under the radar (Scott 1985, 1990). Johansson and Vinthagen (2016) have taken Scott’s work further and theorized it in relation to the repertoires of actions, the relationship between agents and the spatialisation and temporalisation of everyday resistance. They understand everyday resistance as a practice that is entangled with (everyday) power and has the potential to undermine power relations. It is intersectional and heterogeneous, dependent on changing contexts and situations.

To date, most studies that use the term ‘everyday resistance’ have been conducted in the Global South or among minority peoples, drawing direct inspiration from Scott’s own empirical work among poor peasants in Malaysia (Scott 1985). Scott discovered that the peasants resisted dominance in various

ways; for instance, they resisted the tax system by under-reporting their harvests and delivering goods of poor quality. To provide an overview of all studies of everyday resistance is beyond the scope of this chapter, but recent studies have used the concept in numerous settings and analyses. Johnsen & Benjaminsen (2017), for instance, were informed by Scott's work in their analysis of the resistance of the indigenous Sami reindeer herders in Norway when they attempted to undermine the "rationalisation" of their traditional way of managing the herds. Jenkins (2017) studied women engaged in anti-mining activism in Peru and Ecuador, and found that they did not only participate in organised movements, e.g. blockades and marches, but also "stayed put and carried on" with their traditional farming and handicraft work in spite of the obstacles they faced.

The concept of everyday resistance has also found its way into studies of marginalised groups in Europe and the US. One example of this includes Garnier and Hanley's (2007) study of how elderly women exploit and resist the label "frail" on both an individual and collective level. Another example is Frederick's (2017) study of mothers with disabilities. Frederick found that being a disabled woman and becoming a mother is itself a form of resistance towards the stereotypes that label disabled women unfit as mothers. Moreover, when they mother their children, they employ various resistance strategies to appear visible and respectable in a proactive attempt to counter stereotypes. A third example is Ward, Campbell & Keady's (2016) study of women living with dementia. The authors utilise Johansson & Vinthagen's analytical framework to explore the everyday resistance of women with dementia in terms of looks and physical appearance. They discovered that the women resist the spatial and temporal regimes of the care facilities where there is one standard for all and little time for personal routines and 'extraordinary' demands related to hair and makeup.

What these studies have in common is that they explore resistance from the standpoint of actors that are commonly assumed to be under-privileged. One can easily sympathise with their acts of resistance to oppressive power relations. However, as this book bears witness, many Nordic scholars of IE are preoccupied with the work of professionals. Within this context, the very term "resistance" may seem

inappropriate. In some research fields, such as feminist studies, work studies and organisational studies, everyday resistance has been explored through other, but highly related concepts, such as *organisational misbehaviour* and the *micro-politics of resistance* (see for instance Ackroyd and Thompson 1999; Karlsson 2012; Thomas and Davies 2005a; Parsons and Priola 2013; Contu 2008). Both in these fields and in resistance studies there has been debate about what should count as resistance. The most central aspect of this debate has been the question of intentionality.

In his understanding of resistance, Scott includes oppositional *intention*, whereas this is not a requirement in Johansson and Vinthagen's definition of everyday resistance mentioned above. An early critique of Scott's insistence on intentionality came from Bayat (2000), who has studied the everyday resistance of the urban poor in the Middle East. Bayat uses the term "the quiet encroachment of the ordinary" to describe how slum dwellers, street vendors and other marginalised people day by day carve out a place to exist in the cities. They do not organise collectively to demand water supply and electricity for the sheds they have built on public land, but rather illegally tap into the power grid and set up their stalls. They have no intention of changing the landscape of the city; they simply want a better life for themselves. Nevertheless, their practices are reshaping the cities and undermining state power. Such examples of *consequences*, rather than intention, have inspired recent definitions of resistance where intent is not essential. Sørensen, for instance, suggest that acts can count as resistance *either* if there is an oppositional intention (but the results might be limited) *or* if the consequences of practices undermine systems of power (Sørensen 2016).

Bayat warned against romanticising resistance, i.e. reading too much into some acts, so as to find resistance "everywhere" (Bayat 2000). In his opinion, some resistance researchers confuse the awareness of subordinates about, and articulation of, the oppressive situation they live in with resistance to it. Bayat argued that as long as the acts do not undermine the system of power and carve out more space from sources of power like the state, capital or patriarchy, this does not count as resistance. However, such a position raises the question as to whether only those who are successful

can be considered resisters? Johansson and Vinthagen's answer to this dilemma has been to include the term *potential* in their definition, arguing that resistance may incorporate acts that have the potential to undermine existing systems of power (Johansson and Vinthagen 2016).

