

UNIT IV

SAMPLING

Social scientists rarely are able to study all the people, places, and events in which they are interested. Therefore, they resort to sampling. Seeking knowledge about a class of objects or events (called a **population**), they observe a subset of these (called a **sample**), and then they extend the findings to the whole class (Stephan & McCarthy, 1958, p. 22). To assess the generalizability of a study's findings, we need to know how the study sample was drawn.

There are two broad approaches to sampling: probability and nonprobability. In **probability sampling**, cases are selected randomly so that all cases in the population have a known probability of being included in the sample. **Nonprobability sampling** refers to any nonrandom method of case selection. The advantages of probability sampling are that it eliminates bias in case selection and makes it possible to statistically estimate sampling error; however, it is not always possible or preferable. To select cases randomly, for example, it is necessary to identify all members of the population; so, if the population is not identifiable, as with many marginal or deviant groups, one must use nonprobability sampling. Moreover, resources such as time, money, and personnel may preclude random sampling.

Probability sampling is a standard feature of surveys and opinion polls, which typically provide precise estimates of population characteristics. In reporting results, pollsters

indicate the margin of sampling error. For example, based on daily telephone interviews with about 1,500 respondents, Gallup tracks the percentage of Americans who approve or disapprove of the job the president is doing. The weekly average for January 2 through 8, 2012, indicated that 46% approved of the job Barack Obama was doing as president (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/116479/barack-obama-presidential-job-approval.aspx>). The daily poll results have a margin of error of + or – 3%, meaning that the percent approval for all Americans was likely to fall between 43% and 49%.

Nonprobability sampling is common in laboratory experiments, in which subjects often consist of undergraduates who volunteer or receive course credit for participating. It also is a staple of qualitative research, where small samples and research goals tend to favor nonrandom selection. If one is conducting in-depth interviews with a very small number of cases, for example, it usually is better to use expert judgment (i.e., nonrandom selection) than to rely on chance. And in exploratory studies, where the goal is to become more informed about a group or topic, one need not be concerned about precise statistical generalization.

Within each of these two broad sampling methods, there are various ways to select cases. In probability sampling, the specific method depends on the availability of a list of the population and, when personal interviews are

conducted, the geographical dispersion of the population. For example, with relatively small, geographically concentrated populations such as universities, researchers may use **simple random sampling**, in which they select cases randomly from a readily available list of the student population. With larger, dispersed populations for which a complete list does not exist, researchers use **multi-stage cluster sampling** in which the population is broken down into segments or clusters such as states, cities, and blocks, and random selection occurs in stages. Because they wanted to accurately describe the nation's sexual beliefs and habits, the authors of the first selection used multi-stage cluster sampling to select respondents for a personal interview survey.

Likewise, researchers may draw nonprobability samples in various ways. For example, they may select a **convenience sample** by interviewing conveniently available passersby on a street corner or asking for volunteers to participate in an experiment. They may use a process of chain referral, called **snowball sampling**, by first interviewing known members of the population and asking each interviewee to provide the names and contact information of other members of the population, who are then contacted and asked to name others, and so on. Or, researchers may use **purposive sampling** in which they use their expert judgment to draw a sample that is representative of the larger target population. Kathleen Blee, author of the second selection, used purposive sampling to draw a small sample of women who belonged to racist groups.

Both probability and nonprobability sampling have their strengths and limitations. As you read the selections in this unit and others to come, think about whether the particular sampling strategy achieves the goals of the studies.

REFERENCES

Stephan, F. J., & McCarthy, P. J. (1958). *Sampling opinions: An analysis of survey procedure*. New York: Wiley.

RESOURCES

The American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR):

http://www.aapor.org/Bad_Samples1.htm

- This specific link is to what the AAPOR calls “bad samples.” Not only is this linked material instructive, it can also be quite humorous. The website, as a whole, is devoted to survey research; more information about sampling can be found at: http://www.aapor.org/What_is_a_Random_Sample_1.htm

How Polls Are Conducted:

<http://media.gallup.com/PDF/FAQ/HowArePolls.pdf>

- An excerpt from the book, *Where America Stands*, this essay provides an overview of how the Gallup organization conducts public opinion telephone surveys. Gallup poll editors describe the selection of a random sample and the selection of respondents within households.

