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Structured Ignorance and Organized Racism in the United States*

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Abstract

A theory of structured ignorance is developed and applied in an analysis of variation in the number of racist organizations in U.S. counties in 1997 and 2000. The theory identifies forms of structural differentiation that would make the worldview constructed within racist organizations seem plausible to a critical mass of individuals. I argue that racial and ethnic heterogeneity, industrial heterogeneity, income inequality, and changes in the economic structure within local communities provide "evidence" that may appear to be consistent with white supremacists' claims if individuals lack an alternative interpretation. Educational inequality, however, inhibits racist organizing by facilitating the exchange of information that could be used to reject the white supremacists' claims and by promoting passive acceptance of the existing order.

Throughout much of the history of the U.S., a majority of white Americans have favored racial segregation based on a belief in the natural superiority of whites over blacks. Over the past fifty years, however, there has been a substantial decline in the number of Americans who openly express attitudes of traditional prejudice. Survey research shows that many white Americans continue to oppose policies such as affirmative action that are designed to promote racial equality (Jackman & Muha 1984; Quillian 1996; Schuman, Steeh & Bobo 1988), yet only a small proportion express attitudes reflecting a belief that whites are innately superior to nonwhites and therefore more deserving of basic rights

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and privileges (see Bobo & Kluegel 1993; Firebaugh & Davis 1988; Quillian 1996). Although a belief in white supremacy has declined steadily in the United States among the general population, a white supremacy movement has gained strength since the early 1980s (Blee 1998; Ezekiel 1995). According to the Southern Poverty Law Center's "Intelligence Project," more than 600 hate groups were active in the United States in the year 2000 (SPLC 2000).

Currently, the white supremacy movement in the United States is fractionalized and politically powerless in comparison to white supremacy movements of earlier historical eras such as the Ku Klux Klan of the 1870s and of the 1920s. Nevertheless, membership in various racist organizations, particularly neo-Nazi and skinhead organizations, has been on the rise (Perry 2000), and the Internet has provided these groups with a means of reaching new audiences with their messages (see Blazak 2001; Burris, Smith & Strahm 2000). Racist organizations have also been responsible for, or have provided inspiration for, numerous hate crimes in recent years (see Dees & Corcoran 1996; Feagin & Vera 1995; Levin & McDevitt 1993).

In this article I offer a theory of structured ignorance that draws attention to structural conditions that facilitate and sustain racist organizations within advanced industrial nations such as the United States. I develop Michael Schwartz's (1976) concept of "structured ignorance" and draw upon Peter Blau's macrostructural theory of social relations (Blau 1977, 1994; Blau & Schwartz 1984). Following Schwartz's lead, I consider the ways in which different patterns of structural differentiation in society can either conceal or reveal information that is needed to develop an accurate diagnosis of the problems that confront groups and individuals. The term "structured ignorance" is not meant to be pejorative. Instead, the term acknowledges that the world can look quite different to individuals depending upon their position in the social structure. An interpretation of a particular problem may seem bizarre to individuals in one structural context while it may seem perfectly reasonable in another. Yet the term also suggests that some forms of structural differentiation prevent individuals from recognizing the most effective means of solving their problems. Blau's theory is used to identify structural conditions that increase the likelihood that individuals would see organized racism as a plausible solution to their shared grievances.

I begin with a description of the white supremacy movement and of the various groups that comprise it. Following that, I briefly discuss theoretical approaches that have been used to explain racial conflict and social movements before introducing a theory of structured ignorance. I then apply the theory in an analysis of variation in the number of racist organizations in U.S. counties. My central goal is to identify structural conditions that facilitate racist organizing by providing a context in which the worldview that is constructed within racist organizations (e.g., see Blee 2002) appears to be consistent with

what white supremacists are able to observe in their everyday social interactions.

Organized Racism in the United States

White supremacy movements are recurrent phenomena in U.S. history. Of these movements, the Ku Klux Klan has earned the most notoriety. Historically, there have been three major peaks in Klan activity, with each peak occurring at a time when major transformations were taking place in the economic order. The original Klan wreaked havoc throughout the South in the aftermath of the Civil War, using violence and intimidation to suppress African Americans' newly acquired economic and political rights. The Klan was reborn in 1915 and enjoyed tremendous popularity in the early 1920s. Unlike the first Ku Klux Klan, this one was not confined to southern states. The growth of the Klan during this time period was, in part, a reaction to industrialists' accelerated use of unskilled labor, severe shortages of agricultural labor, and high protective tariffs enacted in 1921 and 1922 that exacerbated a sharp postwar agricultural depression (see Blee 1991; MacLean 1994; McVeigh 1999, 2001). A third peak in Klan activity took place in the 1960s, largely in response to the gains made by the civil rights movement (McAdam 1982, 1983). Once again, the Klan used violence and terror in an attempt to deny African Americans their basic economic, political, and social rights.

Like earlier incarnations of the Ku Klux Klan, the contemporary white supremacy movement began to gain strength during a period of economic transition. Declines in the agricultural and manufacturing sectors of the economy during the 1980s provided fertile recruiting ground for white supremacist organizations within communities that bore the brunt of the changes (Bullard 1991; Dobratz & Shanks-Meile 1997). The Ku Klux Klan has played a role in the resurgence of the white supremacy movement, but its influence, particularly outside the South, has been overshadowed by a number of other organizations that are not burdened by the historical legacy of the Klan and therefore enjoy greater flexibility in formulating a message that resonates with potential recruits outside the South in the contemporary era.

The Ku Klux Klan is but one of a staggering variety of racist organizations that compete and at times cooperate with one another within a broader white supremacy movement. Many of these organizations are loosely linked by their adherence to Christian Identity theology. As Blee (1998) describes it, "Christian Identity is a quasi-theological network of between two and three hundred churches across the nation linked by Christian Identity Family Bible Camps and radio shows that preach that Anglo-Saxons are the lost tribe of Israel and the Jews and African Americans and other people of color are inferiors sent

to earth as a scourge from God" (191). According to this belief system, Eve was impregnated with two seeds. Cain and the Jews are believed to be the product of a seed planted by Satan, while members of the "white" race are descendants of Abel, who was born of Adam's seed (Blee 1998). Nonwhites, while they are not believed to be direct descendants of Satan, are viewed with disdain and considered to be less than human (SPLC 1998).

Not unlike many mainstream conservative religious belief systems in the United States, Identity Theology constructs an absolute dichotomy of good and evil and promotes a belief in absolute moral standards (Robbins & Anthony 1979; C. Smith 1996). Unlike mainstream religions, however, evil is presumed to be located within individuals based on their ascribed characteristics. Identity theology constructs a violent tension between the presumed descendants of Cain and Abel, and it legitimates even the most violent actions that may be directed toward Jews and toward racial and ethnic minority group members (Blee 1998; Bullard 1991; Sharpe 2000).

In recent years new radical religious belief systems have gained strength within the white supremacy movement, challenging the privileged position of Identity Theology among American racist organizations. Most notable among these are the Church of the Creator (COTC), also called "Creativity," and racist adaptations of the Norse pagan religion Odinism and its offshoot Asatru'. Like Identity Theology, COTC and racist pagan religions demonize Jews and racial and ethnic minorities, while encouraging followers to prepare for a race war. They are critical of Identity Theology's ties to Christianity, however, and have a close affinity with Nazism (see Dobratz & Shanks-Meile 1997; SPLC 1998).

The white supremacy movement contains four primary wings, consisting of Ku Klux Klan organizations, neo-Nazi organizations, skinheads, and adherents of Christian Identity theology (see Bullard 1991; Dobratz & Shanks-Meile 1997; Perry 2000).¹ There are, of course, important differences among organizations within and across the four major wings of the movement, and several organizations defy simple categorization. Differences across racist organizations, however, should not obscure a broad consensus that exists in the white supremacy movement on several central tenets. Members and supporters, first of all, see themselves as being part of a white race that is innately superior to Jews and to racial and ethnic minorities. They believe in racial separation and are particularly sensitive when it comes to interracial sexual relations (Dobratz & Shanks-Meile 1997; Ferber 1998).

White supremacists also believe that they are victims of racial discrimination, as they think that racial and ethnic minorities, with the help of the federal government, have unfair access to jobs and other valuable resources (Berbrier 2000; Blee 2002). White supremacists believe that the white race is losing ground to other groups and that extreme measures are required to reverse the trend (Dobratz & Shanks-Meile 1997; Feagin & Vera 1995; Ferber

1998). They also resent white Americans who are enjoying economic prosperity. Prosperous whites are seen as beneficiaries of, and even conspirators in, the social changes that are leading to the declining position of the white majority. Promotion of free trade and a global economy are viewed as part of a plot that benefits the elite, as well as other races throughout the world, while reducing the standard of living for ordinary white Americans (Dobratz & Shanks-Meile 1997). White supremacist leaders offer a critique of capitalism that is couched in language of Jewish conspiracies and Jewish plots to create a one-world government.

