GUN SHOWS, GUN COLLECTORS AND THE STORY OF THE GUN: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO U.S. GUN CULTURE

DISSERTATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

The following dissertation explores the symbolic meaning of guns, and the ways in which the meaning of gun ownership, as well as the symbolic meaning imbued in individual guns influences aspects of social interaction. This ethnographic research effort applies thick, descriptive methods of observation and grounded theoretical techniques to this largely unexplored aspect of U.S. gun culture. A total of 52 interviews of varying length were conducted with a range of gun owners in venues that included gun collectors’ homes, shooting events, and public gun shows in the Midwest. Subjects were asked to share the stories of their guns, and explore the value of guns in their collections. The data reveal some interesting patterns, which are not limited to the following: 1) Guns, as an aspect of culture, or product of social interaction, are rich with symbolic values; 2) For many gun owners, the value placed on guns is far more emotional in nature than monetary; 3) The value ascribed to guns by their owners appears to influence the way in which gun owners interact with their guns as well as their social audience; 4) Gun owners recognize a unique type of stigma associated with these cultural products, and respond through a complex series of stigma management techniques; and 5) U.S. gun culture involves a series of deference and demeanor-filled rituals; rituals pertaining to being the gun owner, the gun user, and possibly even the gun as an object of near-worship.
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I dedicate this dissertation to my family and friends for their continued support throughout this process. This list is far from complete, but I would surely never have survived even the first draft of a single chapter without the love of my wife Katie Taylor, the non-stop amusement of my sons Graham and Charlie, the lifetime of encouragement from my parents Toni and Charles, the insightful advice and patience of my Chair Tim Curry, the suggestions and receptive ear of Paul Bellair, the much-needed guidance of my friends and colleagues Leon Anderson, Bob Shelly, Ed Rhine, Martin Schwartz and Ann Tickamyer; and, certainly not last by any stretch of the imagination, the openness and willingness of my many gun-owning informants. Without each of you, there would be no acknowledgments page, as there would have been no completed project.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Relatively little has been published about the symbolic nature of guns and the ritualistic aspects of gun ownership in academic literature. While demographic facts of gun ownership have been extensively studied in the U.S. and abroad, relatively little has been published about symbolic aspects of the guns and gun culture. The purpose of this study is to explore aspects of U.S. gun culture about which little is known, in order to better understand this unique and inseparable part of our history as a common people.

The research herein entails interviews conducted with U.S. gun owners about the history of the guns that comprise their personal collections and the stories they tell about their guns. To emphasize, this project is about the cultural aspects of guns and gun collecting in the U.S. The guns here are considered cultural artifacts and discussed in terms of their symbolic value, historical significance, and cultural presentation. By learning more about how guns are thought about in the U.S. as symbols and as cultural artifacts, the researcher hopes to gain a better understanding of traditions, customs and other patterned behavior associated with guns and gun use.

There is a sizeable body of literature suggesting that the cultural symbols that evolve out of social interaction serve to influence and regulate much of our behavior.
Although both material and non-material culture appear to be the products of social interaction, these social products (such as material goods, values and beliefs) are then assigned value and meaning that we use to communicate with one another and interact with our social and physical environments. In other words, although culture appears to be our creation, our creation is then used to regulate our behavior and actions in the form of complex rituals, customs and traditions that become integrated into our social institutions, social structure and socialization processes. Durkheim’s (1965/1912) research on religion demonstrated ways in which religious symbols and their meaning could be enhanced and perpetuated through seemingly mundane, even primitive local rituals. These primitive rituals and customs eventually diffused into mainstream, modern religious practices. For instance, whether U.S. citizens actively practice any form of organized religion, they cannot escape the far-reaching consequences of religion’s symbolic influence. Religious symbolism is manifest in legal codes, social pleasantries, the architecture, and even the currency. I am not arguing here that gun culture constitutes a religion.

However, from a purely symbolic standpoint, religious artifacts help to illuminate the process by which individuals interact with cultural products, responding to and regulating behavior based on the perceived symbolic value of such artifacts (ex. a totem or crucifix). Relatedly, modern ethnographical research efforts suggest that gender behavior, for instance, is heavily influenced by cultural symbols and their ascribed gender values (Messner and Kimmel 2007; Connell 2005; Messerschmidt, 2000; West and Zimmerman 1987). Other recent research demonstrates how our understanding of culture and symbols directly influences our health, quality of life, and even life span (Courtenay
Related research illustrates that guns are a masculine power symbol, or masculine gender currency that is used as props to perform certain forms of masculinity (Majors and Billison, 1992). More simply stated, our interaction with something as simple as a gun might influence the way gender is performed in a social context. As all forms of culture have symbolic meaning, all forms of culture communicate something to the social world. The symbolic meaning of any single piece of culture has the potential to influence the ways in which individuals interact with their social environments or audiences, using relevant and available aspects of culture as different type of performance-related props. Therefore, on a general level, a more detailed understanding of gun culture might actually serve to explain the social mechanisms through which complicated social processes such as gender performances operate. Additionally, more specific to gun-related behavior, it has been suggested by Hoberman (2004) that even the simple representation of the symbolic meaning of guns within the context of a movie (High Noon) has influenced the way in which several Presidential Administrations have conducted their affairs. If cultural artifacts like guns influence our behavior, and guns - due to their unique history, and constitutionally-guaranteed place within U.S. society – influence how we interact with one another and who we have come to be as a common people - then it is beneficial to know as much as possible about gun culture.

Extensive academic research has been dedicated to gun ownership; however, most of that literature deals with demographic characteristics associated with gun owners (Squires 2000), and seeks to determine who owns gun and for what purpose (Jiobu and Curry 2001; Stenross 1994; Lott 1998; Newton and Zimring 1969; Zimring and Hawkins
1987; and Zimring and Hawkins 1997). Although a few researchers have employed an ethnographic technique of sorts to study militias and the symbolic aspects of guns for defense (Poudrier 2001; Stenross 1994 and Squires 2000), there has been no notable focus on gun collectors and their stories.
CHAPTER II

TOWARD GROUNDED THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

The following theory section was developed in conjunction with the grounded theory aspects of this project and relevant themes that emerged from the data analysis and collection. The theory discussed in this section suggests ways to think about gun displays, ownership and use as primarily masculine and emotional. Here I examine existing theory that addresses how men, guns and violence have been depicted in scientific literature and popular culture, how gun-related behavior is conducted, and how this behavior is perceived by a social audience. Although there has been a long history of male violence (Gilligan 1997), most writing about the gendered nature of violence is relatively recent, with masculinities theory really only burgeoning in academic literature since the 1970s in any notable way.

“NORMAL” GUN OWNERSHIP

According the General Social Survey 1972-2006 cumulative data set, approximately 41.6% of U.S. households report that guns are present. Although the specific reasons for ownership are not entirely clear, these data indicate that a permissive attitude toward gun ownership is accepted by close to half of the U.S. adult population. I argue that adequate attention has not been paid to this detail in the social sciences, or in
academic circles, in general. Moreover, it has not generally been treated as “normal” in the social sciences. The overwhelming majority of known gun use is not criminal in nature (Zimring and Hawkins 1997). Irrespective of this fact, criminological theory has been used primarily in efforts to understand gun behavior. Messerschmidt (1993) observed that criminology, driven by the fodder of negative and dangerous behavior has often taken the –what he considers a limited if not counterintuitive - approach of focusing on the ways in which (politically) weaker members of society, most notably women, behave differently than men who hold greater positions of relative power. Most criminologists focus on men and the crimes committed by men. Instead of treating the criminal and other problematic behavior of men as the relevant phenomena to be explained, sociologists have instead typically asked why women are not more criminal in their behavior; and, subsequently, not behaving more like men (Steffensmeier and Allan 1996).

**GUNS AS GENDER EXPRESSIONS**

In this section, I shy away from the dominant line of questioning mentioned in the preceding section. Instead of asking why women own and use so few, I question why so many men own and use so many guns. By addressing a gendered nature of gun behavior, I seek to explore the issue of how and why men use guns as expressions or extensions of their masculinity, and ways in which this might provide a more detailed understanding of gender dynamics, and masculinity, more specifically. Here, I draw heavily on Messerschmidt's (1993; 1997) and Connell’s (1987; 2000) arguments that the "gender division of labor,” the “structure of power,” and the “structure of sexuality" can and should be analyzed to lend insight into men's patterned social behavior, which I expand to
include a heightened use and ownership of firearms. I argue that an understanding of guns and gun ownership necessitates looking at masculine hierarchical structures, the distribution of gender resources in terms of relative power, and the social construction of accepted expressions of normal sexuality. The culminating construction of masculinity is sometimes informed by male gun use as one means to manage the emotions inherent in some performances of masculinity. Balswick (1988) observed that

“the specific contradictory form the current cultural discontinuity in the male sex role takes includes; (1) the expectation that males are to become intimately involved in primary relationships that include the reciprocal verbal expression of emotions; (2) a parental socialization structure that renders the male psychologically incapable of entering into such intimate relationships; and (3) the expectation that males will preferentially participate in extrafamilial social institutions in which the expression of human emotions are devalued, leaving the familial, emotionally laden roles to females” (1988:189).

Balswick illustrates a context in which men will actively choose to take part in groups wherein emotional expression is ridiculed and undermined in direct response to being incapable of expressing a full range of expected emotions in the home. Consequently, he anticipates a man who will turn to groups outside the family where emotional expression is neither expected or required - and probably not desired - abandoning emotional family work and leaving that to the women. Although this scenario is an all-too-common experience and undoubtedly lends insight into the behavior of some men, it also fails to acknowledge the wide-ranging diversity among men and their social realities. These notions may thrive in the lives of many men, but they cannot be expected to be applicable to all men (or even exclusively to a single man) in all social contexts. This perspective was primarily constructed using data acquired in a study of southeastern college students, and possibly reflective of regional distinctions in masculine values, attitudes and
displays. Interestingly, the strength of this line of research is that the choices men make are situated according to the social actor’s unique social locations as men. The weakness, however, is that it fails to recognize the world of difference among men.

It is my contention in this dissertation that masculinity is an achieved, socially constructed set of highly symbolic - gender order maintained - hierarchical relations among and between men. Ubiquitous but quirky evidence of this reigning gender order in motion is colorfully depicted by Lee (2005), who delineates the protocol for what she terms a “man date.” According to Lee’s observations about the ways in which U.S. men interact in group contexts in which no woman is present, “a man date is two heterosexual men socializing without the crutch of business or sports. It is two guys meeting for the kind of outing a straight man might reasonably arrange with a woman. Dining together across a table without the aid of a television is a man date; eating at a bar is not. Taking a walk in the park together is a man date; going for a jog is not. Attending the movie "Friday Night Lights" is a man date, but going to see the Jets play is definitely not.” Although Lee does not mention guns specifically, two men attending a gun show or even participating in a shooting event together satisfies the requirements of a man date, as well. As Connell (2000) indicates, however, there is no one global set of behaviors which conformed to, expressed or performed satisfy the requirements of some complete or total “masculinity.” Instead, there exists a variety of masculinities, arranged on a continuum of power, prestige, and status. What is yet to be fully explained, however, is how a “gender regime” or order, if primarily a social construct - and not some physical or biological reality - , is established and so well-maintained among men, globally, and throughout history.
How does masculinity come to be portrayed (defined), acted out, and interpreted in everyday life? More specific to this research effort, where does gun ownership and use fit into the acceptance and practice of a gender order? Guns, whether viewed as fun play things, means of protection, art or instruments of death, also provide a rare, permissible playground of male emotional enactment and expression.

**GUNS AND MASCULINE PRIVILEGE**

In the U.S., the process of socialization on various life outcomes clearly operates through the mechanisms of class, race, sexuality, and cultural differences (Messerschmidt, 1997). I argue that masculinities hold a privileged place in American life, with social actors giving preference (i.e. special privilege and prestige) to those who conform to conventional norms and express core social values. Even though there are varieties of masculinities – ranging from the dedicated, reliable dad to the gun-slinging cowboy - each separate form of hegemonic masculinity holds a special, privileged place in relation to femininity. As will be explored in some detail, these are privileges gained at the expense and repression of those who are considered less-than-masculine.

As explained by Olsen (1990), our ancestors carved social life up into male and female domains when we were a more primitive (less specialized) species in order to protect women – primarily for population concerns. She argued that the long-term effect was that when formal social institutions later emerged amidst heightened specialization, the standardized framework of values that encapsulate each social institution reflected a gender-polarized world. Essentially, we had willingly and intentionally carved up the social world into male and female halves. The male half included forced emotional suppression, the arena of combat, hunting and the spoils of industry (ex, hands-on
experience with all emergent technology). The female half, however, was relegated to the domestic arena, where an indulgence in emotions prevailed. Subsequently, males and females were socialized along slightly different paths. These separate paths included what would be cemented as a “gender hierarchy,” and “sexualized dualisms” that overwhelmingly favored males and masculinities. In other words, as male and female social behavior patterns became increasingly more defined by their proximities to either the arenas of combat or the domestic arena, it was eventually taken for granted that these behavior differences were actually natural and not socially constructed differences. Over time, more positive connotations were associated with males, (and consequently masculinity) than females and femininity. For instance, males, actively engaged with the hunt, technology and combat, were more likely to be associated with courage, strength, honor, bravery, technical skills and logic, whereas females, protected in the domestic arena, were isolated from activities likely to lead to these gender associations, and often more likely to be viewed as frail, helpless, emotional, etc. The bottom line is that so many “cool” aspects of social life became the fun, gender playground for males, under the guise of masculinity, with little obvious comparable gender traits or expectations for females.

Masculinities, in general, are highly valued among males. Performing these masculinities through ritualistic, public and private acts is an important undertaking for men. As will be addressed in chapter six, my data reveal that guns are often used to perform masculinity, and there are unique rituals tied to masculinity that center around guns. It is of value, therefore, to consider ways in which masculine privilege and prestige are awarded in some contemporary contexts, including those involving guns. I argue, for
example, that sports offer one way for men to express their masculinity in a personal, individual way, and shooting is one particular, socially accepted way for men to accomplish this. Shooting, as a behavioral expression of masculinity, can also lead to situations where problems arise and power displays are misinterpreted, misconstrued, and devalued by others. This will be discussed in detail in the section on stigma and stigma management.