A Sample of a Sample: How the Typical Respondent Is Found:

<http://www.nytimes.com/library/national/110499/poll-watch.html>

- Many opinion polls these days are based on telephone interviews that use random-digit dialing for sample selection. This brief nontechnical article describes the random-digit dialing sampling procedure of the *New York Times/CBS News Poll*.

Research Randomizer:

<http://randomizer.org/>

- If you need to draw a random sample for a study, you may want to visit this website. It generates random numbers, which you can then match to names from your (numbered) list of the population. Some commonly used software programs can also do this.

Custom Insight, Talent Management Solutions:

<http://www.custominsight.com/articles/random-sample-calculator.asp>

- The authors of the first selection discuss the importance of sample *size*. In case you missed the link to this from the AAPOR's general sampling page, this website allows you to calculate the sample size one needs at different levels of sampling error. Needless to say, this website is for the statistically inclined.

Sampling for Qualitative Research:

<http://fampra.oxfordjournals.org/content/13/6.toc> (see Marshall, 522–526)

- This brief article contrasts quantitative and qualitative approaches to sampling, points out the inappropriateness of random sampling for qualitative research such as Blee's study of women in the hate movement (Selection 8), and describes three broad methods of selecting a sample in qualitative studies.

Selection 7

In 1993, Robert Michael, John Gagnon, and Edward Laumann completed the first methodologically sound survey of American sexual practices and beliefs, the National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSLs). Prior to this time, many other sex surveys had been conducted, but all of them used, as Michael and colleagues bluntly put it, “methods guaranteed to yield worthless results” (Michael et al., 1994, p. 16).

Foremost among the flawed methods were the procedures for selecting respondents, including those used by Alfred Kinsey in his well-known sex survey. In this selection from *Sex in America*, the authors contrast Kinsey’s sampling methods with their own research. As you read, note the key differences between Kinsey’s methods and the scientific sampling techniques of Michael and colleagues’ national survey.

THE SEX SURVEY

ROBERT T. MICHAEL, JOHN H. GAGNON,
EDWARD O. LAUMANN, AND GINA KOLATA

Of all the studies that purport to tell about sex in America, the vast majority are unreliable; many are worse than useless. As social scientists, we found that the well-established survey methods that can so accurately describe the nation’s voting patterns or the vicissitudes of the labor force rarely were used to study sexuality. And the methods that were used in many of the popular studies had flaws so deep and so profound that they render the data and their interpretations meaningless.

The era of large sex surveys began with the Kinsey reports.¹ And the story of those reports illustrates what has gone wrong with attempts to study sex in America.

Alfred Kinsey felt that standard sample survey methods were a practical impossibility when it came to the subject of sex, so he compromised. Kinsey’s compromise was to take his subjects where he could find them. He and his associates went to college sororities and fraternities, college classes and student groups, rooming houses,

Source: Sex in America by Robert T. Michael, John H. Gagnon, Edward O. Laumann, and Gina Kolata. Copyright © 1994 Robert T. Michael, John H. Gagnon, Edward O. Laumann, and Gina Kolata. By permission of Little, Brown and Company. All rights reserved.

prisons, mental hospitals, social organizations of many kinds, and friendship groups in which one interview might lead to others. For a fourteen-year period, he even collared hitchhikers in town.

One looming problem was that the people Kinsey interviewed could not stand in for all Americans. A fraternity here, a college class there, a PTA from a third place, and a group of homosexual men from somewhere else do not, taken together, reflect the population of the United States.

Instead of studying randomly selected members of the population, Kinsey interviewed what is called a sample of convenience, a sample that consisted of volunteers that he recruited or who came to him. This introduced two problems. First, the people he interviewed could not be thought of as representative of anyone in the population other than themselves. They got into the sample because they were relatively convenient for Kinsey to find and persuade to participate, or because they offered to participate on their own. Consequently, while they may have told the truth about their own sex lives, neither Kinsey nor anyone else can know how to generalize from these people to say anything useful or accurate about the whole population or about any particular subset of the population.

It's like interviewing people near the train station at 8:45 in the morning to ask how they usually get to work. If 80 percent of them say they take the train, no one would use that fact to generalize that 80 percent of the people who commute to work in that city take the train.

