PATHS TO PARTICIPATION: A PROFILE OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS-ERA KU KLUX KLAN

David Cunningham

ABSTRACT

While the activities of the Ku Klux Klan are central to accounts of the Civil Rights Movement, and, by extension, closely tied to the development of social movement theory since the 1960’s, no previous study has been able to construct an unbiased profile of Klan membership. This paper draws on a set of 94 FBI interviews with Alabama Klansmen in 1963 and 1964 to compile a representative sample of local Klan membership and evaluate the determinants of individual participation. Using this sample, I examine the extent to which Klan adherents differed from the surrounding population, as well as the structure of bias in previous attempts to profile Klan membership. I conclude by highlighting the importance of social networks in linking individuals to reactive social movement organizations, which adds an important relational dimension to existing research focused on grievances produced by macro-level processes.
attention to the interactive nature of contention – encompassing challengers, reactionaries, and authorities – it remains surprising that we know relatively little about the role played by the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in the broader Civil Rights struggle. Indeed, Klan members – virulent defenders of the segregationist status quo, perpetrators of much of the violence against Civil Rights workers and black citizens that shaped both the dynamics of the movement and the response of authorities in Washington, DC, and the most enduring symbol of racial intolerance and hatred from that period – are perhaps the least understood key players of the Movement.

To a significant degree, limitations in our access to Klan-related data have contributed to this relative silence. One problem has been the fact that, as a “secret fraternal organization,” Klan membership lists or internal organizational documents have never been publicly available, and researchers have not successfully gained insight into Klan members’ motivations or day-to-day activities through interviews. Such barriers have perhaps contributed to a tendency to avoid applying general insights on recruitment and participation that have otherwise gained wide influence in studies of social movements. Early studies of the Civil Rights-era Klan were rooted in strain theories that viewed contentious political action as the outcome of grievances produced by instabilities in status positions. Vander Zanden (1960, 1965), for instance, explained the upsurge in Klan activity in the late 1950s and early 1960s by pointing to macro-level structural shifts, with Klan membership the product of ambiguous or unstable class positions that in turn generated racist action.

Over the past 30 years, strain theories have been supplanted by more instrumental accounts centered on political opportunities for collective action and the ability of social movement organizations to mobilize resources (see Jenkins, 1983; McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996; Morris, 1981). Influential studies in the resource mobilization and political process tradition have variously focused on how mobilizing structures, framing processes, and repertoires of contention mediate macro-level environments and contentious action. In response to the question of who participates in social movement activity, such models recognize that grievances do not translate into protest in a vacuum; aggrieved actors are much more likely to participate in movement activity if they are integrated into social worlds that support and facilitate such action in various ways (Diani & McAdam, 2003; Dixon & Roscigno, 2003; Klandermans & Oegema, 1987; McAdam & Paulsen, 1993; Snow, Zurcher, & Ekland-Olson, 1980).

However, such relational dynamics are often overlooked in studies of reactive movements like the KKK – i.e. those which respond to threats to
their existing social status rather than actively work toward changing the status quo (see Tilly, 1978; Van Dyke & Soule, 2002). While the question of who participates in such movements remains central, the answer frequently is rooted in threat- or competition-based theory, which views reactive insurgent action as a product of grievances generated by perceived threats to existing status relations or competition over scarce resources. These grievances are instrumental expressions, often captured by macro- or meso-level proxies of threat. In a racialized context such as the Civil Rights-era South, threat is captured most commonly by demographic measures; the percentage of non-white residents in a particular spatial unit, for example, provides an estimate of the level of threat faced by whites (Fossett & Kiecolt, 1989; Quillian, 1995, 1996; Tolnay, Beck, & Massey, 1989). Other studies have conceptualized these threats multi-dimensionally, accounting for economic and political dynamics as well (Beck, 2000; McVeigh, 1999; Olzak, 1992; Van Dyke & Soule, 2002), though the underlying competition-based logic remains the same.

While grievances stemming from competition or threat dynamics are typically viewed as collective expressions that, implicitly at least, draw upon social ties as mobilizing resources, empirical studies have largely avoided direct conceptualization of the role played by these ties. This paper examines the processes through which adherents link to organizations like the Klan, and focuses on two distinct issues. The first is straightforward: who participated in the Civil Rights-era Klan? While even the most detailed response to this question yields only descriptive insight into the movement, the answer provides an important foundation for properly dealing with a range of analytic puzzles tied to the ways in which broad environments constitute contexts for individual action.

The second goal is to extend this demographic portrait to examine how Klan recruitment and participation were influenced by existing social links across persons and groups. A long line of studies of non-reactive movement participants have demonstrated that embeddedness within particular social networks can facilitate recruitment to social movement organizations (Kitts, 2000; McAdam, 1986; McAdam & Paulsen, 1993; Passy, 2003). Klandermans and Oegema (1987) and Goodwin (1997) have alternately recognized that social ties can serve as potential barriers to participation, as the time and energy associated with affective or otherwise competing ties create cross-pressures that constrain the actions of many movement sympathizers. The Klan provides a clear case for assessing how such connections operate in the presence of threats to status quo power relations.
More powerful evidence for the importance of networks comes from Blee’s (2002) study of women in contemporary racist groups, which finds that notions of threat or competition fail to satisfyingly explain how or why members come to participate in such organizations. Instead, Blee views social ties as the primary motor driving white supremacist movements, embedding activists in heterodox worlds and contributing to the formation of racist collective identities clearly bounded from ties to the mainstream. While this model compellingly explains participation in today’s marginalized hate groups, the Klan’s militant defense of segregation had considerable appeal in 1960s Alabama, and its organization consequently lacked this insular character. Given the broad threat to status quo power relations characterizing this context, I view Klan participation as a product of the interaction of structurally induced grievances and network processes, with structural factors contributing to the emergence of perceived competition over scarce resources or status positions and social ties channeling aggrieved individuals into organized resistance. But following Blee (2002) as well as Gould (2003), the analysis here moves beyond identifying the presence or absence of preexisting ties across members to assess the varied ways in which specific types of ties both facilitate and constrain participation in groups like the KKK.