Gun use is one mechanism which men use to manage their emotions, exhibiting what I have come to think of throughout the course of this research as backyard or garage emotions. Emotions have to be managed by all people. There are gender-specific ways of accomplishing this which are culturally, historically, and socially relative. Messner (2002) does a decent job of illustrating that males, in performing hegemonic forms of masculinity are socialized toward an acceptance of emotional suppression, accompanied by related “toxic consequences.” These toxic consequences are played out in a variety of negative outcomes not experienced by women, free of the bonds of emotional suppression, to the same degree. Toxic consequences include heightened participation in violent behavior and accidents associated with participation in high-risk behaviors (Watson, 2000). The context of shooting is relevant along these lines. Unlike popular contact sports like football (or increasingly, soccer, basketball and baseball, in terms of aggressive, physical contact), shooting is a disembodied sport, meaning that men are not intentionally touching one another as they would in the other sports mentioned. Even incidental contact is rare. Shooting guns, however, also operates as one way for men to manage their suppressed emotions. The disembodied aspect of the activity allows men to
manage their emotions in a detached, “masculine” and appropriate manner, rather than in a culturally disallowed, embodied, and personal manner.

The activity and ritual surrounding guns and shooting creates strong emotional bonds of a unique type. Interestingly, the nature of shooting sports, although permissive of a certain brand of emotional exchanges, also demands that emotions are kept under close control - in order for the participants to shoot well and safely. Wrapped-up in this aspect of masculinity and special circumstance masculine performance, is the systematic devaluation of the not-so-masculine, or femininity. Similar to what was argued previously, the feminine way, a way that has evolved socially out of a decidedly domestic arena, and quick to embrace a nurturing disposition, might be influenced by notions related to the caring for, nurturing and caressing of children. These gender attributes, and a more feminine way to manage emotions might produce a more embodied sport that involves more frequent touching.

I also argue that the patriarchal or male hierarchical dynamics in homes reflect power relations in society at large. Although contextually defined, the ownership, display, and use of guns in the home and elsewhere by men can be utilized as an expression of their masculinity, which reinforces and influence an archaic gender regime, gender-related social interactions and related outcomes. The presence, possession and use of guns as instruments of power among men facilitate a stronghold of their privileged place in households, within family structures, and in society at large. Dworkin has suggested that a "woman acquiesces to male authority in order to gain some protection from male violence... in order to be as safe as she can be" (1983:14). This is underscored by high rates of male violence, both within and outside the home, and the dominant
control and ownership of guns by males as common to domestic arrangements. Given the previously mentioned hierarchical structure of gender dynamics, both outside of and within the home, logic might dictate that it is more reasonable or acceptable for women to be armed than men. This, of course, is not what is happening.

Instead, it appears that guns provide a rare opportunity for men to express their emotions in an overtly hegemonic masculine fashion. Masculinity insinuates a certain hardness, a suppression of emotion (Connell 2000; and Messner 2000), a dissociation of bodies from each other for tenderness. A pure masculine use of the body implies a more utilitarian use. While performing traditional, hegemonic masculinities, the body is essentially portrayed as a tool or machine. One of the unique characteristics of guns and gun use is that they allow men to engage in emotional behavior without physically touching other bodies. It is as if emotional energy is being diverted through the barrel of a gun, or caught up in the gun’s historical significance, rather than in the more emotional act of contact (even of a non-intimate variety) with another body – especially another male body!. This type of behavior clearly depicts the degree of impersonality that is characteristic of masculine gendered values. Of course, it could be argued that guns play no such role in maintaining traditional patriarchal gender dynamics. It is a commonly asserted view, as will be discussed in the data analysis sections, that guns used in sports are nothing but legal, good, clean, safe fun. Men like guns, they like collecting, holding and shooting them, and the presence of guns in households is no more threatening than a set of tools in the garage or golf clubs, which represent other popular but disembodied male pass times. Or, in Freudian terms, sometimes a gun is just a gun. Further, guns could serve the household as a means of defense against threat from outsiders. These and
similar views are commonly held and espoused by large, nation organizations, such as the NRA and PRO. After a careful and thoughtful consideration of the extant literature and project data, I argue, however, that the two positions are not mutually exclusive, and co-exist as part of the unique, plural meaning imbued in guns and gun-related symbols. A variety of applied meanings are explored in the findings sections.

PERFORMING GENDER

The degree to which gender is a socially constructed or an extension of biological features is an important scientific quandary. I argue that masculinities are fleeting, contextually relative, hierarchical, socially constructed statuses. Further, I suggest that gender identity, one sense of self that individuals possess, is directly tied to cultural definitions about gender roles. That is to say that the gender identity component of sense of self is a function of societal expectations associated with biological sex. According to Connell (2000), gender differentiation, the process wherein the assumed biological differences between males and females are ascribed specific social value, is influenced by outdated gender ideologies. These ideologies, in turn, influence the expectations surrounding male and female emotional and behavioral expression. Contemporary masculinity is popularly viewed now as an actively achieved status among men. West and Zimmerman (1987:126) suggest that:

“When we view gender as an accomplishment, an achieved property of situated behavior, our attention shifts from matters internal to the individual and focuses on interactional and, ultimately, institutional arenas.”

Similarly, the processes of “legitimation” and “reification,” as described by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), help to illuminate this type of phenomena. They contend that much or what we accept as “objective” reality or fact is actually a “fragile reality,” or
reified concept that has come to appear as naturally occurring - due to the combined abilities and collaborative efforts of various agents of social institutions in making them appear legitimate. More specifically, they argue that the effective use of history, philosophy, science, etc., makes us less likely to see the man behind the curtain. The final products are aspects of social life and forms of social control that are not intrinsically real; however, they have very real consequences in terms of our lives and life outcomes.

Exploring diverse ways in which men interact with the world and others around them enables us to examine how masculine roles and behavior are constructed and reconstructed from the unlimited number of available possibilities that fall along Connell’s gender continuum that was discussed in the preceding section. The connection between gender construction via social process and cultural access, and the subsequent contextual reconstruction by men who are socially located, is revealed through the meticulous deconstruction of texts. This process of deconstruction reveals relevant subtexts that reveal real but obscured factors contributing to social interaction (Cheng 1996; Kimmel 2000; and Seidman 2004). Viewed this way, gender becomes both a result and justification for various social structures, positive and negative. As it is, gender constructed in contemporary U.S. society is clearly asymmetrical, with men who are practitioners or possessors of traditional, hegemonic masculinity enjoying the most relative power, status, prestige, and privilege.

One justification for a man's advantaged position in society is the notion that men have more highly valued resources and native abilities at their disposal than women. Accordingly, they are justified in their privilege. Because gender is an active social
accomplishment - with some clearly more accomplished in acquiring hegemonic masculinity than others - men possess masculinity in varying degrees and levels of success. By viewing gender (especially masculinity) as accomplishment, men are then allowed, if not encouraged, to feel justified in enjoying and invoking the rights to a privileged status to which they are entitled in light of such an achievement.

Feminists and their supporters have urged men who are not enmeshed in stereotypical masculine identities to write about men, applying feminist insights to their own lives and sharing them with social audiences - with the express purpose of challenging dominant social structures related to gender (Segal 1990 and Seidman 2004). Denzin (1992) espouses gender sensitivity as one of the critical areas essential to a reshaping of symbolic interactionism in sociology. This rethinking has led to new insights about the nature of masculinity, one of the more prominent being that there are multiple masculinities rather than one ideal type (to which all men aspire). Masculinity is now understood to be differentiated along lines of class, culture (Bourdieu 1984), race (Duneier 1992), ethnicity, sexuality (Pronger 1992), and age. Perhaps most central in a social system differentiated along gender lines is the valuing of experience gained by the granting and seizing of privilege, as well as dictating suppression through the exercise of power. This type of power and experience, of course, speaks primarily to undertakings that are decidedly masculine throughout the world.

Rather than being fixed, masculinity may be understood as constantly emerging, being constructed in the daily lives and lived realities of men and women. Lorber and Farrell (1991:355) have noted that “what is socially constructed can be reconstructed, and social relations can be rearranged.” Similarly, Davidoff (1990:231) warned that
“Feminist writers have had to pay particular attention to boundaries, both the permeability and the limits of categories. In particular they have stressed the shifting definitions of identities, seeing the individual self as constantly reconstructed in various contexts across various relationships.”

Heeding this suggestion, in examining the words and actions of men, I have looked for indications of the construction of masculinities surrounding gun use and ownership throughout this research effort. The resulting gender capital is what men use to construct masculinity. As guns are being analyzed in the course of this study as a symbolically relevant, cultural product, in addition to a masculine power source, it is necessary to consider the role of guns in masculinity construction. Bourdieu’s (1977; 1984) research on culture is among the first to consider ways in which shared culture and symbolic meanings shape our experiences. Perhaps most relevant to this research effort is his concept of habitus, which is described as an interconnected network of common symbolic meanings, actions and character that are shared through access and proximity to common culture (Bourdieu 1977:82-83; Bourdieu 1984). The way that children are socialized and their past experiences affect their current and future behavior. Their current and future behavior is then reconstructed from among available choices reinforced by their social locations. These reconstructed attitudes, values and actions are analogous to habitus. In this study, I seek an understanding of how past experiences of men condition the current and future behavior of men – primarily as gun owners and users. More specifically, I consider how past constructions are packaged, rearranged, refined, and modified to reconstruct a new masculinity in present or future forms. For the purpose of this research, these constructions and reconstructions are all framed within the context of contemporary U.S. gun culture.
MANAGING AND NEGOTIATING EMOTIONS

Guns are indeed a highly emotional topic, on many levels. The ways in which guns facilitate the harnessing, channeling and re-directing of male emotion encompass an intricate web of activities. Although many gun owners and collectors will describe the value of a gun based on special properties (such as serial number, unique design or limited availability) that gives it a fixed and specific market or monetary value, borrowing from Durkheim (1965/1912), I am more interested in exploring the symbolic, emotional value that gun owners and collectors place on their guns. According to Durkheim (1965/1912), a vested emotional, symbolic value of an object or idea is a unique product of social interaction that centers around the concepts of respect and majesty. "To be sure, in the sentiment which the believer feels for the things he adores, there is always fear derived from respect and the dominating emotion of majesty" (79). Emotions indicative of this “awe inspiring majesty” and pride will be covered in some detail.

One of the essential organizing schemes that influence the way that men structure and interpret meaning is the realm of emotion. According to Turner (2000), emotions are highly complex, organized, meaningful systems of adaptation. It is important to note here, before continuing, that I do not necessarily accept Turner’s model of emotion in its entirety. He does not offer clear evidence demonstrating that at some point in our biological evolution that genetic or “hard wired” emotion later gave way to socially constructed influences (77). It seems equally likely to me, that the way in which humans or any organism interacts with their social and physical environments could, in turn influence the physical properties of the organism and its subsequent offspring. What I
admire about Turner’s explanation of the development and dynamics of human emotion, is that it really does not matter which came first, the end results may well be the same: Emotion matters! As humans evolve both socially and biologically, and emotional expression becomes more complex and diversified, the species is improved - social institutions and related social structures become more stable, and our odds of long-term survival increases (43 and 49). “The more varied are the forms of sociality and solidarity that can be created and sustained; and the more flexible are the social relations formed, the more fitness-enhancing are these relations” (43). In the end, it is neither the biological or social origin of emotion that matters, but the undeniable presence and significance of emotion in day to day interaction. As Turner colorfully illustrates

Even after millions of years of evolution expanding the capacity of hominids to mobilize more varied emotional states, social interaction among humans still requires the use of emotion-arousing rituals…..Why so? Virtually all theories of interpersonal processes among humans recognize that interactions start with ritual openings and closings, with additional rituals for tracking the flow of emotional energy…for repairing breaches, sustaining or shifting topics and other features of interaction…Thus, the mobilization and release of emotional energy in humans still needs a source of ignition for jump-starting an interacting…Even after millions of years of evolution…humans are still not able to spontaneously mobilize their interpersonal energies without rituals (Turner, 2000:44).

Emotions have also been characterized as systems of appraisals or appreciations, patterned physiological processes, action tendencies, subjective feelings, expressions, and instrumental behaviors - none of which are necessary for a particular instance of emotion (Fischer, Shaver, and Carnochan 1990:84-85). Emotions fit into and revolve around the specifics of families, but families with no known universal set of features. It is also a function of emotions to connect the physical bodies of individuals to social relationships. Not surprisingly, given the energy that we expend utilizing our emotions, but emotions
have been linked to health issues (Lynch 1985), such as grief, anger and hostility (Mauss et al. 2006), anxiety and depression (Heise and Calhan 1995), and feelings of hopelessness and helplessness (Antonovsky 1987). In response to an increasing volume of literature on these emotion-influenced, interpersonal issues, Sommers (1988) called not only for a social approach to the study of emotion and related concepts, but complete attention to the complex process of emotions at work in all aspects of life, stating that

“Emotions reflect, among other things, knowledge of the valuations of a community, concepts of social relationships as well as attitudes and beliefs held in common by members of a community. It follows that an individual's emotions are embedded in the social framework in which an individual functions and that analyses of emotions cannot ignore social phenomena (1988:26).”

Here, we see that a social audience is necessary to learn and interpret emotions. Freund (1982) suggests that emotional modes of being are socially differentiated. Emotions which are learned are also gendered, with particular emotions considered appropriate for boys and girls, men and women, and they have a history (Stearns and Stearns 1985:836). The valuation of particular emotions changes with historical periods. For example, Stearns has written of how anger, once a prized quality of boys indicative of masculinity, gave way to the angry boy being a menace (1993).