The second problem was that many of Kinsey's respondents volunteered to be in the study. For a sex survey, it seems likely that those who do volunteer and those who do not have different behavior, different experiences, and different attitudes about sex. If so, the data that are collected from volunteers will give an inaccurate picture of the whole population. By including the sexual histories of those who especially want to be counted in the survey, that survey gives a biased picture. This is true for any survey, not just one on sexual behavior. Many studies have suggested that people who volunteer

for surveys are not like people who do not volunteer,² and there is some evidence that people who volunteer for sex surveys have wider sexual experience than those who do not. In addition, there is evidence that people who engage in highly stigmatized behaviors, such as incest, may refuse to be interviewed or would not volunteer to do so.

So, since Kinsey did not select his respondents in a way that permitted generalization, the data he obtained are at best interesting facts about the people he interviewed but are not useful for making statements about the population at large.

Yet though the study was flawed, even by the standards of the time, Kinsey's data shocked the nation and became enshrined as the nation's report card on sexual behavior. The subtext of his books, and what particularly outraged many of his critics, was Kinsey's view that a wide variety of sexual practices were normal and biologically based, part of the animal world as well as part of human society.

Although some statisticians pointed out that Kinsey's methods of sampling were bound to lead to unreliable data, skewed toward an exaggeration of Americans' sexual activities, his data were all we had and their inadequacies went little noticed in the sea of criticism over what they would do to the moral fabric.

Our study, called the National Health and Social Life Survey, or NHSLS, has findings that often directly contradict what has become the conventional wisdom about sex. They are counterrevolutionary findings, showing a country with very diverse sexual practices but one that, on the whole, is much less sexually active than we have come to believe.

There are good reasons, however, to believe that our new data more accurately reflect the behavior of the adult American population. Our survey, in contrast to the "reports" that preceded it, was a truly scientific endeavor, using advanced and sophisticated methods of social science research. These methods had been developed and used in the past for investigations of such things as political opinions, labor force participation and hours of work, expenditure

patterns, or migration behavior. Like studies of less emotionally charged subjects, studies of sex can succeed if respondents are convinced that there is a legitimate reason for doing the research, that their answers will be treated nonjudgmentally, and that their confidentiality will be protected.

In our original study design we wanted a sample size of 20,000, which would enable us to analyze separately data from people who are members of small subpopulations. For example, if 4 percent of the population were gay, a sample size of 20,000 men and women would yield about 400 homosexual men and 400 homosexual women, enough for us to analyze their responses separately.

In the process of designing our survey, it was clear that we would not be able to achieve this sample size with the limited resources of the private sector. We received enough money from private foundations to study nearly 3,500 adults, enough to be extremely confident about the accuracy of the data as a whole, but the sample would not be large enough for detailed analyses of small minority groups (most political polls, for example, have a sample size of 1,000 to 1,500, which gives them sampling errors of no more than 3 percent).

We knew, because we used established statistical sampling techniques, that our respondents represented the general population. In addition, we purposely included slightly more blacks and Hispanics so that we would have enough members of these minority groups to enable us to analyze their responses separately, with confidence that they made statistical sense.

We would have liked to have done the same for homosexuals, including more gay men and lesbians so that we could analyze their replies separately. However, homosexuals are not so easily identified, and for good reason, because their preferences for a partner of the same gender should be private if they want them to be. But that means we could not so easily find an expanded representative sample of homosexuals as we could find blacks or Hispanics. And that means that we could not analyze homosexual behavior separately, asking, for example, how many

partners gay men and lesbians have in their lifetimes or where they met their partners. But we included homosexual sex as part of sex in general, so when we ask a question such as, “How often do you have sex?” we do not distinguish between homosexuals and heterosexuals.

The most important part of our study was the way we selected the people to be interviewed. It can be tricky, and subtle, to pick out a group that represents all Americans. For example, you might say you will go to every neighborhood and knock on the door of the corner house on each block. But that would not give you a representative sample because people who live in corner houses are different from other people—as a rule, they are richer than their neighbors on the block because corner houses tend to cost more. Or you might say you’ll find married couples by taking every couple that got married in June. But then you would end up with too few Jews because there is a proscription in Judaism against marrying in certain weeks that often fall in June.

Of course, the most obvious way might be to randomly select individuals from households across the country. But finding and interviewing people scattered across the United States can be very expensive, so social scientists have found a cheaper, but equally valid, way of identifying a representative sample. Essentially, we choose at random geographic areas of the country, using the statistical equivalent of a coin toss to select them. Within these geographic regions, we randomly select cities, towns, and rural areas. Within those cities and towns we randomly select neighborhoods. Within those neighborhoods, we randomly select households.

