

## White-Knuckle Research: Emotional Dynamics in Fieldwork with Racist Activists

Kathleen M. Blee

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*Current understandings of emotions as relational expressions rather than individual states have made it possible to reconsider the role of emotion in the research process. This article proposes two ways that qualitative research on social movements can benefit from greater attention to the emotional dynamics of fieldwork. First, by examining the strategic use of various emotions by informants as well as by researchers, scholars are in a better position to explore how informants and researchers jointly shape knowledge and interpretation in qualitative research. Second, exploration of emotional dynamics in interviewing relationships can be used as data to deepen understanding of both the interpretative process and of the emotional content of social movements. I examine these issues in the context of a life history project with activists in contemporary U.S. racist movements.*

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Emotions have come out of the sociological closet. No longer regarded solely as individual properties whose manifestation is but "an outer register of an inner process," emotions increasingly are understood as "constituted by those relations that make up social life" rather than as intra-psychic phenomenon. As communicative, interpersonal expressions, emotions thus are studied as rhetoric, as commerce, and as a means of conveying personal narratives (Burkitt 1997: 40, 41; also Fine 1995; Hochschild 1983; Parkinson 1996).

Direct correspondence to Prof. Kathleen Blee, Department of Sociology, 2G03 Forbes Quad, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15260; e-mail: kblee+@pitt.edu.

Despite increasing attention to the sociology of emotional life, there has been some reluctance to probe the emotional landscapes of social movements. At least in part this is due to efforts to understand social movements as products of rational social action rather than as outcomes of irrational collective behavior (Groves 1995; Taylor 1995). Challenges to the traditional equation of reason with rationality and emotion with irrationality by feminist scholars and others, however, have made it possible to conceptualize emotion as an important aspect of the dynamics of rational actors engaged in social movements (Ferree 1992; Lutz 1990; Taylor 1995). In turn, this has opened the way for research on such topics as the role of emotion in constructing collective identities and understandings of grievances and opportunities, in motivating activism, and in creating a sense of community within social movements; the mobilization of emotions in the process of becoming a movement participant; and the emotional culture, rituals, work, and rules of social movements, what Morgen (1995) calls the "politics of feeling" (Aho 1994; Gamson 1995; Groves 1995; Lutz 1990; Melucci 1995; Taylor 1996, 1995; Taylor and Whittier 1995).

New understandings of emotion also make it possible to reconsider methodological issues in qualitative studies of social movements, in particular the affectional dynamics between researchers and social movement participants. In this article, I draw upon my research with contemporary self-defined racist activists in the United States to suggest that attention to the emotional dimensions of fieldwork can be useful in two ways. First, the emotional dynamics between respondent and researcher can be analyzed to understand how the interviewing relationship influences interpretation and analysis. A particularly salient emotion in my research on racist social movements, that of fear, was not simply an unavoidable by-product of contact with violent groups, but was also wielded for strategic advantage by informants in an effort to limit the scope of data collection and to shape interpretation. Second, emotions evoked in the researcher in the process of collecting qualitative data can themselves be sources of useful data. Efforts by respondents to evoke fear in me in order to claim a measure of control over the interview process also provided important clues to the nature and dynamics of fear within the racist movement in which they were involved.

Although qualitative researchers have long been sensitive to how informants can construct the presentation of their emotions as a technique of impression management, less attention has been paid to emotional involvement by the researcher in qualitative studies. Nonetheless, researchers who manage the expression or experience of their emotions to match the expectations of those they are studying or to conform to an understanding of acceptable research practice are operating within the same dynamic of

“feeling rules” that condition social interaction in the larger society. This happens, for example, when researchers transform feelings of horror, disgust, or titillation about their respondents into more acceptable emotions of curiosity or puzzlement (Kleinman and Copp 1993). Moreover, the emotional interactions that occur in fieldwork often are less routinized than those that occur in other social exchanges. Thus it is more difficult in fieldwork than in more routinized sites of daily life interaction to apply established “feeling rules” to guide the emotional dynamics between researcher and respondent. Emotional dynamics in fieldwork often require continual negotiation and renegotiation.