The sections that follow make use of a representative sample of Klan members active in north-central Alabama in 1963 to construct a profile of Civil Rights-era Klansmen. I first compare this profile to the general population in that area of Alabama to examine the extent to which Klan members differed from the overall pool of potentially mobilizable individuals. I also compare this representative sample to two widely cited accounts of Klan membership: (1) historian Kenneth T. Jacksons (1967) membership lists from two 1920s-era Klan groups in Tennessee and Illinois and (2) the nonrandom samples compiled by Vander Zanden and Kallal, which look at Klan members across the South during the early 1960s. I conclude by exploring how this representative sample more generally aids our understanding of the processes that facilitated and constrained participation in the Klan during the Civil Rights era.

THE KU KLUX KLAN IN AMERICA

The revival of the KKK after the 1954 Brown Supreme Court decision is generally referred to as the third wave of the Klan movement. The KKK had first emerged in 1866 in Pulaski, Tennessee. Initially viewed as a social
fraternity, robed Klan members soon spread across the South battling Reconstruction policies. These first-wave Klan adherents embraced vigilante-type behavior, often violently preventing black social and economic advances, as well as battling Republican party officials. The movement never grew beyond the South to achieve regional or national-level coordination, but it did manage to mobilize a broad range of rural whites, thriving in areas with strong black or Republican constituencies (Trelease, 1971). Federal legal action, along with the deployment of Republican-led state militia forces in some states, led to the downfall of the first generation Klan, which had almost completely disappeared by 1872.

The Klan lay dormant for almost 40 years until, spurred in part by the release of D.W. Griffith’s 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* (which viewed Klansmen as heroic defenders of the Southern way of life and protectors of white womanhood), a second generation of the KKK members began organizing anew. By the mid-1920s, this “new” Klan boasted several million members, with strongholds in various states and regions, including Indiana, Oklahoma, and the Southwest. Unlike the first wave, the movement gained considerable popularity in urban areas, and its targets broadened to include immigrants, Communists, Jews, and Catholics (Jackson, 1967; Lay, 1992). Symbolic shows of strength increased as well; sheets and hoods were a carryover from Reconstruction days, but were supplemented with large parades, more intricate regalia, and burning crosses. Considerable violence was again attributed to elements associated with the Klan, though the groups appeal among both blue and white collar workers also allowed it to wield significant political influence at local, state, and even national levels. The centralized coordination that made such larger-scale political inroads possible, however, also contributed to the organization’s spectacular decline, as conflicts over financial excesses caused membership to drop dramatically by the late 1920s (Chalmers, 1981; McVeigh, 1999). By 1944, the Klan again had effectively disbanded.

Several self-proclaimed Klan organizations reemerged shortly thereafter, though none were able to build a significant following. The advancing Civil Rights Movement, however, provided the impetus for a new wave of Klan activity in the early 1960s. The Tuscaloosa, Alabama-based United Klans of America (UKA), led by former tire salesman Robert Shelton, became the largest and most influential umbrella organization for the third-wave Klan. At its peak, the UKA boasted several hundred chapters (“klaverns”) and over 10,000 dues-paying members throughout the South, as well as a small number of supporters in the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic states. Shelton and his followers were mainly concerned about preserving the segregationist
status quo, though they also targeted Communists and Jews as “un-American” elements. Perhaps ironically, the House Un-American Activities Committee tagged the UKA with the same charge in 1966, holding extended hearings in which close to 200 Klan adherents testified. These hearings provided the most extensive public look into what had been a mostly secretive organization (while the UKA regularly hosted public rallies featuring robed Klansmen, their meetings and other activities were kept from the public), and provided a basis for understanding the types of individuals who were attracted to Klan ideology and activities.

Evidence from these hearings, as well as from various other Klan leaders and supporters featured in the local and national news media, have become the primary basis for our current understanding of the breadth of Civil Rights-era Klan membership. The extent to which these visible adherents were representative of the overall membership has long remained uncertain, however. Unbiased data from the 1920s Klan – including a set of complete local membership lists compiled by Jackson (1967) – is more readily available, though differences in the mobilization context across Klan waves have led to a broad sense that little continuity exists across generations of the KKK. While it is widely held that members of the Civil Rights-era Klan were considerably more homogeneous than second-wave adherents, to this point we have no basis for:

- comparing the degree of similarity across waves in more detail;
- evaluating the extent to which local third-wave Klan memberships mirrored the population from which they drew support;
- systematically examining the accuracy of previous attempts to generalize from nonrandom samples of UKA members.

THE DATA

Despite the absence of clear data on the composition of the Civil Rights-era Klan, a fairly consistent portrait of the groups members has emerged. Both Vander Zanden (1960) and Edward Kallal (1989) found that they tended to be men² from the “lower and lower-middle classes,” typically engaged in either skilled trade or semi-skilled or unskilled manufacturing work. A lesser percentage owned small businesses or occupied what Vander Zanden referred to as “marginal white collar positions” (i.e. store clerks, service-station attendants, police officers). While Klan leaders have historically gone to great lengths to stress the presence of white-collar professionals –
especially doctors and lawyers – within their ranks, most accounts view such
data individuals as only a negligible part of the overall membership (Chalmers,
1981; McWhorter, 2001; Vander Zanden, 1960, 1965). News stories and
evidence from Congressional hearings (i.e. U.S. House of Representatives,
Committee on Un-American Activities, 1967) generally reaffirmed this oc-
cupational picture. These sources have also repeatedly emphasized the fra-
gility of the Klan’s base, explained by corrupt, exploitative leadership and
the ephemeral commitment of an irresponsible, largely apolitical following.

The accuracy of such portraits is still an open question, however, as no
one to date has been able to compile a representative sample of the overall
membership. The fact that almost all accounts make heavy use of Klan
members who appear either in media accounts or formal hearings almost
certainly biases these samples toward more central, active, and likely mil-
itant members. Such biases hinder explicit studies of Klan membership (i.e.
Kallal, 1989; Vander Zanden, 1960, 1965), as well as numerous historical
accounts of the Klan generally. For the latter, discussions of Klan mem-
bership draw upon either the findings from such nonrandom 1960s-era
samples or more systematic accounts from Klan activity in the 1920s, for
which a limited number of more detailed membership lists have found their
way into the hands of historians (Horowitz, 1999; Jackson, 1967; MacLean,
1995).

