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# An Ethnographer Looks at Neo-Nazi and Klan Groups

## *The Racist Mind Revisited*

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*The author re-examines his fieldwork with neo-Nazi and Klan leaders and followers. He first reviews primary findings: official movement ideology expressed crude social Darwinism and an apocalyptic struggle between Whites (humans) and Jews (children of Satan); everyday beliefs of members spoke more of a fear that they, as Whites, were going to be economic losers; leaders were intelligent, shallow men, and at core were political beings motivated more by a drive for power than by racism; members were male, young, dropouts without work skills, with a deep fear of personal annihilation—social isolates whose membership expressed personal needs that might be satisfied equally by alternative engagements. The article next asks how a working-class youth becomes a neo-Nazi activist and identifies social and personal factors, relating them to other research. It draws implications for prevention, looking at community organizing and education, and then at the relation of militant White racism to ordinary White racism.*

**Americans today often learn** about Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan through television clips of rallies or marches by men uniformed in camouflage garb with swastika armbands or in robes. These images often carry commentary implying that the racist people are particularly dangerous because they are so different from the viewer, being consumed by irrationality. The racists and their leaders are driven by hatred, it is suggested, and one can scarcely imagine where they come from or how to impede them.

Over 4 years, the author of *The Racist Mind: Portraits of American Neo-Nazis and Klansmen* (Ezekiel, 1995) met about once a week with the young members of a neo-Nazi group in Detroit, periodically holding semistructured interviews with the members and the somewhat older group leader. Over 3 years, he interviewed at length national and middling leaders in the neo-Nazi and Klan movement and attended and observed movement gatherings such as the Aryan Nations national conclaves in Idaho, the regional Klan assembly at Stone Mountain, Georgia, and cross burnings in Michigan. At these gatherings, the writer talked with participants, listened to their conversations with one another, and

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listened alongside the participants to the speeches of the movement leaders. The resulting volume describes leaders, followers, and gatherings and employs lengthy quotations from transcripts to buttress reflections on the White racist movement and the meaning of membership in the militant groups. The first half of this article reviews those findings; the second half, beginning with the discussion of *Becoming a Neo-Nazi*, considerably extends the book's reflections, particularly suggesting steps that would make youth less susceptible to recruitment by racist organizers. It will close with comments on our own social responsibilities.

The methodological core of this work was candor. I was open with my respondents about my identity: That I was a Jew, a leftist, and a university professor. I was direct about my agenda: That I believe (as I do) that most people build for themselves lives that make sense to themselves, and that in my work, I go to people whose lives seem strange to others and ask them to relate to me in their own words the sense of their lives. I told them that I would be using their own words to let others see their meaning, adding my own thoughts. Most people whom I approached were cooperative. (It is relevant that my skin is Caucasian pale. Although I told them that I was a Jew, I did not resemble their rather medieval image of a Jew.)

## MOVEMENT SIZE

The militant White racist movement is far from monolithic; it is a loose confederation of small groups made coherent by the organizing work of major leaders and united by common ideology. The Southern Poverty Law Center (2000a) reported that in 1999, there were 36 Klan organizations (with a total of 138 chapters), 21 neo-Nazi organizations (130 chapters), and 10 racist skinhead organizations (40 chapters). The Klan was once the anchor of the movement and kept its distance from the Nazi organizations as they emerged, but since the 1980s, the two sets of organizations have more or less merged in what some have called the Nazification of the Klan. Concepts and symbols are mixed indiscriminately among the various groups.

Membership estimates were available in 1994 from reliable monitoring organizations: The Center for Democratic Renewal (D. Levitas, personal communication, autumn 1994), the Southern Poverty Law Center (D. Welch, personal communication, autumn 1994), and the American Jewish Committee (K. Stern, personal communication, autumn 1994) estimated hard-core membership in the militant White racist movement at 23,000 to 25,000. Of these, 5,500 to 6,000 belonged to one or another of the Klans; 3,500 were skinheads; and 500 to 1,000 were in Nazi groups or in groups close to the Nazis. The remainder of the hard core was less easily identified; the Center for Democratic Renewal referred to them as the Christian Patriot Movement; they were to be found in politically active churches of the Christian Identity sect and in rural groups scattered across

the country. The monitoring groups estimated that 150,000 sympathizers bought movement literature, sent contributions to movement groups, or attended rallies, whereas another 450,000 people who did not actually purchase movement literature did read it. The movement is small but has had impact beyond its size because of a reputation based on a history of violence.

### **MOVEMENT IDEOLOGY**

The movement's ideology emerged as one interviewed leaders, listened to their speeches, and read movement newspapers and pamphlets. Two thoughts are the core of this movement: That "race" is real, and those in the movement are God's elect. Race is seen in 19th-century terms: race as a biological category with absolute boundaries, each race having a different essence—just as a rock is a rock and a tree is a tree, a White is a White and a Black is a Black.