This method gave us 9,004 addresses. Naturally, since the addresses were generated by a computer, many of the addresses either did not have a residence on them or had a residence on them that was empty. Others had a household but no one who lived there was eligible for our survey—they were not between the ages of eighteen and fifty-nine or did not speak English. We determined that 4,635 of the original 9,004 household addresses were ineligible for one of those reasons, so that left us with 4,369

households that did have someone living in them who was eligible to participate in the study. Although it may seem that our sample shrank quite a bit from the original 9,004 addresses, that is normal and to be expected. We did not say we wanted a random sample of addresses for our survey. We wanted a representative sample of Americans who were aged eighteen to fifty-nine and who spoke English.

We selected the individual in a household to interview by a random process. In effect, if there were two people living in a household who were in our age range, we flipped a coin to select which one to interview. If there were three people in the household, we did the equivalent of flipping a three-sided coin to select one of them to interview.

[Many “reports” of sexual practices, such as those by *Playboy* and *Redbook* magazines, are based on people who volunteer to fill out a questionnaire. However,] the difference between this method and the method used [in our survey] is profound. [In self-selected opinions surveys,] anyone who wants to be interviewed can be. In our surveys, we did not let anyone be interviewed unless we selected them. If we selected a man who offered his wife in his stead, saying he was too busy to be interviewed, we declined to interview her. And if he adamantly refused to be interviewed, his refusal counted against us. He is a nonrespondent, even though his wife might have been eager to fill in for him.

Of all the eligible households, our interviewers completed 3,432 interviews, so we have the remarkable outcome that nearly four out of every five persons we wanted to interview, across the nation, were willing to sit down and answer a ninety-minute questionnaire about their sexual behavior and other aspects of their sex lives. This response rate is even more remarkable because it includes as nonresponders people who simply could not be found to be interviewed.

Once we had the data, we asked whether the 3,432 respondents, as a group, were representative of the population of those aged eighteen to fifty-nine in the United States. In fact, our sample turned out to be exactly like other highly reputable and scientifically valid national samples.

Table 7.1 shows a few of the comparisons we made, using our unweighted sample that excludes the extra blacks and Hispanics that we added on purpose. We compared our group to the Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey of over 140,000 people for 1991 as the benchmark. It is the best information that demographers can get about the characteristics of the population.

The similarities between our sample and the Current Population Survey of the Census Bureau extend to age, education level, and marital status, as Table 7.1 illustrates. This extraordinary similarity of our sample to the U.S. population, from which we randomly selected our respondents, provides assurance that the respondents who were interviewed were representative of the population of all Americans aged eighteen to fifty-nine.

We also looked at the proportions of men and women who answered our questions. We knew from the census data that 49.7 percent of Americans aged eighteen to fifty-nine are men. Among our respondents, 44.6 percent are men. Other surveys that are of high quality, like the General Social Survey and the National Survey of Family and Households, had virtually the same percentages of men and women as we have. The General Social Survey has 43.8 percent men and the National Survey of Families and Households had 43.0 percent men. So we can say with confidence that the people who agreed to participate in our survey of sexual behavior were just like the population at large in their gender. We were not disproportionately interviewing—or failing to interview—either men or women.

Now there are many people in the nation who are not represented in our survey. We can speak with confidence about the behavior of the noninstitutionalized, currently housed population aged eighteen to fifty-nine. We can say nothing about those who currently live in institutions like hospitals or jails or about the homeless or about those who are under age eighteen or older than fifty-nine [or about people who speak a language other than English]. Our sample did not include those groups. But 97.1 percent of [English-speaking] American adults aged eighteen to

TABLE 7.1 Comparison of Social Characteristics in NHSLS and U.S. Population

	<i>U.S. Population</i>	<i>NHSLS</i>
Gender		
Men	49.7%	44.6%
Women	50.3	55.4
	100%	100%
Age		
18–24	18.2%	15.9%
25–29	14.3	14.5
30–39	29.5	31.3
40–49	22.7	22.9
50–59	15.3	15.3
	100%	100%
Education		
Less than high school	15.8%	13.9%
High school or equivalent	64.0	62.2
Any college	13.9	16.6
Advanced	6.3	7.3
	100%	100%
Marital status		
Never married	27.7%	28.2%
Currently married	58.3	53.3
Divorced, separated	12.4	16.2
Widowed	1.6	2.3
	100%	100%
Race/ethnicity		
White	75.9%	76.5%
Black	11.7	12.7
Hispanic	9.0	7.5
Other	3.3	3.3
	100%	100%

Notes: NHSLS unweighted cross-section sample of 3,159.