Taken together and adapted to the Nordic welfare states, everyday resistance can be understood as oppositional practices that carry a transformative potential. In other words, acts and talk that are explicitly critical of the current state of affairs and that involve a desire to change or challenge dominant understandings may count as everyday resistance despite not deliberately being referred to as such.

Similarities between IE and everyday resistance studies

The approach to resistance studies described above converges with IE in many important aspects. First of all, both are interested in what people actually do, that is, their everyday activities and practices. The researcher enquires into people's actual everyday/night *doings*. In IE, the concept of *work* (understood as all activities that require time, effort and intention), and *work knowledge*, is the starting point for inquiry into the social organisation of everyday life (Smith 2005). IE studies should result in thick descriptions of actions and the subjective meaning associated with the activities rather than surface descriptions of intentions. As such, 'everyday resistance' may be part of the everyday *doings* of people.

Another strong link between IE and everyday resistance is the interest in examining power, and an understanding of power as relational. When it comes to everyday resistance studies, many authors have been inspired by Foucault (Baaz et al. 2016). Within IE, the notion of power is based upon an interpretation of Marx's epistemology (Smith 2004). The concept of *ruling relations* draws attention to how people's activities are coordinated with those of other people, located elsewhere elsewhen,

and how this coordination is mediated and shaped by texts. Accordingly, IE emphasises that a study always starts from a specific standpoint. In line with the majority of research on everyday resistance, IE-studies often take the standpoint of those who are perceived to be at the bottom of the hierarchies in the ruling relations. The aim is one of emancipation and transformation of the social processes that work against their best interests, i.e. to produce knowledge *for* and *with* people, not *about* them. Likewise, many resistance researchers explicitly take a normative approach, advocating that resistance research should be useful for those who practice resistance against domination (Vinthagen 2018). Although it follows from a relational understanding of power that power is complex and cannot be reduced to something some people possess while others do not, power is not evenly distributed throughout society. Scholars of both everyday resistance and IE acknowledge that people are often alienated from their own position and participation in relations of power/ruling in ways that sometimes conceal domination and how power is distributed and exercised in their daily lives.

Although the concept of ruling relations is useful for understanding the operations of power, there is a risk that it encourages a focus on how people reproduce ruling, while downplaying resistance to ruling. We say this knowing that this was never the intention with the concept nor with IE more generally - indeed quite the opposite. The concept is relational, not functionalist or structuralist, and as such agency and ultimately the possibility of resistance, is central to IE discovery. Despite this, it seems to us that many empirical studies drawing on IE are good at meticulously unpacking how everyone - be they in the upper or lower echelons of institutional hierarchies - is caught up in webs of ruling, but they speak in less detail about how people challenge and resist the ruling relations in which they are entangled.

It may seem obvious when starting exploration from people's actual work and work knowledge that one might also discover acts of resistance and ways of challenging ruling relations. However, ensuring that involves careful and active listening, primarily because people may not be aware that their acts constitute a form of resistance, and nor do they explicitly refer to their acts in such terms.

Thus, we can learn from everyday resistance studies to become aware of acts that counter ruling institutional intentions. In IE, the notion of *oppositional or critical talk* is suitable to sensitise us to words and acts that imply some kind of resistance. According to Liza McCoy (2006:120), oppositional or critical talk highlights the differences between the institutional discourse and the forms of knowing and being that the speaker feels to be preferable, or brings with her from elsewhere. It does not imply an ignorance of the dominant discourse but marks a stance of opposition or criticism against it and, as such, it is a good entry point to better understanding the operation of the ruling relations. Explicating acts of buying into, strategically enacting, and/or challenging the ruling relations are all equally important in understanding how ruling works (or fails to work) and the social organisation of everyday life. However, we argue that resistance can also be found in acts of non-compliance or in the silent manoeuvring of institutional regulations. In the next section we will look more closely at how resistance can be traced within two studies set in a Nordic welfare state; Rebecca Lund's study of junior female academics in Finnish universities, and Ann Christin E. Nilsen's study of early intervention in Norwegian kindergartens.

