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# Access and Methods in Research on Hidden Communities: Reflections on Studying U.S. Organized Racism

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## Introduction

Sociologists have long been drawn to the hidden aspects of social life. They examine a variety of social groups that exist outside the visible mainstream of society, which are variously conceptualized as subcultures, deviants, marginalized populations, sects, and secret societies. Commonly, studies of hidden social groups use fieldwork methods. Interviewing, observation, and participant-observation methods have allowed scholars access to those who are reticent or hostile to being studied (Duneier 2000; Simi & Futrell 2006; Venkatesh 2008).

The use of fieldwork to study hidden communities raises complex issues about the relationship between scholars and those they study. To explore these, I draw on questions posed by feminist ethnographer Marjorie Devault who writes,

Fieldwork traditions have historically produced knowledge [...] that takes publics 'inside' other realities, helping 'us' to see 'others'. But the scare quotes point to persistent questions about our research processes and the reception and uses of our work: Where do we locate 'the field'? What kinds of knowledge do we seek there? On whose behalf? (2007, p.182)

Although relevant for all fieldwork studies, Devault's questions have particular salience for research on social life that is hidden from public view. In this article, I use her queries as a starting point to ask

three questions about research on hidden communities. First, where do we find what is hidden (in Devault's terms, 'the field')? Second, how can we generate valid knowledge in studies of hidden communities? Third, for whom do we generate knowledge or, put another way, what ethical considerations arise in studies of hidden social life? To explore these issues, I draw on two studies that I conducted on extremely hidden communities, women in U.S. racist groups in the 1920s and women in the U.S. racist movement today.

### **The Field: Where Do We Find What is Hidden?**

Devault asks fieldworkers to consider how they locate the field that they study. For scholars studying hidden communities, the question is more complex. They need not only to identify a field of study but to understand which parts of the field are hidden from view and which are exposed. As importantly, scholars need to consider why and how aspects of the field are hidden. For some groups, hiding is a strategy. Criminals, religious zealots, and wealthy people often seek to remain invisible. Other groups are hidden because outsiders choose not to see them, even if they want to be visible. The experiences of such groups as abused women, people in same-sex relationships, and people with disabilities are among those that have been overlooked historically. Why and how a group is hidden affects how they are studied, as evident in two research projects that I conducted on racist group activists in the U.S.

### **The 1920s Klan**

The first study focused on the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s, especially its mobilization of hundreds of thousands of white, Christian, and native-born women into a racist, anti-Catholic, and anti-Jewish crusade for white supremacy. During its heyday, the Ku Klux Klan,

as an organization, was not hidden from public view. Both male and female KKKs operated brazenly in the open. They marched down the main streets of towns and assembled before the U.S. capitol in Washington, D.C. They sponsored carnivals, fairs, spelling bees, and softball tournaments, drawing large numbers of supporters and onlookers. Indeed, in the Midwest the Klan enrolled the majority of all white, native-born Protestants. In Midwestern communities, it had little reason to be hidden.

While the 1920s Klan organizations operated in the public eye, its members hid their identities by donning white masks and hoods. Yet, these masks and hoods were largely symbolic, at least in the small towns and rural areas in which this Klan was strong. In these places, people were well aware of who was in the Klan. Indeed, the essence of the Klan's power in the 1920s was not as much its acts of physical violence as its power to intimidate. Intimidation took the form of massive marches and burning crosses, the Klan's symbol of 'fiery Christianity' in support of white supremacy, but the Klan also intimidated by making sure that people knew just how many of their neighbours and acquaintances were members (Blee 1991; MacLean 1995). Klansmen and Klanswomen gained power through strategies of hiding and making themselves visible.