Emotions affect the way that men structure their relationships with guns, both at the individual and social levels. I find Hochschild's (1983) work on the management of emotions useful to explain how masculinity can contribute to an understanding of weapons ownership and use. Hochschild argues that responses to certain behaviors, like the behaviors themselves, are socially acquired. She argues that publicly displayed “feeling rules” are channeled into narrow expressions of socially sanctioned behavior for the presentation of gender specific emotions. I argue that gun use offers an appropriate
channel for the masculine expression of emotions. This channel has been reconstructed from the available and approved constructions of masculinity in U.S. society and culture. The way that guns are used, displayed, controlled, and talked about are specific to groups in which men reside and perform. For instance, in Tim O’Brien’s (1999) “The Things They Carried,” he describes a man reluctant to go to war even when drafted. For a man, refusing to take up arms is considered by many to be an act of extreme cowardice and lack of patriotism. It is difficult in contemporary U.S. society to identify a comparable dilemma for females, in general.
CHAPTER III

REVIEW OF GUN LITERATURE

The majority of the existing scholarly research on gun ownership and gun use is based on the results of various surveys. Survey research that attempts to model or account for gun usage or ownership and/or use, generally positions and analyzes ownership of firearms as a dependent variable, with a variety of independent variables included in efforts to account for usage and ownership. Although this list is far-from exhaustive, and the categories are clearly not mutually exclusive, I have found that frequently, the independent variables used to account for gun usage and ownership have been conceptualized in relation to fear of crime, fear of victimization, (Newton and Zimring 1969; Hill et al. 1985; Thompson, Bankston, and St. Pierre 1991; Warr 1992); protection (Lott 1998); recreational use (Lizotte et al. 1981); rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution, protection against an unreasonable Government and mistrust of Government (Jiobu and Curry 2001); aggression (Williams and McGrath 1976); geography (Young 1986); a cultural or subcultural value (Wolfgang 1967; Wright, Rossi, and Daly 1983) or even a remnant of frontier mentality (Gastil 1971; Cramer 1999). For the purpose of this dissertation, I have found it most useful to arrange and discuss this vast literature in terms of categories that have emerged from the data, and then grouped
by the relevant independent variable. Due to the unique nature of guns, an intense
curiosity and interest expressed by the general population, policy makers, and somewhat
more recently, social scientists, popular names and phrases have emerged to explain and
characterize gun ownership and use. These characterizations, such as “subculture of
violence” and “fear and loathing,” have been adopted from social science literature. For
continuity, consistency and convenience, I will use them as my organization scheme for
presenting the review of the literature.

Additionally, as this is a cultural study, in order to analyze aspects of the cultural
phenomenon surrounding guns not adequately covered in extant scientific literature, I
also draw on reference from popular culture, to more fully understand what is being said
and portrayed about guns in contemporary U.S. culture. The methods I employ to
understand gun-related behavior via popular culture draws heavily on everyday life, and
are based, in part, on direct feedback from research participants regarding popular culture
influences pertaining to guns in their own lives. For instance, as part of the survey and
semi-structured interview process, respondents were asked about gun-related publications
they read/purchase. More surprising, however, were the continual references to guns in
popular music expressed by the respondents in a variety of ways – prompting an
exploration of guns in popular music.

CULTURAL AND SUBCULTURAL EXPLANATIONS

Cultural and subcultural explanations attribute the ownership of weapons to
cultural members who hold values and norms which favor weapon ownership. The
association of guns with violence has led some to argue that a subcultural account of
violence can lend insight into a theory of gun ownership. Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967)
posit that high rates of violence occur in some parts of the world because of the persistence of a subculture of violence. The subcultural argument attributes weapons ownership to the shared values and norms of members of social groups learned in interaction with each other. The norms and values are passed down from one generation to the next, and tend to persist among cultural members. Wolfgang and Ferracuti acknowledge the tautological reasoning inherent in the development of their theory – that a subculture of violence is said to exist because of the existence and persistence of high rates of violence, and they call for individual measurement of values to document the subculture's existence. This thesis has been the theoretical point of departure for a line of inquiry which has since spawned several studies.

The persistent high rates of violence in the U.S. South have caused some authors to contend that a unique southern subculture of violence exits there (Gastil 1971). Higher incidence of violence are said to occur in the South because southern subcultural members hold the expression of violence as a value (Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967). Although this proposed violent-permissive system of norms do not promote violence within the subculture in all situations, the persistence of heightened violence in the U.S. south suggests that it is a common characteristic, at present, inseparable from those enmeshed in its culture – and subsequent subculture. Gastil (1971) argued for the existence of a southern subculture of violence and attributed the dissemination of southerners to other parts of the country as an explanation for violence outside the south. Similarly, in the early 1970s, a U.S. geographer named Keith Harries recognized a pattern of high incidence of murder in the U.S. Harries (1971; 1974) argued that this high rate of homicide in the south signaled the existence of a subculture of lethal violence
there. Using regional level data, Harries mapped out the geography of crime and found the South to be distinctively high, as compared to other regions throughout the U.S., in terms of rates of lethal violence. Each of the studies cited above used regional or state-level aggregate data as evidence for their support of a subculture of violence.

Taking this literature and line of inquiry in a more substantial direction, a more useful test of a cultural theory is provided by O'Conner and Lizotte (1978). Using national probability survey data on individuals, they found that where one presently lived effectively predicted handgun ownership. This discounts a cultural explanation because culture represents something more lasting than present place where one lives (i.e., people who had migrated to the south were as likely to report gun ownership as those who had been born and reared there). Young (1986), also using national probability survey data, found non-hunting southern women to be associated with gun ownership; he found the opposite relationship for southern men. Dixon and Lizotte (1987), in analyses of males-only in national survey data, found southern men (both those raised and those currently residing there) to support a southern subculture of violence argument of gun ownership. Even when controlling for factors such as household income, town size, rural vs. urban setting, religious and political ideologies, race and level of fear/confidence, Curry and Jiobu (2001), using cross-national GSS data found that southerners were still the most likely to report owning guns.

Another variant of the cultural hypothesis is that a rural hunting culture might offer insight into why people own guns. Lizotte, Bordua, and White (1981) developed a model of gun owners where several variables indicative of a hunting culture (having friends who hunt, residing in counties with many other hunters, residing in counties
where many people subscribed to hunting and other outdoor-sporting magazines) were associated with gun owners. They concluded that a hunting culture of gun owners was supported, but not a culture of violence. Contradictory and inconsistent findings do not strengthen arguments for a cultural explanation of gun use or ownership based on survey findings.

What we learn from these tests of the subculture of violence thesis is, in certain geographical areas, there do seem to be critical masses of households who report the presence of a gun. The reasons for why the gun is there are not clear, and the problem is confounded when data are used which are not designed to study gun ownership, use, and possession. There is no obvious, objective way in which to study the dynamics introduced by the household presence of a gun. Further, it is not clear from these studies who owns and controls the guns within these households, and what these guns mean to them.

FEAR, LOATHING AND LOVE HYPOTHESES

As a predictive model of handgun ownership, the fear and loathing hypothesis argues that gun owners acquire guns because of a perceived fear of crime. It originates with Newton and Zimring (1969). They argue that "firearm purchases in recent years have often been motivated by fear of crime, violence, and civil disorder" (1969:21). As chart 3.1 illustrates, although gun-related violent crimes have accounted for slightly less than 10% of known violent crime since 1996, this still means close to half a million citizens report facing an attacker with a firearm each year (see Chart 3.2).
The violent crimes included are rape and sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated assault.

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Although Wright, Rossi, and Daly call the evidence "ambiguous" and the conclusions "premature" (1983:98), others have supported this argument (Lott 1998). The problems inherent in the argument seem to stem from a lack of specificity. In some studies adult women, but not men or minors, have been argued to acquire guns because of a fear of crime (Bordua and Lizotte 1979); in others it is men, but not women, who do so (Hill, Howell, and Driver 1985). Warr (1992) found that men purchase guns for fear, but the fear is not fear for themselves but fear for others in the household (“altruistic fear”).

The results indicate anything but consensus on the fear and loathing hypothesis.

When evaluating these studies on their own terms, those of survey research, one
conclusion is that a lack of specificity in the models themselves results in inconclusive findings. They rely primarily on surface or demographic-related explanations for weapon ownership, and from survey instruments with no initial connection to the aims of gathering the data in reference to the aims of guns as the primary subject of interest. In other words, the studies often derive from large surveys of the population, in which a few scattered questions which ask about gun use and/or ownership are responded to along with questions about a mixed bag of other behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, and values. This results in confusing and contradictory conclusions, and a minimized understanding of guns.

Many studies addressing gun ownership and use have used the General Social Survey, a multi-stage probability sample of households in the United States which asks respondents a variety of questions on a large number of topics. The data are collected in cross sectional samples, and has been administered since 1972 on a (usually) bi-yearly basis. While the dataset could be described as having many uses, it was not designed specifically to study gun ownership and use. However, gun ownership and use is measured with the data, and it offers perhaps one of our best estimates of the prevalence of gun and handgun ownership for households available. For example, Hill et al (1985) and Young (1986) identified gun owners' reasons for owning weapons as being for protection if a handgun was present in their home or if they did not hunt. The reasoning was that handguns are not used for hunting, and those who don't report hunting as an activity would own the guns for no other reason than protection. To a degree, this is consistent with my data, as over half of those sampled did report participation in hunting. However, for half of the gun owners and a quarter of the handgun owners, neither
protection nor hunting is the primary reason they report owning guns (Kleck 1991:28).

In addition, many of the hunters surveyed for this dissertation also own at least one gun for protection and other assorted reasons, in addition to the their hunting activities.

Studies which specifically studied gun ownership have uncovered some of the reasons for ownership but encounter the problem of causal order-- did the fear of crime and victimization prompt gun purchases, or did the presence of guns affect fear of crime and victimization? Also not mentioned in these studies is the possibility of rationalizing gun ownership by claiming protection in hindsight or to provide socially acceptable answers to survey takers. Lizotte et al (1981) addressed reasons associated with the presence of guns in households, but were unable to disentangle the causal order issue. In studies in Illinois at the county level, they found that while women were far less likely to own guns than men, women's ownership was more closely associated with reasons of protection. Blacks, while less likely to own guns, also provided answers more closely associated with protection. They found that county crime rates affected both respondents' perceived level of and fear of crime. The problem is that fear of crime is measured at the time of the survey, victimization is measured for a specified time from the time of the survey into the past, and gun ownership is a continuing status extending for perhaps decades into the past. Untangling the causal sequence is impossible to accomplish methodologically or statistically, and the argument rests upon accepting the logic that fear motivates gun ownership. What is probably the most comprehensive attempt to disentangle this causal sequence was undertaken by Curry and Jiobu (2001), who found that even when controlling for a whole host of other factors that influence gun ownership (ex. Income, education, region, religion, city size, political ideologies, etc.) a side effect
of fear remains in the form of a lack of confidence. Those who lack confidence or fear the Government or its inability to protect them are more likely to own guns.

What we learn from these studies is that people who own guns also report varying levels of fear of crime, and these fears are associated with gun ownership to varying degrees by race, gender, perceptions of victimization, and perceptions of and level of crime in the community. What these studies have been unable to do is deal with the sticky issue of a causal model. When behavior is presented in terms of models, the issue of causality remains a matter which presents special problems.

Finally, I propose that the interactive world of the gun presents a seamless tango, simultaneously characteristic of fear, disdain, pride and love. As my data reveal in the findings sections, a gun owner might claim that guns, in general, mean “a right to bear arms,” indicate which specific guns within their collection represent added security to protect their families or serve as reminders of special memories of loved ones - while others are used as ceremonial rites of passage, and pathways of emotional exchanges among males. The world of the gun is a busy and expressive world, and far more involved than existing literature would suggest.

SOCIALIZATION INTO GUN USE

One component of a cultural or subcultural theory of gun use must be how the behavioral traits characteristic of the culture are transmitted. A primary aspect of socialization is the perpetuating of the symbolic meaning/value of various aspects of both material and non-material culture for incorporation into social performances. Accordingly, if gun-related behavior can be shown to be transmitted from one generation to the next, evidence supporting a cultural explanation would be strengthened. Marks
and Stokes (1976), using data based on questionnaires administered to university students in Georgia and Wisconsin, found regional as well as gender variation in socialization into gun use. Southerners were more likely to have been socialized into gun use at an earlier age than non-southerners. Whether located in the south or not, males were much more likely than females to have been socialized into gun use. Diener and Kerber (1979), using data from small, non-representative samples of men in Illinois, found gun owners were likely to have been socialized into gun behavior by parents. Similarly, Lizotte et al. (1981) found that the parental model of gun socialization holds true only for guns which are used for sporting purposes, primarily a male phenomenon, while female gun use is more consistent with ownership as a response to perceived threat. Kleck (1991), using several years of national multistage probability samples, found respondents who were male, hunters, protestant southerners, living in and socialized around rural areas and small towns to be likely gun owners. He maintains this information presents us with a model of gun ownership which is consistent with a rural lifestyle in the United States, where there is plenty of room to hunt on public and private land (unlike Europe). Kleck reacts strongly against those who claim weapons ownership is a response to crime, perceived or real. Wright and Rossi (1986), in a study of adult convicted felons, found that most of the men in their study had acquired guns for self protection—not to commit crimes or violent. In a study of juveniles, eighty-four percent white, both in and out of correctional facilities, Sheley and Wright found "the main reason reported for carrying or owning a gun was self-protection" (1993:1). They found high percentages of both incarcerated and high school males reported owning and carrying guns, and most of them considered it easy to acquire guns. The means of acquisition was to either "borrow" a
gun from friends or get it "off the street," and the choices of weapons were "high-quality, powerful revolvers, closely followed by automatic and semi-automatic handguns and shotguns."

WARRIOR NARRATIVES

One interesting aspect of socialization into gun use that intersects gender socialization and the learning of masculinities is underscored by recent explorations of “warrior narratives.” Warrior narratives are the running scripts lived out by individual social actors that unfold during the course of performing some aspect of masculinity (Jordan and Cowan 2007). Jordan and Cowan (2007) focused on the warrior narratives used by children in a Kindergarten classroom to negotiate aspects of gender along a variety of basic tasks, leisure activities and general social exchanges. They found that the performance of masculinity was facilitated by learned, symbolic aspects of masculinity as expressed through the codes of warrior narratives, and used to play even basic childhood games. For instance, a male child playing with a toy car was likely to engage in a running narrative about how it was involved in a police chase or some deviant act – where no such warrior narratives were found to be expressed while engaging in activities not typically associated with traditional forms of masculinity (ex. girls playing with dolls). Further evidence of masculinity narratives have been explored by Evans and Wallace (2008), who found that male prisoners, upon reflection of their own upbringings, and what it “means to be a man” found the persistent presence of varied warrior narratives in each of the prisoners’ accounts. These narratives included similar themes of “emotional suppression,” “hardness,” “power,” and the necessary audience perception of strength (no weakness) at all times. Similarly, Hutchings (2008), in her analysis of
masculinity and war has noted that the active roll of war narratives, and the related incorporation into masculine performance are inseparably linked (i.e. as definitions of one changes, the other is adapted to be complementary).