Tracing resistance in welfare state institutions

In her IE of a Finnish university undergoing neoliberal restructuring and reform from the standpoint of junior female academics, Rebecca Lund identified forms of resistance that did not only work in the interests of those who did not speak the institutional language. A central pillar in the university restructuring was the introduction of a US-style Tenure Track System, which involved clearly defined standards and notions of 'the good academic.' Emphasis was placed on international journal publications in English and the priority of research above teaching, and increasingly, an individualist competitive working culture was encouraged (Lund 2015; Lund & Tienari 2018; Lund 2019). It was

argued by the university management that these standardised notions of quality would promote equality because all people – regardless of gender, class, race or sexuality – would be evaluated on exactly the same criteria. The standardised notions of excellence shaped the choices and priorities of early career academics at the university, who were striving for permanent positions, but it quickly turned out that there was gendered and class-oriented backlash to the so-called “neutral” criteria. While, for the most part, junior female academics, due to gendered divisions of labour within and beyond the university, were systematically disadvantaged in terms of achieving a position, the response to this was surprising. Some women openly resisted standardised notions of ‘excellence’ by speaking derogatively about the institutional intentions of becoming ‘world class’ and about those individuals who had been ‘seduced’ by the institutional language and performed the so called ‘ideal academic’. But people were positioned very differently in terms of engaging in everyday derogatory talk. On the one hand, it seemed that those who were most openly and ardently critical of the standard were also those who were perfectly capable of speaking the institutional language and living up to the excellence criteria. On the other hand, those who were positioned most vulnerably in relation to the new criteria, tended to internalise, individualise and depoliticise the problem; focusing on their own ‘lacks’ rather than critiquing the standards of excellence and university strategy. Thus, it would seem that derogatory talk, as a form of everyday resistance, was a privilege only some could afford. Resistance was revealed as an element in (re)producing hierarchies within academia, because it was used in the enactment of a subtle distinction between ‘true researchers’, driven by passionate commitment to knowledge building, and ‘instrumental researchers’, driven by career building and status more than substantial contributions to knowledge. This example brings together the process of “discovery” which IE affords, with an important discussion within resistance studies – that resistance cannot be understood as dichotomous; as either/or. Those who appear powerful within one relationship, might be the resisters in another. And what is today a form of resistance to a system of

power, might tomorrow be the new dominant system, facing a new type of resistance (Baaz et al. 2016).

Although the ideals and standards were pivotal for aspiring young academics, Lund found that they were actively challenged, particularly by academics in relatively secure positions. For instance, by insisting on writing in Finnish, and dedicating themselves to teaching and offering PhD courses in which participants would learn about and challenge university politics, senior academics enacted other ways of being academic than those promoted by the tenure track system. For instance, at the university a PhD course was explicitly designed to oppose the current university regime. Formally, the course was called “Professional Academics at Work” and thus, from an outsider perspective, would seem like a course in ‘best practices or how to get tenured’, but informally the content was very different. Thus, the course leader used the tools of the master in the attempt to dismantle the master’s house. These acts were important acts of resistance because they showed younger scholars that the standards of excellence were not inevitable, and that young scholars would learn a language by which they could *speak resistance* and *speak their experience* and actively think through how they would weave their commitments together with whatever they would be held accountable for. Whereas this is an example of resistance that, albeit concealed in formal papers, was outspoken and deliberately aimed at transforming the university sector, Ann Christin E. Nilsen’s study provides an example of resistance performed in more covert and tacit ways.

Nilsen interviewed kindergarten staff about their *concern work* (see chapter 7). An important part of this work is to identify children ‘at risk’ or with ‘special needs’, and in doing so, the kindergarten employees are expected to use different tools to assess the development or behaviour of the children. The intentions are explicitly to do good: The children, once assessed and identified as children of a specific at-risk category, will be subject to some kind of intervention intended to ameliorate their situation. The idea to “screen and intervene” (White and Wastell, 2017) is part of an international social investment paradigm which increasingly permeates the education sector. However, critical

voices warn against the unintended consequences of labelling children. The quote below is taken from an interview with the kindergarten teacher “Heidi”, who has worked in kindergartens for more than 30 years. Building on her experience and discretionary knowledge, she finds the requirements to use assessment tools troubling: *“There are no tests that are good enough. You see that quite easily when you work with children, that it doesn’t work that way. You cannot just sit there and tick off this and that.”* Later in the interview, Heidi gives an account of a three-year-old boy in the kindergarten:

Now, we have this little naughty one. He just cannot take control of that hand of his - it is as if he just *has to* hit [chuckles], or pinch or push or grab. Last year he used to bite, but fortunately he stopped that. He is still so small, and I am thinking that we cannot put him in that “behavioural disorder” box yet. Because he has so many good sides. But very often there is this one child who becomes the one who gets the blame, and the other children pick that up immediately. [So even if it was not him] he still gets the blame. And that is the worst thing that can happen, I think, that it will last. So, I tell the other adults that we have to be cautious so that we don’t turn him into the scapegoat. Because then he will get all the blame, and that’s not fair. No, he cannot be made into that problem-child that other parents don’t want their children to play with.