Information compiled through FBI interviews of north-central Alabama
Klan members in 1963 and 1964 provides a unique opportunity to construct
a representative sample of Civil Rights-era Klan adherents. These interviews
were carried out as part of two bomb investigations. The first stemmed from
the dynamiting of the Gaston Motel in downtown Birmingham, where var-
ious members of a Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) del-
egation (including Martin Luther King, Jr.) were staying on the night of
May 11, 1963. There had been a large Klan rally in nearby Bessemer that
night, and just after midnight, dynamite exploded along the west wall of the
motel. Miraculously, no one had been killed, though the bombing led to
widespread media attention (McWhorter, 2001, p. 429). The second inves-
tigation resulted from one of the watershed events of the Civil Rights
Movement: the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Church in Birmingham. On
the morning of September 15, 1963, dynamite was detonated at the church,
and four young girls were killed in the blast. Given the long history of Klan-
related bombings in Birmingham – they occurred frequently enough for the
city to have earned the nickname “Bombingham” – the FBI immediately
suspected several central members of the local Eastview klavern.
There has been much speculation about the FBI's ambiguous role in solving Civil Rights-related cases in the South, as well as Director J. Edgar Hoover's reluctance to investigate incidents involving Klan-related violence (see Cunningham, 2004; Garrow, 1981; McWhorter, 2001; O'Reilly, 1991). Despite this ambivalence on the part of the Bureau, it is important to emphasize that the FBI ultimately devoted significant resources to neutralize the KKK and related groups. Responding to significant pressure generated by the national headlines garnered by the senseless killings in Birmingham, Hoover reluctantly authorized an aggressive investigation into the church bombing, along with the earlier incident at the Gaston Motel. Over the next several years, Bureau agents interviewed and reinterviewed close to 100 Klan adherents. The following year, the Klan-orchestrated murders of three Civil Rights workers in Neshoba County, Mississippi, led the FBI to establish a massive counterintelligence program, or COINTELPRO, against 19 “white hate groups.” Between 1964 and 1971, Bureau agents initiated nearly 500 actions designed to “expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize the activities” of Klan targets (Cunningham, 2004). This program operated alongside existing COINTELPRO operations against the Communist Party-USA and the Socialist Workers Party, with additional programs against “Black Nationalist/Hate Groups” and the New Left added after 1967.

Further, the Bureau's efforts against the Klan were unusually successful. Despite Hoover's lack of enthusiasm for tackling the Klan and other white hate groups, this particular COINTELPRO resulted in perhaps the FBI's greatest success of the era. Agents were effectively able to exploit their overlap with Klan adherents' broad worldview, characterized by a deep-seated sense of patriotism and anti-communism. As a result, the FBI was able to develop several hundred informants, as well as carry out a large number of successful disruptive actions against various Klan units. Similar effectiveness was lacking in other COINTELPROs against New Left and Black Power groups, largely due to the fact that agents failed to grasp the motivations and culture characterizing activists in those worlds (Cunningham, 2004).

This ideological and organizational overlap with the Klan meant that the FBI had access to information about Klan units and members, as well as the means to gather and interpret data from interview subjects that was not marred by the inaccuracies that characterized their examinations of many other groups. The breadth and depth of the Bureau's efforts is reflected in the House Un-American Activities Committee's extensive hearings on the KKK in 1965 and 1966 (U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Un-
American Activities, 1967). The committee’s case relied heavily on information from the FBI’s files, and several leading Klan organizers have since confirmed the validity of the Bureau’s knowledge of units and members.4

In Alabama, agents in the local FBI field office were certainly privy to who exactly was tied to the secretive UKA, as they had employed numerous informants as infiltrators in Eastview and other Birmingham-area klaverns (Cunningham, 2004; McWhorter, 2001). The interesting thing about these particular investigations was their thoroughness and scope; in an attempt to gain as much information as possible, Bureau agents sought interviews with everyone they identified as connected to the Klan. The ability to rely on agent interviews rather than intelligence data (second-hand accounts from informants, etc.) avoided many of the inaccuracies that inevitably entered into FBI reports on groups for which they lacked such extensive access (Donner, 1980). Importantly, the interviews included central leaders and members of local klaverns as well as more peripheral members and even those who only sporadically attended meetings and rallies. As such, they avoided the common bias toward viewing membership as limited to those who were the most visible, stable, and active adherents of particular klaverns.

The interview reports themselves contain two types of information. First, FBI agents were primarily interested in each member’s activities on the nights of the bombings. The specific alibis provided by each Klansman were frequently unverifiable and obviously subject to the self-interested untruths of those involved in the incidents, and as such do not constitute reliable data. Fortunately, this information is not directly tied to the concerns of this paper. Second, the reports contained detailed background information about each subject. These background reports were gleaned from observations by the interviewing agents (mostly related to race, sex, age, height, and weight), accounts provided by the interviewees themselves, and data gathered from earlier informant and agent records. Thus, while particular Klansmen may have been vague or hostile about providing information during the interviews themselves, data about their occupational histories, marital statuses, family and friendship associations, and levels of involvement in Klan activities could be cross-checked with detailed past records. At times, agents noted that particular pieces of information were inconsistent with their knowledge of suspects, and noted any necessary “corrections.” This data, therefore, moves beyond a mere transcript of the self-interested accounts provided by each suspect during the course of the interview itself, and thus constitutes a reliable resume for each interviewee. A total of 94 of these
This unique sample includes a broad range of adherents, consistent with accounts emphasizing the Klan’s highly layered membership structure (Chalmers, 1981; Huie, 2000 [1964]; McWhorter, 2001). While the hierarchical nature of each klavern was represented by a dizzying array of formal offices (Exalted Cyclops, Grand Kludd, Grand Titan, Kligrapp, etc.), these officers and their committed followers also benefited from a less stable collection of more peripheral players: those who attended meetings only sporadically, as well as the considerable number who provided various types of “support” to the Klan at public events and with more covert activities.