While white supremacist organizations draw members from all social classes, observations of the movement indicate that membership is concentrated in the working class and in the lower middle class (see Dobratz & Shanks-Meile 1997). The movement's rhetoric concerning the declining position of the white race should be particularly appealing to white Americans who have experienced downward mobility or who are insecure about their economic circumstances. Others may be drawn to the movement not by their own downward mobility and insecurity but by those of their friends and family members. White supremacist leaders have made a deliberate effort to capitalize on feelings of economic insecurity as they have recruited heavily in communities that have been hit hard by agricultural decline and by the decline of the manufacturing economy (Bullard 1991). As Matt Hale, the leader of the racist COTC describes it,

When we send jobs overseas, for example, it's not the rich who hurt, you know, because the rich — a lot of them are actually sending the jobs overseas. But the working class hurt and the working class know what it means to work, to be a productive citizen and they don't like the fact that their livelihood is being taken from them. And they also don't like the fact that there are people on welfare who are just living off them. So, I would say, at looking over our rolls, our membership rolls in my head, that most of our members are working class. (Quoted in Dobratz & Shanks-Meile 1997:27)

The white supremacist leaders' critique of the global economy seems to have struck a chord with many recruits (SPLC 2000). Commenting favorably on the 1999 protest against the World Trade Organization in Seattle, white supremacist leader Louis Beam claimed,

The new politics of America is liberty from the NWO [new world order] Police State and nothing more. . . . Whatever their political sympathies, the violent Seattle protesters were bravely fighting the Police State goons who were there to protect the slimy corporate interests of free trade at the expense of free people. (Quoted in SPLC 2000:42)

Rhetoric such as this feeds upon the genuine fears and frustrations that come with individuals' feelings of economic insecurity and provides individuals with

a target for their accompanying feelings of anger and resentment. Targets of recruitment are led to believe that they are victims of a grand conspiracy orchestrated by Jews and by elite whites. Jews, elites, and racial and ethnic minorities are portrayed as beneficiaries of the economic transformations that are contributing to the downfall of the white majority.

In their analysis of the contemporary white supremacy movement, Dobratz and Shanks-Meile (1997) have emphasized the role that economic instability and uncertainty play in promoting the growth of racist organizations. Many members of these organizations, they argue, are concerned with real and pressing economic difficulties and are seeking solutions when the government seems to be unresponsive to their needs. A consequence of economic inequality, they suggest, "is the blending of economic concerns with a broad base of political support among mainstream citizens, such as fear over unemployment and the declining standard of living, with ideological beliefs like white separatism that are held by a much smaller segment of the population" (Dobratz & Shanks-Meile 1997:293).

Blee's (2002) research on women in the contemporary racist movement, however, casts doubt on the notion that economic insecurity is a driving force in the movement. Many of the members she observed were not suffering from economic hardship, and for some members economic hardship was a consequence rather than a cause of their participation in a stigmatized movement (Blee 2002). More important, very few members she interviewed cited economic self-interest as a motive for joining. In fact, many of Blee's interviewees did not claim to have strong beliefs concerning race until after they became members. Describing the experience of one racist member to illustrate an apparent trend, Blee (2002) writes,

Janice did not characterize her entry into organized racism as a heartfelt search for a way to express her beliefs or safeguard her interests. Rather, she presented becoming a white supremacist as something that just happened, tied more closely to her social life than to her ideology. (27)

According to Blee (2002), the most common route to membership is simply through contact with a member of a racist group. Based on her interviews and observations of racist women, she claims that most women come into racist groups with beliefs and ideas that are closer to being mainstream than radical. It is in the group setting (within the racist organizations) that they come to adopt many of the extreme beliefs that are promoted by the movement. Blee's observations are consistent, in many respects, with Bearman and Stovel's (2000) analysis of autobiographical accounts of individuals who joined the Nazi Party in Germany before the Nazis seized power. Bearman and Stovel find that macrolevel events such as World War I and the economic crisis are rarely mentioned in these narratives concerning the process of becoming a Nazi.

Becoming a Nazi is more commonly explained in terms of "ordinary events occurring in the author's local world" (Bearman & Stovel 2000:83).

Is the contemporary racist movement, as Dobratz and Shanks-Meile suggest, a response to genuine economic grievances among those who feel that the federal government is unresponsive to their problems? Or, as Blee contends, are the beliefs expressed by movement members, whether they concern race or the economy, better understood as a consequence rather than a cause of exposure to racist movements? I propose that a theory of structured ignorance can unite these seemingly contradictory claims. The theory should also contribute to our understanding of social movement participation in general by calling attention to the ways in which collective action frames that are developed in a group setting (e.g., within social movement organizations) are also developed and evaluated within a broader structural context. Rather than debating the rationality or irrationality of movement participation, the goal is to identify features of the social structure that make social movement claims appear plausible to a critical mass of individuals, regardless of their accuracy. Before presenting that theory, however, it is necessary to briefly discuss other theoretical approaches that have been used to explain racial and ethnic conflict and social movements.

White Supremacy and Theories of Ethnic Conflict

Although the white supremacy movement began to gain strength in the United States in the early 1980s, it has just recently attracted significant attention from social scientists. As yet there have been only a few systematic studies of variation in the movement's activity across time or geographic location. For the most part, these studies have explained the movement in terms of ethnic competition theory (Olzak 1992) or some form of economic or political threat posed by minority group members (Blalock 1967). Ethnic competition theory characterizes intergroup conflict as a manifestation of an underlying struggle over scarce resources (Olzak 1992). This competition can be intensified by increasing intergroup contact or by increasing scarcity of valuable resources within local settings. Ethnic competition theory and, more generally, models of economic and political threat have been fruitfully applied in several studies of overt racial and ethnic conflict and violence. These include studies of labor conflict (Olzak 1989), lynching (Olzak 1990; Soule 1992; Tolnay & Beck 1995), riots (Myers 1997; Olzak, Shanahan & McEneaney 1996), and ethnic and nationalist movements (McVeigh 1999; Nielsen 1985; Olzak 2002).

Beck (2000) applied ethnic competition theory in an analysis of variation in white supremacist activity in southern counties between 1980 and 1990. In his analysis he found that white supremacist activity was more common in

counties in which Asians and Hispanics had gained an increased relative share of aggregate household income. In a time-series analysis Soule and Van Dyke (1999) show that increases in black church arsons from 1989 to 1996 are associated with increasing numbers of black elected officials, higher unemployment, and lower per capita income. Also in support of a political threat model, Van Dyke, Soule, and Widom (2001) find higher numbers of hate crimes committed against gays and lesbians in states with higher numbers of gay elected officials. The authors acknowledge, however, that this finding could be due to more diligent hate crime enforcement and reporting practices in these states rather than to a higher number of actual hate crimes committed in response to a perceived political threat.

While it is likely that competition and threat play a role in explaining the emergence of contemporary white supremacy organizations, there is reason to suspect that this theoretical approach is more useful in explaining violence and criminal activity initiated by these organizations than in explaining the movement itself. While many of the organizations are located in racially and ethnically diverse communities, others are situated in communities that are ethnically homogeneous. While some white supremacists do engage in direct conflict with minority group members, many do not. In addition, models of competition and threat do not help us understand why anti-Semitism plays such a central role in white supremacist discourse. White supremacists in the United States, after all, rarely find themselves in direct competition with increasing numbers of Jewish Americans in local settings. It is also worth noting that the racist women interviewed by Blee did not describe their decision to join racist organizations as a response to economic competition or a political threat. Factors that motivate racial and ethnic conflict could be different, in several important respects, from factors that help sustain racist social movement organizations in the U.S.

White Supremacy and Social Movement Theory

Leaders of the white supremacy movement have attempted to recruit members by capitalizing on the discontent of farmers, manufacturing workers, and middle-class Americans who have been adversely affected by changes in the economy. Clearly, members and supporters of racist organizations are dissatisfied with existing social, economic, and political arrangements in the United States. Organized racism and white separatism are offered as solutions to a wide array of problems that potential recruits may face. Members and supporters of racist organizations use Jews, homosexuals, African Americans, and other racial and ethnic minorities as scapegoats, and they engage in activities that have no realistic chance of solving their problems (see Feagin &

Vera 1995). As Blee (2002) has noted, participation in racist organizations actually exacerbates problems for many members. It would appear that the only benefits to be gained from participation in these organizations involve the psychic satisfaction that may come from expressing one's resentments and prejudices in the company of like-minded individuals.

The preceding interpretation of the white supremacy movement, however, is at odds with the way in which social movement participants are depicted by contemporary social movement theories. The most widely utilized theories in the field, resource mobilization theory (McCarthy & Zald 1973, 1977; Oberschall 1973) and political opportunity theory (see Jenkins 1985; Jenkins & Klandermans 1995; McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1989, 1994), characterize social movement participants as rational actors engaged in strategic interaction with the state and other opponents to win new benefits for the group (Klandermans 1997; Tarrow 1994). Contemporary research on specific social movements tends to downplay the causal significance of group discontent, focusing attention instead upon the importance of social network ties in recruiting processes (Klandermans 1997; McAdam 1986; Oberschall 1973; Snow, Zurcher & Ekland-Olson 1980) and on the ways in which groups strategically exploit organizational resources and political opportunities to advance collective interests. In the case of the civil rights movement, for example, strategic action was readily apparent in tactics such as bus boycotts, sit-ins, and freedom rides (McAdam 1982, 1983; Morris 1984; Oberschall 1989). By disrupting the normal functioning of society through peaceful demonstrations, the civil rights movement gained leverage against the federal government and against opponents and was able to secure new benefits for constituents (McAdam 1982).

The rationality of organized racism, however, is not as obvious. Preparing for war against the "Zionist-occupied government," after all, hardly seems to be a rational or strategic response to whatever grievances the white supremacists may hold. Yet qualitative research on contemporary racist organizations suggests that white supremacist members, while they may not adhere to a logically consistent ideology and may not even have a firm grasp of the ideology espoused by their leaders (Blee 1998, 2002), do appear to believe that their actions and their participation in the movement will result in collective benefits for their group (see Blee 1996, 1998; Dobratz & Shanks-Meile 1997). As Blee (1996, 2002) describes it, they selectively draw upon the leaders' discourse, shaping and reshaping movement ideology in a way that seems consistent with their own life experiences and understandings of the world.

In recent years an increasing number of social movement researchers have focused attention on processes of meaning construction (or framing processes) within social movements. Proponents of the framing perspective in social movement theory have pointed out that even when conditions seem ripe for

the emergence of social protest (e.g., organizational resources are in place, and the political climate is favorable), individuals are unlikely to participate in collective action if they do not interpret their situation as a collective problem that could be solved through collective action (McAdam 1982; Snow & Benford 1992; Snow et al. 1986). Researchers utilizing the framing perspective have focused on the way that social movement leaders frame the issues, or offer interpretations of the situation that resonate with individuals whom they hope to recruit, bringing the worldviews of the movement organizers and potential members into alignment (Gamson 1992b; Snow & Benford 1992; Snow et al. 1986).