Heidi knows well that if the kindergarten teachers document the boy’s behaviour in line with some predefined assessment criteria (as they are supposed to do according to the regulations), he will most likely be ascribed a specific category (e.g. a child with ‘behavioural disorders’) or even a diagnosis. In her opinion, however, this is likely to have more harmful effects for the boy than what she assumes will be a gradual behavioural adaptation. She therefore attempts to persuade her colleagues not to “screen” him, out of both a distrust in the assessment technology and a concern for the effects of intervention. Her acts are clearly in opposition to the ideology of early childhood intervention. In the interview she is open about her stance, yet in her everyday work, her acts of resistance are quite covert. She does not openly object to using the assessment tools, but she finds way to bypass them whenever she finds that necessary.

The professor in Lund's study who explicitly challenges the system by giving a critical PhD-course, is an example of resistance that is intentionally aimed at undermining the standardised excellence criteria and the university strategy from within. However, acknowledging that the university would not approve of such a course, (s)he deliberately twists her way around the regulations in ways that conceal the resistance. Heidi, on the other hand, disobeys the rules in order to make a difference for one particular boy. Although her behaviour may influence or inspire the actions of her colleagues, her actions are not explicitly aimed at transforming the system of child assessment. Hence, it seems unlikely that her covert resistance and pragmatic adaptation of the rules will contribute to changing the system as long as she acts alone. In order for such actions to be transformative, there has to be some kind of collective action. One may argue, nevertheless, that such acts carry a potential for transformation (Johansson and Vinthagen 2016), and as such count as resistance.

IE and resistance – some challenges and potentials

The examples above point towards some challenges in explicating resistance that are worthwhile discussing. Our first concern is with the term resistance itself, whereas the second concerns ethics. A potential problem with the term *resistance* in an IE study is that what the researcher calls resistance, people themselves might refer to with different words. In neither of the two illustrative examples above was the term "resistance" uttered explicitly by research participants. Some people might not be comfortable being labelled a "resister", for instance if the informants themselves have not articulated their acts as explicitly oppositional, or due to fear of repercussions. This might be something to be especially alert to in a Nordic context where power is frequently associated with good intentions in welfare institutions. The dominant discourse of abiding to rules as something that serves the greater good in the Nordic countries places resistance as marginal activities by individuals

on the fringe of society, or more commonly, something which is practiced by people elsewhere. In order to discover resistance, we need to pay attention to oppositional talk and to acts that challenge the dominant discourse. However, referring to these acts as resistance involves theorising and requires the researcher to elaborate on the discrepancy between the informants' and researcher's understanding. Such an approach is clearly in line with Smiths' original formulations and should not be problematic in the IE tradition, where mapping the ruling relations beyond what may be immediately visible to the individuals involved is essential. Such a map might also be a tool to guide the emancipation process by pointing towards individual activities that already exist and which might be turned into more organised resistance. Then, IE will be able to contribute to knowledge production which is truly useful for people when they navigate the terrain of the ruling relations.

Another potential problem worth highlighting is that of ethics. People who engage in everyday resistance do it, either explicitly or not, in ways that challenge or undermine the ruling relations. Much of this is hidden and takes place under the radar. But what happens if the researcher exposes everyday resistance and articulates it? An obvious risk is that those who have an interest in minimising and controlling this resistance will know more about it, making it easier for them to do their job. Or maybe, if they already knew about it, they feel forced to act on it when it is made public by the researcher. Do we risk that those responsible for kindergartens become even more insistent that Heidi and her colleagues should assess all children, even when there is just a slight suspicion that one of them does not fit the standard? Will this make it even harder for Heidi to escape the demand to "screen and intervene"? And what about the Finish academics who organise a course with different content than the title suggests - is there a risk of sanctions once this "misbehaviour" is made public? We believe that these are indeed real risks, but they will always have to be weighed against the potential benefits the openness will provide for those who seek change. One may even ask whether it would be unethical *not* to reveal these dilemmas. Potentially, more focus on resistance makes it easier for Heidi's colleagues to join hands with her in opposing the assessment regime in kindergartens. And

perhaps an articulation of the oppositional content of the academic course could give the management of the university a chance to reconsider their reliance on the tenure track system.

Inspired by studies of everyday resistance, we argue that there is potential to discover resistance also in contexts where it seems out of place, such as in the Nordic welfare states. The concept of resistance sensitises us to question how ruling relations are maintained and challenged, whether overtly or tacitly. Resistance does not necessarily lead to transformation, yet discovering acts as resistance brings awareness to the emancipatory and transformational potential of IE.

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