As existing examinations of Civil Rights-era Klan participants draw upon those members visible in the media and in Congressional hearings, the breadth of the membership has been systematically underrepresented. The FBI’s interviews, however, do include anyone whose associations with a local klavern may have made them privy to information about particular bombing activities. Thus, of the 94 Klansmen included in our sample here, slightly less than half (45/94) would be considered central members (i.e. those who regularly attended meetings and also participated in outside Klan-related activities). Twenty-one others paid membership dues but rarely attended meetings, one had never attended a meeting since paying his membership fee at a local rally, and nine had previously been sporadic members before quitting the Klan entirely over the past year. The final 18 interviewees were not formal dues-paying members, but considered themselves “associates” of the Klan, assisting them with various tasks or providing needed resources. These categories were salient from both the perspective of the FBI agents undertaking these investigations (hence their efforts to track down and interview this broad range of adherents) and the members/associates themselves, who described their own roles in these varied ways.

A PROFILE OF THE MEMBERSHIP

In this section, I describe the makeup of the Civil Rights-era Klan in central Alabama. To understand the range of the Klan’s appeal, I compare this profile to the overall local white male population. Next, I consider the question of generational continuity across Klan waves by comparing this portrait to a locally representative sample of second-wave Klansmen from Knox County, Tennessee, and Winchester, Illinois. Finally, I compare my
findings here to two unrepresentative but widely influential studies of Klan membership, and examine the extent and structure of sample bias in these previous accounts.

The Klan as a Segment of the North-Central Alabama Population

Most theories of Klan adherence focus on white males’ class standing, consistent with a theoretical emphasis on grievances emerging in reaction either to status-based insecurities (Vander Zanden, 1960, 1965) or to perceived competition with non-white workers (Beck, 2000; Van Dyke & Soule 2003). Previous studies portraying Klan members as being disproportionately drawn from blue collar and marginal white-collar industries have been used to support both of these theories. Here, I deal with the occupational standing of Klan members, but also provide a more complete portrait of the membership.

The Klan members examined here all resided in Jefferson and Tuscaloosa Counties, were uniformly male (with no “Ladies Auxiliary” groups (see endnote 2) active in these areas) and, on average, significantly older (mean age was 38.5, compared to 29.8 in the population generally; \( p < 0.001 \)), less educated (median years of schooling was nine, versus 10.1 for the population generally; \( p < 0.001 \)), and slightly more likely to have been born in Alabama (87.9% were Alabama natives, versus 83.4% of county residents generally) than the overall population. The educational difference was especially striking, as only one Klansman in the sample actually graduated from high school (two others completed an equivalency degree while in the military), while, in contrast, 36.4% of Jefferson and Tuscaloosa County residents had completed high school, with over 40% of those going on to complete at least one year of higher education.

The vast majority of Klan members (90.2%) were married at the time of their interview; only one was separated from his wife, and 6.6% had been divorced at least once previously. Most (92.1%) married Klansmen had children; the mean number of children was 2.4, with no family having more than five. At the time of the Birmingham church bombing, interview subjects had been affiliated with the Klan for an average of five years, though this value is considerably skewed by the fact that two individuals had joined during the 1930’s. The median length of membership was three years, with 13.5% of the sample joining the Klan after the start of 1963. Over four-fifths (81/94) of the Klan members interviewed reported their current occupations and places of employment. While it is reasonable to
assume that those who refused to discuss these matters were more likely to be unemployed, all but three of those who did report their work status were actively employed at the time of their interview. Using the categorization scheme from the 1960 U.S. Census (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1963), Table 1 reports the distribution of occupations held by members of the Klan, as well as the occupational makeup of the overall Jefferson and Tuscaloosa County white male workforce. Nearly half of Klansmen were employed as some type of “operator” (i.e. machinist, sheet-metal worker, heavy equipment operator, and – most frequently – truck driver), making them almost twice as likely as other male workers in this area to be located in such occupations ($p < 0.001$). Conversely, Klan members were systematically underrepresented in white-collar occupations – professional, technical, and clerical workers (all $p < 0.001$). Klansmen’s relative lack of participation in the professional workforce is consistent with the account provided by Vander Zanden (1960), though we also see that members’ likelihood of managing or owning business establishments did not significantly differ from the overall local white population. Most generally, despite the systematic differences within particular categories, a paired-sample $t$-test shows no significant overall difference between Klansmen and locals in their distribution across occupational categories.

Table 2 repeats the above exercise, focusing on workers’ industry groupings rather than their occupational categories (the categorization scheme is
again drawn from U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1963). We see that Klan members weren’t consolidated into any particular category, but were systematically overrepresented within the “transportation and public utility” (mostly due to the disproportionate number of truck drivers in the sample), and “business and repair” (plumbers, mechanics, electricians, and general maintenance workers) groupings. Klan adherents were also well-represented in the manufacturing sector, though not above what we would expect given the overall makeup of Jefferson and Tuscaloosa Counties. The absence of agriculture and mining workers matched the few overall opportunities for work in those sectors, though we see that Klan members were underrepresented in industries with a strong white-collar presence: “finance, insurance, and real estate” \((p<0.001)\), as well as “professional services” \((p<0.001)\) and “public administration.” As with the occupational groupings, a paired-sample \(t\)-test shows no significant overall differences between Klan members and the local white population in terms of their distribution across industry categories.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{lcc}
\hline
 & Klan Sample (%) & Overall Local Population (%) \\
\hline
Agriculture & 0 (0) & 1.2 (2,141) \\
Mining & 0 (0) & 2.1 (3,813) \\
Construction & 6.7 (5) & 5.8 (10,385) \\
Manufacturing (durable goods) & 17.3 (13) & 19.3 (34,526) \\
Manufacturing (non-durable goods) & 10.7 (8) & 8.0 (14,363) \\
Transportation and public utilities & 22.7 (17)*** & 8.6 (15,420) \\
Trade (wholesale and retail) & 20.0(15) & 22.5 (40,320) \\
Finance, insurance, and real estate & 1.3 (1)**** & 5.9 (10,585) \\
Business and repair services & 17.3 (13)**** & 2.5 (4,549) \\
Personal services & 2.7 (2) & 3.2 (5,627) \\
Entertainment and recreation services & 1.3 (1) & 0.5 (906) \\
Professional services & 0 (0)*** & 12.9 (23,121) \\
Public administration & 0 (0) & 4.5 (7,973) \\
Industry not reported & – & 2.8 (5,087) \\
Total & 100 (75) & 100 (178,818) \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Industry Distribution of White Men in Labor Force.}
\end{table}