Frame resonance has been identified as a key component of any successful collective action frame (Snow et al. 1986). If a frame is to motivate collective action, it must have some empirical credibility among those targeted for recruitment (Babb 1996; Cress & Snow 2000; Snow et al. 1986). Some researchers have compared collective action frames to falsifiable hypotheses or scientific paradigms that can be disconfirmed by empirical observation if they depart too much from the lived experiences of movement members and supporters (Babb 1996; Gamson 1992a; Snow et al. 1986). As yet, however, there have been few systematic studies of the relationship between the frames that are constructed by movement leaders and the objective circumstances that confront targets of movement recruiting (see Benford 1997).

Inattention to the relationship between movement frames and the circumstances of recruitment targets makes it difficult to address questions concerning differential participation among similarly situated individuals. Why do some individuals accept the worldview constructed by white supremacists while others reject it? Why are racist organizations able to take root in some communities and not in others? While individuals act upon their perceptions of reality rather than on objective circumstances, those perceptions are rooted in observable structural arrangements. To fully understand the motives and the worldview of white supremacists, it is essential to situate white supremacist organizations within a structural context.

A Theory of Structured Ignorance

In his case study of the Farmers' Alliance, Michael Schwartz (1976) offered an explanation for the seemingly irrational behavior of some protest participants. His explanation has been largely ignored by social movement researchers, but it is part of a much broader and extensive literature on bounded rationality (see Collins 1989; Gould 1993; Macy 1991; Simon 1957; White 1981). Schwartz (1976) raised the question of why individuals who appear to be faced with the same problem may pursue entirely different, and sometimes conflicting,

solutions to that problem. It is extremely unlikely that both responses are equally effective. So how do we account for the actions of individuals who engage in the least effective response? Rather than assuming, without supporting evidence, that they are acting irrationally, Schwartz argued that it is more analytically useful to recognize that individuals make decisions based on incomplete information. Much like Babb's (1996) comparison of collective action frames to scientific paradigms, Schwartz (1976) compared social movement participants to scientists operating with incomplete or flawed data. Based on such data, the scientist (or the social movement participant) may draw an incorrect conclusion, while behaving in a perfectly rational manner.

Schwartz was not suggesting that social movement participants always act rationally. They don't. He did argue, however, that it is reasonable to assume that social movement participants are at least as rational as the people who study them (Schwartz 1976). To understand the actions initiated by movement participants, it is essential to recognize that individuals make choices and decisions based on limited information. Information that is required to develop an accurate diagnosis of a collective problem is distributed unevenly throughout the social structure. An individual's access to relevant information, therefore, is largely determined by his or her position within that structure.

INEQUALITY, HETEROGENEITY, AND ORGANIZED RACISM

I draw upon Peter Blau's macrostructural theory of social relations to identify forms of structural differentiation that facilitate and sustain organized racism in the United States. Blau (1977) defines social structure as "a multidimensional space of different social positions among which a population is distributed. The social associations of people provide both the criterion for distinguishing social positions and the connections among them that make them elements of a single social structure" (4). A given population is differentiated along nominal parameters such as racial and ethnic categories or occupational categories and by graduated parameters (or hierarchical gradations) such as levels of income or education (Blau 1977; Blau & Schwartz 1984).

Blau demonstrates that heterogeneity on nominal parameters promotes intergroup contact. For example, in the extreme case, if all members of a given population are white, there is no opportunity for interracial contact. In a population that is racially heterogeneous, however, interracial contact is difficult to avoid. Similarly, Blau shows that inequality on graduated parameters promotes status-distant contact. Again, in the extreme case, if all members of a population possess the same amount of wealth, there are no opportunities for contact between individuals of different economic standing. In a population characterized by extreme inequality of wealth, status-distant contact occurs frequently. These basic insights have important implications for a theory of

structured ignorance. Individuals are carriers of information required to diagnosis the causes of social problems and to formulate effective solutions. Varying degrees of intergroup contact should promote different interpretations of collective grievances and may lead some groups to formulate flawed strategies based on incomplete access to information.

Currently, members of white supremacy organizations represent a small numerical minority of the population even within communities in which the movement is relatively strong. As a result, members of racist organizations cannot restrict their social associations exclusively to fellow members. They must, and do, interact on a fairly regular basis with nonmembers within the broader community. As Berger (1969) has noted, the plausibility of a given system of beliefs for the individual depends upon the extent that the belief system is reinforced in various forms of social interaction (see also Billings 1990; Lofland & Stark 1965). Racist organizations, therefore, should have difficulty sustaining themselves within communities in which individuals, through their interpersonal contacts, fail to find evidence that is consistent with the white supremacists' claims. These organizations should also have difficulty sustaining themselves within communities in which individuals, through their interpersonal contacts, have access to information that can be used to reject the white supremacists' worldview.

White supremacists believe that their racial identity, rather than their occupation or their educational credentials, entitles them to certain rights and privileges, as well as a decent standard of living. They believe that the white race is losing ground and that racial and ethnic minorities are claiming what is rightfully theirs. They see themselves as victims of economic transformations such as agricultural crises, the decline of manufacturing, and globalization. These transformations are thought to be part of a grand conspiracy orchestrated by Jews and elite whites, who increase their own wealth and political power at the expense of working-class and middle-class white Americans (Bullard 1991; Dobratz & Shanks-Meile 1997). The task at hand is to determine what forms of structural differentiation lead some people to accept the white supremacists' interpretation of existing conditions based on their own "convenience sample" of empirical observations.

A theory of structured ignorance can make sense of the conflicting views held by those who study contemporary racist organizations. On the one hand, we may find that racist organizations are most likely to take root in communities characterized by economic inequality and economic transition. Within such an environment, white supremacists' claims concerning Jewish conspiracies and elite manipulation of the economy may resonate with individuals who are able to observe disparities of wealth and income along with economic instability yet who do not possess an alternative explanation for what they observe. White supremacist claims would have little resonance, on the other hand, in communities in which wealth is distributed equally and the

economy is stable. At the same time, it may be, as Blee suggests, that individuals do not seek out and join racist organizations in an attempt to solve their problems. Instead, they take on the beliefs of the group once they are exposed to movement ideology in a group setting. Yet if the movement's ideology is radically inconsistent with what potential members are able to observe in their everyday interactions, individuals should be less susceptible to movement recruiting and racist organizations should have greater difficulty sustaining themselves.

Social Structure and Racist Organizing

Blee's observation that contact with members of racist organizations is a key factor in explaining how individuals become members of those organizations is consistent with a large body of research on social movement participation (e.g., see Klandermans 1997; Klandermans & Oegema 1987). This is particularly true of recruitment into "high risk" activism (McAdam 1986, 1988). Observations made by Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson (1980) on recruitment into deviant religious groups are also similar, in many respects, to Blee's description of recruitment into racist organizations. As Snow and his colleagues note, "It is important to emphasize that people seldom initially join movements *per se*. Rather they typically are asked to participate in movement activity. Furthermore, it is in the course of initial participation that they are provided with the 'reasons' or 'justifications' for what they have already done and for continuing to participate" (795).

Once contacted by a member of such an organization, however, individuals must make a decision to join based on their understanding of the movement's goals and their own understanding of the world. In Klandermans's (1997) terms, they must also come to sympathize with the goals of the movement, they must become motivated to participate, and they must overcome other barriers to movement participation. The argument advanced in this article is that racist organizations will be more likely to thrive within communities in which patterns of structural differentiation provide individuals with evidence that appears to be consistent with the white supremacists' claims while at the same time shielding them from information that could be used to develop an alternative interpretation that is at odds with those claims. Below I identify several forms of structural differentiation that should facilitate racist organizing.

RACIAL AND ETHNIC HETEROGENEITY

In general, I expect that heterogeneity on nominal parameters will have a positive effect on racist organizing. In the case of the white supremacy movement, racial and ethnic heterogeneity should be particularly important.

Heterogeneity promotes intergroup contact, which increases the likelihood that white individuals will observe at least some out-group members who are faring better, economically, than the average member of their own group. It is not necessary that out-group members as a whole be advancing. In a heterogeneous environment, individuals are likely to find some supporting evidence of the white supremacists' claims. White supremacist leaders promote a worldview that subjugates all members of racial and ethnic minority groups to a subordinate status. Evidence that even one member of a minority group in the community is enjoying economic prosperity or occupies a position of power and prestige would be viewed as an affront to the natural order of the world. The more heterogeneous the environment, the more likely it is that a white individual would have contact with minority group members who are not confined to, and do not accept, a subordinate status.

Racial and ethnic heterogeneity also increases the likelihood that individuals will be able to recall at least one unpleasant confrontation with a member of another group. As Blee describes it, women in racist organizations often reinterpret events that occurred earlier in their lives in a way that seems to support or justify white supremacist claims. According to Blee (2002),

[I]n the racist women's stories, members of racial minorities are most often linked to memories of fear, vulnerability, and anger. When they recall being jostled by children in elementary school, being threatened by groups of fellow students in high school, failing to get a desired job, or worrying about their safety on the street, the women recount incidents in which specific members of racial minorities are the protagonists. (85)

Children, of course, get jostled and threatened by fellow students in racially homogeneous settings. And when they get older they lose jobs and fear for their safety in racially homogeneous settings. Racial and ethnic heterogeneity, however, increases the likelihood that these events can later be interpreted in a way that seems consistent with the white supremacist worldview. As Bearman and Stovel (2000) note in their study of Nazi narratives, "The cognitive labor of linking otherwise unrelated elements together is the hallmark of a narrative of identity formation."