Whites are civilization builders who have created our modern world, both its technology and its art. People of color are civilization destroyers, most characteristically showing their essences in the social pathologies of inner-city populations. The races have separate origins, as explained in the theology of Christian Identity (a major influence throughout the White racist movement)<sup>1</sup>: Whites are the creation of God, who is White; people of color, whom they refer to as "the mud races," have originated in the mating of Whites with animals. Along with White people and people of color, the world includes a third and very dangerous species, the Jews, who have resulted from the mating of Eve with the Serpent. Whites are actual humans and the children of God; Jews are not human but the children of Satan; and people of color are semihuman. God has created the world, which the humans—Whites—are to rule; the people of color, like cattle in the field, should not be hated but tolerated and set to work to meet the needs of the humans. Satan has created the Jews to destroy the Whites and seize the world for Satan. These two forces, the army of God and the army of Satan—the Whites and the Jews—are to struggle with each other until one is destroyed. The Israelites of the Old Testament were early Aryans, unrelated to modern Jews; Jesus thus was an Aryan, not a Jew (Ezekiel, 1995, p. xxvi; Zeskind, 1986).

Most White people, the ideology states, are uninformed about the real nature of things and believe the soothing and ill-intentioned lies of the "Jew-controlled" media. The Jews have made great strides in their war against God, convincing Whites that they must give up their position of dominance in America and cede privilege and power to the African Americans, the Latinos, the Asians, the feminists, the gays, and immigrants. Through their domination of the media, churches, schools, major corporations, and government, the Jews and their White dupes have succeeded in reducing drastically the power of White people; the White race now faces its extinction. Only the members of the movement have grasped this truth and are working to awaken and mobilize White people to defend themselves before the White race has been destroyed. The

movement is a defense organization. Members of the movement are very special people, a minority that is not afraid of the truth, is loyal to God, and is willing to fight the workings of Satan and his Jews. Movement members are, in fact, the Chosen People.

The Jews work to destroy the White race through contamination; they call on Whites to engage in race mixing with Blacks and other races, which will produce a hybrid variety that has lost the White essence and thus the God-given strength and virtue of the pure Whites. The call to self-destruction is carried by the media, the churches, and the government, all controlled by the Jews and their flunkies. Only the White racist movement understands the real meaning of the ongoing changes in society and in the culture, understands that a single hidden aim lies behind those seemingly unrelated changes, and that a single hidden force plans them and brings them about. The Jews, in turn, recognize that only the White racist movement stands between them and success, and so the Jews use their organizations, the media, the churches, and the federal government to attack the White racist movement. To the extent the Jews succeed, Whites are taught to lose their race pride and movement leaders are sent to prison.

The struggle between God's agents and Satan's agents is a war of annihilation; only one side will survive. Any measure is justifiable in this war for survival. If innocent people die, it is unfortunate but a given in a war of survival.

All this is heard repeatedly in leadership presentations, and its apocalyptic energy animates the larger movement gatherings. But one wonders how much of the detail is salient for members on a day-by-day basis. If one listens at length to ordinary members, one hears pieces of this God-and-Devil story. But what comes through as central in the members' thinking is that Whites are losing ground, the world is changing, and the member may not do well in the world. The Whites are losing, and the member is losing. These are people who are scared and who draw important comfort from being members of a group.

Official ideology in the movement speaks extensively about the characteristics of the target Others, and this is what the general public assumes is the core of the movement. But, as I shall show in this article, the members teach us that the actual emotional center of the group is thoughts and feelings about the Self. The group is valued most for what it can do for the member's sense of himself.

## GENDER

I say "sense of himself" because this is a men's movement. Some women are around but always in quite traditional supportive roles. They are the girlfriends or wives of members, and at gatherings they can serve the food they have cooked. In my 7 years around the movement, I heard many speeches, but never

one by a woman. I never saw a woman in a leadership role. Women were servants and nurturers.

Those were the roles open to real women. The men also had their sexualized fantasies about special women who were imagined as trophies. The drawings in their publications, like their chatter, suggested a junior high school mindset: scantily clad women holding AK-47s below their jutting breasts were “saving their love for real men.”

## HOMOPHOBIA

Fear of homosexual rape was evident; strong Black men who “wanted to rape White women” might also commit anal rape on the White adolescent members. At a less problematic level, there was buy-in to traditional straight American male attitudes about homosexuality: Gay men and lesbian women were perverts. Contemporary shifts in mainstream attitudes toward understanding were seen as the results of the Jewish campaign to undermine the strength of the White race; through their control of the media, the Jews were able to make it seem as though gay men and lesbian women were ordinary people who should be accepted rather than people who were violating God’s design. At movement rallies, people were led repeatedly in the chant, “Praise God for AIDS!”

## TARGETS

At the ideological level—in the writings and speeches of leaders—the contemporary Klan has joined the neo-Nazis in identifying the Jews as the prime source of evil. Leadership speeches throughout the movement present “the Jew” as the central enemy, with African Americans, Latinos, and Asians as the rather dumb members of “the mud races” who are pawns of the Jews, as are many brainwashed Whites. The leadership ranks gay men and lesbian women with Jews in the enemies list.