These narratives are very similar to what Mills and Tivers (2001) and Hunt (2008) describe as living histories. Typically referring to past events that are reconstructed through “serious leisure,” with a specific place (such as a battlefield) in mind, a living history constitutes a collective attempt to recreate historical events on designated sites through replicating…a particular period by actors living out the conditions of the day (Mills and Tivers 2001:1; Hunt 2008: 461).

Hunt argues that “traditional masculinities” are “negotiated and manufactured” through a “site of a serious leisure pursuit that attempts to draw boundaries with the feminine” (Hunt 2008: 460). Here she is talking about specific sites, such as battlefields, where a known type of masculinity is actively performed, through the leisure of detailed outdoor performance – with an effort to do the masculinity in an historically accurate way. Warrior narratives, interestingly, achieve essentially the same basic ends, with actual research subjects, in real time, providing living narratives surrounding any specific place, activity or aspect of culture (such as a gun) that the researcher is lucky enough to observe. In the case of the gun, it becomes a type of historical site, and narratives surrounding its use may be captured and analyzed to provide insight into socialization pertaining to guns, and gun culture, in general.

Many of these studies have demonstrated that white, middle class men are the primary owners of guns (Kleck 1991) without thoughtful exploration of the reasons and meaning symbolic meaning behind guns and gun ownership. The survey data upon
which most of this research is anchored is useful for suggesting the distribution of guns in households, to the point that the individual being surveyed has knowledge. Additionally, it provides information on the beliefs, values, attitudes, and some behavioral characteristics of those surveyed in gun owning households, as reported to and documented by the surveyor. While this information is interesting, it is of limited value in discerning the phenomenology of gun ownership and use. Survey data is invaluable for information on the distribution of some reported behavior, claimed (or derived) values, and reported attitudes, but it offers us little in the way of understanding the everyday lived realities of people. I suggest that in the case of guns, an additional challenge is presented to the researcher, as gun ownership is a controversial topic, with many dissenters, and a population of participants, often with good reasons for which to be less than forthcoming about their gun-related activities. I want to locate the meaning of guns, gun ownership and use from the standpoint of those who are the primary owners and users in U.S. society.

“GUN CONTROL,” “LAW AND ORDER” AND “PUBLIC SAFETY”

As this dissertation is unfolding, guns are everywhere in the public psyche and lexicon – guns are a hot topic. On February 14, 2008, a former graduate student walked into a classroom at Northern Illinois University, opening fire and killing 6. December 2007, a gunman opened fire in a Colorado Springs church, killing 2. Two more were killed on the same day, 70 miles away in Arvada, Colorado, when a gunman opened fire in a youth ministry dormitory. These shootings occurred on the heels of two other highly publicized shootings. The first was the Virginia Tech Massacre on April 16, 2007, resulting in 32 deaths. Also, on February 8, 2008, a woman opened fire in a classroom at
the Louisiana Technical College, killing 3. Generating more of a buzz than these highly publicized shootings, however, is new legislation and Supreme Court activity pertaining to the interpretation of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Amendment and related gun laws. With all of the carnage mentioned at the beginning of this section, which doesn’t come close to accounting for a fraction all of the gun-related violence during the same time period, it would be natural to anticipate a tightening of restrictions pertaining to gun ownership and use. In fact, the polar opposite appears to be the case. According to MSNBC, on April 9, 2008, Florida Law Makers approved new legislation permitting workers who own guns to take them to work and keep them in their automobiles – even if the owners of the private property do not permit the guns. Some types of workplaces, such as nuclear power plants, prisons, schools and companies whose business involves homeland security were exempted, however, due to obvious safety concerns. More center-stage in a non-stop barrage of 24-hour news cycles, is the decision made by the U.S. Supreme Court, to revisit a landmark case from 1976, which banned handgun ownership in Washington D.C. in reaction to what was then perceived to be an epidemic of interpersonal violence. According to a September 24, 2007 report issued by the Cato Institute:

on September 4, the District of Columbia government asked the Supreme Court to reverse a federal appellate decision in *Parker v. District of Columbia*, 478 F.3d 370 (D.C. Cir. 2007), which upheld a Second Amendment challenge to D.C.’s ban on all functional firearms. The six D.C. residents who brought the lawsuit — although they won in the lower court — agree with the city that the Supreme Court should revisit the Second Amendment for the first time since 1939. A four-square pronouncement from the High Court is long overdue. The entire nation, not just Washington, D.C., needs to know how courts will interpret "the right of the people to keep and bear arms." Sometime before year end, the justices will decide whether to review the case. If the Supreme Court chooses to intervene, a final decision will probably be issued by June 30, 2008.
Most of the problem appears to center around the interpretation of these 27 famous words from the 2nd Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America: “"A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." On June 26, 2008, The U.S. Supreme court, for the first time, interpreted the “core ambiguity” of the Second Amendment’s wording, and in a 5-4 ruling opted in favor of the constitutionally protected right of individuals to own handguns (www.msnbc.msn.com/id/25390404). The overall impact of this reversal of a thirty-year ban on handguns in Washington D.C. and other major U.S. cities is yet to be determined. However, for the moment, a nation that already stakes a claim to well over 200,000,000 guns has further strengthened its position on the right to own them.

The pressure for interpretation of the second amendment, after so many years, is rooted in major crime-control efforts that grew out of the politically tumultuous 1960’s. In the mid- 1960s, the presidential campaign focused on "law and order" and "crime in the streets." These constructed social problems were a response to escalating crime rates and prompted the entrance of the Federal state into law enforcement in this country. The establishment of the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) signaled a new, strong presence of the federal government into local law enforcement efforts and the LEAA established an Office of Law Enforcement in the Department of Justice. According to a special (1994) issue of Congressional Digest that mapped out the evolution of the Federal Law Enforcement Roles and related crime budgets (in part driven by public fear of gun violence), “since 1965, the expenditure of Federal funds rose from $535 million to $11.7 billion in fiscal Year 1992, an increase of over 2,000%”
Following the establishment of LEAA, the report “The Challenge of crime in a Free Society” was published in 1967 by the President's Commission, and in June of 1968 the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act was passed by Congress, which mandated the LEAA to make grants to local law enforcement agencies for planning, recruitment, and training in the "fight" against crime (National Archives 2008 http://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/423.html#423.2 ). The war against crime was well underway, and in 1984 the Comprehensive Crime Control Act was passed, which enhanced the power of officials to deal with criminals. The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988, and the Crime Control Act of 1990 further tightened control of the Federal government over crime and firmly established a link between violence, drugs, and crime in the structure of the - U. S. state. The fear of crime, fueled in large measure by a fear of gun-related crimes, were responsible, in part, for these measures. To illustrate the escalating public attention and concern pertaining to guns and gun use in the last century, Alan Korwin (1995) mapped out the “growth” in Federal gun laws from 1791 to 1994. As illustrated in table 3.1 and chart 3.3, although the figures are crude, based only on the amount of words added to United States Federal Laws (new and existing), he effectively demonstrates a lack of attention or interest in major changes to gun legislation from 1791 until public fear driven largely by heightened public concern and awareness of organized crime violence prompted the passage of the National Firearms Act of 1934 and Federal Firearms Act of 1938.

As depicted in chart 3.3, we then see little change until public reaction over highly publicized political assassinations usher in the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act.
Act of 1968, which is followed by a series of acts in response to increased fear of violent crime surrounding the escalating war on drugs.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>Words added</th>
<th>New USC sections</th>
<th>% increase at the time</th>
<th>% of total as of 1994</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1791</td>
<td>0*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>547</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910s</td>
<td>1,481</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920s</td>
<td>1,543</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930s</td>
<td>1,736</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940s</td>
<td>7,498</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>58.6</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>7,102</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>27,908</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>58.4</td>
<td>37.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>11,407</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>6,777</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>7,687</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>73,686</td>
<td>231</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The 27 words of the Second Amendment (and other Constitutional provisions) are not statutes and are not counted for the purposes of this chart.

On the local level, New York City and Washington, D.C. passed strict gun control measures, virtually outlawing the possession of handguns within those cities in response to fear of gun-related and violent crime.

These measures by the state are one indicator of conditions which prompted the medical and health care community to take an interest in guns and their use in violence. In an impressive series of articles, the medical community has defined guns (ownership,
presence, and use) as a risk factor in violence as a public health problem. Articles have covered such areas as the choice of weapons for firearm suicides (Grossman et al. 2005; Wintemute, Teret, and Kraus 1988); guns and health (Vernick et al. 1999); television and violence (Felson 1996; Centerwall 1992); assault weapons as public health hazards (Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1999); proposals for reporting firearm fatalities (Teret, Wintemute, and Beilenson 1992); violence as a public health problem (Wright and Steinbach 2001; Rosenberg, O’Carroll, and Powell 1992); firearm homicide among Black males in metropolitan counties (Fingerhut, Ingram, and Feldman 1992a); firearm and non-firearm homicide among teens (Fingerhut, Ingram, and Feldman 1992b); pediatric homicide in the city (Fingerhut and Christofeř, 2002; Ropp, Visintainer, Uman, and Treloar 1992); urban high school youth and handguns (Reich et al. 2002; Callahan, Frederick, and Rivara 1992); whether restrictive licensing effects homicide and suicide (Loftin, McDowall, Wiersema and Cottey 1992); the role of weapons in family/intimate assaults (Zimring and Hawkins, 1997; Saltzman et al. 1992); gun ownership as a risk factor in the home (Duggan, 2001; Kellermann et al. 1993); and the logic behind keeping known dangerous guns in the home (Stolzenberg and D’Alessio 2000; Kassirer 1993). Using data from hospitals, emergency rooms, and published statistics, a world of risk from association with guns is outlined and defined in these research efforts. Through statistical research designs, these efforts catalog and document how the presence, use, and lethality of firearms lead to increased risk of death and injury in the home and elsewhere. They cover several aspects of the use of guns in death and injury, and the general conclusion is that the presence of guns is a risk factor in violent interpersonal behavior.
Zimring and Hawkins (1997) go one step further, arguing that it is not simply the presence of guns that lead to increased violence, but the presence of guns in the wrong type of social climate or context. This body of research, to varying degrees, establishes relationships between guns, urbanity, youth, drugs, and violence. In most cases, the authors call for some type of gun control measures and acknowledgement of their danger in the home. The American Medical Association, in direct opposition to the National Rifle Association, called for legislation which would restrict the sale and private ownership of semi-automatic weapons in a resolution in 1989 (Council on Scientific Affairs 1992:3067). The articles draw upon a medical model, advocating prevention and restrictive gun control measures.

I argue that the measures in dispute, the licensing and control of weapons in private hands will be informed by the present study. An understanding of the everyday lived reality of gun-related behavior will help us to comprehend how people conceptualize their use and ownership of guns, and put us in an improved position to ascertain if control is possible, desirable, and warranted. Additionally, I suggest that these research efforts exercise an incomplete and faulty logic by focusing too narrowly on the connection between gun volume and injury/violence. The assumption that more guns equal more violence proceeds with the premise that each gun is equally likely to be used to commit an act of violence. I argue that the living history and symbolic value ascribed to each gun has a direct influence on the outcomes associated with each gun. As emphasized by Zimring and Hawkins (1997), one size fits all policies won’t work. Different regions, states, counties, cities, neighborhoods and even households have different concerns – each potentially influenced separately by the presence and active use
of guns). Additionally, as some of my project data will reveal, many gun owners who own a large volume of guns not only are not criminal, they express an overtly hostile, and proactively reactionary stance that they would never deign to use a gun in any threatening, unsafe or disrespectful manner.
CHAPTER IV

METHODS

The findings reported in this paper have emerged in the context of a multi-method field study, employing Clifford Geertz’ “thick, descriptive” style of observing and characterizing data in motion, with grounded theoretical techniques. The late Clifford Geertz challenged us in his seminal (1973) work “The Interpretation of Cultures,” to recognize that it is essential for a qualitative researcher to go beyond making “thin” descriptions of our observed data, and sharpen our focus to ferret out a rich, “thick description” of whatever is unfolding around us. Geertz explains that an observer witnessing a research subject closing only one eye might produce a “thin description” by documenting it as merely a twitch. Upon closer scrutiny, however, a more astute, culturally imbedded or well-informed researcher might have seen the same “thin” twitch as a piece of coded information, communicating a variety of possible meanings (such as a wink meaning anything from “I know something you don’t know,” the acknowledgement that secret information has been exchanged, a form of flirtation, etc.) to his or social audience (Geertz 1971:6-9; Ryle 1971). Geertz encouraged us to position ourselves as researchers in such a way as to best facilitate wading through the “winks upon winks,”
and arrive at informed, thick descriptions that unveil often veiled codes and categories of shared meaning. Toward this end, I have found tenets of grounded theory to be the best suited to this cultural study of gun owners.

The purpose of grounded theory is to discover social theory by systematically collecting and analyzing data, and locating themes, categories and relationships among the data, social contexts and concepts (Glaser 1992; Charmaz 2006). It is left to the skill, training, preparedness and creative flexibility of the researcher to identify a research question, study relevant data, and ultimately identity theoretical categories that emerge after careful reflection and consideration of the data. Once arrived at, the grounded theoretical product will be presented as either a set of well-documented and detailed set of “codified propositions,” or in an ongoing, fluid, “theoretical discussion” unfolding from the data, relying on emergent “conceptual categories and their properties” (Glasser and Strauss 1967: 31).

For the purpose of generating grounded theory, the researcher plays a crucial role. A finely tuned, observant and motivated researcher is essential to this process. As stated by Glasser and Strauss (1967:251)

The researcher is a highly sensitized and systematic agent. The researcher has insights, and he can make the most of them…through systematic comparative analysis.

In order to facilitate the process of moving from a trained researcher’s observations of data to related, emergent theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967) envisioned grounded theory as emphasizing two primary procedures: a constant comparative method, and theoretical sampling (Charmaz 2006). Charmaz (2006) explains the constant comparative method to be
A method of analysis that generates successively more abstract concepts and
theories through inductive processes of comparing data with other data…
emerging categories with other emerging categories and categories with concepts.
These Comparisons are then used to signal each stage of analytic development.
(187).