INDUSTRIAL HETEROGENEITY

Industrial heterogeneity can promote racist organizing by providing people with evidence of individuals other than one's "own kind" advancing in society. Collective identity can be based not only on race but also on occupation or industry. Supporters of the white supremacy movement are often not in direct competition with minority group members for jobs. Instead, they resent changes in the economic structure that seem to be benefiting members of other groups while leaving them behind. Farmers or manufacturing workers, for example, may resent individuals who are employed in different industrial sectors that

depend upon free trade and increasing globalization of the economy while their own industry is in need of protection from foreign competition. Higher rates of contact between individuals who are employed in different industrial sectors are likely to feed this resentment by providing evidence that some out-group members are prospering. Industrial heterogeneity decreases the likelihood that the majority of the members of the community will share similar interests in regard to free trade and globalization. While this resentment may not be the driving force that leads individuals to join racist movements, the racist interpretation of the economy should appear to some individuals to be more plausible within communities characterized by industrial heterogeneity.

INCOME INEQUALITY

Income inequality should also be positively associated with racist organizing. Inequality promotes status-distant contact. White supremacists' claims that elites are conspiring against them, manipulating the economy to their own advantage at the expense of working-class and middle-class white Americans, would appear to be more plausible in communities in which there is an obvious gap between the rich and the poor. Some individuals may embrace the white supremacists' worldview in an effort to understand their own economic plight. Yet in a setting in which income is distributed unequally, the white supremacists' claims may seem valid even to those who are not suffering from economic hardships. If income is distributed equally, however, there would be a sharp disjuncture between the white supremacists' claims and what individuals are able to observe in their immediate surroundings.

CHANGES IN THE ECONOMIC STRUCTURE

Changes in the economic structure should promote racist organizing by providing evidence that appears to be consistent with the white supremacists' claims. Higher rates of contact between people who are far apart in terms of income or who are employed in different industries should be more noticeable in communities in which inequality and heterogeneity are increasing over time. Within such settings, individuals have not yet had time to accommodate themselves to the changing economic structure. Additionally, economic transformations should contribute to a sense of urgency among those who are being adversely affected by economic change — a sense of urgency that matches that which is communicated by movement leaders. As mentioned previously, racist organizations have made a deliberate attempt to capitalize on these conditions, recruiting in locations where individuals have experienced the ill effects of economic change.

EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY

Observations that some out-group members are prospering and that income inequality is increasing are subject to many different interpretations. I expect that educational inequality plays a critical role in determining whether or not individuals accept the white supremacists' interpretation. Educational inequality within local settings should inhibit racist organizing in three primary ways. First, educational inequality provides members of the community with greater access to information required to accurately diagnose their problems and to reject the white supremacists' interpretation. Second, it promotes quiescence among those who may be bearing the brunt of economic transformations, as they defer to the beliefs and values held by those who have considerably higher levels of education. Finally, educational inequality should inhibit racist organizing by making other forms of inequality in society appear legitimate — that based on achieved status rather than ascribed status. The logic behind these claims is described below.

Educational inequality promotes contact between individuals with relatively little formal education and those who have had many years of schooling. This status-distant contact increases the likelihood that the values and understandings of the world held by the highly educated can diffuse throughout the community at large. A large body of research has shown that individuals with higher levels of education tend to exhibit less racial prejudice, to hold more tolerant views of out-group members, and to be more liberal on a wide range of social issues (Bobo & Kluegel 1993; Bobo & Licari 1989; Davis 1975; Greeley & Sheatsley 1974; Lipset 1960; Phelan et al. 1995; Selznick & Steinberg 1969; Weil 1985). In the U.S., individuals with higher levels of education are also less likely to hold anti-Semitic attitudes (Weil 1985), and they are likely to have a more sophisticated understanding of how the economy works. Research, for example, has shown that education promotes a greater awareness of structural impediments to social mobility (Bobo & Kluegel 1993; Kluegel 1990; Kluegel & Smith 1982).

In short, people with higher levels of education tend to possess the information needed to diagnosis the economic problems facing members of the community, and they are far less likely to diagnose the problems in terms of Jewish conspiracies or discrimination against the white race. Some research suggests that the liberal values expressed by the highly educated are superficial and do not reflect a true commitment to social equality (Jackman 1984; Jackman & Muha 1984; Sidanius, Pratto & Bobo 1996). Nevertheless, these values would inhibit racist organizing by offering an effective counterargument to the claims made by white supremacists. In the context of educational inequality, frequent contact between individuals who are widely separated in terms of education provides those who have not had the benefit of advanced

schooling with access to information that could be used to reject the white supremacists' worldview.

Even if individuals with lower levels of education do not embrace the worldview of those with higher levels, educational inequality can prevent them from posing a challenge to the existing order. The white supremacy movement represents a challenge to liberal values and is threatening not only to members of racial and ethnic minority groups but also to the elite, who benefit from the existing order. People with higher levels of education are best equipped to use ideology to control the behavior of other members of their community. As Jackman (1994) has argued, spatial proximity and vast disparities in resources between groups make it easier for dominant groups to control the behavior of subordinates. Rather than relying upon force or coercion, members of dominant groups seek to promote quiescence or passivity among subordinates through paternalism and through ideological manipulation. Vast disparities in years of schooling decrease the likelihood that subordinates will be able to effectively challenge the dominant ideology (Jackman 1994; see also Gaventa 1982; Lukes 1974).

Educational inequality can also serve to legitimate economic inequality. If, for example, vast disparities in income can be attributed to vast disparities in education, individuals are more likely to view these differences as being based on differences in qualifications, efforts, and expertise. When inequalities of wealth or income cannot be easily traced to inequalities in educational credentials, however, the door is open to other interpretations of economic differences, including theories of vast Jewish conspiracies.

INTERACTION EFFECTS

Above I have specified three mechanisms through which educational inequality should inhibit racist organizing. If my argument is correct, educational inequality should also diminish the positive impact that other variables have on racist organizing. For example, the diffusion of liberal values that tend to be held by the highly educated would decrease the likelihood that racial and ethnic heterogeneity would be seen as evidence supporting the white supremacists' claims. The broad diffusion of liberal values would also decrease the likelihood that individuals would see income inequality in their local environment as evidence of a grand Jewish conspiracy. To the extent that educational inequality promotes quiescence, and to the extent that it legitimates existing economic inequalities, it would also decrease the likelihood that individuals would respond to income inequality or racial and ethnic heterogeneity through a white supremacist organization. If income inequality simply seems to reflect inequalities in educational credentials, white supremacists' claims would seem less compelling.

The role that educational inequality plays in racist organizing should also depend upon the relative number of highly educated people within a county. For example, if every person in a county held a college degree there would be very little educational inequality, yet many individuals, by virtue of their college education, would have access to information that could be used to reject white supremacist claims. The negative effect of educational inequality on racist organizing should therefore be weaker when higher proportions of the population hold a college degree.²

Data

As a test of the theory of structured ignorance, I examine variation in the number of racist organizations in U.S. counties and county equivalents. Census data appropriate for testing my argument are available for almost all counties and county equivalents in the United States, resulting in a total of 3,135 observations. Four of these cases are lost to missing data when measures of economic transformation are included in the analysis. Although the choice of any ecological unit of analysis is open to valid criticism, for this particular analysis the use of county-level data has some important advantages. On the one hand, because racist organizations exist in both small towns and large cities, restricting the analysis to standard metropolitan statistical areas would ignore substantial regional variation in the dependent variable. Comparable data are not available for all towns and cities in the United States, but they are available for counties. An analysis at the state level, on the other hand, would miss important intrastate variation in the explanatory variables. I have argued that varying degrees of intergroup contact within local settings can affect views on the plausibility of frames advanced by racist organizations. This argument is more tenable at the county level than at the state level, since individuals are more likely to have contact with individuals residing in their own county than with those living in other regions of the state.

To measure the dependent variable, I use lists of hate groups compiled by the Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Project. The SPLC compiles annual lists of hate groups known to have been active in a given year. The Intelligence Project obtains information on the location of the hate groups by using the hate groups' publications, citizens' reports, law enforcement agencies, field sources, and news reports. "Activity" includes marches, rallies, speeches, meetings, leafleting, publishing literature, and criminal acts. Organizations that appear to exist only on the Internet are not included. The SPLC categorizes the racist organizations into five primary groups. These include Ku Klux Klan organizations, neo-Nazi groups, skinheads, Christian Identity organizations, and "other." Those falling in the "other" category are described as "organizations whose racist behavior stems from a variety of unrelated ideologies. These

groups include Ku Klux Klan offshoots, independent gangs of racist youths and religious groups that cloak their white supremacist beliefs in “quasitheological” terms (SPLC 1997:19). The SPLC also has a separate category for black separatist organizations. I exclude these organizations in my analysis since the grievances and understandings of the world held by black separatists are different in many respects from those held by white separatists.

Some researchers (e.g., Dobratz & Shanks-Meile 1997) have noted that advocacy organizations such as the SPLC have an incentive to exaggerate the danger posed by racist organizations and that their data, therefore, should be treated with caution. Such measurement bias, if it exists, would be more likely to show up in claims concerning membership or in descriptions of the movement’s goals, rather than in a listing of organizations. The SPLC’s lists of U.S. racist organizations are by far the most comprehensive available. Its outstanding reputation is well established, and the SPLC has been an excellent source of information for social scientists who study racist organizations (Beck 2000; Dobratz & Shanks-Meile 1997; Ferber 1998; Perry 2000).³

There are, however, important data limitations that should be acknowledged. No information is available, for example, on the founding dates of the organizations. There are also no measures of membership size, which undoubtedly varies considerably across organizations. Also, some organizations may have been active in a given year while failing to attract the attention of the SPLC’s Intelligence Project. Many of the racist organizations are unstable and have a short lifespan. They may show up on the SPLC’s list one year and be gone the next. There is also room for debate about what type of organization qualifies as a racist organization and what type does not. For example, in the year 2000 the SPLC made a decision to add numerous chapters of a neo-Confederate organization called the League of the South to its list of hate groups. In previous years the SPLC was familiar with the organization but did not include it in its lists.