Among the rank and file, the picture is more traditional. Most followers whom I have met exhibited intense prejudice against African Americans that tended to reflect the general prejudice of their families and neighborhoods. Followers could repeat the party line about the Jews, but my strong impression from interviews and from watching socialization into the Detroit group was that new members arrived with strong antipathy toward Blacks but little interest in Jews. They came in hating Blacks and liking the idea that the movement represented Whites in a struggle against Blacks; after entry, they had to be taught who the Jews are and why they should hate them.<sup>2</sup>

## LEADERS

There is no White racist movement without its leaders. There are people who are resentful, people who are needy, people who are adventurers, but by themselves they are not a movement. The leaders, themselves a particular kind of adventurer, combine charisma, ideology, and organizational capacity to create White racist groups and, from the groups, the movement.

Racist leaders rise through their own talents. The life stories they tell in the interviews speak of an initial time of puzzlement and casting about, a point of enlightenment, a discovered capacity to draw followers, and a determined struggle to bring the truth forward. Some have college degrees, but in essence all are self-educated with the certainty and the blind spots this entails. The utter certainty is a great deal of their power. The march to prominence has taken place in a context of competition; the racist organizations are in a constant competition with one another, and a leader gains importance as his capacity to attract members and media attention grows. The power to attract members comes from the leader's certainty and his capacity with words and body to be the living expression of the resentment and anger of the listeners. Moreover, he can make his listeners feel that they are part of something that is happening, that these are not empty words.

In many ways, the leader is operating in a vacuum: Middle-class politicians and clergy do not speak to this audience. The audience surmises, accurately, that the Establishment does not see them. The good life seen in advertisements will not be coming to them; their spokespeople are not on the talk shows; their futures will have little wealth and less glory. They do not feel respected.

The leader works with this raw material. The leader radically differs from the media's depiction of him. He is not irrational, and his primary motivation is not race hatred. He is rational and, in many cases, intelligent. He has a flaw: Within his self-education, he has rejected mainstream explanations of the social world and sees himself as one of those original thinkers who is at first scorned but later will be proven correct; this enables him to ignore pieces of personal experience that might disconfirm his ideas.

Because his own life course and thinking are fairly unbound by mainstream assumptions and he is basically self-defined, conspiracy theories are congenial. Within his self-education, he has rejected a sense of the world as tediously complicated, as a result of manifold complex interacting forces. He pictures himself as atomistic and self-determined, and it is logical then that he can believe great effects are caused by tiny groups of hidden men through hidden instrumentalities.

In most cases, the leader is not extremely racist. Racism is comfortable for him, but not his passion. At core, he is a political organizer. His motive is power. Racism is his tool. He feels most alive when he senses himself influencing men, affecting them.

The interviews with national leaders were lengthy—2 or 3 hours, repeated two, three, or more times. As we sat in interview, the respondent would take calls on the phone from lieutenants and would also speak to them in person. From those interactions and from the interviews, a pattern emerged. The leader, usually, is a man who is clever, who is shallow, and who does not respect people. He thinks almost all people are dumb and easily misled. He thinks almost all people will act for cold self-interest and will cheat others whenever they think they will not be caught. His disrespect includes his followers. He respects only those, friend or foe, who have power. His followers are people to be manipulated, not to be led to better self-knowledge. He loves, in abstract words, those whom he feels are disadvantaged. He loves, to this listener's perception, an idea of himself.

As I recall the stories the leaders told me and the things they said to their followers, everything that comes to mind is masculine: The actors in the stories are masculine; the stories are about combat, domination, and subjugation; the stories are not about nurturance or about cooperative effort that adds new elements, not about creativity or about tenderness. In a very fundamental way, the world of the leaders and the followers is an only-masculine world, a world impoverished of half the range of human feeling and thought—like the Army, like prison.

## FOLLOWERS

The first years of research were with a Detroit neo-Nazi group that I will call the Death's Head Strike Group. The 1995 book tells how I made the contact with the group and gives portrayals and reflections in depth. The conception of followers that grew from this one group of followers was not contradicted as I met others at movement gatherings.

The members of the Death's Head Strike Group were all male, other than the cell leader's very young lover, who soon left, and several other women who later chanced by briefly. The group was small, with a nucleus of 7 to 10 members and 10 or 15 others in a looser connection. Still another 10 or 15 friends could be mobilized for a specific action. Members were young, ranging from 16 to 30, with a median age of 19. They had come to the group in batches based on friendship clusters. The majority had come from one of three distinct Detroit neighborhoods. People in two of these neighborhoods were extremely poor; the neighborhoods had once been White but now only two or three White families to a block remained, the other families being African American. The third neighborhood was half White and half Black, with families ranging from working-class downward—a struggling but not destitute neighborhood.

Almost every Strike Group member (18 of 20 who were interviewed) had lost a parent when young; usually the loss was of a father (16 of 18). Most of the losses (15 of 18) were due to divorce or separation. The other 3 were due to death or to causes that had never been revealed to the child. The median age at time of

loss was 7. The fathers had been working men. After leaving, they maintained no contact with the child or the family and did not send money to the home. Stepfathers or transient boyfriends of the mother tended to be cold, rough, and abusive. Several members had spent portions of their childhood in foster homes.

A few members spoke spontaneously of parental alcoholism or violence; a few others were responsive when I asked questions. Seven members reported alcoholism, six reported family violence. Seven members spontaneously mentioned serving time at detention centers, jails, or prisons. I suspect, from the stories involving street fights and the hints about drug use and pilfering, that there was more undisclosed penal time.