Gender: Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, 1991.

Age, Race/Ethnicity: Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, 1991.

Education: Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, 1990.

Marital Status: Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, 1992.

fifty-nine in the nation are represented, and this is the first large-scale study of the broad and inclusive dimensions of the sexual patterns and experiences of this large majority of Americans. All this checking of our data has convinced us that this sample is an excellent one from which we can make generalizations about sex in America and we do so with confidence.

NOTES

1. Alfred C. Kinsey, Wendell B. Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders Co., 1948); Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, Clyde E. Martin, and Paul H. Gebhard, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders Co., 1953).
2. Norman M. Bradburn and Seymour Sudman, *Polls and Surveys: Understanding What They Tell Us* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1988).

QUESTIONS

1. Kinsey interviewed what the authors call a “sample of convenience,” or more simply, a

“convenience sample.” What are the two major problems associated with this type of sample that make it impossible to use as a basis for generalizing to the larger population?

2. Explain why the researchers were able to separately analyze the survey responses of blacks and Hispanics but not homosexuals.

3. The survey that Michael and colleagues conducted, the National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSLs), used multi-stage cluster sampling. Describe the steps or stages involved in selecting their sample of addresses or households.

4. One indicator of survey quality is the **response rate**: the number of completed interviews divided by the number of sampled or eligible households. What was the response rate of the NHSLs?

5. One way to evaluate the representativeness of a sample is to compare it with other established, scientifically valid samples of the same population. How did selected characteristics of the NHSLs compare with the same characteristics of the Current Population Survey?

Selection 8

Racist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and Aryan Nations “are routinely condemned and shunned” by mainstream society (Blee, 2002, p. 192), as they should be. Yet, to design effective strategies to combat such groups and the ideas that they espouse, we must understand why people choose to join them. Based on this premise, Blee set out to interview women in a variety of racist groups to learn about their identities, life

histories, and beliefs. One of the difficulties in studying groups such as these is identifying and selecting members to interview. Blee describes how she used systematic, albeit nonrandom, methods to select a broad-based, national sample of women in the hate movement. As you read, make note of how she sought to overcome the obstacles to drawing a representative sample of this population.

CROSSING A BOUNDARY

KATHLEEN M. BLEE

Intense, activist racism typically does not arise on its own; it is learned in racist *groups*. These groups promote ideas radically different from the racist attitudes held by many whites. They teach a complex and contradictory mix of hatred for enemies, belief in conspiracies, and allegiance to an imaginary unified race of “Aryans.” Women are the newest recruiting targets of racist groups, and they provide a key to these groups’ campaign for racial supremacy. “We are very picky when we come to girls,” one woman told me. “We don’t like sluts. The girls must know their place but take care of business and contribute a lot too. Our girls have a clean slate. Nobody could disrespect us if they tried.

We want girls [who are] well educated, the whole bit. And tough as shit.”

The groups and networks that espouse and promote openly racist and anti-Semitic, and often xenophobic and homophobic, views and actions are what I call “organized racism.” Organized racism is more than the aggregation of individual racist sentiments. It is a social milieu in which venomous ideas—about African Americans, Jews, Hispanics, Asians, gay men and lesbians, and others—take shape. Through networks of groups and activists, it channels personal sentiments of hatred into collective racist acts. Organized racism is different from the racism widespread in mainstream white

Source: Inside Organized Racism: Women in the Hate Movement, by Kathleen M. Blee, 2002, Berkeley: University of California. Copyright 2002 University of California Press.

society: it is more focused, self-conscious, and targeted at specific strategic goals.

When I began my research, I wanted to understand the paradoxes of organized racism. Were, I wondered, the increased numbers of women changing the masculine cast of racist groups? Why, I asked myself, did racist activists continue to see Jews, African Americans, and others as enemies, and why did they regard violence as a racial solution? Convinced that we can defeat organized racism only if we know how it recruits and retains its members, I also wanted to learn why people join organized racism and how being in racist groups affects them.