This method helps to keep the researcher engaged in the project, and enhance the
prospects of yielding more fruitful outcomes. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967)
thetical sampling essentially entails the fluid processes of observing/collecting, coding
and analyzing the data. Charmaz (2006) elaborates on theoretical sampling for the
purpose of constructing grounded theory a little more, by asserting that

…the researcher aims to develop the properties of his or her developing categories
and themes, not to sample randomly selected populations or to sample
representative distributions of a particular population. When engaging in
theoretical sampling, the researcher seeks people, events, or information to
illuminate and define the boundaries and relevance of the categories. Because the
purpose of theoretical sampling is to sample and discover the theoretical
categories, conducting it can take the researcher across multiple substantive areas
(189).

Theoretical sampling creates a few notable issues for the researcher: 1) What to
use for data (i.e. which relevant population or populations to sample)?; and 2) When and
how to disengage from the research project, or “theoretical saturation.” For the process of
theoretical sampling, data related to the research question are selected for comparison to
generate common categories and shared properties. While making these selections, the
researcher’s goal is to identify and saturate these emergent categories, for the purpose of
data-driven theoretical development (supported by the framework of saturated, emergent
categories). Theoretical saturation has effectively been reached at the point in the data
collection wherein additional observations and data collected among the selected
population or populations are yielding no new insights into themes or categories relevant
to the research question or sample population. When the point of theoretical saturation is achieved, the researcher disengages from theoretical sampling on the related category. This does not imply, however, that data collection is complete – just data collection on the category that has been effectively saturated. Further, Glasser (1978) warned that theoretical sampling is used not to justify and test “preconceived hypotheses” or verify theory, but to check and validate the emerging conceptual framework in progress. Moreover, the combined, continual use of theoretical sampling and the constant comparative method throughout the research process provides relatively stable checks and balance mechanisms to assist in producing final results that are actually grounded in the project data and well-planned. This research project adapts these methods as an effort to tease theoretical categories out of the gun stories and other project data, “weave the fractured story back together,” and move the story told in a grounded theoretical direction (Glaser 1978:72 and Charmaz 2006: 63).

My fieldstudy on gun owners spanned a 3-year period, from January 2005 to January 2008. Field research included approximately 250 hours of direct interaction with research subjects in a variety of settings, including gun shows and live action play groups (e.g., “cowboy clubs”). In addition to field observations, a total of 52 semi-structured interviews (see interview schedule in appendix A) of varying length were conducted with a range of gun collectors and other gun owners in venues that included gun collectors’ homes, different kinds of shooting events, and public gun shows throughout the Midwest. Further, the researcher has photographed gun collections and collected gun collectors’ stories about the living histories of their individual guns. Contact was initiated face to face, at gun events, using a standardized approach script (see appendix D), and also via
snowball sampling. For future researchers attempting to conduct similar research on gun culture, I feel that it is noteworthy to mention that although gun owners and enthusiasts are naturally guarded and trust can be quite difficult to establish, I found that I had much better success in terms of new contacts and questionnaire returns after I cut my hair off short and whenever my wife was in attendance with me.

Other data considered here include published materials circulated at gun shows (and other gun-related assemblies mentioned above), official data from the Bureau of Justice, gun culture websites, popular gun owner/collector publications, such as The Official Gun Digest Book of Guns & Prices, The American Rifleman, Women and Guns, Guns and Ammo, and popular song lyrics depicting gun imagery. Songs were selected as a relevant pop-culture aspect of gun data primarily based on the inescapable presence of gun-related song lyrics throughout this research process. Some of the identified themes pertaining to guns and gun use in popular culture are examined through the analysis of songs lyrics depicting gun symbolism from various genres. Although significant bodies of research exist that explore portrayals of gender symbolism in the media and advertisements (Carter and Steiner 2003; Vigorito and Curry 1998; Kirchler 1992), gender performance in music (Gottlieb and Wald 1994), guns as a source of symbolic empowerment (Jiobu and Curry 2001), and guns as a masculine power symbol (Brown 1994), masculine expressions of guns in music is an unexplored area of social inquiry. Similarly, although researchers have documented “bifurcated” media portrayals of masculinity and femininity in popular magazines (Vigorito and Curry 1998; Kirchler 1992) and called for “the exposure of cultural texts or symbolic meanings pertaining to gender by reviewing a variety of media” (Gottlieb and Wald 1994:252), gender
representations of guns in popular magazines also appears to be an unexplored area of inquiry. Each area is considered in this research effort. Finally, pictures of some of the guns discussed are included. As most gun events are copyrighted, and photos are not allowed to be taken, most image data from events appears in the form of handouts distributed at events.

DATA ANALYSIS

A general description of the data analysis used throughout this project is provided in this section. Note that to preserve the integrity and continuity of the grounded theory-based aspects of this project, additional, detailed analyses and specific findings of the data are also provided in the relevant sections of later chapters. Whenever possible, aspects of the data are explored as they unfolded during the active telling of gun stories and through direct, observed interactions with guns in their natural social environments. Charmaz (2006) characterizes the construction of grounded theory and related data analysis as a fluid, flexible, and an ongoing process. Glasser and Strauss (1967:65) indicate that for the collection and analyses of data, well-selected, often diversified slices of data, with essentially no limits as to the type or characteristics of the data are collected.

While the sociologist may use one technique of data collection primarily, theoretical sampling for saturation…allows a multi-faceted investigation, in which there are no limits to the techniques of data collection, the way they are used, or the types of data acquired. One reason for openness of inquiry is that…the sociologist works under the diverse structural conditions of each group: schedules, restricted areas, work tempos, the different perspectives of people in different positions, and the availability of documents of different kinds (65)

For the purpose of this research, to ensure that the data slices were as representative of gun culture as possible, all slices were carefully considered once
embedded within pockets of gun culture, reviewed multiple times prior to beginning any
coding, and discussed in detail with multiple study participants to carefully scrutinize
“meanings.” Also, consistent with the inductive nature of grounded theory, as opposed to
a more typical “logico deductive” approach, I began analysis early on in the data
collection process. More specifically, after settling on a research question and related
data, I first began with an initial review of available gun data, allowing the unfolding data
to guide the literature review, “sensitizing concepts and general disciplinary
perspectives” (Charmaz 2006:11). This led to the identification of initial general
concepts (overt and subtle), themes, and relationships among the data. Accordingly,
initial data analysis began once the first events were attended and initial interviews were
conducted. These initial discussions with research subjects and observations within gun
culture settings were crucial to the process, as it served to guide future interview
questions and conceptualization of the data.

As I worked through interviews and event data, emerging themes in the data were
continually synthesized and analyzed to organize subsequent data collection and work
toward an informed, grounded theory of the gun. As slices of data were collected in this
area of inquiry, they were next informally coded and categorized within and across events
and pieces of data, working toward saturation, as prescribed by Charmaz (2006).
Accordingly, data collected at the events and interviews were reviewed several times
prior to conducting any initial coding. Next, I utilized a crude form of line-by-line
coding, thoroughly probing the text and attempting to isolate overt and latent “meaning.”
I refer to it as “crude,” as much of the data has no obvious start or stop point that would
indicate an obvious line of text (ex. much of the data exist in the form of pictures, decals,
literatures, movie and song references, images of guns and sentence fragments).

However, any specific detail from a piece of data that is distinct enough to communicate something obvious or specific makes it “stand alone” data, and constitutes a line for the purpose of this research.

A type of focused coding was then used to sort and synthesize the large amount of data collected by studying and comparing the initial codes. I sought out categories and themes that cut across venues and interviews. As directed by Glasser and Strauss (1967) and Charmaz (2006), for heightened rigor, attention to detail and accuracy, the constant comparative method was used throughout data analysis to make comparisons of responses between and among research subjects about similar aspects of the data following each interview and event.

The purpose of this qualitative analysis was to move toward a grounded theory of symbolic gun value within U.S. gun culture. Although many gun owners and collectors will describe the value of a gun based on special properties (such as serial number, unique design or limited availability) that give it a fixed and specific market or monetary value, borrowing from Durkheim (1965/1912), I am more interested in exploring the symbolic, emotional value that gun owners place on their guns. According to Durkheim (1965/1912), a vested emotional, symbolic value of an object or idea is a unique product of social interaction that centers around the concepts of respect and majesty. "To be sure, in the sentiment which the believer feels for the things he adores, there is always fear derived from respect and the dominating emotion of majesty" (79). By following the procedures outlined above, I seek to inquire as to what type of respect as well as awe or
majesty-inspiring life experiences culminate in the formation of emotional attachment to firearms for gun owners and influence social interaction.

As an inductive process, grounded theory implies that no pre-conceived hypotheses are tested as an effort to validate the emergent theory. However, it is natural to the process to have certain hypotheses come into focus after the initial consideration of the data. These hypotheses may then be used to test emerging relationships between data and other data, categories/themes with other categories/themes, as well as between data and categories/themes. Accordingly, my eye toward the saturation of conceptual themes unfolding from this research project was partially guided by the following hypotheses that emerged from the initial wave of general data coding:

- The emotional value assigned to guns is fluid, not fixed, so it is contextually relevant
- Some guns will generate higher levels of emotional attachment than others
- Guns used in work (police) will have less emotional attachment than guns associated with leisure activities, especially those involving friends or family
- Guns that were used as part of some memorable activity, such as a hunt and kill will garner a higher emotional value than one that was merely purchased
- The greater the historical/social significance of a firearm, the greater the emotional attachment (ex. If it was handed down from a grandfather or parent, or owned by a renowned public figure, such as John Wayne)
- A firearm that was used as part of a right of passage, such as being handed down from a family member to signify the transition into manhood, will garner a higher emotional value than a weapon of historical significance that is acquired from outside of the owner's primary social network
- The cost of a firearm has no relationship to the emotional attachment (outside of the presumed positive correlation between historical/social significance of a firearm and monetary value). Some of those most highly valued in a collection,
eliciting the most emotional response will carry the lowest monetary or trade value

CREDIBILITY

In laying out the criteria for studies utilizing components of grounded theory, Glauser and Strauss (1967) and Charmaz (2006) each stresses the importance of establishing credibility with the study population as well as the audience reading the findings. Most of establishing credibility with the reading audience appears to hinge on the researcher’s ability to provide details, details, details. The goal is to paint a vivid enough picture through thick description and data presentment to demonstrate believable “familiarity with the settings and topic” (Charmaz 2006:182). Toward this end of establishing credibility, I have included a substantial range of observations from numerous subjects, a variety of venues, and continually drawn comparisons among the data and settings. To establish credibility with my informants, continual efforts were made to remain engaging, respectful, genuinely interested, and to treat the work with them as a professional collaboration. In others words, I was sure to continually share my observations with the research subjects to ensure that they jibed with the stories they were providing, their intended meanings, and how the informants also interpreted various features at gun events that I have recounted.

Additional assurances of credibility were attempted through the use of a type of data auditing. Burton and Price-Spratlen (1999), introduced an issue with qualitative data collection that they called the contextual moment hypothesis. Their study revealed that even when a researcher is fortunate enough to have access to longitudinal data, sampling the same subjects on the meaning of identical items, over the course of several years,
there is still as issue of concern relevant to data credibility. They demonstrated that a subject’s perspective when providing an assessment about any type of value or feeling is subject to fluctuations throughout the day. A subject might answer the same survey instrument item differently, depending on aspects of the actual “contextual moment,” such as neighborhood characteristics and life events that had unfolded on a given day. As my accurate accounts of project data are contingent on my attention to detail and successful transmission of shared meanings, in addition to the reliability of accounts supplied by the research subjects, the potential for fluctuations or inconsistencies in my informants’ stories was a relevant concern. With these concerns in mind, I devised a form of data auditing suitable for this project. First, as previously mentioned, I worked closely with informants to ensure that I accurately characterized stories and details that they shared. The auditing component created to ensure that informant accounts were not changing notably over time worked by contacting subjects who had provided detailed gun stories within 3 to 6 months of the time they provided their stories. By a combination of email, phone, fax and mail follow-ups (depending on the informant’s preference), I provided accounts that were slightly different from the details given by the informants, changing minor details about their event descriptions, and omitting some of the key details, as well. I then compared the informants’ comments/revisions to the original story details, checking for notable differences. In the case of this project, the contextual moment did not prove to be an area of concern. The research subjects always caught the changes to story details and provided the original account again. Interestingly, it was only details pertaining to hunting that fluctuated a little, with subjects sometimes slightly altering the size of an animal killed with a gun. Accounts about why the owners valued a
specific gun, or which guns they valued the most did not fluctuate. Whenever possible, in additions to descriptions of what I have observed, samples of the data in the form of detailed stories from informants, pictures of their guns, and copies of relevant event literature are included to help the reader understand the context more fully.

**HUMAN SUBJECTS CONSIDERATION**

As guns have proven to be a bit of a touchy subject among my informants, I was made aware very early on in the preliminary phases of this dissertation that assurances of anonymity were a must. Prior to conducting any interviews, participants were ensured that I had no agenda other than to collect the stories of their guns. Each participant was provided a copy of a consent form (see Appendix B) prior to interviewing.

Initially, the project was designed to include the taping of subject interviews. However, during preliminary data collection, I noted that subjects were either turned off completely by taping, or just clammed up once the record button was pushed. I literally saw subjects begin to writhe in their chairs, and shift from being open fountains of information to providing only short/choppy responses. Witnessing this effect, I elected to suspend audio taping and rely on hand-written notes, other typed or hand-written accounts received directly from research subjects, and photographs.

As this research centers around values placed on guns, it was not necessary to photograph the owners with the guns. In addition to excluding subjects from photographs, I also used first names only on data collection materials, and in report findings, refer only to subjects as “respondent,” “informant,” or mention only a descriptive detail pertaining to their region or occupation.
CHAPTER V

CONSIDERING POPULAR CULTURE AND POPULAR LITERATURE

In addition to published academic literature on the topic of guns, I also reviewed magazines that targeted gun owners and users. In order to gain a detailed understanding of guns, we must consider what is being said about guns and the information about guns being presented, whether text or image. Although extant research has documented separate media portrayals of masculinity and femininity in popular magazines and other forms of popular media (Carter and Steiner 2003; Vigorito and Curry 1998; Kirchler 1992) and called for “the exposure of cultural texts or symbolic meanings pertaining to gender by reviewing a variety of media” (Gottlieb and Wald 1994:252), gender representations of guns in popular magazines appear to be an unexplored area of social inquiry.