There was little money in the homes. Most of the mothers worked as cooks or waitresses in small eating places or drew disability payments. Most of the members had no jobs and no prospect of work. A couple had steady work at low wages; a few found occasional work in the neighborhood, for example, tearing down a shack for someone. Industrial employment in Detroit was shrinking rapidly, and the prospects for these young men were very poor, especially because they had little work experience or education. They had left school early. The school history of 16 members is known. Six had quit school in the 9th grade, 3 in the 10th, and 4 in the 11th. The 3 who had graduated from high school had each taken a semester or two at a community college.

These young men were living in startling social isolation. The impact of parental loss and poverty depends on the sort of parenting by the remaining parent and on the quality of other social supports. Aside from their mothers, about whom little is known, social supports were minimal. Ties to siblings tended to be weak or nonexistent, and only one member spoke of someone from the extended family who had played a role in his life. None ever mentioned a teacher who had been important to him, or a coach or scout leader, or anyone from a church, the neighborhood, or a social agency.

The members had grown up in neighborhoods in which they had to fight a lot. This would have not been easy because most of them were fairly slim, rather slight. They depended on fighting real hard, once something broke out. They were wiry and tough, but preoccupied with their thinness.

They were not good physical specimens. A surprising number had been born with a childhood disease or deficiency, such as being born a blue baby or "born with half a liver." There are a lot of hospital stories in the interviews.

Very early in the interviewing, I sensed an underlying theme of fear. At an unspoken but deep level, the members seemed to feel extremely vulnerable, that their lives might be snuffed out at any time like a match flame in the wind. This makes the appeal of the Nazi symbols understandable. When I asked them what they knew about Nazism, they referred to late-night movies on television. If you are afraid that you will disappear, how appealing are the symbols of a force that was hard, ruthless, even willing to murder to achieve its goals.

None of the members could establish a long-term intimate relationship. Several had caused pregnancies, but neither they nor the cell leader was able to

establish a fathering role. Eventually, two of the members did become seriously involved with women, one of them fathering a child; each of these young men drifted from the group as he became involved. One of them soon was living with his woman friend and held down both a full-time job and a part-time job, where he began to have friendly bonds with some of his African American coworkers; he abandoned the Strike Group.

The group did not have conventional meetings; rather, the members hung out at the leader's apartment. Periodically, they were transported in the windowless rear of a rented Ryder van to some outlying town where they would put on a rally for a few minutes until counterdemonstrators drove them away. I think this action also assuaged their fears. If you are not quite sure that you are alive, how reassuring to stand shoulder to shoulder with your comrades, notwithstanding for a few minutes the taunts, threats, and hurled snowballs, chunks of ice, and flashlight batteries of the counterdemonstrators. When the police quickly shepherded them safely back to their van, they rode back to Detroit, and, that afternoon and for weeks thereafter, rejoiced in rather inflated memories of their courage, feasting their eyes repeatedly on newspaper photos.

### BECOMING A NEO-NAZI

How does a working-class kid in Detroit become a neo-Nazi? What are the factors that make adolescents vulnerable to recruitment by racist organizers? Figure 1 is a schematized representation of factors suggested by the interviews. Social factors, listed on the left, intersect with personal and family psychodynamics. A range of alternative outcomes, shown on the right, may follow.

The tally of social factors begins by noting the *presence of a racist group*. Where there are no groups and where there is no effort at recruitment, recruitment is probably unlikely. Every young person who has been recruited stands for hundreds of others who just as readily might have been recruited if there had been an organization on the scene.

Many of the Detroit youths I met with had written away for membership cards in the Klan when they were in junior high school. This was a mail transaction that gave them a card to carry in their back pockets, with whatever boost that gave their egos as they moved about in the racially mixed schools in which they were the minority. They could not recall how they had found out about this mail-order opportunity. They later heard about the Detroit neo-Nazi group because it got a lot of publicity on Detroit television. Occasional placards shown on the video clips included the group's phone number, so they could call its leader. After meeting with him a few times, they would start coming around regularly. When one joined, a couple of friends usually followed.

The growing number of White racist Web sites on the Internet make racist propaganda widely accessible. Monitoring organizations fear that this will aid recruitment (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2000b, 2001a; Weitzman, 1998,

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Presence of Racist Group	Social Dislocation	Economic Pressure (?)	Differential Outcomes, such as:
			ordinary coping
			numbness
			malaise
			alcoholism
Racist Ideology	Family Dynamics, Personal		chronic anger
Macho Ideology	Psychodynamics		individual violence
			racist activism
Absence of Democratic Ideology			
Absence of Cross-Cutting Loyalties			

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**Figure 1: Schematized Representation of Suggested Factors Influencing a Youth Becoming a White Racist Activist**

2000). Data are absent, and some are skeptical (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2001b).

The diagram's second social factor is *social dislocation*. Widespread changes in American society mean that previous status hierarchies are disrupted or threatened. (Note parallels to developments in Weimar Germany [Kershaw, 1998].) Most members of the American White racist movement believe that they, as White men, are members of an endangered species. Very little about their futures can be taken for granted. Many cues tell them that old values, which they have assumed would benefit them for life, are challenged by new values. Real social change is involved here, as well as exaggerated perceptions of change and endangerment.