The Klan operated with menacing visibility in the 1920s, but slipped into the shadows in the decades that followed. When the 1920s Klan collapsed amidst sexual and financial scandals, including a lurid rape-kidnapping by one of its most powerful leaders, its members disappeared off the public stage quickly and most concealed this aspect of their biographies from their descendants. However, Klanswomen disappeared from historical memory more completely than did Klansmen. The histories that were written about the 1920s Klan generally paid little attention to the presence of Klanswomen,

regarding them largely as a curiosity (Rice 1972; Wade 1987). Subsequent Klans in the 1950s and 1960s, composed only of men, similarly had little interest in acknowledging that women had been active in a previous wave of Klan activity. They considered women to be irritants and distractions to the cause of white supremacy and made considerable effort to project an image that the Klan was – and always had been – a fraternity of white Christian men (Blee 2002; Blee 1991). The hidden nature of the 1920s Women’s Klan was thus a complicated product of actions and agendas of different groups of actors. Klanswomen wanted visibility for the Klan in the 1920s, but tried to hide their personal involvement from future generations. At the same time, the role that women played in the 1920s Klan was made invisible both by Klansmen who sought to safeguard the male image of the Klan and by scholars who ignored them because they did not regard women as political actors. Hidden communities, as this history shows, can be hidden by different actors for different reasons.

Members of hidden communities may not want to remain hidden. Indeed, some may cooperate with scholars in an effort to shed light on what has been invisible to the public. This was true for the 1920s Klan. Although I was interested in why women joined this Klan, the few documents that survived, largely pamphlets published by the Klan and newspaper accounts of their activity, give little clue as to the motives of Klan members. But as I searched through archives and storage areas of historical societies, churches, and libraries, I became aware that some of its former members, including women members, were still alive. Others warned me that it would be futile to try to find them since they had spent a lifetime hiding their Klan pasts. But I set out to find these former Klanswomen, putting notices in every venue that might lead to them: history

center newsletters, small town advertising circulars, and church bulletins. To my surprise, a few women responded. With the promise of confidentiality, they agreed to talk with me, to expose some of what they had hidden for decades from family members and neighbors. They were hesitant about revealing their pasts, but hoped that my research would correct what they regarded as the unjustly negative reputation that their Klan had acquired. From the outset, then, I and the former Klanswomen I interviewed had radically different agendas. We each were interested in bringing women's role in the Klan out of hiding, but they anticipated a more positive depiction of the Klan than my research produced. Just as scholars and Klansmen both, for different reasons, obscured the history of women in the Klan, so too did my respondents and I have different motivations for making that history more visible.

The example of the 1920s Klan suggests that finding what is hidden is not simply a matter of a scholar's persistence or skill, but can depend heavily on the interests and cooperation of those who are hidden. Just as it is important to question who did the hiding, so it is critical that scholars of hidden communities understand the agendas of those who want to bring social life out of hiding.

### **Modern organized racism**

The question of hidden social life also appeared in my study of women's roles in the modern U.S. racist movement (Blee 2002). Organized racism today is a loosely connected network of (1) small Ku Klux Klan groups that pursue the Klan's traditional emphasis on white, Christian supremacism and xenophobic patriotism; (2) a more active set of neo-Nazi groups, including affiliated young racist skinheads, that focus on Jews as the main enemy and reject allegiance to the U.S. government which they regard as Jewish-controlled, or a

ZOG (Zionist Occupation Government); and (3) miscellaneous white power groups, some of which live in isolated racist communities (Zeskind 2009).

When I began to study organized racism in the early 1990s, most racist groups and activists were not particularly hidden. They feared government surveillance and prosecution and, perhaps equally as much, exposure to rival racist leaders and groups. But they took few precautions to safeguard themselves from journalists or scholars. In fact, many racist groups sought publicity. They staged elaborate rallies and racist gatherings in places across the country and allowed outsiders access to racist compounds like those of the Idaho-based Aryan Nations.

The relative openness of racist group in the early 1990s allowed me to pursue a strategy of access that would be impossible with more hidden groups. Since I wanted to find a broad range of women racist activists with whom I could conduct life-history interviews, I designed a multi-stage sampling strategy. I began with a one-year collection of all publications and propaganda produced or distributed by racist groups anywhere in the U.S. From these data, I identified which groups had significant women members and drew a purposive sample of groups, creating a sample that varied by location, type of group, and characteristics of members. Finally, I contacted each of these to locate a woman activist who would talk with me. This provided me with a sample from which I was able to conduct life-history interviews with 36 racist women.