Despite the intensity of such emotional negotiation in field research, including “deep feelings of insecurity, anxiety, loneliness, frustration, and confusion” (Emerson 1983:187), only a narrow range of emotional experiences involving the researcher typically is discussed either during fieldwork or in subsequent analysis. Gary Fine’s comment that “hated individuals are found within our ethnographic world [but] ... we crop them from the picture” (1993:273) sums up one common outcome of emotional management in fieldwork that stems from the anticipated reactions of audiences. Other scholars have pointed to other forms of “feeling work” or emotional negotiation that are undertaken but seldom articulated in fieldwork, as for example, the emotional attenuation provoked by expectations that researchers who succeed in establishing empathetic connections to respondents will have positive feelings toward them (Kleinman and Copp 1993). Such self-censorship is likely in situations in which researchers seek to protect themselves or their informants from reprisal or to conform to readers’ expectations of themselves or their informants (Adler and Adler 1993; Brewer 1993; Esseveld and Eyerman 1992; Kleinman and Copp 1993; Mitchell 1993).

The ethnographic “confessional tale” may appear to be an exception to strictures against personal emotional revelation by researchers (Van Maanen 1988) but, as Sherryl Kleinman and Martha Copp note, such stories tend to pose the researcher as a “hero who went on a dangerous journey and lived to tell us about it.” In such confessional tales, they point out, “[s]uccess implies that the author transcended any troubling feelings, at least by the time the account was written” (1993:17; also Ellis 1995:83). An analysis of the emotional negotiations between researcher and respondents and between researcher and potential audiences thus can illuminate an aspect of reflexivity in qualitative research that is often erased from written accounts, giving new insight into how the social interaction between scholars and those they study shapes knowledge and interpretation (Esseveld and Eyerman 1992; Melucci 1992:245).

## BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

My study examines the role of women within active self-defined racist and anti-Semitic groups operating within the U.S. today. Although organized racism is commonly assumed to be an exclusively male province, women have been a growing component of the movement since the early 1980s, comprising an estimated 25-50% of members in some groups. Racist leaders target women and teenaged girls for recruitment for several reasons. Some assume that women members will recruit their husbands and children into racism. Others reason that women will be less likely to attract the attention of law enforcement to the group since they are less likely than men to have criminal records. And still others hope that increasing numbers of women will counteract the sluggish gains in membership experienced by some racist groups.

This article draws from unstructured life history interviews and structured questionnaires that I conducted between September 1994 and October 1995 with 34 women who were active members of a racist group, together with an analysis of propaganda published by more than 100 then-active racist and anti-Semitic groups. The propaganda represented all publications (including newspapers, magazines, flyers, music, Web sites, television and radio programs, videos, telephone and fax messages, and other communications) generated or distributed by every self-proclaimed racist, anti-Semitic, white supremacist, Christian identity, neo-Nazi, white power skinhead, and white separatist organization in the United States for a one-year period. I compiled names and addresses of groups from lists maintained by several anti-racist and anti-Semitic organizations, from archival collections on right-wing extremism at Tulane University and the University of Kansas, and from references in other racist group literature.

I used the resulting set of publications for content analysis of racist literature and to determine which groups had significant numbers of women members or women in visible or leadership roles. From these groups, I then selected approximately 30 that varied on region of the country and type of racist/anti-Semitic activity and contacted these organizations (or, if known, women in these groups) to be interviewed. The selected groups represent the most active segments of the racist/anti-Semitic movement today: (1) white power "skinheads"—loosely-organized and transient gangs of teenagers bound together by a culture of white power music, violence, and hatred of peoples of color, Jews, immigrants, and those they perceive to be gay or lesbian (Hamm 1993); (2) "Christian Identity" communities—a network of quasi-theological sects that view Jews and African Americans as the offspring of Satan and white Christians as the true lost tribe of Israel and whose members have been implicated in several terrorist actions

(Barkun 1994); (3) neo-Nazis and white supremacists—a variety of small, usually violent groups that trace their ideological lineage to Hitler and typically favor either complete separation between white Aryans and others, or extermination of non-Aryans; and (4) Ku Klux Klans—a number of competing groups that trace their ideological heritage to the Reconstruction-era Ku Klux Klan, many of whom now find common purpose with neo-Nazis and white power skinheads. The demarcations among many segments of the racist/anti-Semitic movement are difficult to determine, however, because there is considerable overlap among some groups (e.g. Klan leaders who are also Christian Identity preachers) and intense conflict within some segments (particularly among different Klan groups). Moreover, individual activists tend to switch group affiliation over time. It is not uncommon, for example, for a neo-Nazi to have belonged earlier to a Klan group and currently be involved in a Christian Identity church.