White Americans have made only an awkward accommodation to the increased political strength of African Americans. The work of Howard Schuman and his associates addresses the complexity of this issue: Looking at surveys of probability samples over decades, they found White Americans verbally endorsing some egalitarian values, while steadfastly opposing concrete steps that would implement those values (Schuman, Steeb, Bobo, & Krysan, 1997).

In early versions of this diagram, I listed *economic pressure* as a social factor. People that I met seemed to come from families with incomes below the median and sometimes well below the median. I am no longer confident that my impressions justify a claim linking economic factors to membership in racist groups. Several lines of research challenge this assumption. First, Leonard Zeskind (personal communication, autumn 1994), whom I consider the most astute political observer of the White racist movement, believes that the movement is a representative cross-section of American society. Second, James Aho (1990), in a careful study of the movement in Idaho, found educational levels that did not suggest economic pressures. (Interestingly, he noted that respondents in the more extreme portion of the sample "seem either to be college graduates or high school dropouts.") (p. 141.)

Finally, a strong set of new studies from Yale casts doubt on a linkage between economic status and racist group membership or racist crime. The most impressive of the Yale studies (Green, Strolowitz, & Wong, 1998) demonstrated that the number of bias-crime incidents in New York City neighborhoods between 1987 and 1995 was not related to neighborhood economic status (unemployment rate, poverty rate, or median income) but to turf patterns: Racially motivated crime rose when there was a rise in non-White migration into neighborhoods in which Whites had for a long time enjoyed a large majority. A second study (Green, Abelson, & Garnett, 1999) examined responses from a probability sample of North Carolinians about political and economic matters. Elegant procedures permitted the inclusion of an identified subsample composed of members of White supremacist groups and of hate crime perpetrators. (Unfortunately, this subsample is small.) Although the two populations differ predictably in political views, the subsample's more negative view of the economic condition and prospects of their communities differs from the general population's assessment to a degree that is only "small to moderate" (p. 447). A third study (Green, Glaser, & Rich, 1998) readdresses, with more sophisticated techniques, historical data on lynchings and economic changes and found "little robust support" for a frustration-aggression hypothesis. Interestingly, the ensuing discussion highlights a more nuanced conception of the linkage of economics and racist activity: The authors point to historical periods in which propagandists from the political, business, or labor communities mobilized racial hostility by identifying a racial group as the cause of economic problems—an analysis that parallels this article's characterization of the White racist leaders as people who are fundamentally political beings.

Despite the power of the Yale studies, this issue may not be conclusively settled. We are dealing with groups with secret memberships, and the historical record in Weimar Germany, dramatically commands attention (Kershaw, 1998).

The third social factor is *social isolation*, which has been discussed at length above. The importance of social support has been widely studied; see, for example, the discussion of social support in Cohen and Herbert's 1996 review of

health psychology. The young men in the Strike Group may or may not have been close to their mothers, but the lack of other meaningful adults meant unusual vulnerability. The racist group offered comradeship, authority figures, and a home to young people who lived in what might be termed *spiritual poverty*.

The fourth and fifth social factors are *racist ideology* and *macho ideology*. These help determine the direction that the conversion process takes. The ideology of racism, which was passed on to the new member by the group leader and reinforced in conversations with other members, gives the new recruit a continuing sense that there is an important reason for the group to exist. This is more than a casual friendship group. The movement makes its claim, in the ideology, to a turf and declares its role as defending that turf. The members struck me as people who felt rather orphaned, and the racist ideology permits the member to construct in his mind a new family, the mythologized White race. In the member's conversations, we hear the fantasy that someday this great White family will realize what he has done for them and then they will embrace him.

Macho ideology is a familiar presence in authoritarian movements (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Smith, 1965; Stone, Lederer, & Christie, 1993). This is an ideology of pseudomasculinity, an ideology that glorifies toughness and fears tenderness or nurturance as weakness. This stance buttresses the ego of shaky male individuals; it can be especially important to adolescents, and in this case, we are speaking of particularly fearful adolescents.

The listing of social factors concludes by noting absences: the *absence of democratic ideology* as a real part of the mental life of the youths, and the *absence of cross-cutting loyalties* that might make exclusivist appeals uncomfortable. Research relevant to the latter appears in Urban and Miller (1998) and Marcus-Newhall, Miller, Holz, and Brewer (1993). The two absences become apparent when one asks how it can be that these young people do not experience revulsion when presented with the authoritarian and racist worldviews that are the center of the recruitment process. What is not there that one might expect? The absences, as we shall see, have direct implications for prevention of recruitment.

The diagram assumes that the impact of the social forces depends on the particular characteristics of the individual's psyche and the dynamics in the individual's family. Psychodynamics are examined by Dunbar (2000), Dunbar, Krop, and Sullaway (2000), Hopf (1993), Staub (1989), and Sullivan and Transue (1996). Staub covered historical and social issues as well as psychodynamics. Dunbar, et al. (2000) compared men convicted of racist homicide to men convicted of nonracist homicide.