\textit{Note:} Number of cases in parentheses; asterisks represent significance of differences between Klansmen and overall local population (****\(p<0.001\), ***\(p<0.01\), **\(p<0.05\), *\(p<0.1\)).
The Klan’s true heyday, in terms of membership and political influence, was the mid-1920s, when KKK members numbered in the millions rather than the tens of thousands. The Klan of that period is generally viewed as considerably more diverse than either the first or third waves, as the organization gained favor in cities as well as small towns, recruited women as well as men into local chapters, counted prominent businesspeople and politicians among its most visible members, and was not confined to a single region (Blee, 1991; Chalmers, 1981; Jackson, 1967; Lay, 1992). Such distinctions, alongside the fact that the central second-wave Klan organization disbanded in 1944, have resulted in a tendency to view KKK participation as discontinuous with earlier or later waves. However, as we see below, a considerable percentage of Civil Rights-era Klan members cite the impact of their fathers and grandfathers’ previous participation in the Klan world, and a sparse network of Klan adherents in certain areas did provide some basis for continuity across eras, consistent with Taylor’s emphasis on abeyance structures across waves of the U.S. women’s movement (Taylor, 1989).

While such observations do not at all imply that motivations for participation in the second and third wave Klans were equivalent – it is clear that the historical context for participation differed considerably – they do emphasize the importance of comparing membership profiles over time to understand where continuities and discontinuities emerge.

Within a broader examination of the second-wave Klan’s appeal in urban communities, Jackson (1967) reported on the complete membership records for local Klan groups in Knoxville, Tennessee, and Winchester, Illinois.9 second-wave Klan units in Denver, Colorado (Goldberg, 1981), and Eugene (Toy, 1992), and La Grande (Horowitz, 1999), Oregon. In each case, these profiles confirm the broad diversity noted by Jackson, and underscore the fact that unskilled and semi-skilled industry workers were a distinct minority within many local incarnations of the national movement. While these records, like the Alabama sample compiled here, suffer from their lack of national-level generalizability, they are an extraordinarily comprehensive record of the local membership. As the data was taken from membership applications and Klan dues records, they presumably include both central and peripheral members.

The final column of Table 3 compiles the occupational distribution of members in the Knoxville and Winchester Klans. Quickly apparent is the large size of the Klan units; Winchester had 180 members and Knoxville approached 400. This great popularity was reflected in the breadth of the
Klan’s support as well. While Table 3 shows that the presence of small business owners, industry and marginal white-collar workers did not differ significantly from the Civil Rights-era Klan, Jackson found that 19.4% of Klan members held high-prestige jobs, a figure considerably greater than was evident in the Alabama sample examined here (or in Vander Zanden’s national sample). Kallal’s examination of those testifying before the House Committee on Un-American Activities yielded a similarly high proportion of higher-status members, though even ignoring the considerable sample bias issues discussed in more detail below, his pool of third-wave high-prestige workers was relatively narrow. While those testifying in 1966 did include an attorney, school board member, and physician, most of the Klan’s highest-prestige members were ministers, local business owners, and foremen.

The Knoxville and Winchester Klans, on the other hand, included a broad range of white-collar members, including 39 business workers and managers, six teachers, six lawyers, five doctors, and at least one engineer, realtor, pharmacist, undertaker, and professor. None of these high-prestige occupations were included in the Alabama Klan population, confirming historical accounts of the narrowed appeal of the Civil Rights-era Klan. While the Klan’s second wave successfully organized beyond the South, and within a wide range of community types, they were also able to mobilize a significantly broader range of the population than has the KKK since, including elites that could provide some measure of political and civic legitimacy to the organization generally.

Table 3. Occupational Comparison of Klan Membership Samples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NC Alabama (%</th>
<th>Vander Zanden (%)</th>
<th>Kallal (%)</th>
<th>Jackson (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower prestige</td>
<td>8.1 (6)</td>
<td>0.0 (0)</td>
<td>13.1 (16)</td>
<td>0.4 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Un/semi-skilled industry workers</td>
<td>37.8 (28)</td>
<td>36.0 (55)</td>
<td>23.0 (28)</td>
<td>36.0 (208)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled industry workers</td>
<td>20.3 (15)</td>
<td>33.3 (51)</td>
<td>9.0 (11)</td>
<td>12.6 (73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small business owners</td>
<td>13.5 (10)</td>
<td>7.2 (11)</td>
<td>20.5 (25)</td>
<td>18.2 (105)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginal white-collar workers</td>
<td>17.6 (13)</td>
<td>23.5 (36)</td>
<td>15.6 (19)</td>
<td>13.0 (75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher prestige</td>
<td>2.7 (2)</td>
<td>0.0 (0)</td>
<td>18.9 (23)</td>
<td>19.4 (112)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100 (76)</td>
<td>100 (153)</td>
<td>100 (122)</td>
<td>100 (585)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Number of cases in parentheses.
Representativeness and Bias in Profiles of the Civil Rights-Era Klan Population

While the overall picture presented in Tables 1 and 2 supports both Vander Zanden and Kallal’s central conclusion that the Klan drew its membership from the “lower and lower-middle classes,” a deeper comparison of these findings allows us to better understand the extent to which previous samples were not fully representative of the KKK’s membership. I undertake such a comparison here, as well as explore how particular biases have limited a rich understanding of Klan mobilization and participation.

I contend that the Alabama sample employed here represents the breadth of the Klan’s membership base, and specifically that it is the first data source fully inclusive of more peripheral actors who provided considerable support and strength to Klan activity across the South. However, this data is limited in the sense that it is not fully generalizable to the Klan’s national membership, as it is drawn from a particular region of a single state in the Deep South. Above, I explored the degree to which this regional Klan membership deviated from the overall local population, finding that Klansmen were disproportionately represented within particular blue-collar occupations and industries, and conversely only sparsely represented within professional and typical white-collar fields. This general finding likely holds across regions, though the particular structure of the relatively industrialized Birmingham and Tuscaloosa, Alabama, labor markets almost certainly ensures that we underrepresent certain types of rural workers, especially farmers, in our profile of Klan members.  