After choosing a set of groups, I contacted individual female members to be interviewed, using personal contacts, referrals from other racist activists, journalists, researchers, police, and other sources. I was not able to use snowball sampling, commonly used in studies of difficult-to-locate populations, because the tremendous animosity among racist groups meant that members could not be relied upon to suggest respondents from other groups.

The women interviewed for this study represent a range of organizational positions, ages, regions of residence, and types of groups. Fourteen were considered leaders in their groups; twenty were simply members. The average age of respondents was twenty-four although the oldest was ninety and the youngest, sixteen. They lived in fifteen different states, with the greatest concentrations in Georgia (6), Oklahoma (5), Oregon (4) and Florida (4). Eleven were from the South, ten from the West Coast, ten from the Midwest, and three from the East Coast. Fourteen were neo-Nazis (non-skinhead), six were members of various Ku Klux Klan groups, eight were white power skinheads, and six were members of Christian Identity or related white/Aryan supremacist groups.

In soliciting respondents and at the beginning of each interview, I made it clear that I did not share the racial convictions of these groups. I explicitly said that my ideological views were quite opposed to theirs, that they should not have any hope of converting me to their views, but that I would try to present an accurate depiction of women racist activists. This stance—as distant but *not* neutral researcher—was intended to clarify the nature of my interest in racist activists and their movement. It also positioned me as an observer who had not decided in advance to depict them as crazy or as personally pathological (a common media portrayal) and thus increase their vulnerability to incarceration by law enforcement or mental

health agencies (cf. Fielding 1982; Goode 1996; Lee 1995; Pollner and Emerson 1983). In the interviews, I was prepared to elaborate on the nature of my disagreements with organized racism, but in nearly every case respondents cut me short in this effort, eager to move into a presentation of their own ideas and personal history. The contrasting stances of respondents in an earlier study of the 1920s Klan as compared with those in modern racist groups suggests a way to understand these respondents' lack of concern with my opinions.

In my earlier research on the 1920s Ku Klux Klan, a racist, anti-Semitic, and anti-Catholic movement whose large membership made it nearly normative in many communities dominated by white native-born Protestants, I also found that respondents had little interest in my political disagreements with the Klan. In the case of the 1920s Klan, this reaction was due to a belief among these elderly former Klansmembers that a white person like me must secretly share the racial agenda of the Klan despite my public pronouncements to the contrary. This attitude is not surprising, given the acceptance of the Klan among many white Protestants in the 1920s and the subsequent racial and religious homogeneity of the communities in which these former Klansmembers lived (Blee 1991).

The disinterest in my ideological stance among contemporary racist activists, however, was rooted in a different political dynamic. These modern-day racists, in contrast to the 1920s Klan, participate in a movement that is extremely marginal in the American political landscape. Unlike their predecessors, these respondents were quite willing to believe that an ideological gulf divided them from me, since it divided their ideology from nearly all political ideas deemed acceptable in modern public life. They did not believe that I privately shared their beliefs; rather, they were accustomed to having people disagree with them and they rarely tried to sway those who expressed open opposition to their opinions. They were interested in me, not as a potential convert, but rather as a recorder of their lives and thoughts. Their desire, at once personal and politically evangelical, was for someone outside the small racist groups to which they belong to hear and record their words. Such eagerness on the part of respondents underscores the ethical dilemma of scholarship that might inadvertently provide a platform for racist propaganda (Blee 1993; Fielding 1982; Hurtado and Stewart n.d.; Robben 1995). To avoid giving further publicity to racist groups as well as to ensure anonymity, I use pseudonyms for both respondents' names and the names of their groups and have changed some identifying details.