Hopf's (1993) review of qualitative and clinical work on authoritarians and their families yields psychological portraits that fit the neo-Nazi youth of the Strike Group to a startling degree. On pages 128 to 130, she reconstructs Ackerman and Jahoda's 1950 study. Ackerman and Jahoda interviewed psychoanalysts at length about anti-Semitic non-Jewish patients in their caseloads. The

following characteristics were described as universal for these anti-Semitic patients:

1. A vague feeling of fear, linked to an inner picture of the world around them that appears to be hostile, evil, and difficult to master;
2. A shaky self-image, identity problems, and fluctuations between overestimation of self and self-derogation;
3. Difficulties in interpersonal relationships manifested in part in a high degree of isolation and hidden in part behind functioning facades. "But at best such disguises deceive the outer world and sometimes the self; they never lead to the establishment of warm, human relationships" (Ackerman & Jahoda, 1950, p. 33);
4. The tendency to conform and fear of attracting attention;
5. Problems in coping with reality; often there are weak bonds not only to other persons but also to external objects (content of work, occupation in leisure time, and so forth);
6. Problems in the development of an autonomous set of ethics.

Hopf's review leads one back to the qualitative chapters of *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al., 1950). Indeed, the entire Stone et al. volume and Smith's 1965 data argue for readdressing the central concepts of the Berkeley research (also see Smith's 1997 review). Note, on the other hand, a strong, recent dissent by Martin (2001), who argued that even in the qualitative sections, the members of the Berkeley group were fatally naive in their methodology, fell into systematic error because they had reified scale positions as existing human types, and consistently misinterpreted data in a self-serving fashion.

In either case, the psychological has consequence. The diagram proposes that in the presence of the stipulated social factors, some people of particular personal and family psychological patterns will enter into a period of activism in the White racist movement. The diagram proposes as well that small differences in the social and individual inputs will result in quite a range of possible outcomes. One can well imagine people who might become lonely cranks, or drunkards, or even quite ordinarily competent adults. The devil, as always, is in the details.

## PREVENTION

### PERSONAL CONNECTION

What would make individual White adolescents less vulnerable to the recruitment efforts of neo-Nazi and Klan organizers? Recall the social isolation of the Detroit youths. During those repeated interactions, I became aware that warmth was increasing between us, despite my identifying myself as a Jew and a progressive.

I had my own personal issues. On a pivotal afternoon very early in the project, I was driving to Detroit to continue our conversations and thinking about the life of one of the young men. I had been getting a sense of what his life had been and

what its onward trajectory was likely to be. What could be done, I asked myself, that would help him have a more competent sense of himself, that would encourage him to take a firmer grasp on his life—to begin to understand that his life mattered and that it could be directed in a hopeful way? I pondered and abruptly shook myself: “What am I doing, worrying about a Nazi?” I thought about it. And then from my gut came the reply: “He is also a kid. It cannot be wrong to be concerned about a kid.”

The neo-Nazi youths were reacting to me as well. Their greetings, their remarks, and their bearing showed that I was becoming a person who mattered to them. That made sense. I would sit and speak with an individual for a long time, talking with him about his life, taking his life seriously, looking into his eyes as we spoke. This happened again and again. Probably no one had acted that way with these youths for a long time.

This sort of interaction may be a critical ingredient in programs that address the needs of disadvantaged kids. Every child needs an adult who *sees* him or her: an adult who does not disappear, who shows by attention and action over time that he or she takes the child seriously and that the child matters.

This is not an elegant formula. It is labor-intensive and lacks multiplier effects. But it may be fundamental. In addition to macro-economic changes, perhaps we need direct personal action if we are to reduce the amount of youth violence, of teenage pregnancy, of youthful gang activity, of racist activity, and of all the other ways that disadvantaged youths hurt themselves and others. We perhaps should tithe ourselves—a tithing of time for children in need of relationships. See in this connection the discussions of mentoring in Freedman (1993) and in Tierney and Grossman (2000).

## COMMUNITY

Complementary ways in which we could address the social isolation of youths such as these tie to the word *community*. Research with the Peace Corps and experience in teaching have convinced me of the power of context: Given a meaningful challenge that is difficult but not insuperable, within an artful combination of structure and freedom, young people can mature and become competent to a degree that would not be predicted from a simple examination of their past (Ezekiel, 1969; Smith, 1966). These lessons were in my mind as I interacted with the neo-Nazi youth and asked myself about alternative scenarios that could have been played out in their lives. They were neither mindless nor hate-filled. They were poorly educated and fearful at the core. What they wanted profoundly was to have close relationships and to feel that their lives mattered.

The Nazi group offered them this feeling to a degree and for a while, but other endeavors could probably have done this as well or better. I thought I probably could have led many of them away from their leader (because I was a warmer person and cared more for them) to some other group. But what other group would fit their needs? The best fit, I felt, would be a radical environmental group

such as Earth First. Such a group would have given them adventure and a chance to shock the Establishment, while doing something of intrinsic value and enjoying camaraderie. Earth First's goals would have jibed with the anticorporate bias of the youths and with their romanticism about the outdoors. Working in that organization would not have particularly affected the racial prejudice these kids harbored, but it would have met their need to act out in a shocking and socially relevant fashion while gaining group affection. The youths probably would have remained racist—but so would their peers who did not wear swastikas. The point is that these young people seemed to have no intrinsic need to act out their racism but did have needs to have companionship, to be shocking, and to feel that their lives had meaning.