Although I successfully gained permission to interview racist women, my interviews were interrupted by an event which radically reshaped the relationship of racist groups to outsiders. In 1995, a federal government office building in Oklahoma City was bombed by a reputed sympathizer of racist militias, an attack that claimed 168

lives. In its aftermath, government surveillance of the racist movement sharply escalated and racist groups became increasingly hidden and reluctant to be observed by outsiders. This intensified more when the racist movement was identified as a source of domestic terrorism in the anti-terrorism campaigns that followed the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and other places by Islamic radicals (United States Department of Homeland Security 2009). Within a short time, racist groups shut off almost all public access to their members.

With the shift in the larger context, my study of organized racism moved from an examination of social groups that were mostly in the open to a study of groups that were hidden. Contacting racist groups became more difficult as they were now suspicious of the motives of anyone gathering data about them. As their more moderate members dropped out in the wake of government surveillance, racist groups also became more extreme in their ideologies and more dangerous in their actions. Over time, those members who remained were more dedicated to agendas of violence and even terrorism. My study had not only shifted from a subject that was public to one that was hidden, but from a study of those who expressed vile ideologies but posed little threat to researchers to a study of violent groups that saw all outsiders as enemies. Although it might have been prudent to end the project at that point, there was also danger in failing to follow through with racist activists that I had already contacted. If I failed to interview them after receiving their permission, they might conclude that I was a government agent which would put me in physical jeopardy. So I continued interviewing.

My two studies of racist groups are examples of the complicated issues that arise in scholarship on hidden communities,

particularly the issue of what/who is hidden and from whom. In the 1920s as well as today, racist movements are both hidden and open. They are hidden from authorities, and sometimes from scholars. But they need to be visible to potential recruits and to the public they seek to impress and intimidate (Blee 2002; Blee 1991; Mitchell 1993). Thus even organized racism has both hidden and open aspects.

Locating a field of study requires scholars to recognize what is open and what is hidden and to weigh the motives and agendas of those who hide social life or who seek to bring it in the open. Indeed, probing why and how social groups are hidden can reveal important features of these groups (Mitchell 1993). Social groups that are hidden by the acts of outsiders are likely to be relatively powerless. Those that purposely hide themselves have the power to manipulate their visibility (Currier 2007).

### **Generating Knowledge: Gaining Access to the Hidden**

Scholars are able to gain access to many hidden communities, although often with difficulty and by taking risks. This is true even for hidden communities that strenuously guard their privacy.<sup>1</sup> If such access is possible, however, it also can pose problems for the unwary scholar. In many hidden social worlds, those who are most accessible are likely to be the wrong people to study. To return to the example of organized racism, the easiest people to identify in racist groups – and the people who are most willing to talk to scholars – are likely to be the self-proclaimed spokespersons and self-designated leaders who want publicity. Such people can be quite unrepresentative of most racist activists. Moreover, self-styled leaders and spokespersons may have little connection to the racist group for

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<sup>1</sup> Blee 2003; Blee 1993; Huggins & Glebbeek 2008; Jipson & Litton 2000a; Jipson & Litton 2000b; Lee 1995; Lee-Treweek & Linkogle 2000; Sehgal 2007.

which they claim to speak. Scholarship that relies on interviews with or statements by visible racists can give a misleading impression of the overall characteristics of organized racist groups (e.g. Swain & Nieli, 2003).