One participant probe used as part of the semi-structured research instrument was a consideration of gun-related publications frequently purchased or read by my informants. The two most commonly cited by my sample population were Guns and Ammo, and American Rifleman. A third publication that was mentioned by my informants, and also represented among popular publications displayed at attended events was Women And Guns. I included the third publication primarily for contrast, as well as
diversity among target audiences. *Women and Guns* also serves as an interesting springboard into views that male gun owners appear to approve of and want shared with women.

While researching and writing this dissertation, I was regularly exposed to back-dated issues of each of these publications. It is a common practice for gun show promoters and attendees to discard back-dated issues of gun-related literature at gun events, setting them out on display for review and giving them away to interested parties. Other issues were reviewed on newsstands around the greater Columbus, Ohio area.

The publication *Guns and Ammo* caters to those who own, use, collect and have some active interest or love for firearms and all things firearms related. *Guns and Ammo* is published monthly by the Peterson Publishing Company in Los Angeles. I also reviewed and obtained several past issues of *American Rifleman*, ranging in dates from the early 1980s to present. *American Rifleman* is a publication of the National Rifle Association (NRA). Finally, I reviewed hard copies of the publication *Women and Guns* at gun events and newsstands that dated back to the mid-1990s as well as articles listed in the online archive (May 2001 – April 2008). *Women and Guns* is also a monthly publication. *Women and Guns* is published by the Second Amendment Foundation, which according to their website ([www.saf.org](http://www.saf.org)) is a tax-exempt, non-profit, educational, research and publishing corporation.

The existence of *Women and Guns* plays into questions regarding the relationship between gendered beings and guns – primarily the assertion I have made throughout this project that guns are objects of masculine definitions and social performances via symbolic empowerment. The magazine is aimed primarily at a female audience, with the
purpose of educating women in gun use and ownership. After reviewing dozens of issues spanning 14 years, I also gleaned a clear presentation of a type of template demonstrating how and when women are to be viewed as appropriate owners and users of guns. If we also consider the general (unstated) purpose of magazines as a forum for advertisers to sell their wares, and also catering to weapons’-related industries as any other, this consideration becomes more interesting. The very presence of this publication serves as notice that gun manufacturers recognize women owning guns in increasing numbers – and being worthy of a sales pitch. Logic dictates that this consideration only ever accompanies the acknowledgement of a likely sale. I contend that the special interest group which publishes *Women and Guns*, The Second Amendment Foundation, perceived and exploited an opening in the market for a publication directed at this largely untapped audience.

This opening coincided with and helped promote their overt message of responsible gun ownership for all. The publication also taps the fear of crime which has remained high in the past few decades (Zimring and Hawkins 1997), as well as the perceived need for protection for the increasing numbers and percentages of women who are spending more time outside the home alone. A gun culture push for greater diversity appears to have ushered in the publication of *Women and Guns*. Further, *Women and Guns* does not appear to challenge the traditional masculinities model of guns ownership in a notable way. I have observed in the magazine that women are usually accompanied by men, and often depicted as fearing men. Fear of victimization is continually appealed to as a type of advertising gimmick. Guns are presented as being needed primarily for the protection of women (presumably against would-be male attackers). Instances of
women using guns do not show them as instruments of protection from any other source than the criminal stranger.

Interestingly, although females are far more likely to experience violence at the hands of acquaintances and significant others, I found no suggestion in the magazine that guns might be useful as a means of protection from others in the home, or perhaps partners or friends who do not cohabitate. I found men to be presented as both friends and threats to women gun owners. Friendly (white, middle class) men are depicted as teachers and companions to the female weapons owner. Unfriendly/dangerous men (minorities lurking in the shadows) are depicted as threats to women and one of the reasons that she needs the gun for protection.

In some of the older issues, I came across the story of Paxton Quigley - well-known late 20\textsuperscript{th} century “women’s empowerment” proponent in the U.S. – which was frequently alluded to in articles and advertisements in addition to her (1989) book \textit{Armed & Female}, which was also advertised. Quigley is a feminist who actively disavowed guns before reconsidering her position and ultimately asserting that guns empower women. Quigley’s message, along with other contributors to \textit{Women and Guns} mirrors the view pushed by the Second Amendment Foundation via their advertisements - that guns do empower women, but the real or apparent dangers she perceives as facing women comes from outside the home in the form of the dangerous, stranger/predator. I never encountered advertisements suggesting that the dangers facing women come in the form of abusive husbands, fathers, or "normal" men.

\textit{AVAILABILITY AND CORE CONTENT}
American Rifleman is only available through the NRA. It is one of two magazines included as part of a membership with the NRA. Upon joining, members of the NRA elect to receive either American Rifleman or American Hunter magazine. Guns and Ammo is the most widely available of the three magazines analyzed in this section. It is distributed via numerous outlets, including online, general newsstands and bookstores. Women and Guns is also available online, from newsstands and bookstores. It is, however, a bit more difficult to find. Throughout the course of this study, I found that local area grocery stores and also Barnes and Noble always carried Guns and Ammo, and I frequently found an issue or two of Women and Guns in these locations, as well. The magazines' availability varies widely in libraries. The Columbus Metropolitan Library carries sporadic issues of Guns and Ammo from 1958 to present, but not Women and Guns. The Athens, Ohio Public Libraries, however, carries mixed issues of each. A librarian at the Columbus Public Library explained to me, however, that it is not always the national volume of sales that determines what they have on the shelves. Subscription/publication availability is also determined, in part, by the active interest of patrons and librarians, as well as donations.

The most interesting location where I found copies of Guns and Ammo is Port Columbus International Airport. It just never occurred to me that airplanes and guns were a reasonable or expected combination. The other two publications, however, were not available at the airport. I have not found either magazine to be widely available from college and university libraries, as their value as legitimate tools of research or popularity among students and faculty are apparently not widely recognized - appreciated. I will characterize the publications, in turn, after a few comments applicable to all of them.
All three of the magazines have depictions of a variety of guns. Guns are depicted on the cover art, guns are included in the advertisements, and photographs of guns are included along with the text of the stories. Guns are depicted by themselves, as well as in groups, and include handguns, long guns, semi-automatic guns and revolvers (see appendix C for a glossary of gun terms). One effect that the liberal display of guns has on the reader is to desensitize us to the exposure or presence of so many guns. This serves to reduce the shock value of seeing guns and makes them appear safe. After pouring over every detail of dozens of like magazines, the guns and associated wares seem commonplace – as expected as what you might find flipping through a J.C. Penney’s Catalog. I have noticed while collecting project data that whether they are physically present or depicted in photographs or some other form of media, guns and other weapons will usually stand out, catch and hold the viewers’ attention. Even when present in homes, guns are usually considered appropriate to conceal (in drawers, closets, etc.), partly attesting to their shock value, their devalued status, and their monetary value as objects and universal commodity, not to mention the danger factor.

Gun safety, community awareness and educational literature published and distributed at gun events by both the NRA and PRO commonly depict families interacting in home environments without including guns in the photos at all. However, the typical magazine advertisement depictions of guns everywhere does suggest that guns are commonplace, not to be feared (when in the hands of the good guys) or hidden. Instead, they are everywhere and “safe.” Another message promoted through the saturation style display of guns is that there is nothing wrong, secretive, or unhealthy about guns. The hiding of guns might imply that there is something about them that is
not quite on the level. Through the prominent depiction of guns in a variety of settings, guns become just another social prop, piece of culture, or part of the “normal,” “expected” backdrop of everyday life, and not really different than the family photo album, remote control or umbrella stand.

Ammunition is also liberally depicted in text and advertisements. Russian ammunition, bi-metallic shotgun shells, 6 MM (millimeter), and 9 MM, 100-grain copper pointed bullets are just a sample of some of the ammunition portrayed. The guns are shown sometimes with people, but often without. For example, the April 2008 issue displays a female target shooter on the front over, but an old February 1994 issue of *Women and Guns* has a photograph of a chocolate birthday cake with five lit candles, such as one might envision for a five year old's birthday celebration, surrounded by semi-automatic pistols. This cover was commemorating the magazine’s first five years of publication. The effect, however, to me, was a little unsettling. There’s just something about the combining of an innocent birthday cake with an assortment of guns. As no people are present, one could imagine this is the scene waiting for someone for their surprise birthday celebration. As the cake is decorated as one might do for a child's birthday (there are five candles), the image was likely intended to combine the celebration with the notion that guns, in themselves, are not harmful or dangerous. They are as innocent as a child's birthday cake. The message may also be that guns should be part of every home, just as a birthday celebration is part of many homes. In seeing the abandoned birthday cake – candles still burning, and a display of guns, my initial thought was that the story was going to be about some tragic family shooting. This is likely a
side-effect of the media saturated school shootings of late, but the image that this cover
conjured up was not a happy celebratory one, but death.

Another commonality is that all of the magazines carry advertisements, images
and stories about products which are illegal to possess, purchase or use in some localities.
The magazines carry a disclaimer addressing this issue, warning the reader that products
may be illegal. A disclaimer that the American Rifleman prints on the title page, in small
boxes, reads:

NO ADVERTISED ITEM IS INTENDED FOR SALE IN THOSE STATES,
INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO CALIFORNIA, OR IN THOSE AREAS
WHERE LOCAL RESTRICTIONS MAY LIMIT OR PROHIBIT THE
PURCHASE, CARRYING OR USE OF CERTAIN ITEMS. CHECK LOCAL
LAWS BEFORE PURCHASING. MENTION OF A PRODUCT OR SERVICE
IN ADVERTISEMENTS OR TEXT DOES NOT NECESSARILY MEAN THAT
IT HAS BEEN TESTED OR APPROVED BY THE NRA.

Women and Guns also carries a disclaimer, much longer than the one listed above,
expressly claiming no responsibility for accidents which might result from information
gained from reading the magazine or using the products advertised in it. Guns and Ammo
carries a much shorter disclaimer. Their disclaimers immediately brought to my mind the
way in which the NRA and PRO educate people on the handling of guns, where
responsibility and legality of gun use are addressed. The beginner is quickly taught that
in order to legally use a gun (as a form of protection), the user must feel that their
immediate life is being threatened and that there is no escape from the danger. Any other
statement to authorities from someone who shoots another person will invariably result in
criminal charges being pressed. With this storyline, there is the possibility that the gun
was used defensively, absolving the user from legal charges of homicide or manslaughter.
Another common advertising theme that these magazines share is the scarcity of racial minorities in either text or advertisements. Although racial minorities are occasionally present, they are rare. Minorities are not depicted or represented in proportion to their presence in the general population. I did not find demographic characteristics of these magazines’ viewing populations, however, so there is no way to be sure that advertising depictions of racial minorities do not approximate the racial distributions of the general readerships. Primarily, minorities appeared to be more likely to be depicted as the predator (when male), potential victim (when female), or otherwise not seen. For example, in the March 1991 issue of *American Rifleman*, the only minority likeness in the entire magazine was in an advertisement for a sculpture of American Indians. Every other person in the magazine, in advertisements and text, appeared to be white. In issues of *Women and Guns*, ranging in dates from the winter of 1989 to Spring 2008, it was typical for two to three minorities maximum to be shown. A typical scenario was what I observed in a February 1994 issue, in which one minority was what appeared to be an African American woman featured on an insert to be mailed in to renew or order a magazine subscription. The other possible racial minority a man with a stocking over his head, depicting an intruder in the home (making his race technically impossible to determine – but his exposed skin was very dark). The text of the ad was for laser sights as an aid to aiming guns. My interpretation was that he was supposed to be African American. Again, the exposed skin color was almost dark black. The person was meant to depict a burglar.

*Guns and Ammo* has a similar record for racial/ethnic minority depiction. For instance, in an April 1994 issue that I reviewed at an Athens, Ohio gun show, one Asian
American woman was depicted, in a small black and white photograph. She was holding a handgun while calling the police. The text box advised readers to be prepared not only by having a gun, and being trained on proper technique, but to also be prepared and cautious while calling police during break-ins (once you had a would-be assailant subdued). The other depiction was a small photograph of former U.S. Surgeon Joycelyn Elders. Interestingly, this photograph was part of a four page advertising spread delineating enemies of the NRA. The ad was titled "Your Government Has Ganged Up On You." The unstated but overt message that I received through photographic display and notable omissions from all these magazines is that it is not desirable to arm people of color. The few minority representations are shown in an almost exclusively negative light when they are present at all. The people shown to be using guns, ammunition, and other products responsibly are either white or, in rare instances, minority females. The issues that I selected to describe were chosen based on a combination of factors, including availability, impressions formed while reading and looking through the magazines, and what I believe to be representative of the treatment that racial minorities receive in these publications. Looking through other issues did not reveal more or more positive minority depictions. In the case of women, however, even in Women and Guns magazine, I noticed that white women were continually depicted as legitimate shooters, and also people who sometimes shoot just for fun and sport. The Olympic gold medal shooters Nancy Johnson and Kim Rhodes were often referenced; however, minority women, when depicted, were only depicted in a vulnerable state, as wielding guns to protect themselves – not as “legitimate” gun users, and never just for the fun of the sport.
All of the magazines devote considerable space to stories about the technical aspects associated with using and owning guns. The magazines have feature articles as well as regular advice columns and technical articles. There are numerous articles about reloading equipment, various kinds of ammunition, the defensive uses of guns, the attributes of various guns, and other accessories related to gun use. For example, the May 2003 issue of *Women and Guns* offer articles on a comparative test of three .357 handguns; an article on cases (i.e., purses and handbags) for carrying concealed weapons; an article on an advertising entrepreneur who deals heavily with guns; one on shotguns used for shooting clay targets; and two articles on female shooting instructors. Most of the articles consider the interface between women and guns— as the title of the magazine suggests. By offering images of women who own, use, and display guns, an attempt is made to portray the female gun user as modern, trendy, savvy, wise, and liberated. The attempt is lacking in some respects. The portrayed liberation is from the worries of crime or depending on a male to protect her from crime. There is not even a shadow of an allusion that women might need guns to be protected from household members or acquaintances such as lovers or boyfriends. Women are portrayed as gaining power from the use, ownership and display of guns, but the power comes only from being able to independently navigate the dangerous world in which they find themselves today. They are also portrayed as gaining protection from guns for their children. All women are not tied to men in the magazine. For the depictions of children, women are shown as their potential protectors. This suggests that an armed woman could be responsible for keeping children safe when there is no man around to do it for them. However, several of
the photographs of women with guns do show a man behind her - always looking safe and understanding - encouraging her in her handling and education of guns.