While it is important to acknowledge these data limitations, it is also important to develop a better understanding of the causes of racist organizing. Due to the secretive nature of white supremacist groups, it is unlikely that perfectly clean data will ever become available that could be used in a systematic analysis of these organizations. Yet systematic analysis could be extraordinarily useful in identifying the social conditions that foster racist extremism in the U.S. In the analysis that follows, steps are taken to reduce the problems associated with the data limitations described above. Without information on the founding dates of the organizations, we cannot say with certainty that the independent variables had a direct causal effect on the emergence of the organizations. Yet since the list includes only organizations that were active in a given year, we can identify structural features that are related to having an active racist organization in the county. I argue in this article that racist organizations would have difficulty sustaining themselves

within communities in which individuals fail to find evidence that appears consistent with the white supremacist claims. So at any point in time, racist organizations should most likely be active in counties that are, according to my argument, structurally conducive to racist organizing.

In the analysis I also use the SPLC's list of hate groups from two different years. I use the list from 1997, the first year that the SPLC reported the location of all chapters rather than just the primary headquarters of an organization with several chapters. I also use the more recent list from the year 2000. If my theoretical argument has merit, the results should be similar even when there is year-to-year fluctuation in the organizations reported as being active. Some of this year-to-year fluctuation reflects changes in the level of activity among racist organizations, while some of it undoubtedly reflects measurement error. In either case, we should have more confidence in the theory if it can be used to consistently predict racist organization activity reported by the SPLC.

According to the SPLC, 462 hate groups (not counting black separatist organizations) were active in 1997. In the analysis I exclude 9 organizations that could not be located within a county. Of those that are included, 125 are Ku Klux Klan organizations, 99 are neo-Nazi groups, 40 are racist skinhead groups, 80 are Christian Identity organizations, and 109 are categorized as "other." The majority (79) of organizations in the "other" category are chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of White People. For the year 2000, 554 hate groups (excluding black separatist organizations) were reported by the SPLC to be active. For this year I exclude 7 organizations that could not be located within a county. Of those organizations that are included in the analysis, 108 are categorized by the SPLC as Ku Klux Klan groups, 177 are neo-Nazi groups, 39 are racist skinhead groups, and 32 are Christian Identity organizations. The remainder of the organizations fall under the headings of "neo-Confederate" and "other." The vast majority of groups in the neo-Confederate category (79 out of 85) are chapters of the previously mentioned League of the South. Of the 103 organizations listed in the "other" category, 45 are identified as the Council of Conservative Citizens, 17 are listed as the National Association for the Advancement of White People, and 12 are listed as the National Organization for European American Rights.

There are noticeable differences between the lists of hate groups. For one thing, more hate groups are reported as being active in 2000 than in 1997. Much of this difference, however, reflects the addition of League of the South organizations to the list in 2000. Perhaps the most striking differences are the increase in neo-Nazi organizations and a decrease in Christian Identity groups. In general, the differences between the two lists reflect changes in levels of activity among various racist organizations and, to some extent, changes in the SPLC's categorization scheme. A comparison of the two lists also reveals substantial change in terms of which counties had at least one active racist

TABLE 1: Presence or Absence of at Least One Active Racist Organization, 1997 and 2000

		Racist Organization, 1997	
		No	Yes
Racist Organization, 2000	No	2,597 (91.9%)	164 (52.4%)
	Yes	229 (8.1%)	149 (47.6%)
	Total	2,826 (100%)	313 (100%)

Source: Southern Poverty Law Center.

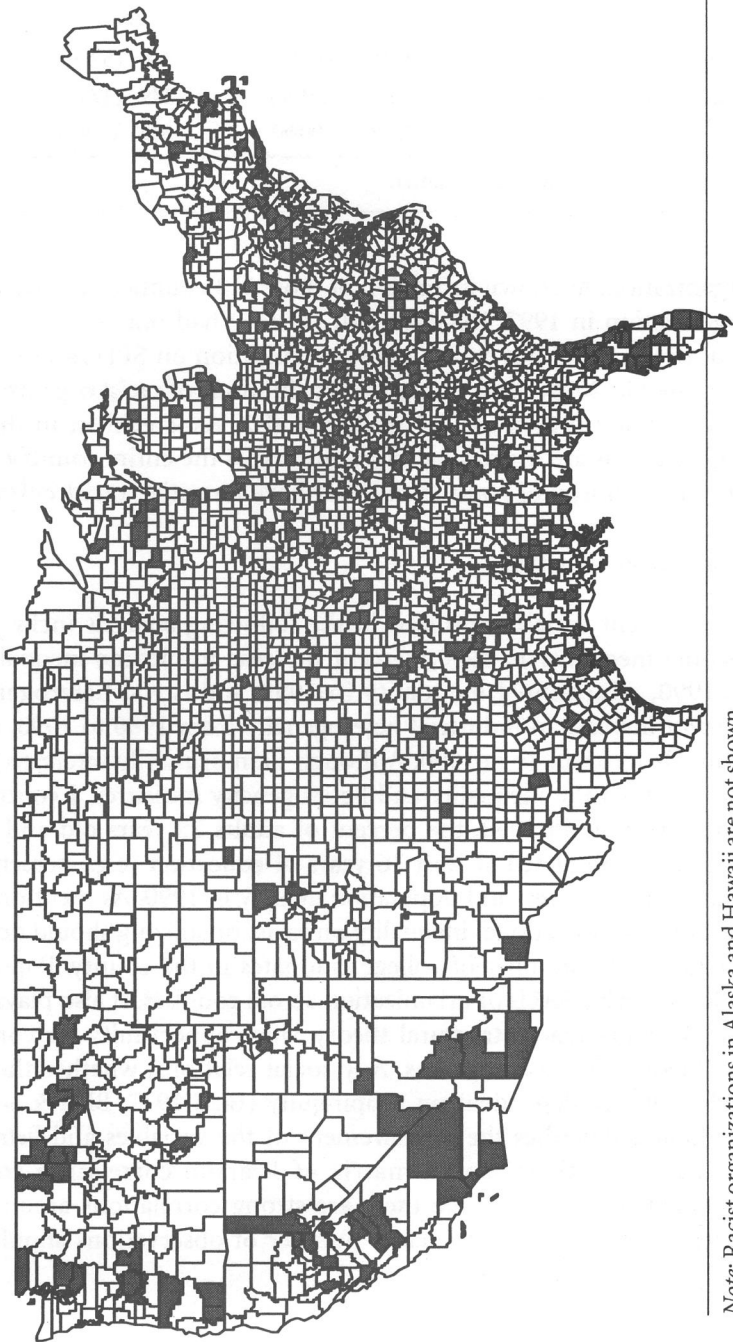
organization. As shown in Table 1, of those 313 counties that had an active racist organization in 1997, less than half (47.6%) had one in 2000. Of those 2,826 counties that did not have a racist organization on SPLC's 1997 list, 8.1% had one listed in 2000. The geographic distributions of racist organizations for 1997 and 2000 are presented in Figures 1 and 2. As is evident in the maps, racist organizations are distributed unevenly across the entire country. In both years, the vast majority of counties did not have an active racist organization.

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Independent variables utilized in the following analysis include measures of income inequality in 1990, percent increase in income inequality from 1980 to 1990, educational inequality in 1990, industrial heterogeneity in 1990, percent increase in industrial heterogeneity from 1980 to 1990, and racial and ethnic heterogeneity in 1990. Although I am primarily interested in estimating the effects of the inequality and heterogeneity measures, I control for median family income in 1990, the percent of adults 25 years old and older in 1990 who have completed at least 16 years of education (e.g., percent with college education or more), and population density in 1990. As mentioned previously, the effect of educational inequality on racist organizing should depend, to some extent, on the number of college graduates in the county. Population density reflects varying levels of urbanization across counties. It also plays an important role in Blau's macrostructural theory, since opportunity for contact is one of the theory's key assumptions. Any social relations, whether they are friendly or hostile, are dependent on propinquity (Blau 1977; Blau & Schwartz 1984).

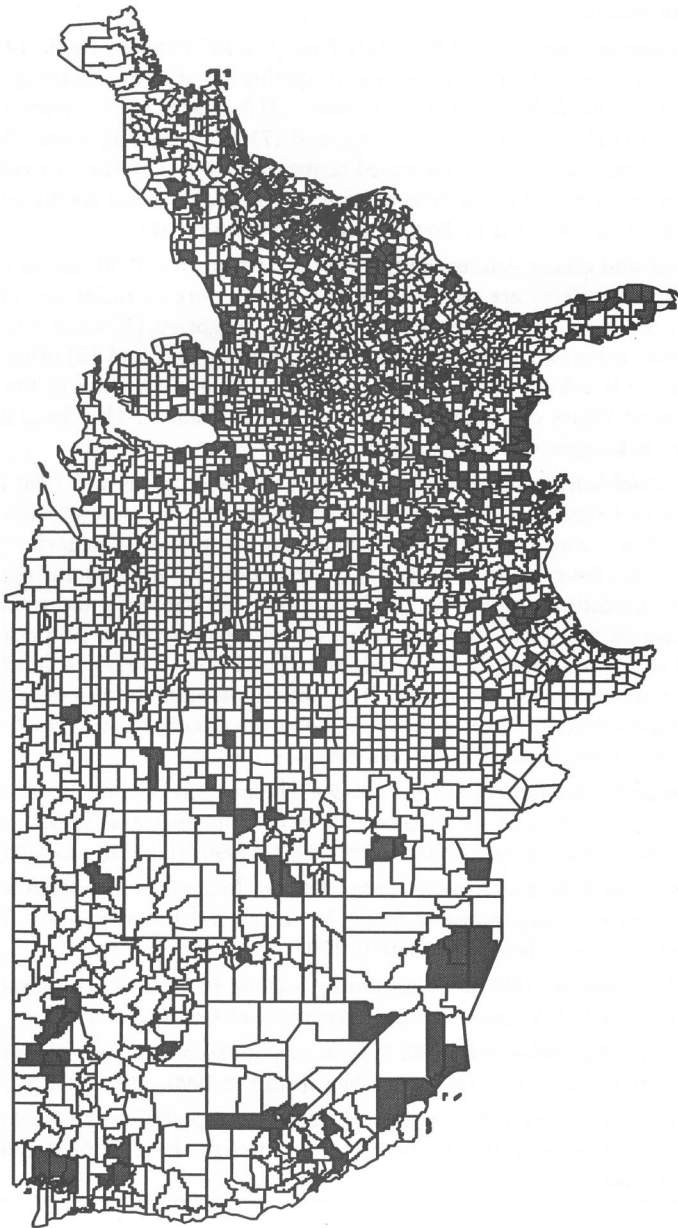
Table 2 describes the measurement of the variables and lists data sources. Univariate statistics and a matrix of Pearson correlation coefficients are provided in Table 3. While there are strong correlations among some of the independent variables, the large number of observations should be useful in