To analyze the motivations, ideological understandings, and political identities of racist activists, I used unstructured life history interviews. Life histories differ from more standard interview formats in allowing respon-

dents great latitude to construct the history of their lives. As respondents narrate stories of their lives, they reveal what events and processes they view as central and pivotal to their lives and to what they attribute changes in their lives over time. I used this format for two reasons. First, I wanted to avoid the pronounced tendency of racist activists to substitute organizational doctrine for personal belief in standard interview settings, such as in media interviews in which members of organized racist groups simply utter propagandistic slogans in response to any question. Second, I wanted to elicit narrative accounts of the causal ordering of events in the respondent's personal and political history for a larger study of the connection between identity transformation and racist activism among women (Blee 1996). My decision to focus on life history events and causal reasoning in narrative accounts, rather than on the beliefs of participants, also reflected an effort to minimize the potential for this study to be used to broadcast racist ideologies to new audiences.

The interviews began with a single question, usually "can you tell me how you got to where you are now?" I interjected questions only to clarify meanings or to encourage respondents to continue their narrative accounts. At the conclusion of these narratives, I asked a series of open-ended structured questions to establish clear chronologies of events and to collect demographic data and information on such factors as personal networks, organizational policies and activities, and political and racial attitudes. Interviews varied in length from 2 to 6 hours, with the initial narrative account usually taking 1-2 hours. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed in full.

The setting of the interview was left to the discretion of the respondent; most were held in the respondent's home or in a public setting such as a restaurant, hotel lobby, or public library. One respondent was interviewed in prison, in a death row interview room. Three were interviewed by telephone from the home of a prominent racist leader who arranged and scheduled the interviews. A few interviews were conducted in whole or in part through written questionnaires with follow-up telephone interviews.

### DYNAMICS OF FEAR IN THE INTERVIEW

Reflecting upon his studies of the fascist National Front in England, Nigel Fielding (1993:148) noted the lack of methodological guidelines for scholars who study what he termed, with understatement, "unloved' groups." The profusion of methodologies based on rapport and empathy, according to Fielding, tends to draw upon research on groups that scholars

find “conductive, whimsical, or at least unthreatening” rather than on groups that are actively hostile or frightening (also Lee 1995). By emphasizing the importance of authenticity, empathy, and trust in research practice, feminist qualitative researchers, too, often assume a measure of ideological compatibility between scholar and those being studied. Indeed, much recent feminist scholarship on qualitative methodology has focused on the potential of rapport to be exploitative when researchers exaggerate the potential for reciprocity and authorial control by respondents (Berik 1996; Borland 1991; Edwards 1993; Lal 1996; Patai 1991; Stacey 1991; also Obligation 1994).

Methodological principles based on trust and rapport are most useful as safeguards for the integrity and accuracy of narratives of respondents with whom scholars share some level of common experience or a similar world view (Emerson 1983; Johnson 1983). They are more problematic when empathetic connections are ruptured by fundamental differences in ideology and belief, as is the case with my interviews with racist activists. It is one thing to seek to understand the world through the eyes of an informant with whom you have some (even a little) sympathy, but a very different matter to think about developing rapport with someone—like racist activists—whose life is given meaning and purpose by the desire to annihilate you or others like you. Moreover, empathetic connection, even if possible, violates expectations by scholarly and public audiences about required boundaries between researchers and members of intensely “unloved” groups. Researchers of social movements like organized racism rightfully are concerned that they not be sullied by the political stigma attached to those they study (see also Ellis 1995; Kleinman and Copp 1993; Swedenburg 1995) even as they seek to establish an understanding of the life experiences and beliefs of their respondents.

To conduct productive interviews with racist activists, it is thus necessary to modify some methodological principles about the relational and emotional dynamics between researcher and respondent. For example, instead of thinking about my life history interviews as largely embedded in dynamics of empathy or rapport, these interviews might be better understood as structured also by relations and strategies based on fear.

For me, fear was ever-present throughout the process of identifying informants and respondents and conducting interviews. In part, of course, this reflected my own understandings of the violent conduct of these respondents, such as the eastern skinhead organizer whose comrades referred to her as “Ms. Icepick” or other respondents well known for violent crimes. Among racist activists, my white skin color provided little protection. Many of those in the racist movement who have faced criminal charges have been betrayed by other whites, often other members of their groups. Moreover,



at least some members and leaders in the racist movement personally maintain that race is determined by actions rather than by genetics, in direct contradiction to the biological essentialism of most racial propaganda (Blee forthcoming; Blee 1998). Thus, "true whites" are revealed only by their commitment to white power politics, or at least by their failure to betray the "white cause." It was not possible therefore to assume that these respondents would continue to view me as white and as a non-enemy throughout the course of our relationship. I could not count on racial immunity from violence.