FOCUSING ON RACIST WOMEN

To understand organized racism from the inside—from the experiences and beliefs of its members—I decided that I needed to talk with racist activists. I chose to interview women for a variety of reasons. On a practical level, I found that I could get access to women racists and develop some measure of rapport with them. More substantively, I wanted to study women racists because we know so little about them. Since 1980 women have been actively recruited by U.S. racist groups both because racist leaders see them as unlikely to have criminal records that would draw the attention of police and because they help augment membership rolls. Today, women are estimated to constitute nearly 50 percent of new members in some racist groups, leading some antiracist monitoring groups to claim that they are the “fastest growing part of the racist movement.”¹ Yet this new group of racist activists has been ignored, as researchers have tended to view racism as male-dominated and racist women as more interested in domestic and personal concerns than in its politics.

METHODOLOGY

The women in this study are broadly representative of the range of women racial activists across the

country and represent the only relatively systematic sample of racist group members in the contemporary United States. A statistically random sample of racist activists is not possible because there is no comprehensive list of racist activists or even a reliable estimate of their numbers. Except for a few public leaders, most racist activists are interested in keeping themselves hidden from the public, and the scholarly, eye. The few studies that have looked at members rather than leaders of racist groups have drawn on small numbers, generally members known personally to the researcher or referred by known members. They also tend to focus on a single racist group or a single geographic area.

To create a broadly based, national sample of women racist group members, I began by collecting and reading all newsletters, magazines, flyers and recordings of music and speeches, websites, television and radio programs, videotapes, 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 from 1993 to 1994. These were gathered from all groups that I could identify through my contacts with self-proclaimed racist activists, through citations in the primary and secondary scholarly literature, from lists maintained by major antiracist and anti-Semitic monitoring and activist organizations (including the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and the Center for Democratic Renewal), from archival collections on right-wing extremism at Tulane University and the University of Kansas, and from references in the literature of other racist groups. As a result, I collected publications by more than one hundred different groups, most of which issued items at least two times during that year.

I used these materials to determine which groups had significant numbers of women members or women in visible or leadership roles. I then selected approximately thirty groups from among those with active women members or leaders (overlap makes several of these

difficult to differentiate). I selected groups that varied in their ideological emphases and form of organization so that I could assess whether these characteristics affected the recruitment and commitment of women members.

To examine whether racist groups that are remnants of racist activities in rural southern areas differ from those in other regions, I also selected groups from every region of the country, with nine from the South, ten from the West Coast, eight from the Midwest, and three from the East Coast. They were located in fifteen different states, with the greatest concentrations in Georgia (four), Oklahoma (three), Oregon (four), and Florida (four). Such geographical dispersion reflects the landscape of organized racism today. Racist groups can be found in almost every area of the country, but they are particularly concentrated in the Pacific Northwest and the northern sections of the West Coast, in part because many racist group members from various parts of the country have migrated to this region in search of a pristine “white homeland.”²²

After identifying a sample of racist groups, I still faced the problem of identifying women to be interviewed. Most racist publications do not publish the actual names of members other than those who are public spokespersons for the group. Many racist activists and even some spokespersons use aliases or code names, such as “Viking Mary.” Thus, finding women to be interviewed was a protracted process. I was able to contact a few women through their groups, but generally this direct approach was inadvisable: racist activists are highly suspicious of and hostile to unknown outsiders. I relied most often on a more indirect approach, using personal referrals and contacts to break through layers of evasion, deception, and political and personal posturing. To find racist women, I drew on contacts that I had established in my earlier research. I also located women racists through parole officers, correctional officials, newspaper reporters and journalists, other racist activists and former activists, federal and state task forces on gangs, attorneys, and other researchers. Although they might seem to be an unlikely source of referrals, police and criminal

investigators were valuable contacts for some young racist skinheads, who both hate such authorities and find themselves occasionally dependent on them for protection from abusive peers and the dangers of life on the streets.

To ensure a variety of experiences and perspectives, I selected all the women from my target groups. This method provides a more representative look at organized racism than does a reliance on snowball samples (in which interviewees are referred by prior interviewees) or samples of convenience (in which interviewees are selected based on their accessibility to the researcher), techniques commonly used in studies of difficult-to-locate populations. Even when one interviewee was likely to know women in a group that I was interested in contacting, I rarely made use of this connection because I did not want the women to have the opportunity to slant their narratives to fit, or perhaps to contradict, stories told by earlier interviewees from related or antagonistic groups. Word of my research project spread quickly among networks of racist activists, at once putting me in the awkward position of declining to interview some women who wanted to be part of the study and helping me gain the confidence of others. The knowledge that I had interviewed someone in the past who did not immediately become the target of criminal investigation added credibility to my claim that I was not feeding information to prosecutors.