FIGURE 1: Counties with at Least One Active Racist Organization in 1997



Note: Racist organizations in Alaska and Hawaii are not shown.

FIGURE 2: Counties with at Least One Active Racist Organization in 2000



Note: Racist organizations in Alaska and Hawaii are not shown.

TABLE 2: Measurement of Independent Variables and Data Sources

Income inequality, 1990: Data from the 1980 and 1990 U.S. censuses are used to construct Gini coefficients for family income. The measures were calculated by Nielsen, who has graciously made them available on his Website. A detailed description of the measurement can be found in Nielsen and Alderson (1997). Family income is grouped into 17 categories in the 1980 census and 25 categories in the 1990 census. Nielsen uses a Pareto interpolation to estimate the average income in categories above the category containing the mean income.

Educational inequality, 1990: Data from the 1990 census (table 142) are used to construct a Gini coefficient measuring inequality in years of schooling. The data are aggregated into the following seven categories: (1) 0-4 years, (2) 5-8 years, (3) 9-11 years, (4) 12 years, (5) 13-15 years, (6) 16 years, and (7) more than 16 years. To calculate the Gini coefficient, the average is estimated as the midpoint in the first six categories. The average of the open-ended category is assumed to be 19. The Gini coefficient is calculated using the formula provided by Nygård and Sandström (1981).

Racial and ethnic heterogeneity, 1990: Data from the 1990 census (U.S. Department of Commerce 1998) are used to construct a measure of racial and ethnic heterogeneity. Race and ethnicity are aggregated into five categories: (1) white, (2) black, (3) American Indian, Eskimo, Aleut, (4) Asian or Pacific Islander, and (5) other. The heterogeneity measure is calculated as $1 - \sum P_i^2$, where P_i is the proportion of the population in each category. Values can potentially range between 0 and 1. The closer the value is to 1, the more heterogeneous the population.

Industrial heterogeneity, 1990: Data from the 1980 census and 1990 census (U.S. Department of Commerce 1998) are used to construct a measure of industrial heterogeneity. The data are aggregated into the following 13 industry categories: (1) agriculture, forestry, and fishery, (2) mining, (3) construction, (4) manufacturing, (5) transportation, communications, and other public utilities, (6) wholesale and retail trade, (7) finance, insurance, and real estate, (8) business and repair services, (9) personal, entertainment, and recreation services, (10) professional and related services, health, (11) professional and related services, educational, (12) professional and related services, other, and (13) public administration. Heterogeneity measures are calculated as $1 - \sum P_i^2$, where P_i is the proportion of the population in each category.

Increase in income inequality, 1980-90: The measure was calculated using the Gini coefficients described above. Increase in income inequality is measured as the percentage increase in income inequality from 1980 to 1990: $([\text{Gini90} - \text{Gini80}]/\text{Gini80}) \times 100$.

Increase in industrial heterogeneity, 1980-90: Increase in industrial heterogeneity is measured as the percentage increase in industrial heterogeneity from 1980 to 1990: $([\text{Indhet90} - \text{Indhet80}]/\text{Indhet80}) \times 100$.

Median income, 1990: Median family income in 1990 (in thousands of dollars) as reported in the U.S. census (U.S. Department of Commerce 1998).

Percent college-educated, 1990: Percent of population 25 years old and older with at least 16 years of education. Data are taken from the 1990 census (table 142).

Population density, 1990: Population density as reported in the 1990 census (U.S. Department of Commerce 1998). The measure represents number of people (in thousands) per square mile.

TABLE 3: Pearson Correlation Coefficients and Univariate Statistics for Independent Variables, U.S. Counties and County Equivalents

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
(1) Income inequality, 1990	1.000								
(2) Educational inequality, 1990	.630	1.000							
(3) Racial and ethnic heterogeneity, 1990	.480	.386	1.000						
(4) Industrial heterogeneity, 1990	.084	-.060	.072	1.000					
(5) Increase in income inequality, 1980-90	.384	.045	.132	.028	1.000				
(6) Increase in industrial heterogeneity, 1980-90	.014	-.042	.191	-.398	.102	1.000			
(7) Median income, 1990 (\$1,000s)	-.548	-.544	-.056	.034	.041	.246	1.000		
(8) Percent college-educated, 1990	-.149	-.412	.051	.088	.118	.338	.694	1.000	
(9) Population density, 1990	.087	-.008	.170	.017	.066	.188	.169	.217	1.000
Mean	.380	.142	.179	.825	3.282	2.708	28.471	13.52	.220
Standard deviation	.039	.032	.169	.041	.7065	.868	7.163	6.57	1.432
Minimum	.253	.042	.001	.479	-28.03	-13.31	10.903	3.69	.0001
Maximum	.561	.387	.677	.909	47.10	10.51	65.201	53.42	52.378

TABLE 4: Racist Organizations in U.S. Counties and County Equivalents, 1997 and 2000

Variable	1997		2000	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Income inequality, 1990	12.324** (3.816)	4.977 (4.336)	9.722** (3.198)	2.753 (3.578)
Educational inequality, 1990	-14.823*** (3.929)	-11.124** (4.128)	-15.875*** (3.516)	-12.234*** (3.567)
Racial and ethnic heterogeneity, 1990	1.660** (.568)	1.567** (.553)	3.087*** (.476)	3.059*** (.470)
Industrial heterogeneity, 1990	1.297 (1.845)	8.593*** (2.370)	-.752 (1.695)	5.566* (2.286)
Increase in income inequality, 1980-90		.045** (.016)		.048*** (.014)
Increase in industrial heterogeneity, 1980-90		.557*** (.118)		.445*** (.106)
Median income, 1990 (\$1,000s)	.075*** (.019)	.056** (.020)	.074*** (.017)	.059*** (.017)
Percent college-educated, 1990	.004 (.017)	.012 (.017)	.003 (.015)	-.011 (.016)
Population density, 1990	.158*** (.039)	.094** (.034)	.059* (.028)	.028 (.028)
Dispersion parameter	2.937*** (.441)	2.570*** (.413)	1.902*** (.285)	1.705*** (.270)
Constant	-8.467*** (2.065)	-13.193*** (2.381)	-5.707** (1.884)	-9.598*** (2.303)
N	3,135	3,131	3,135	3,131

Note: Models are estimated using negative binomial regression. Standard errors are in parentheses.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

teasing out the independent influence that the variables have on racist organizing.⁴

Analysis

The dependent variable in the analysis, the number of racist organizations in a county, is a count variable. Racist organizing in a county is a relatively rare event, as most of the observations have a value of 0. The mean of the variable is .145 for 1997 and .175 for 2000. In 1997 the variable ranges from 0 to 7, while in 2000 it ranges from 0 to 6. Due to the nature of the dependent variable, I

estimate the models with negative binomial regression rather than ordinary least squares regression (King 1989). I use negative binomial regression instead of Poisson because negative binomial regression allows for overdispersion by relaxing the Poisson model's assumptions that the variance is equal to the mean and that micro events or counts are statistically independent (Greene 1995). An assumption of independence seems unrealistic in this case, since the presence of one racist organization in a county is likely to be dependent to some extent on the presence of other racist organizations in the county. For example, a skinhead group may be more likely to emerge within a community in which adolescents are exposed to literature distributed by a neo-Nazi organization.⁵ Negative binomial regression includes a dispersion parameter to accommodate excess variance (Land, Davis & Blau 1994). The disturbance is expected to follow a gamma distribution, where the expected value of U_i^2 is $\Theta[1 + \alpha\Theta_i]$ with $\Theta_i = E(Y_i) = \exp(x_{iB})$. The models are estimated with LIMDEP.

Results of the analysis are presented in Table 4. The first pair of columns in the table contain the results of the analysis of racist organizing in 1997, and the second pair of columns contain the results of the analysis of racist organizing in 2000. In each case, the first model includes only the 1990 measures of the independent variables. In the second model I add the measures of economic change. The results of the analysis for 1997 and 2000 are strikingly similar. Indeed, the only notable difference is that population density, a control variable that is a statistically significant predictor of racist organizing in 1997, is not a statistically significant predictor of racist organizing in 2000 when the measures of economic change are included in the model. Otherwise, the only differences reflect changes in the magnitude of the coefficients.