Interviewing members of racist groups, many of which are semi-underground and operate on the political margin, also provokes a voyeuristic fear. Barrie Thorne's (1983:225) insight into fieldwork as adventurism is apt:

venturing into exciting, taboo, dangerous, perhaps enticing social circumstances; getting the flavor of participation, living out moments of high drama; but in some ultimate way having a cop-out, a built-in escape, a point of outside leverage that full participants lack.

Researching social movements on the political, ideological, and social margins of society elicits the complicated emotions of voyeurism, in which feelings of intrigue are mixed with those of fear. From the safe distance of academe, such observers gain a sense of participants' experiences of excitement and adventurism, along with sensations of horror and incredulity.

The netherworld of racist social movements provides an extreme setting in which research and voyeurism overlap. The very organization of racism as a social movement is constituted on a premise of violence as a political and racial strategy, an organizing framework for collective action that is dramatic and distinctly out of the bounds of normative politics. Nearly all groups in the contemporary racist movement, for example, insist that a cataclysmic "race war" is imminent in which white Aryans will need to fight for their very survival against all other races. Many openly advocate violence and even terrorism. Perhaps even more shocking to researchers and other outsider observers, violence in some groups often lacks direction or purpose. Violence is casual, even mundane, as in the case of white supremacist skinheads who beat themselves to the edge of consciousness in frenzied music stomps or who hang near-wild cats from the arms of their friends until blood wells up on the floor beneath. To qualitative researchers, such violence can be bewildering because, as Antonius Robben and Carolyn Nordstrom note, there is "no higher ground from which to observe the world of violence with relative detachment" (1995:13). As recent scholarship on emotions makes clear, however, fear needs to be understood not simply an individual emotional reaction but also in relational terms.

Throughout the interviewing process it was fear, not empathetic connection, that leveled the hierarchical distinction between me as the scholarly authority and them as the subject. Informants constantly highlighted my vulnerability to them, asking whether I was afraid to come see them, whether I was afraid to be in their home. Others suggested that I would face harm if I did—or sometimes if I did not—interview a particular person in the movement. Even the respondent interviewed in handcuffs on a prison death row found a means by which to reduce the power differential between us through intimidation, noting that she could call upon gangs of allies both within and outside across the prison walls:

I'm not scared of anybody so I'm not gonna worry about it. I'll say what I got to say ... 'cause I got the Jamaican Posse and the Cuban Posse all behind me, they gonna kick ass.

Some respondents were more indirect in their use of intimidation. Many bragged of the violent history of members of their group, making it clear that those perceived as enemies of the movement would be treated harshly. An Aryan supremacist boasted that the movement attracted people who were “totally messed up and totally mindless” who were prone to “fight and kill, rip off armored cars, get guns.” Others were more specific about their ability to call upon comrades who would retaliate against enemies. A lesbian neo-Nazi gave an account of the aftermath of a conflict she had with two African American women:

And so I called my ex-girlfriend about it, I'm like, “Well D—, I have a job for you to do.” She's like, “What's wrong?” I said “I want you to fuck somebody up for me.” She said, “No problem, Mommy. I'd do anything for you. I love you Mommy.”

Even now, years after completing the interviews, I receive letters from respondents warning that they “are watching” me, that I had better tell “the truth” about them and their movement.

In many cases, it was the issue of selecting the interview setting in which fear became a visible component in the research relationship. Generally, I asked respondents to choose a place in which they would feel comfortable talking to me, indicating that I wanted the interview to proceed without interruption by family members or racist group comrades. Many respondents used this to begin a process of negotiation of risk (see also Lee 1995). Several suggested their homes as interview settings, saying that they would be most at ease there but also warning that their houses contained significant amounts of weapons and that other comrades (presumably less trustworthy than the respondents) might appear at the house during the interview. Others picked a public place, but indicated that they would station armed comrades nearby in case the interview did not “pro-

ceed as planned.” On only two occasions did I refuse a respondent’s suggestion for an interview site, both for safety reasons. One wanted me to be blindfolded and transported to an unknown destination in the back of a truck. Another proposed a meeting in a very remote racist compound to which I would have to be driven by a racist group member. In these cases, the issue of my personal safety did become explicit, but even here the issue was complex. When we agreed on a more visible site for the first-mentioned interview, for example, the respondent assured me that I should not be concerned for my safety in this spot because “men with guns” would be hidden along the street “in case of a police raid.” Negotiations over the terms and setting of the interviews thus provided an opportunity for respondents to probe my reaction to allusions to possible illegal activities (guns, hidden compounds) as well as to claim a measure of control over the interview itself.