To explore whether women at different levels of racist group hierarchies vary in their racist identification or commitment, I searched for women in various positions in their groups. I selected four who were leaders known both in and outside the movement, ten who were leaders but who were not known publicly, and twenty who were rank-and-file members of racist groups. I also sought women of disparate ages in an effort to assess whether the appeal of racist groups might be understood differently by those at different ages or with different levels of family responsibilities.

Eventually, I persuaded thirty-four women from a variety of racist and anti-Semitic groups across the country to talk to me at length about themselves and their racist

activities. Fourteen women were in neo-Nazi but not skinhead groups, six were members of Ku Klux Klans, eight were white power skinheads, and six were in Christian Identity or related groups.

Why were these racist women willing to talk to me? They had a variety of reasons. Some hoped to generate publicity for their groups or themselves—a common motivation for granting interviews to the media. Many saw an opportunity to explain their racial politics to a white outsider, even one decidedly unsympathetic to their arguments. In a racist variant on the religious imperative to “bear witness” to the unconverted,³ they wanted the outside world to have an accurate (even if negative) account to counter superficial media reports. As one young woman put it, “I don’t know what your political affiliations are, but I trust that you’ll try to be as objective as possible.” Others wished to support or challenge what they imagined I had been told in earlier interviews with racist comrades or competitors. And, despite their deep antagonism toward authority figures, some young women were flattered to have their opinions solicited by a university professor. They had rarely encountered someone older who talked with them without being patronizing, threatening, or directive.

From the beginning, when I asked women if I could interview them, I made it clear that I did not share the racial convictions of these groups. I explicitly said that my views were quite opposed to theirs, that they should not hope to convert me to their views, but that I would try to depict women racist activists accurately. I revealed my critical stance but made it clear that I had no intent to portray them as crazy and did not plan to turn them over to law enforcement or mental health agencies.

I was prepared to elaborate on my disagreements with organized racism in my interviews, but in nearly every case the women cut me short, eager to talk about themselves. What they told me shatters many common ideas about what racist activists are like. Among the women I interviewed there was no single racist

type. The media depict unkempt, surly women in faded T-shirts, but the reality is different. One of my first interviews was with Mary, a vivacious Klanswoman who met me at her door with a big smile and ushered me into her large, inviting kitchen. Her blond hair was pulled back into a long ponytail and tied with a large green bow. She wore dangling gold hoop earrings, blue jeans, a modest flowered blouse, and no visible tattoos or other racist insignia. Her only other jewelry was a simple gold-colored necklace. Perhaps sensing my surprise at her unremarkable appearance, she joked that her suburban appearance was her “undercover uniform.”

Trudy, an elderly Nazi activist I interviewed somewhat later, lived in a one-story, almost shabby ranch house on a lower-middle-class street in a small town in the Midwest. Her house was furnished plainly. Moving cautiously with the aid of a walker, she brought out tea and cookies prepared for my visit. Meeting her reminded me of the phrase “old country women,” which I had once heard from a southern policeman characterizing the rural Klanswomen in his area.

I also interviewed Roseanne, a small, lively white supremacist woman with short-cropped black hair who wore a flowered sundress. We got together in the living room of her government-subsidized apartment in a large, racially mixed housing complex. Her apartment was very small and nearly barren of furniture—making her expensive computer and fax and copy machines dedicated to her work “for the movement” stand out all the more.

My encounters with skinhead women were more guarded, although some were quite animated and articulate. Not one invited me into her home—all I got was a quick glance when I picked her up for an interview in some other location. Most seemed to live at or barely above the level of squatters, in dirty, poorly equipped spaces that were nearly uninhabitable. Their appearance varied. Molly sported five ear piercings that held silver hoops and a silver female sign, an attractive and professionally cut punk hairstyle, fine features, and intense eyes. Others were ghostly figures, with empty eyes

and visible scars poorly hidden behind heavy makeup and garish lipstick.