For both years, when measures of economic change are not included in the models, population density and median income are positively associated with racist organizing. The percent of adults with a college education has no significant impact on the dependent variable. Among the theoretical variables, racial and ethnic heterogeneity and income inequality are each highly significant and positively related to racist organizing. And, as expected, educational inequality has a strong negative impact on the dependent variable. Contrary to expectations, industrial heterogeneity is not statistically significant. The dispersion parameter is highly significant, indicating that overdispersion is present and therefore negative binomial regression is preferable to Poisson.

As can be seen in the second and fourth columns of Table 4, increases in income inequality and industrial heterogeneity are highly significant predictors of racist organizing in both 1997 and 2000. Interestingly, the coefficient for industrial heterogeneity becomes positive and statistically significant when the change measures are included in the model. This finding suggests that many of the counties in which industrial heterogeneity increased most sharply tend to be those that were still relatively homogeneous in 1990. In fact, the zero-

TABLE 5: Racist Organizations in U.S. Counties and County Equivalents, 1997 and 2000

	1997		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Income inequality, 1990	4.595 (4.344)	31.154** (9.789)	4.844 (4.298)
Educational inequality, 1990	4.004 (5.458)	65.704* (26.888)	-19.855** (6.296)
Racial and ethnic heterogeneity, 1990	11.896*** (2.382)	1.459** (.557)	1.506** (.566)
Industrial heterogeneity, 1990	8.640*** (2.403)	9.208*** (2.395)	8.322*** (2.360)
Increase in income inequality, 1980-90	.047** (.016)	.046** (.016)	.044** (.015)
Increase in industrial heterogeneity, 1980-90	.564*** (.115)	.539*** (.117)	.542*** (.119)
Median income, 1990 (\$1,000s)	.054** (.019)	.059** (.020)	.055** (.020)
Percent college educated, 1990	-.017 (.017)	-.010 (.017)	-.095 (.052)
Population density, 1990	.093** (.034)	.090** (.033)	.078* (.034)
Educational inequality × racial and ethnic heterogeneity	-71.760*** (15.778)		
Educational inequality × income inequality		-190.905** (63.595)	
Educational inequality × percent college educated			.702 (.435)
Dispersion parameter	2.442*** (.386)	2.472*** (.404)	2.448*** (.403)
Constant	-15.041*** (2.455)	-24.173*** (4.648)	-11.762*** (2.507)

order correlation between industrial heterogeneity and increasing industrial heterogeneity is -.398. After the effect of increasing heterogeneity is controlled, industrial heterogeneity has, as expected, a significant positive effect on racist organizing. Income inequality, however, is no longer significant after controlling for increasing inequality. In this case, many of the counties that are characterized by income inequality in 1990 are also those that experienced increasing inequality between 1980 and 1990. The zero-order correlation between income inequality and increasing income inequality is .384. The results

TABLE 5: Racist Organizations in U.S. Counties and County Equivalents, 1997 and 2000 (Continued)

	Model 1	2000 Model 2	Model 3
Income inequality, 1990	2.510 (3.571)	27.671** (9.476)	2.382 (3.540)
Educational inequality, 1990	.640 (4.198)	60.791* (23.878)	-22.309*** (5.379)
Racial and ethnic heterogeneity, 1990	10.784*** (2.057)	2.953*** (.470)	2.999*** (.475)
Industrial heterogeneity, 1990	5.512* (2.289)	6.164** (2.282)	5.170* (2.249)
Increase in income inequality, 1980-90	.049*** (.014)	.049*** (.014)	.047*** (.014)
Increase in industrial heterogeneity, 1980-90	.445*** (.105)	.429*** (.106)	.428*** (.104)
Median income, 1990 (\$1,000s)	.057*** (.017)	.060*** (.017)	.057*** (.017)
Percent college educated, 1990	-.014 (.016)	-.010 (.016)	-.106* (.045)
Population density, 1990	.033 (.028)	.029 (.030)	.012 (.029)
Educational inequality × racial and ethnic heterogeneity	-54.445*** (13.828)		
Educational inequality × income inequality		-182.620** (61.337)	
Educational inequality × percent college educated			.805* (.363)
Dispersion parameter	1.663*** (.265)	1.640*** (.265)	1.578*** (.260)
Constant	-11.081*** (2.298)	-19.969*** (4.027)	-7.796** (2.374)

(N = 3,131)

Note: Models are estimated using negative binomial regression. Standard errors are in parentheses.

* p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001

indicate that increasing income inequality, rather than inequality at one point in time, provides more fertile recruiting ground for racist organizations.⁶

The results presented in Table 4 offer strong support for the argument advanced in this article. As suggested earlier, a theory of structured ignorance

TABLE 6: Predicted Number of Racist Organizations at Varying Levels of Educational Inequality and Racial and Ethnic Heterogeneity, U.S. Counties, 2000

		Educational Inequality		
		Low	Mean	High
Racial and Ethnic Heterogeneity	Low	.069	.069	.069
	Mean	.155	.116	.087
	High	.349	.194	.108

Note: Low and high values of educational inequality and racial and ethnic heterogeneity are one standard deviation below and above the mean values. All other variables are set at their mean values.

should prove useful in identifying variables that can predict racist organizing in spite of year-to-year fluctuations in the location of active racist groups. The results show that in 1997 and 2000 racial and ethnic heterogeneity, industrial heterogeneity, increasing income inequality, and increasing industrial heterogeneity had a positive impact on racist organizing. Also as expected, educational inequality had a strong negative impact on racist organizing.

INTERACTION EFFECTS

As argued earlier, educational inequality should inhibit racist organizing by increasing contact between individuals with relatively little formal education and those with higher levels, providing community members with greater access to the information necessary to reject white supremacy as a solution to collective grievances. In addition, educational inequality should promote quiescence or passive acceptance of the dominant order, and it can also be used to legitimate other forms of inequality in society. Educational inequality, then, should also diminish the positive impact that racial and ethnic heterogeneity has on racist organizing. To test this argument, I examine interactions between educational inequality and racial and ethnic heterogeneity and between educational inequality and income inequality. I also examine an interaction between educational inequality and the percent of the population with a college education. The results are presented in Table 5.

As Table 5 shows, the interaction between educational inequality and racial and ethnic heterogeneity is highly significant in models of racist organizing in 1997 and 2000. As expected, the coefficient for the interaction term is negative. To gain a better sense of how the interaction effect operates in this nonlinear model, I used the results of the model predicting racist organizing in 2000 to calculate the expected number of racist organizations at varying levels of

TABLE 7: Predicted Number of Racist Organizations at Varying Levels of Educational Inequality and Income Inequality, U.S. Counties, 2000

		Educational Inequality		
		Low	Mean	High
Income Inequality	Low	.111	.105	.101
	Mean	.149	.113	.086
	High	.200	.121	.073

Note: Low and high values of educational inequality and income inequality are one standard deviation below and above the mean values. All other variables are set at their mean values.

educational inequality and racial and ethnic heterogeneity when all other variables are set at their mean values. As seen in Table 6, at low levels of racial and ethnic heterogeneity, educational inequality has virtually no impact on the dependent variable. This should be expected, since in a racially and ethnically homogeneous county the white supremacists' claims would have little resonance regardless of the way education is distributed among the population. At higher levels of racial and ethnic heterogeneity, however, educational inequality has a strong negative effect on the dependent variable. Similarly, it can be seen that at low levels of educational inequality, racial and ethnic heterogeneity has a strong positive impact on racist organizing.

I also tested for an interaction between educational inequality and income inequality (results reported in Table 5). Higher levels of educational inequality should provide county residents with information that could be used to reject white supremacists' interpretation of economic inequality. Educational inequality can also legitimate income inequality by leading people to view disparities in income as resulting from disparities in credentials and expertise. This argument is likewise supported, as the coefficient for the interaction term is negative and highly significant. I also calculate the expected count (number of racist organizations in a county) at varying levels of educational inequality and income inequality when all other variables are set at their mean values. The results are presented in Table 7. When income inequality is low (e.g., one standard deviation below the mean), educational inequality does have a negative impact on racist organizing, but that negative effect is much stronger when income inequality is high. Again, this would indicate that when income inequality in a county is low, the white supremacists' claims would have little resonance regardless of the distribution of education in the county. At higher levels, however, educational inequality has a strong negative impact on the dependent variable. It is also noteworthy that income inequality has a positive

TABLE 8: Predicted Number of Racist Organizations at Varying Levels of Educational Inequality and Percent College-Educated, U.S. Counties, 2000

		Educational Inequality		
		Low	Mean	High
Percent College-Educated	Low	.175	.102	.060
	Mean	.156	.108	.075
	High	.139	.114	.094

Note: “Low” and “high” values of educational inequality and percent college-educated are one standard deviation below and above the mean values. All other variables are set at their mean values.

impact on racist organizing when educational inequality is low but a negative effect when it is high.

The preceding analyses support my arguments concerning the important role that educational inequality plays in racist organizing. Not only does educational inequality have a negative impact on racist organizing, but it also diminishes the positive effect that racial and ethnic heterogeneity and income inequality have on the dependent variable. In fact, the results show that income inequality has a positive effect on racist organizing only when there is relatively little educational inequality in the county. As argued earlier, when education is distributed relatively equally within a community, disparities in wealth and income cannot easily be traced to educational credentials, which can make alternative explanations of societal inequalities seem plausible — even, for some individuals, explanations cast in terms of vast Jewish conspiracies.

I also argued, however, that educational inequality should inhibit racist organizing by promoting higher rates of contact between those with advanced levels of education and those who have not had the benefit of many years of schooling. In the U.S., individuals with a college degree tend to have more liberal views on a wide range of social issues and to have a more sophisticated understanding of how the economy works (Jackman & Muha 1984; Kluegel 1990; Kluegel & Smith 1982; Krysan 1998; Phelan et al. 1995; T.W. Smith 1995). Therefore, the impact that educational inequality has on racist organizing should depend, in part, on the relative number of college graduates in a community. If everyone in the community held an advanced degree, a large proportion of the population, by virtue of their college education, would have access to resources that could be used to reject the white supremacists’ claims. Under these conditions, years of education would be distributed equally yet such a community would presumably not be a breeding ground for racist organizations. In most cases, however, the majority of residents in a county do not have a college degree. Under these conditions, educational inequality can

inhibit racist organizing by promoting higher rates of contact between those who are far removed in terms of years of education.