But the dynamics of fear are relational. My informants also were conscious that they had things to fear from me—disclosure to the police, enemies, or family members who are not aware of their racist activism. To the extent that providing a narrative account of one’s journey into organized racism might be a means of self-empowerment, it also potentially exposes these activists to retribution. One Washington racist skinhead worried that I might secretly funnel information to violent gangs of anti-racist skinheads about buildings occupied by racist skinheads: “[after you leave], well, uh, I wonder if some skins’ house is gonna get molotov-cocktailed and the [anti-racist skinheads] are doing this in retaliation.” An older neo-Nazi was concerned that the interview tape “could be used against me in a court of law.” Many expressed suspicions about how I had found them at all. Throughout the interview a racist militia woman from Montana repeatedly asked, “just how did you become aware of the group that I’m in?” Since such fears could derail the interview, I sought to quell these concerns through assurances that the interviews would be confidential and would not contain real names and that I would not ask questions about illegal activities.

It is not uncommon for researchers to need to repeatedly win the trust of respondents over the course of fieldwork (Brewer 1993), but here many respondents used claims of fear in a strategic fashion. Racist activists deemed off-limits as too dangerous to discuss in the interview topics that placed them in little actual jeopardy but that might reflect badly on them personally. Once established as a realistic concern, fear was cited by respondents as a reason for declining to answer questions about their relationships with boyfriends and parents, their performance in school, and even their taste in music—even as I needed to intervene to forestall them from revealing more potentially incriminating information about illegal ac-

tivities or plans. A young Nazi activist in California, for example, parried nearly all my efforts to inquire about her family life on the grounds that she was being constantly watched by the police who could use such information against her, but kept returning to an unsolicited story about her friends who “buried their guns in oil drums up in the hills for when the race war comes.”

Racists also used fear *as rapport* to keep the interview moving. Although we most commonly think of the researcher as creating rapport in an interviewing situation, it was the case here that many respondents were highly motivated to have their stories heard by me. Thus, efforts to evoke fear on my part—pointing to my vulnerability in the well-guarded living room of a racist leader, for example—typically were followed by statements that pointed to the respondents’ own vulnerability to me—noting that I probably had “really good connections to the police.” At times, the contradictory nature of this fear-talk became nearly comical, as when a middle-aged respondent repeatedly made note of the guns and sketches of lynchings that lay around her living room but then sought to assure me that although “the average person has an idea that the Klan is very military [violent] and they’re afraid,” this could not apply to her, because “I wasn’t aware of [that reputation] until just recently.”

Such responses served to level the playing field of risk, underscoring the stalemate in which we were (seemingly, at least) equally exposed. The terms of the interviewing process thus were negotiated through the medium of fear, which both increased the power of the respondents to shape the direction of the research process and served to maintain an interviewing space.

Emotional transactions in fear also have an underbelly. In fieldwork with “unloved groups” seduction may be the antithesis of fear. If the dynamics of fear pose researcher and respondent as wary opponents, seeking personal advantage but careful to keep the interview intact, the dynamics of seduction, as Antonius Robben (1995:85) notes, “trades our critical stance as observers for an illusion of congeniality with cultural insiders.” Seductive lures in fieldwork have been reported by several scholars of loathsome political groups who cite the painful emotional dissonance of discovering that participants in some of history’s most horrific social movements can be charming and engaging in interview situations (Blee 1991; Koonz 1987; Robben 1995).