Access is problematic also because there is a tendency to conflate position with power in studies of hidden communities. Since it is difficult to gain *entrée* into hidden social worlds, it is tempting to focus on those who hold official positions in a group such as founder, president, organizer, or, as in the KKK, grand wizard. In fact, however, the actual practice of leadership in hidden communities, as elsewhere, can be exerted by those who lack official positions and titles. In racist groups, women often undertake the activities of leadership, providing group cohesion, strategies, and collective identity, although they seldom are given formal leadership positions. Nonetheless, their practice of leadership can be substantially more effective than men's. Male racist leaders generally assert themselves through threats, violence, and bravado. By these means, they secure obedience from members in the short run, even if, over time such practices tend to splinter racist groups and erode the base of the leader. In contrast, women's leadership practices in racist groups tend to be less directive. For example, women are typically in charge of molding new recruits to take on the proclaimed goals of racist groups, such as fomenting a race war, and reshaping the goals of racist groups to fit the capacities of the group's current members. Although women's leadership may be more influential than men's in some racist groups, easier access to racist men with ostentatious titles makes them more likely subjects of scholarly inquiry and media attention (Blee 2002). Yet they may not be in a position to provide the best information about this community.

Scholars of hidden communities, like any fieldworkers, also should be careful about using people they know or those to whom they are initially referred as their primary means of entrée. It is particularly tempting to use personal contacts for studies of hidden groups where access can be difficult to achieve, but such contacts may know only the most accessible members of these groups. Moreover, some hidden communities designate those who will talk to outside media and scholars and these official contacts may provide very selective access to the community (Blee 2002). The quality of fieldwork studies can be seriously compromised by forms of access that provide biased or very limited data (Denzin & Lincoln 2005).

### **Methodological suggestions**

From my research on organized racism, I have three methodological suggestions for studying hidden communities. None of these are unique to the study of hidden communities, but they take on special salience in this context. First, it is important to let those being studied speak for themselves, something that can be difficult when there is a large disjuncture between the worldview of scholars and those of the members of a secretive group (Blee & Taylor 2002; Blee 2000). A robust understanding of hidden social worlds requires that scholars be cautious in assuming that they fully understand what members say and the meanings they attach to their actions. As an example, when I interviewed modern-day racist women about how they entered racial extremism, many framed their life story as a dramatic tale of personal conversion. They told of a personal event that changed them from weak and racially naive to a strong, committed racial warrior. Conversion narratives are common in mainstream society, found in the stories of recovering alcoholics, gay and lesbian activists, committed Christians, and feminists. Thus, it is

tempting to take the conversion accounts of racist women at face value and conclude that these women entered racial groups because they were transformed by dramatic personal events, like being in a car accident. Yet, that would be an inaccurate reading of their narratives. On the contrary, the stories of racist women actually *conceal* how they got involved in racist groups. In fact, as other data on these women make clear, they generally entered racist groups in a way that was much more incremental and less dramatic than conversion stories suggest. And their entry always involved meeting a racist recruiter who introduced them to racial activism. What their stories of dramatic conversion reveal is not how they became racist activists, but that they learned a new story of their life once they entered organized racism. Being in a racist group taught them to think of themselves in a new way. It created for them a sense of personal identity that is radically different than their past, drawing on the sharp, dichotomous understandings of society preached by racist groups for whom the world is divided between white and non-white, ally and enemy. Their stories of conversion are thus a *result* of being associated with racist groups, not an accurate description of how they joined (Blee 2002).

A second suggestion for studies of hidden communities is to pay attention to everything that members express in interviews and conversations. Again, this suggestion applies to all research (Holstein & Gubrium 1995), but it is particularly pertinent when studying hidden communities in which talk can be disingenuous or evasive. When I interviewed former members of the 1920s Klan, some remembered their time in this hate-filled crusade in the most banal terms, as ‘fun,’ an innocent time of joviality and sociality. However difficult it is to accept these memories of a time of racial brutality, such sentiments provide important clues to how racism can become

the fuel for a movement as large as the 1920s Klan. Their memories show that even the most virulent forms of racism can become mundane to its possessors and that racist violence can be motivated by the most ordinary and pedestrian of sentiments (Blee 1991).