Community organizations could build much more broadly on the similar hungers of great numbers of kids, who could learn community in contexts of challenge. Our culture tends to relegate young people to roles that are neither meaningful nor honorific. What is the significance of being overindulged or socialized to see oneself primarily as a consumer? What scope do we offer an adolescent who wishes to prove his or her significance in the world? Churches, synagogues, mosques, neighborhood organizations, scouting organizations, and political or ethnic organizations could begin to build youth groups in which there was serious challenge; there are plenty of hard and meaningful tasks to be taken on. A critical need, again, would be for adult leadership that would not fade out.

#### **SCHOOLS, DEMOCRACY, ANTIRACIST EDUCATION**

Schools, like community groups, may play a role. The youths I met had first become involved in racist activity in junior high school. Their prior (and subsequent) schooling had not led them to harbor a concept of community. The classroom had seldom been shaped as a community in which class members had felt mutual responsibility for one another. On the contrary, the classroom probably had reflected the desperation and the atomization of the society outside the school.

Equally, the schools had left no feel for democracy. The youths had no positive association to the word, which seemed to them a meaningless term used by adults for hypocritical purposes. School had afforded little chance for real impact on decisions that mattered, opportunities to learn in action the meaning of the word democracy. Both community and democracy can be taught through experience in the classroom, when schools consider these goals part of the curriculum and invest energy in building related skills.

For the neo-Nazi youths, the teaching in school of multiculturalism had been another adult exercise in hypocrisy. Black History Month was an annual annoyance. It is easy for an adult-led discussion to seem like sermonizing. I would suggest that education about racism should begin with respect for the constructs and emotions that the students bring with them into the classroom. The students have

ideas and emotions about race that are the product of their own lives. They have heard their parents, their neighbors, and their friends, and they have had their own experiences. To ignore their emotions and constructs around race is to ignore the sense that they make of their own experiences.<sup>3</sup>

Teaching about racism, I want to suggest, is a subtopic of teaching about identity. Perhaps the first step is to help the student think through his or her own sense of identity and to look for its roots. What was the life of your grandparents and what does that life tell you about yourself? What are the legends or myths in your family—why is it special to be a Kelly or a Krueger? What has been the experience of religion that you have heard about from your parents, and what has been your own experience—how have these helped to make you the person you are? Young people, regardless of race or ethnicity, should be helped to see where their own sense of identity comes from and how it affects their own lives. And to see its many different facets. Only then can the student begin to acknowledge that other people also have a sense of identity, and that it also had multiple roots. And also plays a role in their lives.

### **HOW DO WE RESEMBLE THEM? HOW DO WE DIFFER?**

It is fashionable to repeat Walt Kelly's *Pogo*: "We have met the enemy, and they are us." And it is worth noting that the neo-Nazis are not totally alien to White Americans. A social attitude does not exist in the mind as an isolated single entity. Real attitudes, or orientations, are laid down throughout life in layer after layer. If you visited South Africa and spoke with older White South Africans, you would expect to find their minds affected by having grown up in a society that was intensely racist. White Americans grow up in a society in which race has been and is profoundly important.

If I grow up living next to a cement factory and inhale cement dust every day, cement dust becomes part of my body. If I am White and grow up in a society in which race matters, I inhale racism, and racism becomes part of my mind and spirit. (I do not presume to speak here for the experience of people of color.) There will always be layers of myself that harbor racist thoughts and racist attitudes. This is not to say that those must remain the dominant parts of my mind and spirit. It is to say that it is mistaken to presume that I have no traces of racism in me.

The task is to get acquainted with those layers of oneself—to learn to recognize them and not be frightened by them. It is not a disgrace to have absorbed some racism. It is a disgrace not to know it and to let those parts of ourselves go unchecked.

I overcome those layers of myself by getting acquainted with them and by adding additional layers that are not racist. How do I do that? By action: I try to

behave in a nonracist fashion or an antiracist fashion in the external world and absorb this experience as another layer of myself.

There is perhaps a parallel in clinical work. In therapy, I may learn to recognize the parts of me that were shaped by early experience with my parents (or, rather, what my childish mind thought was early experience with my parents). I learn to understand that in some circumstances—for example, in a disagreement with a superior—pieces of those early attitudes are likely to get activated. I can learn to think about this before going into the boss's office, and prepare myself not to be blindsided by infantile parts of myself that are not relevant to the situation at hand. And, over time, I can add layers of nondefensive experience to my psyche.

If, then, those of us who are White have grown up in the same society as the racists and have absorbed some of the same cement dust, are we the same as them? The organized White racist movement rests on the following four axioms: that race is real, that White is best, that the language of human interactions is power, and that society's surface conceals conspiracy. We European Americans have layers of ourselves that also hold the first two of those axioms. We may have been taught in school that race is merely a social construct and that White superiority is a myth. But that teaching runs up against what we are taught by our lives, every day. Race does matter in America. And White ends up on top.