Table 3 compares this sample to findings in Vander Zanden (1960) and Kallal (1989). For consistency with these earlier studies, I make use of the occupational typology developed by Vander Zanden and modified by Kallal. This typology includes six categories: skilled industry workers (including machinists, mechanics, carpenters, masons, electricians), small business owners (building contractors, proprietors of restaurants, stores, or gas stations), marginal white-collar workers (clerks, attendants, police officers, salespersons, office workers), unskilled or semi-skilled industry workers (generally in the textile, steel, auto, aircraft, or coal industries), and positions of higher or lower prestige than these four categories.

Kallal’s sample is drawn from Klan adherents who testified during the HUAC investigations into KKK activities in 1966. Those subpoenaed by the committee were disproportionately leaders and other nationally known supporters who had been visible in the media and, as such, we should not be surprised that Kallal’s population contains a relatively low proportion
(45%) of industry and other low-prestige workers. Vander Zanden drew a portion of his population from "Klan spokesmen in the press," but also incorporated less obviously skewed sources such as arrest records and even a "police-seized membership list." Correspondingly, his proportion of industry workers is considerably higher (69%), and similar to the 66.2% of low-prestige workers in the Alabama sample.

The overall occupational distribution of Alabama Klan members described here does not significantly differ from that found by Vander Zanden; in both cases, approximately one-third of the membership are either small business owners or marginal white-collar workers, with the remaining two-thirds employed as industry workers. This overlap is likely primarily due to the fact that his sample managed to incorporate more peripheral members as well as leaders and core constituents. The significance of this split becomes clear once the Alabama sample is subdivided into groupings of central (i.e. those who regularly attended meetings as well as participated in outside Klan activities) and more peripheral members. While peripheral members are fairly evenly distributed across occupational categories (50% worked in industry, the other half were business owners or marginal white-collar workers), the more committed membership is concentrated within the blue-collar industry sector; a full 84% of central members were employed either in skilled or unskilled industry jobs.

This split holds across other measures, as central members tend to be slightly older and less educated than their counterparts. The schooling gap is less than a year – a mean of 7.7 years versus 8.4 for peripheral members – but the concentration of active members in the lower educational echelon is striking. The standard deviation is only 1.9 years for central adherents – 37% smaller than for more marginal members – and no central member had remained in school beyond the tenth grade. The implications are significant.

Given the fact that central and peripheral members differ considerably, capturing the full diversity of Klan membership requires a sample that accurately represents both subpopulations. Generalizing about the Klan (or, by extension, other extremist groups) from the makeup of their visible leadership (Daniels, 1997; Kallal, 1989) almost certainly inflates the economic and social status of the full membership and, conversely, generalizing from those hard-core members whose commitment and militance translates into media-ready violent or illegal actions tends to overemphasize the lower-status adherents.

This portrait of Klan members provides insight into the structural context for the emergence of race-based grievances, i.e. the socio-spatial locations of likely adherents. However, it is also important to examine the processes
through which individuals’ susceptibility to specific grievances translates into political organization in the KKK. The political process tradition in social movement theory points to the key role played by preexisting social ties that link individuals to particular activist organizations. Not surprising, then, is the large number of connections apparent within our sample of 94 Alabama Klansmen.

Family ties were abundant: the wife of one Klansman was the aunt of another, the daughter of a third Klansman was also married to a fourth, the cousin of a 1950s Klan officer joined shortly thereafter, two sets of brothers were members, as were another set of three cousins. Sometimes these family ties crossed generations; four interview subjects described Klan involvement as “in their blood,” as their fathers and/or grandfathers had also been members. While the presence of these preexisting ties seems significant in itself, it is also crucial to uncover how ties serve to connect persons to organizations (Diani, 2003). In this case, the salience of familial connections made it likely that such ties provided both an initial receptivity to Klan participation (through broad socialization mechanisms) as well as a more enduring reinforcement of the link between such participation and salient aspects of individual identity (McAdam & Paulsen, 1993; Passy, 2003).

Similarly, the workplace did not just provide a passive backdrop for the formation of class-based grievances; it could also serve as a venue for connecting aggrieved actors. Here, two Klansmen described work colleagues as their first connection to the organization. The fact that the daily routine within many workplaces connected large numbers of individuals meant that they also constituted ideal settings for certain persons to be targeted by concrete recruitment attempts, what Passy (2003) refers to as the “structural connection function” played by particular social settings. And since work-based ties aren’t formed across random individuals, but instead among persons similarly situated in the labor market, they are likely to occur among those who are mutually receptive to ideas that nurture the development of grievances (in this case, based on race and federally mandated threats to status quo labor market arrangements). Over time, recurrent interactions with similarly aggrieved coworkers potentially increases receptivity to Klan activity.

Public gathering places became venues for recruitment attempts as well—two local eateries, Cash’s barbeque restaurant and the Horseshoe Bar, were both well-known as popular meeting places for Klansmen. While the fact that groupings of Klan members gathered to eat and drink together is not surprising, at least two future members in our sample were first recruited at these venues after expressing particular opinions about the state of race
relations in Birmingham. In several other instances, members cited their initial recruitment into the Klan as stemming from old friendships or school or neighborhood connections, with these shared histories creating a context for trust and receptivity to the ideas expressed by the contacts.

Of course, these observations come only from known Klan adherents, and thus do not account for similar connections that may have existed across persons who never joined the UKA (McAdam, 2003). What they do provide is a starting point to account for, in Roger Gould’s (1991, p. 716) words, “the interplay between social ties created by insurgent organizations and [potential members’] preexisting social networks.” Just as an understanding of how particular social ties function to link individuals to organizations should supplement the mere observation that ties exist, it is important to view community residents as embedded within a complex set of connections and group affiliations. These connections can serve to reproduce specific shared meanings and identities that reinforce one’s commitment to particular ideologies and actions, though they can just as easily compete with each other to loosen certain existing commitments while strengthening others (Goodwin, 1997).