My interview with Linda, who heads a small, violent group of male and female white power skinheads in Utah, illustrates one consequence of the emotional seduction of researchers. Prior to our formal interview, my relationship with Linda was extremely tense. Over the course of several months, Linda insisted on changing the place and conditions of the inter-

view several times, citing the need for additional security for herself and more elaborate assurances of my independence from the police and asserting that she might bring both guns and her boyfriend to the interview, in defiance of our agreement. Each of these demands resulted in a prolonged negotiation and presented Linda with another opportunity to remind me that she would not hesitate to hurt anyone (like me) who betrayed her or her group. Indeed, there was ample reason to take Linda's threats seriously as both she and her boyfriend had served prison sentences for violent assault, drug sales, and other offenses. I came to the interview both frightened and prepared for hostile confrontation. In person, however, Linda was the opposite of my expectations. She was charming, soft-spoken, and concerned for my comfort during the interview. Although quite willing to express horrific attitudes, Linda prefaced many statements with apologies for what she thought I would find offensive. My fear eased away, replaced by a seductive, false rapport in which Linda set the parameters and I responded. Off-guard, I pressed Linda less intensely than I did other respondents to explain contradictions in the chronology and logic of her story. In retrospect, I am uneasy about the field notes that I taped immediately after the interview which reveal how it is possible to be disarmed by subversion of expected emotion even while being suspicious that this is occurring:

I found the [negotiation and preparation for the] interview with Linda to be the most emotionally stressful, maybe with the exception of [another] interview during which I was fearing for my life. Actually with Linda and [her boyfriend] there was no indication that they might try to harm me at all. In fact, quite the contrary. I actually was afraid of that before they came because they both have very violent reputations, but in person they were extremely cordial and very friendly, not trying to intimidate me in any way. Perhaps trying to cultivate me.

### DYNAMICS OF FEAR WITHIN RACIST MOVEMENTS

The examination of fear as an aspect of the dynamic of qualitative research provided another, unexpected benefit. Beyond probing my own emotional stance vis-à-vis my racist respondents, analyzing fear as a medium of interaction also allowed me to understand more clearly the ways in which fear operates within racist groups themselves. From the narrative accounts of racist activists, it is clear that fear is highly salient in the lives of all members of the modern racist movement. Since the organized racist movement in the contemporary United States is extremely small relative to the much larger number of members of racial, sexual, religious, and political groups whom they seek to destroy, organized racists use physical intimidation and the threat of violence to gain power over their opponents. Demonstrations, marches, violent propaganda, cross burnings, and terror-

istic actions are meant to demonstrate (usually, with little success) the strength of the racial movement and to induce fear among its enemies. Racist publications commonly comment upon the perceived reaction of opponents to their public actions, noting with glee any indications that they are feared by other groups or by the public.

Within racist groups, too, fear is a common currency. Both official and informal leaders find fear to be a useful motivating emotion among members. Members are warned repeatedly of the dire consequences that might befall them if they should defect from the group, particularly but not exclusively, if they also betray the group to the outside. These are not idle threats, as former members of racist groups do suffer violence by their former comrades. During the course of my interviews, for example, police on the east coast were investigating the chilling abduction, assault, and near-murder of a young girl by a mixed-sex gang of skinheads who feared her defection from the group.

Members of the racist movement also are reminded by their groups and leaders that they have much to fear from the "outside" (i.e., non-organized racist) world and the talk of racist activists is replete with statements about the terrors that they would face outside of the protective shelter of the organized racist movement. Those activists who have chosen to relocate to states of the Pacific Northwest, joining what many in the racist movement bill as the "Great Northwestern Territorial Imperative," find such fears both compelling and self-reinforcing as they settle in isolated areas hoping to establish an all-white Aryan paradise and then secede from the United States. Although the majority of racist activists have not moved to the isolated racist settlements of the Northwest, all undergo a similar emotional process since participating in organized racism increases rather than dissipates fear of the outside, the unknown.

Even for those for whom fear of others was not crucial in their initial decision to join a racist group, fear becomes increasingly salient over time. In this sense, what is learned in the process of participating in the racist movement is not simply a language for expressing ideas, but also the ideas themselves. As Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson (1980:795) argue, the motives of movement participants "arise out of the process of ongoing interaction with a movement organization and its recruitment agents." Thus, it is in racist groups that activists learn conspiratorial explanations that help make sense of the injustices they perceive in the society and in their own situations. Among my respondents, almost none could cite experiences in their own lives that could account for the intensity of their anti-Semitic feelings and actions. It was only after joining the racist movement—motivated by racism against African Americans or immigrants or simply lured by friends and the promise of sociability—that these activists learned to

adopt anti-Semitic ideologies. Similarly, ideas about what is to be feared are largely a group phenomenon rather than an individual sentiment. Members learn fear within the racist movement as they come to adopt its conspiratorial logics as their own.