The covers of the magazines invariably display guns, often several guns. *Women and Guns* more often has photos of people, usually white people, displayed with the guns than in the men's magazines. Men's magazines are more likely to feature a photograph of an oversized hand cannon of some sort. All of the magazines display guns in the hands of people. To me, this suggests that there exists a natural fit between hands and guns, and it is in use/in action, in the hands of people where guns really belong. As previously mentioned, women are often portrayed along with men behind them. The women are typically holding guns in some sort of student or amateur capacity. The message seems to be that women are quite capable of handling guns, as long as there is a man around. One way to interpret the presence of women shadowed by a man is that women are more sociable or less likely to be loaners than men; another would be that women are simply dependent on men. Both interpretations are plausible and not contradictory. I did not find covers with just two women on them. The other two (men's) magazines more often offer pictures of guns without humans, perhaps suggesting that guns are more separate from the body for men than for women or that men are less sociable than women. I did not find women on the covers of *American Rifleman* or *Guns and Ammo* in the dozens of issues that I reviewed. The simple fact that women gun owners and users are known to exist suggests more at work here than women simply not being part of the magazine’s target demographics. We know that they comprise some of the demographic. The blatant exclusion or distancing from women on the covers, on the most basic level, loudly resounds that guns are more appropriate for men to use and own than women.
The *American Rifleman* carries considerably more politically oriented articles, reflecting the lobbying efforts of the NRA. Not only are the politics of gun use and ownership written about frequently and extensively, the history of the Second Amendment as well as the implications of its repeal is covered in the magazine as interpreted by the NRA officers, members and advocates.

Within each of these publications, there are regular features which address the political implications of gun ownership, and regular writers with known positions who address the issues surrounding gun ownership and use. The stress is on the legal and informed use and ownership of guns, and the primary implication is that all problems associated with guns are due to illegal use and (inadequately) educated and ill-informed gun users and owners. *Women and Guns*, perhaps reflecting the positions of its publishers, a political organization, also addresses some of the political implications of gun use and ownership. A regular column is "Legally Speaking," where a female lawyer addresses the legal ramifications of gun use and ownership. Again, an informed gun user appears to be the goal of this column.

Advertisements in the magazines try to sell a wide variety of guns (including machine guns), ammunition, and accessories for the gun aficionado. Gun safes, carrying pouches, holsters, bulletproof vests, ammunition clips, and devices for altering guns are continually found in these publications. Some of these products are illegal. Spare parts, for example, for AK-47 assault rifles are advertised, various types of stocks, silencers, scopes, an abundance and wide assortment of knives, and even bull whips are found for sale in these publications. Shooting competitions are also widely advertised in all three magazines. Various political organizations, most notably the NRA, are advertised in
them. Hunting equipment, such as knives and camouflage clothing are also carried in the magazines. *Guns and Ammo* and the *American Rifleman* have a lengthy classified section whereas *Women and Guns* does not. Items ranging from chili recipes to weed killers to term papers are offered for sale in the classified ads.

*Women and Guns* offers advertisements wherein the gun is (re)defined as a feminine accessory. The interpretations offered below are only one way to read the messages contained in the ads; my decoding is not offered as the only one. Guns are shown, for example, on a nightstand alongside a string of pearls, framed photographs of children, compacts, and teddy bears. One full page ad shows handguns, sparkling as if they were jewels, along with a string of pearls, and they are described, in large letters, as "Precious Possessions." The ad goes on to describe things that are worth protecting, such as rights and possessions, as a reason to purchase Davis Industries handguns. One ad in *Women and Guns* reads "Size can mean a lot," featuring a small revolver alongside a string of pearls, a single rose, and what I would describe as delicate or dainty, and apparently lace doilies.

This play on sexuality is a common, recurring theme in each publication. For example several issues of *Guns and Ammo* featured an article on shotgun barrel length with the ad text asserting “Shotgun barrel length. The vote is in...longer is better!” The sexual connotations are blatant. In the worlds of guns and sex, size matters. The implications contained in the words of the ad that judgments or evaluations for guns are similar to those of penises and both are evaluated, at least in part, on size. Another *Women and Guns* ad, rather than suggesting that a bigger gun is better, suggests that "Compact Accuracy can protect your life!" The contradiction implied in the ad is
interesting. Women are often generalized to consider the size of penises as less a matter of concern than men. Yet, in this ad, the statement is that size can mean a lot, and what is offered from the gun is performance in the guise of accuracy rather than a “big gun.” Yet another ad promises that "good things come in small packages," another possible reference to the similarity of guns and penises (if penises are looked at as a compact part of men's anatomies; the analogy to jewels and small packages also comes to mind). Of course, testicles are often referred to as "family jewels."

One characteristic which arguably distinguishes femininity from masculinity and is found in the ads in Women and Guns is concealment. Women conceal tampons and pads within their bodies, and they are able to conceal pregnancy (for a while). Some of the advertisements proclaim "that no one knows" you're carrying a weapon, promised by some of the "gun purse" and "pistol pack" manufacturers and distributors. The smaller handguns designed for women could be for: smaller hands, smaller body size/type, and ease of concealment. Guns are presented which fit a woman's physiology, and one must remember this is a magazine published by men which cannot afford to offend men, while at the same time, offering them as suitable and attractive for women. Another way of interpreting the ads would be to say that "here is a dainty, feminine means of protection that is accurate. You don't have to have a man or a penis, so how else will you protect yourself?"

The magazine for women must not offend men, for they are likely to be read differently by men and women. Messages with double meanings for men and women seem to work especially well. But the critical matter is not the specific examples but the lively use of symbols and words that evoke male/female emotional responses. The
magazines seem to cater to a public desperate for a way of life which eludes them. By buying and using guns, they attempt to get a handle on the good life, the life where people are not burdened by government impositions on their behavior (yet government protection of perceived rights is desired), where men are men and women are women, where no ambiguity exists. They seek a measure of control over their lives and the way it is threatened - not only by other societal members but also by their own government. They want to be able to live their lives unfettered by people intruding into their life (styles), and where their government likewise leaves them alone yet strenuously protects their right to own and carry guns.

The contradiction I see is that, while they want the government to be unobtrusive, they also want protection from the government. They want proactive protection of the right to own guns. An attempt appears to be made to let us know that the magazines are for the fun-loving, sporting shooter, with the added bonus of educating us on how this handy little device can also save your life. I also felt that the reader is being encouraged to read between the lines, picking up a message of not-so-subtle racism and eroticism, and that their way of life is being threatened, not only by criminals (who are members of non-majority groups), but the government. Accordingly, gun owners have to protect themselves because no one else is going to do it. I also received the message that the job of protecting families and homes is a masculine one. While women can be good, accurate, shooters, they have to buy into a masculine story line of non-emotionality, hardness, and assuming the positions of student and something to be protected in order to be accepted. Attempts are made to preserve or enhance the femininity of female shooters, particularly but not exclusively in Women and Guns. The message is that
behind the shell of femininity must be some evidence of qualities traditionally thought of as masculine. Just in case the woman has not bought into performing traditional masculinities, forsaking feminine qualities, she will find the comforting depictions of men behind them - suggesting that he is there, just in case.

However, there is also an attempt to redefine femininity in these publications, most notably in the one aimed at women, *Women and Guns*, although it is an image some women may not accept. The introduction of "Lady Smith" pistols, pink Cricket “designer rifles, pink pearl-handled pistols, the design of clothing and accessories to conceal weapons, the teaching of shooting/defense classes by women for women, suggest that rather than accepting a masculine ideology, some women want to reconstruct femininity - or that the magazine is attempting to do this for women. What appears to be happening is that weapons and ammunition manufacturers are trying to sell a product line to women for which women have no (or little expressed ) interest. Guns are identified with men and masculinity. While men may want others to think that the guns are owned and used for protective and sporting purposes- purposes which should appeal to women as well as men - the reality is that guns are masculinity enhancers. No amount of advertising will change that.

What is missing in these magazines, in my opinion, from these attempts at redefinition, is the identification of the true threat to women: the men with which they live. Just as the publications aimed at men do not address the numerous occasions when men kill acquaintances, family, and friends; they do not address the serious problem of alcohol and guns mixing; nor do they address the issues which influence men choosing guns over other means of masculine expression. The marketing of guns to women
presents an incomplete picture of the weapons situation. These publications offer ideological underpinnings to masculine uses, definitions of, and real life behavior of gun owners and users.

The magazines offer a way for men and women to (re)define and (re)construct gun related behavior along gender, racial, and political lines. Gun use and ownership is a way for people to express themselves in sport as well as the added bonus of self protection. Guns allow users to maintain a way of life in which men and women can participate in self expression and thwart intrusions of those who would alter their way of life. Threats to the status quo come from the unknown others, outside the home, and a contradictory stance is taken in regard to the state. While the magazines staunchly proclaim that government interference is unwanted in gun control, understood as regulating access to guns, they want the state to maintain and protect the right to own guns. By portraying guns as properly controlled by men and gun behavior as one expression of masculinity, these popular magazines focus attention on the meaning of guns as arising from the interactions among gender-performing people and guns. Simply stated, the images depicted by the magazines, pertaining to guns, may then be incorporated and re-incorporated into gendered-performances surrounding the perceived meaning, use and owning of guns as a symbolically charged piece of culture.

GUNS AND MUSIC

One of the more interesting and surprising caveats to this dissertation has been the intersection of gun symbolism and popular music - an area that has yet to be explored scientifically. Guns as a source of symbolic empowerment have been established by Jiobu and Curry (2001), and Brown (1994) demonstrated the use of guns as a masculine
power symbol. Recent research on gender dynamics in music has depicted separate
gender performances for males and females pertaining to the playing, writing, performing
and sharing of music, with unequal access to music-related symbols portrayed as the most
masculine (Leonard 2007; Darling-Wolf 2004; Whiteley 1997; Gottlieb and Wald 1994).
There also appears to be a gender order in music that is well-regulated to preserve
existing patriarchal structures (Leonard 2007; Whiteley 1997). Masculine expressions of
guns in music, however, remain an unexplored area research area.

Throughout every phase of this project, I have been unable to escape music
references to guns. It began while gathering data at the first gun show that I attended –
even though I didn’t know it. T-shirts and bumper stickers displayed the saying
“happiness is a warm machine gun.” A few months later, while conducting field research
at a cowboy club tournament, I was watching a female shooter who, upon finishing her
shooting event, turned and walked over to a large man standing directly behind her, fully
adorned in cowboy apparel. With a very large smile on her face, appearing to beam with
self-satisfaction, she looked at him and said “happiness is a warm gun…bang,
bang…shoot, shoot…” At the time, I thought the tournament participant was making a
turn of phrase. It was not until later, when performing word searches on music lyric data
bases that I realized this all-too-common expression in the world of guns has its origins in
what I considered to be the unlikeliest place of all: it stems from a Beatles song from The
White Album, on a track titled simply “Happiness is a Warm Gun.” I was a bit surprised
by this song’s visible impact in the gun world, given the Beatles well-publicized
association with the peace movement and the not-so-subtle irony that John Lennon was
killed by a deranged man with a pistol. It was not the revelation that this popular phrase
was actually part of a Beatles song that caused me to notice the heavy emphasis on guns in contemporary music lyrics, however. Much of what I noticed was in retrospect. As with any research adventure that requires the principle researcher to be submersed in the subject of study, I naturally because sensitized as to the overall presence of my subject matter in society at large – I probably saw it popping up in places were I would have previously not noticed. It was while driving to one of my first gun events that I noticed while flipping through local radio stations on a 30-minute drive, that several of the songs referenced guns. One was the Jim Croce song “Leroy Brown,” stating the Leroy had a “.32 gun in his pocket for fun.” I had probably heard the song hundreds of times growing up, and the line about the gun for fun never really stood out. On the same trip, I also came across the song “Saturday Night Special,” by Leonard Skynard. I discovered through the course of my gun research, that the .32 gun referenced in the classic Jim Croce tune is actually the same as the “Saturday Night Special” mentioned by Leonard Skynard. According to their song about this infamous gun, “it’s got barrel that’s good and cold. Ain’t good for nothing, but put a man six feet in a hole...” Each of these songs speaks to separate themes common in the world of the gun, and these are fun and fear, respectively. Once this connection was revealed, and it became clear that the overt gun references were endemic in contemporary music lyrics, at least a general analysis seemed appropriate, if not necessary.

GUN LYRIC SOURCES

In addition to noting convenient references to guns as I encountered them on the radio, I found that there is actually a variety of large music lyric data bases available at no charge to the general public. Before getting into details about these data bases and the
searches performed, I think it worthwhile to demonstrate that data do, indeed, sometimes come from the unlikeliest of sources. I doubt that I am unique as a researcher, in that, at times, I struggled desperately to locate sources or slices of data that epitomized the message that I intend to convey. In the winter of 2007, I stumbled across one such source, in the form of a song from the popular country music iconoclast Toby Keith. The song is titled “Love Me If You Can,” and it includes the simple lyric “My father gave me my shotgun that I'll hand down to my son, try to teach him everything it means.” It bothered me for days that this simple one-liner said so much about what I am trying to reveal about gun symbolism through this dissertation – and, in some ways, with a far-more tidy summary than I could accomplish with several paragraphs of text. I want to know “everything it means” to the man passing along a gun to his son. By collecting these gun stories and asking people to share the stories of their guns, and what each gun means to them, I want to know what Toby is claiming to already know.