Results of a model including an interaction between educational inequality and the percent of the population with a college education are presented in Table 5. As expected, the coefficient for the interaction term is positive for both 1997 and 2000. However, the coefficient falls short of statistical significance for 1997 ($p = .106$). Table 8 shows the predicted value of the dependent variable at varying levels of educational inequality and percent college-educated when all other variables are set at their mean values. The results indicate that the negative effect of educational inequality is weaker when higher proportions of the population hold a college degree. Also as expected, when years of education are distributed relatively equally in the county, the percent of the population with a college education has a negative effect on racist organizing.⁷

Conclusion

After several decades of gradual decline, income inequality began to increase in the United States in the 1980s. According to data from the U.S. census, the top 20% of families in the United States received 41.3% of the nation's aggregate income in 1960. That share declined to 40.9% in 1970 and held steady at 41.1% in 1980. By 1990, however, the top 20% of families received 44.3% of the nation's aggregate income, and that group's share continued to rise into the 1990s (U.S. Department of Commerce 1980, 1999). Several factors have contributed to increasing levels of income inequality in the United States. These include the decentralization of industry, increasing foreign competition, plant closings and relocations, agricultural decline, a transition from a goods-producing economy to a service-producing economy, and changes in the tax code during the Reagan administration that benefited the wealthy (see Grant 1995; Morris, Bernhardt & Hancock 1994; Nielsen & Alderson 1997; Sassen 1990; Tickamyer & Duncan 1990).

Measures of growing income inequality at the national level obscure substantial variation in the way that local communities have been affected by these economic transformations. Based on the data employed in this analysis, the majority of counties in the United States (71.4%) did experience an increase in income inequality between 1980 and 1990. In 28.6% of the counties, however, income inequality actually declined. Income inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient, increased by 5% or more in 41.6% of the counties. Yet inequality declined by 5% or more in 11.8% of the counties. The economic transformations of the past two decades have had a devastating impact on some communities in the United States, while many others have been untouched or have benefited from the changes.

Structural changes in society often generate new grievances among subsets of the population. These new grievances provide an incentive to engage in collective action (McVeigh 1999). In this article I have argued that varying forms of structural differentiation not only promote varying levels of discontent in society but also promote different understandings of the causes and solutions to social problems. The theory of structured ignorance provides a framework for understanding the causes of racist organizing in the United State by identifying structural conditions that produce a critical mass of individuals who view organized racism as a reasonable response to the problems they face in their daily lives. Interactions with nonmembers in the broader community are insufficient to sway them from their beliefs. While white separatists may not seek out racist organizations in an attempt to solve a particular problem, economic or otherwise, they are most likely to stay with the organization if the movement's ideology seems reasonable based on what they are able to observe from their position within the social structure. As Blee (2002) describes it, "Racist groups draw from the political mainstream. Core elements of racism targeting African Americans, of xenophobia, and even parts of anti-Semitism supply platforms on which racist groups construct extraordinary ideologies about enemies that seem plausible to their members" (106).

As Schwartz (1976) argued in his study of the Farmers' Alliance, information that is needed to accurately diagnose a social problem is distributed unevenly throughout the social structure. To develop an accurate diagnosis of the problem, individuals must be in contact with those who hold the relevant information. Social structure, as defined by Blau (1977), imposes constraints on intergroup contact. The key finding that educational inequality inhibits racist organizing may appear at first to be counterintuitive. We know, for example, that individuals with high levels of education are less likely to possess attitudes reflecting traditional prejudice. When years of education are unequally distributed, it means that aggregate years of schooling in a community are concentrated into the hands of a relatively small proportion of the population. Yet educational inequality promotes contact between individuals who are widely separated in terms of years of schooling, and this intergroup contact proves to be an important ignorance-reducing mechanism when it comes to racist organizing. At the same time, educational inequality can also promote quiescence, and it can serve to legitimate other inequalities. When other forms of inequality within a community do not seem to be linked to educational differences, the door is open to a number of other interpretations.

There is a strong connection between the theory of structured ignorance described above and Granovetter's (1973) important ideas concerning the "strength of weak ties." As Granovetter demonstrates, the stronger the tie between individuals, the greater the degree of overlap in their friendship

networks. Since individuals with strong ties, by definition, spend a great deal of time with one another and have overlapping friendship networks, there is also likely to be considerable overlap in the information they possess. Individuals can most effectively gain access to new information, therefore, by utilizing weak ties or casual acquaintances, who serve as bridges between groups (Granovetter 1973; see also Lee 1969). Without such bridges, information cannot escape the confines of a friendship network and diffuse throughout society at large. Educational inequality plays a similar role by promoting higher rates of contact between those who are far apart in terms of years of schooling. This intergroup contact makes it possible for the liberal values that tend to come with higher levels of education to diffuse broadly throughout the community.

In this article I have discussed structured ignorance only in relation to the white supremacy movement. Yet the diffusion of information should play an important role in the mobilization of a wide variety of social movement activities and campaigns. As recent research on social movements has emphasized, processes of meaning construction play a critical role in mobilizing collective action. In order to recruit members, movement leaders must develop a collective action frame, or an interpretation of a situation that inspires people to participate in a collective endeavor. Researchers have argued that diagnostic framing and prognostic framing are critical elements of a successful collective action frame (Buechler 2000; Cress & Snow 2000; Snow & Benford 1988; Wilson 1973). As part of the recruitment process, movement leaders must offer a diagnosis of a problem and its causes and propose a remedy or course of action that seems plausible to potential recruits. The analysis presented in this article demonstrates that structural constraints can have an important impact on the quality of both the diagnosis and the prognosis offered by movement leaders. Structural constraints also affect the ability of the targets of recruitment efforts to detect a flawed diagnosis and prognosis. Rather than debate the rationality of protest participation, regardless of the ideology of the movement or the accuracy of its claims, researchers can use a theory of structured ignorance to identify features of the social structure that can create a match between movement ideology and the understandings of the world held by potential movement supporters.

The research presented here may also contribute to our understanding of racial and ethnic relations more generally by specifying the conditions under which contact between members of different racial or ethnic groups can lead to intergroup animosity as predicted by ethnic competition theory (Olzak 1992) or to assimilation or accommodation (Hirschman 1983; Park & Burgess 1921). The results of the analysis show that racial and ethnic heterogeneity has a strong positive effect on racist organizing in counties with relatively low levels of educational inequality. That effect is weakened substantially, however, at

higher levels of educational inequality. The consequences of interethnic contact, therefore, may be conditioned by patterns of educational achievement within the community.

The research also contributes to our understanding of how ethnic antagonism can develop in the absence of intergroup contact. Individuals may be more open to conspiracy theories that characterize out-group members as the source of the world's problems if they are unable to see a clear connection between disparities in income and disparities in education. A growing body of research on distributive justice indicates that most Americans tolerate (and even approve of) substantial disparities in wealth and income in society as long as they perceive that those disparities result from different levels of skill and educational training (see Jasso 1980; Kelley & Evans 1993). When differences in wealth and income do not appear to be linked to differences in education and training, frames that identify Jews or homosexuals as the source of the world's ills may resonate with a critical mass of individuals needed to sustain a hate group.

Notes

1. In this article I do not include militia or "patriot" organizations in the analysis. Not all of the patriot groups qualify as racist organizations, and at this stage it is difficult to discern which organizations qualify and which do not. After a brief growth spurt in the immediate aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing, the patriot movement is currently in steep decline (SPLC 2001). Many members defected when militia groups, in the eyes of the public, became linked with the mass murder perpetrated by Timothy McVeigh. Others, who approved of the bombing, drifted into racist organizations in which their radical views are more widely shared (SPLC 2001).

2. Other researchers have shown that the relative size of a group positively effects homophily in social relations. While inequality and heterogeneity impose constraints on homophilous choices, the larger the group, the easier it is to associate with others who are similar. In this case, while educational inequality promotes status-distant contact, a larger number of college graduates would make it easier for college graduates to interact exclusively with people who have similar levels of education, thereby limiting the potential for the diffusion of information (see Blau 1994; Feld 1982; Fischer 1995; McPherson & Smith-Lovin 1987).

3. I can think of no reason why any errors in the SPLC reporting would vary systematically across counties or that they would be systematically related to the explanatory variables used in my analysis. I did consider the possibility that hate groups located in the state of Alabama or in other southern states might have a better chance of drawing attention from the SPLC since the SPLC is located in Montgomery, Alabama. I tested for this in preliminary analyses by including a dummy variable for counties located in Alabama. I also estimated models with a dummy variable for counties in

southern states. Neither variable is a statistically significant predictor of hate groups. Including the variables has no notable impact on the results of my analyses.

4. When the models are estimated with ordinary least squares regression, the variance inflation factors (VIF) are quite low when the interaction effects are not included in the models. In fact, the VIF does not exceed 3.942 for any of the variables. The VIF is below 3 for all but two of the variables. As is always the case, the VIF is considerably higher for variables that are components of an interaction term.

5. In separate analyses (not shown) I also tested for spatial effects based on a belief that the number of racist organizations in one county may be affected by the number of racist organizations in nearby counties. Using techniques that were employed by Tolnay, Deane, and Beck (1996), no spatial effects were detected.

6. In separate analyses (not shown) I also included measures of increasing racial and ethnic heterogeneity and increasing educational inequality. The coefficients were not statistically significant.

7. In separate analyses (not shown) I tested for interactions between other measures of inequality and heterogeneity. No significant relationships were detected.

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