Indeed, even within our population of successful Klan recruits, not all ties served to integrate members into the Klan or reinforce their commitment to the group. In three cases here, members who had recently quit the Klan cited either family, work, or civic ties as creating new constraints on their time and energies. One ex-member claimed that he had “lost interest” in the Klan after getting married, another wanted to devote more time to both his job and a volunteer position coaching a youth baseball team, and a third cited time constraints with his job that made it difficult to attend meetings or devote himself to Klan activities to any real degree. Thus, while being well-integrated into work, family, and civic groupings may increase one’s likelihood of being the object of a Klan recruiting appeal, the multiple competing obligations (both practical and ideological) that result exerts a potential prophylactic effect on Klan-based and other political activity (Goodwin, 1997; Klandermans & Oegema, 1987).

Altogether, the 94 interview subjects cited 38 instances of ties channeling them to the Klan, and in the three cases discussed above, cited competing ties as significantly limiting their Klan activities. This figure is clearly a highly conservative estimate of the role played by social ties, as the FBI’s interviews were not primarily concerned with members’ initial recruitment into the Klan. The associated accounts of how these ties operated in relation to broader patterns of connections and obligations are truncated as well, with FBI agents only sporadically recording the sorts of detailed
“becoming” stories that could provide deeper insight into the role played by
social contacts. The primary utility of these skeletal accounts, then, is not
that they provide an exhaustive count of the number of preexisting ties
across Klan adherents, but rather that each cited connection is explicitly
linked by the interviewee to his entry into the UKA. The data employed here
only hints at the complex role played by social connections in channeling
particular aggrieved individuals toward the UKA, while more systematically
serving as a basis to understand the backgrounds of both central and pe-
ripheral Klan adherents.

DISCUSSION

The sample of Birmingham and Tuscaloosa-area Klan members provides
the first representative window into the full membership of the Civil Rights-
era KKK. While not necessarily generalizable to the entire South, the sam-
ple importantly captures a representative proportion of central and periph-
eral members, which has allowed us to explore the breadth of the Klan’s
appeal within particular communities. Certain stereotypes of Klansmen do
hold up under this scrutiny – it is true that Klan members were less educated
and more likely to hold blue-collar jobs than the overall local population –
but others were found to be misconceptions. While the rapid rise and fall of
Klan waves might be viewed as a partial product of a young, impression-
able, and unstable membership, the data here suggests that Klansmen were
less likely to be under 30 years of age than we would expect from the
makeup of the overall population, and that a significant number of core
members were stable adherents, with some tracing their affiliations back as
far as the 1930s.

The inclusion of what I refer to here as peripheral members speaks to the
larger question of how to appropriately bound the membership of social
movement organizations. While it was true that the Klan inducted members
through an intricately formal ritual, their activities were clearly dependent
upon the resources of a broader pool of supporters. While including any
individual who merely sympathized with the KKK’s goals renders the ques-
tion of “membership” meaningless, there was a considerable periphery of
individuals who, without necessarily taking a Klan oath, devoted various
forms of resources to the organization.

The membership standard used here, then, is a demonstrated expenditure
of resources for official Klan activities, which was quite similar to the
strategy adopted by FBI agents when identifying interviewees for Klan-
related investigations and intelligence work. These expenditures could take
the form of formal membership – which involved the payment of monthly
dues, the purchase of robes and hoods, and attendance at klavern meetings,
rallies, and other public events or campaigns – or the provision of less
formal support such as land for rally sites, professional and legal assistance,
materials for cross burnings and other events, or space to hold klavern
meetings. Importantly, the analysis above showed that a failure to recognize
the latter category – i.e. peripheral members – results in a portrait of the
Klan that underemphasizes the diversity of the group’s adherents.

Accurately portraying the Klan’s membership and support base also
yields broader insight into why and how individuals attach to reactive social
movements. The analytic utility of profiling the membership base of reactive
movements has conventionally come from linking grievances to subsequent
protest activity. For Vander Zanden (1960, 1965), Klan members were those
whose ambiguous or unstable status positions generated grievances that
were channeled into racist action. More recent work has been inclined to
view Klan adherents as acting instrumentally to redress grievances resulting
from perceived competition with black residents newly empowered by Civil
Rights gains (Beck, 2000; Olzak, 1991; Van Dyke & Soule, 2002).

This competition dynamic is evident here. While non-white workers made
up over a quarter of the overall labor force in Jefferson and Tuscaloosa
counties, Klan members were significantly underrepresented in the craft,
clerical, professional, and technical sectors, where the non-white workforce
was relatively small (between 6.8–11.9%). On the other hand, the Klan was
a disproportionately strong presence among operators and service workers,
where the proportion of non-white workers was quite high (38.3% and
53.8%, respectively). Both sets of cases support the view that the Klan’s
appeal was strong within sectors where white workers’ status would be most
vulnerable to looming changes posed by desegregation policies.

But while such grievance-producing structural contexts may be necessary
for the emergence of reactive mobilization, they are not a sufficient expla-
nation for the mobilization of Klan adherents. Indeed, the data discussed
here, while far from a complete or systematic accounting of each individ-
ual’s recruitment into the Klan, demonstrates the importance of relational
contexts and seeks to move beyond identifying a relationship between net-
works and mobilization to consider how particular types of connections
matter.

The data considered here does not allow for an exhaustive or systematic
evaluation of the role played by social ties in each member’s entry into the
Klan, but it does yield evidence that strong ties, especially those among kin,
did much to enhance individuals’ receptivity to the Klan. Following Granovetter’s (1973) classic insight about the strength of weak ties, it appears that other adherents were drawn into the Klan world through more casual relationships. Especially important in these cases were the existence of institutional settings that could serve as venues to link mutually aggrieved persons. And it is clear that the ties discussed here represent only a slice of any individual’s social lives, with broader networks serving at times to reinforce commitment to groups like the Klan, but in other cases constituting competing obligations that constrained involvement with the KKK. The serious constraints on our access to the world of Civil Rights-era Klan adherents limit our ability to systematically weigh the importance of relational versus individual and macro-level factors. But it is clear that future work on reactive movements should emphasize relational structures, examining how individuals’ embeddedness within institutions that facilitate or constrain subsequent mobilization interacts with broader structural dynamics that predispose them to particular politicized appeals.