We can learn to not be captive to the layers of ourselves that are racist. "Am I racist?" is not the question. The question is, To what degree am I racist in what situations? And the more important question, What are the concrete effects of my actions (or inactions)? In the 1970s, my interviews with African American families in the Detroit inner-city included interactions with a woman named Ruby and her children (Ezekiel, 1984). Ruby lived on 12th Street (as it was then named), and her children had cornflakes with water for their daily breakfast. Ruby and her children were real; the contrasts between their lives and mine were painful. I learned to ask myself, when people spoke on the radio or at the university about a program or a policy, how it would affect Ruby's children: Would it help them to have milk with their cornflakes, or would they keep on eating cornflakes with water?

### **THE GUILT OF THE ORGANIZED RACISTS**

Between Reconstruction and 1945, 3,000 to 5,000 African American men and women were tortured and killed by lynch mobs. The Ku Klux Klan was a dominant force behind those killings. Local officials were often themselves Klansmen but, in any case, did not obstruct the Klan. During the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, Klansmen instigated mob assaults on Freedom Riders and the like, and carried out bombings and murders of activists—or of little girls in a church—under cover of darkness. Organized White racism has a

long and bloody history. Its goal has been to preserve White domination in America. Its primary weapon has been terror.

The Klan and neo-Nazi groups hold a different position today. Town and county officials are much less likely to be secret members and are much less likely to be cowed by overt White racist demands. To this writer's perception, White racism remains a major strand in American culture, but as a political force, it has expressed itself more often as a covert message within mainstream politics. Major presidential candidates have not hesitated to win support by suggesting that too much is being done for the undeserving poor, a code word for African Americans. Demonization of the poor has proceeded apace, buttressed by an almost unspoken assumption (a statistically inaccurate assumption) that most of the poor are non-Whites. This demonization may have served as a distracting cover for a reapportionment of wealth from middle-income families upwards (Collins & Yeskel, 2000).

Probably the greatest effect of White racism today is its capacity to slow institutional change. Policies that help institutional racism to continue to flourish do much more to hurt minority people than do hate crimes. High infant mortality rates in the inner cities and policies that let them continue are more dangerous than the Klan.

Actual hate crimes, for the most part, are committed by people who are not members of organized White racist groups (Dunbar, 2000; Dunbar et al., 2000). Deep racial distrust and antipathy mark our culture and would exist without the dramatic statements and demonstrations of the White racist groups. But the statements and the rallies of those groups increase the temperature, and the advocacy of specific steps pinpoints actions that perpetrators can take.

The leaders and the lieutenants of those groups are morally responsible to a nontrivial degree for racial violence in the United States (a responsibility they gladly claim in private conversation). Indeed, the future for which they avowedly work is one in which racial violence increases until the long predicted race war erupts and White America wins back its God-ordained dominance. The followers in the groups, the willing actors in the theater produced by the leaders, share in that moral responsibility. And of course, where leaders or followers have committed crimes, they are fully responsible.

### RACISM, HATE CRIMES, AND RESPONSIBILITY

I chose to talk with members and leaders of White racist organizations as part of a broader project of understanding White racism in America. I have gained the impression, since publication of *The Racist Mind*, that more and more of the general public and the educated public are letting the task of talking about hate crimes displace from the agenda the task of thinking about racism.

Perhaps this is not surprising. You and I do not commit racial assaults, and no one we know does. It is interesting and unthreatening to imagine the world of

those other people, whoever they may be, who engage in racist violence. And how nice if that form of contemplation can also be the only price White people have to pay for living in an unjust society. So that the more indignant and outraged I can be about the evils of the Klan and neo-Nazis, the more virtuous I can feel. And the more virtuous I feel about their misdeeds, the less I need to listen to tiresome critics who talk about racism and the need for institutional changes.

If I were to think about the true and continuing effects of racism, I would have to think about the ongoing social order, in which I am a part and for which I have responsibility. All of us are ready to say that Klan murders are evil. But what are we ready to do, today, about the continuing racially based maldistribution of health, of wealth, and of hope?

## NOTES

1. A recent report suggested that the influence of Christian identity in the movement is in decline, being replaced, especially among young members, by racial Odinism (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2001c).
2. In interviews, speeches, and conversations, nothing was said about Catholics or the Catholic Church.
3. The teacher must proceed, I think, with some humility. It is not unreasonable for a White American kid to have absorbed some racism. That young person is growing up in a fairly racist society—that is, a society in which race strongly affects life chances (health, longevity, income, wealth). He or she hears on all sides conversations in which race is an emotionally charged subject. He or she lives, often, in a neighborhood that is segregated by race. This young person learns over and over that race matters in America. To preach to an adolescent that race does not matter, or that we should act as though it does not matter, rightly invites skepticism. Teachers need to wrestle in their own minds and guts with these issues before trying to educate others. Are teachers ready to be honest with children about the actual state of our society and to talk honestly about the steps that may need to happen for the society to be less racist? This may require talking about economics, the great unspeakable in our culture. Teachers may need to spend time in protected settings, working through their own understanding; they may also need to do a fair amount of reading. Simple preaching is not going to accomplish the task (Ezekiel, 1998, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c).

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