The peculiar logic of racist ideology makes fear a particularly facile currency in organized racist groups. The belief that history is propelled by secret conspiracies—usually involving hidden and powerful Jewish conspirators, but sometime also including government agents, African Americans, or other minority groups—easily lends itself to fearful exchange. One's life is not under one's own control, but is manipulated from the outside by those seeking to harm white Aryans. "Discovering the truth," as racist activists label their experience of ideological conversion (Blee 1996), is only one step toward rectifying this historical stranglehold by unknown conspirators. In addition, they insist, white Aryans must organize themselves to combat the influence of the conspirators.

Finally, the virulent hatred that many in the racist movement express toward whites who do not participate in a white agenda also is fueled by paranoia and fear. As one respondent in Colorado told me, such "race traitors are everywhere." The person who appears white but is not "really white" is a common target of organized racist attack since they are particularly able to undermine the racist agenda through racial stealth, even if unwittingly. Members of organized racist groups fear not only the enemy without but the hidden enemy within the movement.

## CONCLUSION

Few scholars study social movements as politically marginal and loathsome as organized racism. For most researchers, therefore, the emotional dynamics of fieldwork may be less raw and perhaps less problematic than occurred in my relationships with racist activists. Yet the methodological lessons garnered from this research are applicable for much less troubling research relationships.

First, as this and other scholarship indicates, it is important to understand emotions as negotiated and relational in qualitative research rather than as an individual reaction or affectional state. Just as researchers may try to invoke emotional dynamics of rapport to facilitate data collection in interviewing situations, so too respondents may attempt to create emotional dynamics that serve their strategic interests.

Second, methodological injunctions to understand how the positionality of the researcher affects observation, interpretation, and even the nature of whom or what is observed can be extended to encourage scholars to

probe their own emotional entanglements in fieldwork relationships and to analyze these as additional sources of data. Maintaining an emotional log of one's feelings and the emotional negotiations of fieldwork relationships over time is one way to ensure that emotional issues will be available for subsequent analysis (cf. Kleinman and Copp 1993).

Third, this research suggests that it is important to understand emotional negotiations in fieldwork in a dynamic sense. My initial interviews for this project, conducted largely with members of the contemporary Ku Klux Klan, left me nearly paralyzed with fear. In my emotional notebook from that period are numerous entries of interactions infused with issues of safety and confidentiality. My fear of being harmed and the respondents' fears of being exposed set the parameters for the negotiations leading to the interviews and framed much discussion during both the structured interviews and the unstructured life history narratives.

In the last set of interviews, conducted largely with members of neo-Nazis and white-power skinhead groups—groups who have engaged in much more frequent physical violence than have many segments of the Klan—my fieldnotes record a distinct subsidence of the dynamics of fear. These respondents were more confident than were initial respondents that I was a reliable researcher since no immediate harm had befallen others interviewed by me earlier. On my part, I had become more numb to tales of assaults and boasts of preparation for “race war.” The relationships between me and these respondents increasingly took the form of business transactions in which we parried to establish favorable terms for ourselves in the interview. Fear was certainly not absent as a factor shaping fieldwork but it was less visible and maybe less influential than it had been at first. Moreover, these later interviews were less intellectually productive than were earlier interviews. The tension of fear that provoked insight on my part had begun to slip away. I was becoming numb to the horrors of organized racism, a situation that was not only personally dismaying but also signaled the need for me to end fieldwork and regain emotional separation from the research.

Finally, this research indicates that there are issues of interpretation and ethics that have just begun to be explored in qualitative work. Research stances of empathy and rapport may be appropriate methodological stances for qualitative research with some respondents, but pose risks of exploitation, scholarly complicity in horrific political agendas, or dramatic misinterpretation if used with other groups of respondents. Probing the emotional depths of fieldwork relationships provides a means by which to understand how scholars and informants jointly shape knowledge in qualitative scholarship as well as a way to explore the ethical dimensions of interpersonal relationships in qualitative research. Focusing on emotion in



fieldwork cautions us again about the responsibility that researchers shoulder when they undertake studies that have the potential to engage the hearts as well as the minds of their informants.

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