UNCITED REFERENCES

- Birmingham, Alabama, Police Department, Surveillance Files (1947–1980); Johnson (1923); Strang & Soule (1998); Vander Zanden (1959).

NOTES

1. Two notable, if partial, exceptions exist. For an earlier incarnation of the Klan – its so-called second-wave, which peaked during the mid-1920s – Blee (1991) was able to interview a range of women members, and several historians (see Horowitz, 1999; Jackson, 1967; Lay, 1992; MacLean, 1995) have been able to access various documents and membership lists. For the “third-wave” Civil Rights-era KKK, McWhorter (2002) gained considerable insight into a specific notorious Klan unit, Eastview 13, based in Birmingham, though a general explanation of Klan recruitment and participation is beyond the scope of her historical memoir.

2. Though it should be noted that in some states, most notably North Carolina, the wives of Klansmen organized active “Ladies Auxiliary” groups, and contributed significantly to local Klan projects, which included public rallies and street walks, charitable works, and local, state, and regional organizational functions (see U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Un-American Activities, 1967).

3. After a five-year investigation, the FBI decided not to prosecute any suspects, with Bureau Director J. Edgar Hoover arguing that the chances of obtaining a conviction in an Alabama trial was remote. Alabama Attorney General Bill Baxley
reopened the case in 1971, and in 1977 Robert Chambliss, a Klansman, was convicted of one count of murder. Two other members of the Eastview klavern ca. 1963, Thomas Blanton and Bobby Frank Cherry, were convicted of murder in 2001 and 2002, respectively.

4. Author interviews with former UKA Imperial Wizard Robert Shelton and Imperial Kludd George Dorsett, along with Peter B. Young, a consultant on the KKK activity for the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, confirm this point.

5. While, as noted above, interviews were generally a more reliable data source than accounts from informants, it is possible that agents provided unreliable information, either as a conscious effort to strengthen their case or as an unconscious expression of their own biases. While FBI agents were certainly prone to inaccurate assumptions about so-called political dissidents, the information evaluated here (such as place of employment, and the number of Klan meetings attended) was generally not subject to ideological interpretation, and is therefore likely accurate. The fact that these cases remained officially unsolved for years (see endnote 3) reduces the likelihood that agents were consciously manipulating evidence to gain a conviction. Finally, the reports themselves, unlike Bureau files lodged in the Reading Room at FBI Headquarters in Washington, DC, have not been censored or “blacked out” in any way. Thus, all names, dates, and other information are included.

6. The local population includes Jefferson and Tuscaloosa counties in Alabama, where all of the subjects of the FBI’s investigation resided. Data related to these counties is drawn from U.S. Bureau of the Census (1960, 1963).

7. This significant difference in educational level holds when taking into account the fact that Klan members were, on average, approximately 10 years older than the overall population. While, across the South, level of schooling during this period was positively related to birth cohort, educational attainment for white residents of Jefferson and Tuscaloosa counties did not vary significantly between 1950 and 1960. Even compared to their peers (i.e. 38 year old white residents of these counties), Klan members had 12% less schooling, a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.001$).

8. Less obviously meaningful, though potentially interesting, data gleaned from interview reports included Klansmen’s height and weight; they averaged 5’10” (ranging from 5’5” to 6’6”) and 183 pounds (ranging from 125 to 280). Also, another signal of Klan members’ class position is the fact that their cars were, on average, eight years old (FBI agents recorded makes, models, and colors as potential identifiers in future cases).

9. Jackson also compiled data on two additional chapters, in Chicago and Aurora, Illinois. However, as he himself notes, the fact that this membership data came from the magazine *Tolerance* ensures that white-collar workers were overrepresented, as “anti-Klan elements were quick to identify the names of independent businessmen on the Klan lists” when compiling the data (1967 p. 242). Consequently, in Table 3, I have chosen to include only the local Klans for which complete membership data was available. Several other researchers have more recently uncovered similar membership profiles for

10. For example, in North Carolina, which had the largest Klan population of any state in the nation by 1966 (U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Un-American Activities, 1967), the UKA thrived in the heavily agrarian eastern part of
the state and almost certainly was supported by a significant number of farmers in that area.

11. Similarly, 54.3% of Klan members in Kallal’s sample have a high school diploma, a status achieved by only 6% of the Klansmen in the Alabama sample explored here.

12. Note that the segment of the membership that I refer to here as “committed” or “central” is much broader than the leaders and other nationally recognizable Klan figures who constituted the bulk of the samples utilized by Kallal and Vander Zanden. While the visible KKK leadership was certainly committed to the organization, the vast majority of the Klan’s central membership was composed of those who rather anonymously attended meetings and held offices in local units. While these members were unlikely to be closely linked to national officers or recognized by reporters, their commitment to their local units did sustain the majority of the Klan’s activities, both political and social.

13. In one case, a Klansman had struck up a conversation at Cash’s Barbeque with a local resident based on something the former felt they had in common: their mutual harassment by FBI agents. In fact, the latter’s interview with Bureau agents had been a result of their efforts to develop him as an informant. These efforts would prove to be successful, and the conversation at Cash’s provided the entry the would-be informant needed to join the local UKA klavern.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank the staff of the Birmingham, Alabama, Public Library for their help with uncovering various data used throughout, and Kirsten Moe, Sarah Boocock, and anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of this paper. Financial support for this project was provided by the Brandeis University Mazer Fund.

REFERENCES


Dear Author,

During the preparation of your manuscript for typesetting, some questions may have arisen. These are listed below. Please check your typeset proof carefully and mark any corrections in the margin of the proof or compile them as a separate list.*

**Disk use**
Sometimes we are unable to process the electronic file of your article and/or artwork. If this is the case, we have proceeded by:

- Scanning (parts of) your article
- Rekeying (parts of) your article
- Scanning the artwork

**Uncited references:** This section comprises references that occur in the reference list but not in the body of the text. Please position each reference in the text or delete it. Any reference not dealt with will be retained in this section.

**Queries and / or remarks**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location in Article</th>
<th>Query / remark</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AQ2</td>
<td>Please provide complete text in footnote 9.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thank you for your assistance

*In case artwork needs revision, please consult http://authors.elsevier.com/artwork