Over a two-year period I spent considerable time with these women, talking to them about their racist commitments and getting them to tell me their life stories. Listening to them describe their backgrounds, I realized that many did not fit common stereotypes about racist women as uneducated, marginal members of society raised in terrible families and lured into racist groups by boyfriends and husbands. Instead, I learned:

- *Most were educated.* Against the idea that racism is the product of ignorance, fourteen of the thirty-four women were in college or held associate or higher degrees. Another fifteen had finished or were currently in high school. Only five had failed to complete high school.
- *Most were not poor.* People generally believe that racism is most intense among poor and lower-working-class people who compete with racial minorities for jobs, housing, and social services. However, most of the women I interviewed had good jobs. They were occupational therapists, nurses, teachers, engineers, librarians, draftpersons, or phone company representatives. Some were attending college; others were not employed but were married to men with decent jobs. Only about one-third were living in more precarious conditions—as waitresses in pizza parlors, as lay ministers in tiny racist churches, as teachers in racist private schools, or as the wives of men who lacked secure employment.
- *For some, poverty was caused by racist activism.* For almost half of those without good jobs (or married to underemployed men), marginal employment was a *consequence*, not a *cause*, of being active in racist politics. Some women (or their husbands) lost their jobs when employers discovered their racist activities, or when they were caught proselytizing racism to customers or fellow employees. Others decided to work in racist enclaves—for example, as teachers in Christian Identity schools—to escape the nefarious influences of the outside world and to contribute to the racist movement.
- *Most did not grow up poor.* Most of the parents of these women had decent jobs. Their fathers

were laboratory technicians, construction workers, store owners, company executives, salesmen, farmers, repairmen, postal workers, architects, doctors, factory foremen, and inspectors as well as Christian Identity “ministers.” Their mothers were housewives and Christian Identity schoolteachers as well as nurses, teachers, secretaries, social workers, clerks, computer consultants, corporate executives, real estate agents, and bankers.

- *Most were not raised in abusive families.* Writers often suggest that racist activists are the product of disorganized, uncaring, or abusive families.⁴ Yet none of the women I interviewed were raised in foster homes, by relatives, or in institutions. Several grew up in unstable and violent families, ran away from home, or had intense conflicts with parents or stepparents, but it is not clear that such stresses burdened a significantly higher proportion of these women than the population as a whole. In contrast, some women related stories of idyllic family lives, as did the Klanswoman who recalled her “very happy family background [in which] my parents have been married for thirty-two years and all my brothers and sisters and I are very close.” Most described their family backgrounds in more mixed terms, as both nurturing and restrictive. In any case, it is difficult to know how childhood experiences are related to racist activism.
- *Not all women followed a man into racism.* Racist women often are seen as compliant followers of the men in their lives. But the women I interviewed described many paths into the racist movement. Several said they and their husbands or boyfriends grew up in the racist movement and followed their family’s political path. Four said that they and their husband or boyfriend joined a racist group at the same time, as a mutual decision. Another four said they joined racist groups by themselves and met their current boyfriend or husband at a racist event. Seven said a boyfriend or husband encouraged them to join a racist group. Others followed different patterns, including one woman who followed her son into the racist movement, several who recruited male intimates into racist activism, and a handful whose husbands or boyfriends refused to become involved in organized racism.

NOTES

1. Floyd Cochran, a prominent antiracist activist quoted in Linda Yglesias, untitled in *New York Daily News*, July 27, 1993; clipping in “Aryan Action Line” folder, Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, New York.

2. “Racists Seek to Form White Homeland in the Northwest,” *Albany (Ore.) Democrat-Herald*, June 12, 198

3. On “bearing witness,” see Virginia Lieson Brereton, *From Sin to Salvation: Stories of Women’s Conversion, 1800 to the Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991). On the perception of researchers as “naïve sympathizers,” see Richard G. Mitchell, *Secrecy and Fieldwork* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1993), 14.

4. For example, in his study of a racist group in Detroit, *The Racist Mind*, Ezekiel finds family problems and trauma in the background of many of the racist men he interviewed.

QUESTIONS

1. Why did Blee choose to interview female, as opposed to male, racist activists?

2. What prevents researchers from drawing a random sample of racist activists? Prior to Blee’s study, how did researchers go about studying members of racist groups?

3. Evaluate Blee’s study from the standpoint of generalizability. In what ways did her selection of interviewees constitute a relatively diverse, broadly based, national sample of women members of racist groups?

4. Once she selected a sample of racist *groups*, how did Blee find the women she interviewed?

5. In what ways did the women interviewed by Blee not fit the stereotypes of racist women?