A final suggestion is to look for the cracks, what doesn't fit, in the talk and actions in hidden communities, a technique that the microhistorian Jacques Revel calls the 'method of clues' (Revel 1995; Blee 2006). Although useful in many studies, the method of clues is particularly useful for hidden communities in which members tend to simply parrot the official ideas of their groups as their own when queried by a researcher (Blee 2002). By probing for cracks in their stories, it is possible to move beyond their rote statements and explore whether the ideas of individuals actually mirror those of their groups. When asked to talk about their own experiences, for example, the racist women I interviewed eventually confided beliefs to me that were profoundly at odds with the ideologies of their groups, even if their initial comments made such differences seem unlikely. They talked of taking their children to Jewish doctors, having abortions, and maintaining friendships with lesbian friends and family members. Other studies of racist groups similarly find that activists' private views can deviate significantly from the public tenets of their groups.<sup>2</sup> Such findings provide important insights into the multiple dimensions of life within organized racism that are not visible from the outside, demonstrating that members can hold ideas quite at variance with the positions of their groups.

### **For Whom? Ethics of Studying Hidden Communities**

Devault's last question concerns for whom we generate knowledge. This is an important issue in the study of hidden communities. Such

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<sup>2</sup> Aho 1990; Billig 1978; Ezekiel 1995; Fielding 1981.

studies produce particular questions of ethics because those we study may not want to be known. Should scholars set limits on how much access they will seek into hidden communities? Are there conditions under which researchers should decline to study those who seek to be hidden? Are there parts of hidden social life that should be protected from scholarly inquiry? Do some social groups have an absolute right not to be known, a position asserted by some Native American communities vis-à-vis non-native researchers (Smith 2005)? Do benefits that will derive to scholarship or to the hidden community outweigh the costs of exposure? What principles should be used to decide when it is appropriate to probe into hidden social life and when a scholar should back away? Such questions are not often discussed among scholars since there is a presumption that all social life should be accessible to study. But this is not clearly the case for hidden communities in which the desire of people to shield their lives from scrutiny is contrary to the interest of scholars in understanding the broadest range of social life.

Scholars need to consider the issue of limits on access on multiple ethical and personal levels. Ethical issues include the extent to which scholars should protect a hidden society from exposure in all cases. Scholars are divided, for example, on whether they are obliged to protect the privacy of those engaged in reprehensible practices, like drug pushers or racist activists (Calvey 2000; Lee-Treweek & Linkogle 2000). Ethical concerns exist as well about which members of hidden communities are recognized and promoted in the process of being researched (Kleinman 2007). Is a study likely to benefit existing power holders in a hidden community? Is this an ethically-defensible outcome? On a personal level, there are issues of a researcher's physical and emotional safety in hidden communities, especially those engaged in illegal, immoral,

or problematic actions. Scholars also wrestle with how prepared they are to empathize and develop rapport with members of a hidden communities whose experiences, ideas, and values are very different than their own.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, resolving the conflicting interests of subjects and scholars requires informed and reflexive judgment on the part of researchers as well as sustained discussion in a scholarly community.

## **Conclusion**

Fieldwork creates knowledge that brings the public into the reality of others, as the quote from Marjorie Devault (2007, p.182) at the beginning of this article points out. When fieldwork is used to study hidden communities, scholars have special responsibilities to ensure that the reality that is exposed is accurate and not harmful to those being studied. This paper makes three arguments about scholarly responsibility. First, scholars need to be sensitive to the reasons that a community is hidden and, in fact, can acquire useful information by finding what is hidden and what is open in a community. Second, access can be particularly complex in the study of hidden communities and contacts into hidden communities can create problems of bias for researchers. Third, those who study hidden communities must consider the ethics and personal risks of such studies. That scholars should acknowledge the pitfalls, problems, and dilemmas of fieldwork on hidden communities does not mean that such research should be avoided. Indeed, it is by studying the hidden that scholars can gain perspective on how power shapes social boundaries of marginality and centrality in modern society. But such studies need to be done with respect for the integrity and privacy of those who are its subjects.

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<sup>3</sup> Blee 1998; Blee 1993; Lee-Treweek 2000; Lee-Treweek & Linkogle 2000; Possick 2009; Sehgal 2007.

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