Toward this end of understanding the meaning of guns and how we use them to interact, I found myself perusing large song lyric data bases. My two primary search engines housed very large collections. The first is elyrics.net, which houses lyrics to almost 154,000 songs ranging from pop and rock to rap and country. I liked this search engine because it allows the user to perform keyword searches on both song titles and song text. Using the word “pistol” alone, I found 747 songs referencing the word “pistol,” and another 123 songs referencing the word “guns.” There are more songs that include references to specific guns by caliber, such as 9mm and .357, as well. My other preferred music lyric data base was cowboylyrics.com. From this site, keyword searches can also be performed. A simple keyword search pulled up 1278 songs that use the word
gun either in the title or song text, and another 168 referencing pistols. At a glance, my initial reaction was there’s no way that guns are referenced in that many songs. After spending considerable time reviewing the song lists, I quickly became aware that themes of the songs mirrored the popular themes noted in the gun research as well as those unfolding from my own project data. As referenced in a sampling of the lyrics below, to be sure, some of the songs were, indeed, accounts of gratuitous violence. I found examples of these in multiple genres.

Santeria, by Sublime

“Tell Sanchito that if he knows what is good for him he best go run and hide
Daddys got a new.45
And I won’t think twice to stick that barrel straight down Sancho’s fucking throat
Believe me when I say that I got somethin’ for his punk ass.”

Delia’s Gone, by Johnny Cash

“She was lown down and triflin’ and she was cold and mean...
Kind of evil makes me want to grab my submachine...
First time I shot her, I shot her in the side...
Hard to watch her suffer, but with the second shot she died...

“Ghetto Symphony,” by Snoop Dog

“I pop a cap in yo’ ass...
Then pop some more in the glass...
Too legit to quit...
I'm spittin’ gangsta shit...
Man fuck all that yappin...
We 'bout that gun clappin’...

“Wish You Would,” by Lil’ Wayne

“Look look look - don’t play with me
Look look look
Huh? Huh? Look
Let's get the pistols out the trunk, let's get ready to bust things
Leave a nigga block full of nothin' but guts, brains
Ain't no way, nowhere that these niggas could duck flames
My guns up for and tellin' all to suck Wayne
I'm runnin' with a clique that just be thuggin' heavy
Plus I'm runnin' in them bricks, cook it, cut it, sell it
One time for my daddy, Rabbit, up in Heaven
Ever since my nigga died I've been strapped up and ready
Come and get it - it's Wheezy Whee, the hottest ever
Now this fella gon' get bullets inside his sweater
I'm just terror, or better yet, horror or drama
And tomorrow I'ma hit the block and barrow your momma
Beef with me, you're swimmin' in water with sharks and piranhas
Revolvers and choppers got all your partners callin' the coppers
And for the grand finale, I might pull up in a tan Denali
When I hop out, in my hand is a Calico sprayin' your family

Chorus
Don't play with me - I wish you would
I'ma hit your hood, then split your hood
You bet' not play with me cause I cock my gun
I pop my gun
Better hide and run...

References to guns for committing acts of violence like these were fairly typical across rock, country and rap genres. However, there were also non-violent themes typical to gun culture, such as the badass factor and masculinity of guns, guns as a comedic prop, and guns as a site of rituals. The final theme that I noted pertained to women and guns. Whereas gun lyrics pertaining to men may be used to display power, ritual or entertainment, gun lyrics involving women invariably portray women as victims. They are either using guns to protect themselves or to lash out against someone who has hurt them. Even in song lyrics, the masculine center of guns is highly protected. In using guns in songs, women are not only relegated to a second-class citizen and victim, but they are also not portrayed as trading on the “badassedness” or “badassitudes” of the gun. The following section includes a sampling of popular gun lyrics to illustrate my point.
GUNS: THE BADASS/MASCULINITY FACTOR

Somehow, it almost seems rude to have a scholarly discussion about the badass and masculine factor of guns without leading off with a focus on “Folsom Prison Blues,” by the late Johnny Cash. The line “when I was just a baby, my mama told me son, always be a good boy, don’t ever play with guns” speaks volumes about how guns are perceived by many males in contemporary U.S. society. Playing with guns makes you a “bad boy.” The concept of being “bad” is very rock & roll, and often portrayed as desirable to the type of women who men are supposed to want to attract. Another line in the song which helps to illuminate the masculine power imbued in guns is the classic line “I shot a man in Reno, just to watch him die.” Although this image is one of undeniable, gratuitous violence, it is also one of absolute power. Here the gun is the ultimate symbol of hyper masculinity. The “bad boy” has taken a gun, empowered himself and, for an instant, was master of someone else’s fate.

“I’m Still a Guy,” by Brad Paisley

“When you see a deer you see Bambi
And I see antlers up on the wall
When you see a lake you think picnics
And I see a large mouth up under that log
You're probably thinking that you're going to change me
In some ways well maybe you might
Scrub me down, dress me up oh but no matter what
remember I'm still a guy

When you see a priceless French painting
I see a drunk, naked girl
You think that riding a wild bull sounds crazy
And I'd like to give it a whirl
Well love makes a man do some things he ain't proud of
And in a weak moment I might walk your sissy dog, hold your purse at the mall
But remember, I'm still a guy
I'll pour out my heart
Hold your hand in the car
Write a love song that makes you cry
Then turn right around knock some jerk to the ground
'Cause he copped a feel as you walked by

I can hear you now talking to your friends
Saying, "Yeah girls he's come a long way"
From dragging his knuckles and carrying a club
And building a fire in a cave
But when you say a backrub means only a backrub
Then you swat my hand when I try
Well, now what can I say at the end of the day
Honey, I'm still a guy

And I'll pour out my heart
Hold your hand in the car
Write a love song that makes you cry
Then turn right around knock some jerk to the ground
'Cause he copped a feel as you walked by

These days there's dudes getting facials
Manicured, waxed and botoxed
With deep spray-on tans and creamy lotiony hands
You can't grip a tacklebox

Yeah with all of these men lining up to get neutered
It's hip now to be feminized
I don't highlight my hair
I've still got a pair
Yeah honey, I'm still a guy

Oh my eyebrows ain't plucked
There's a gun in my truck
Oh thank God, I'm still a guy"

In this song, although there is technically a heavy comedic feel to this song, the use of the gun is an interesting study in masculine capital and symbolic empowerment. Here we have a man lamenting that he doesn’t want to be neutered by carrying his girlfriend’s purse or walking her sissy, little dog. How does he retain his “pair,” (of testicles/balls)
given his plight? Interestingly, the writer references guns not only in the last line of the song to secure his manhood, he also opens the song with a line about shooting animals. He has “symbolically empowered” himself with guns as a masculine power symbol as a direct response to the affront to his masculinity.

“BIG IRON,” by Marty Robbins

“To the town of Agua Fria rode a stranger one fine day
Hardly spoke to folks around him didn't have too much to say
No one dared to ask his business no one dared to make a slip
for the stranger there among them had a big iron on his hip
Big iron on his hip

It was early in the morning when he rode into the town
He came riding from the south side slowly lookin' all around
He's an outlaw loose and running came the whisper from each lip
And he's here to do some business with the big iron on his hip
big iron on his hip

In this town there lived an outlaw by the name of Texas Red
Many men had tried to take him and that many men were dead
He was vicious and a killer though a youth of twenty four
And the notches on his pistol numbered one an nineteen more
One and nineteen more

Now the stranger started talking made it plain to folks around
Was an Arizona ranger wouldn't be too long in town
He came here to take an outlaw back alive or maybe dead
And he said it didn't matter he was after Texas Red
After Texas Red

Wasn't long before the story was relayed to Texas Red
But the outlaw didn't worry men that tried before were dead
Twenty men had tried to take him twenty men had made a slip
Twenty one would be the ranger with the big iron on his hip
Big iron on his hip

The morning passed so quickly it was time for them to meet
It was twenty past eleven when they walked out in the street
Folks were watching from the windows every-body held their breath
They knew this handsome ranger was about to meet his death

81
About to meet his death

There was forty feet between them when they stopped to make their play
And the swiftness of the ranger is still talked about today
Texas Red had not cleared leather fore a bullet fairly ripped
And the ranger's aim was deadly with the big iron on his hip
Big iron on his hip

It was over in a moment and the folks had gathered round
There before them lay the body of the outlaw on the ground
Oh he might have went on living but he made one fatal slip
When he tried to match the ranger with the big iron on his hip
Big iron on his hip"

In this song, it is difficult to escape the true “cowboy cool” just dripping from the imagery. When he sings of the cowboy ready to “do some business with the big iron on his hip,” we might as well be watching Clint Eastwood in an all-too familiar scene with a cigar tightly clinched between his teeth. This cowboy is brave, tough, and definitely performing with his gun the “right way.” This aspect of “badassedness,” or type of cool surrounding guns and gun use permeates every aspect of gun culture that I have had the opportunity to observe while conducting my extensive field research. Something similar to the scene depicted in this song is a close approximation to what many of my informants recounted as the dream they are chasing when they hold their favorite guns – and sometimes slip them into their cowboy holsters. As one of my research subjects so eloquently stated: “Sometimes, when it comes to the male fascination with guns, it’s as simple as John Wayne, the Lone Ranger, Gene Autry and other matinee heroes.”

GUNS AS HIGH COMEDY?

In general, guns are serious subject matter, and there’s nothing particularly funny about them at all. However, while researching the music lyric data bases, I came across
several popular songs that do use guns as a type of comedic prop. This could either be to make guns appear less dangerous by making light of their awful power, or simply because sometimes it’s easier to laugh about the things that we fear the most (to sort of reclaim the power they hold over us).

The first comedic gun ballad that I encountered was a #1 hit for country music singer Mark Chestnut titled “Bubba Shot the Jukebox.” In this song, poor Bubba has had his heart broken, and decided to take his pain out on the jukebox by shooting it. Or as the song goes

“Bubba shot the juke box last night
Said it played a sad song it made him cry
Went to his truck and got a forty five
Bubba shot the juke box last night”

“Pistol Packin’ Mama,” by Al Dexter

“Drinking beer in a cabaret and was I having fun
Until one night she caught me right and now I'm on the run.

Lay that pistol down, babe - lay that pistol down
Pistol Packin’ Mama, lay that pistol down.

She kicked out my windshield - she hit me over the head
She cussed and cried and said I'd lied and wished that I was dead.

Drinking beer in a cabaret and dancin' with a blond
Until one night she shot out the light - Bang! that blond was gone.

I'll see you every night, babe - I'll woo you every day
I'll be your regular daddy - if you'll put that gun away.

Now I went home this morning - the clock was tickin' four
Gun in her hand, says "You're my man, but I don't need you no more."

Now there was old Al Dexter - he always had his fun
But with some lead, she shot him dead - his honkin' days are done.”
This song is an interesting mixture of themes. First, we are definitely supposed to find it funny that the lead character in the song is chased around by a violent women wielding a pistol. However, true to the formula of women in songs with guns, this is not a simple issue of a woman symbolically empowering herself with a gun. Once again, we are supposed to believe that in response to what a man has repeatedly done to a woman – in the form of habitual maltreatment, she has, at long last, resorted to violence and the use of the gun as an equalizer.

**GUNS AS A RITUAL SITE**

Emile Durkheim established the standard for studying ritual behavior with his (1965/1912) *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Durkheim perceived rituals as both “determined modes of action” (51) and “rules of conduct which prescribe how a man should comport himself in the presence of sacred objects” (56). According to Turner (2000) and Goffman (1967), at our current state of social evolution, it is impossible for human social interaction to exist without the assistance of interaction rituals. Rituals, which are typically “emotion-arousing,” are used to begin and end all interactions, and also set the stage for everything that occurs socially in between (Turner 2000). Goffman (1967) expanded on Durkheim’s sacred-centric definition of rituals, adding that rituals “represent ways in which the individual must guard and design the symbolic implications of his acts while in the immediate presence of an object that has a special value for him” (57). As Birrell (1981) noted, this expanded definition broadens the application value of rituals as a site of social observations, in that it is not limited to rare subject matter that is set aside as sacred. Guns make for an interesting case study, in that they make it difficult for the researcher to disentangle the Durkheim from the Goffman. In other words, some
of the gun owners clearly depict their guns as sacred objects that are “awe inspiring,” and something to be set aside and revered. Others gun owners, however, lean far more toward Goffman’s point of view, describing their guns as important, meaningful and “special,” but by no means on the same level as an authentic object of religious worship. Whether depicted as “sacred” or simply “special and meaningful,” the world of the gun is rich with ritual activity surrounding their use.

The Toby Keith song that was referenced at the start of this section titled “Love Me If You Can” hints to the deep symbolic meaning of guns, and a type of ritual-like activity surrounding the owning and passing down of guns. From the line “my father gave me my shotgun that I'll hand down to my son, try to teach him everything it means,” we can see that there is much more than valuable property being exchanged. The singer is referencing a code and an entire way of life, the meanings of which are all tied up in the ceremonial passing on of this gun.

One type of gun-related ritual that came up several times during the course of this project involved gun cleaning. Although this will be detailed in a later section, it is very common for gun owners to have a special type of cleaning ritual for guns they value the most (not just monetarily, but more typically for sentimental reasons). However, a few of my informants also regaled me with accounts of another special kind of gun cleaning ritual. Among some gun owners who have daughters of dating age, it has become a type of half-serious/half-joking ritual to have the would-be unfortunate male suitor presented to meet the girl’s father while he (the father) is in the process of cleaning one of his guns. While conducting this cleaning exercise, the father is laying down all the rules and expectations about how he expects his daughter to be treated. I found this type of
account to be played out in a song currently in the top 10 of the country music charts titled “Cleaning This Gun,” by Rodney Atkins. The general sentiment of the song is manifest in the following lines

“Come on in boy, sit on down
And tell me 'bout yourself
So you like my daughter, do you now
Yeah we think she's something else
She's her daddy's girl and her mama's world
She deserves respect, that's what she'll get, ain't it son
Now y'all run along and have some fun
I'll see you when you get back
Bet I'll be up all night
Still cleaning this gun”

PROTECTING THE MASCULINE CENTER OF GUNS IN MUSIC

Song lyric references about females with guns are not rare. However, as I observed with popular gun magazines, and among attendees and a variety of gun events, women with guns are subjected to a patriarchy-based power struggle even in song. First, unlike men, women were not portrayed in any of the songs I reviewed as using guns just for fun. It also appears that the badassitudes enjoyed by men who usurp the symbolic power of the gun as part of their gender performance does not translate into song lyrics – at least not in an obvious way. Even when the song is about a female who is wielding her gun, it is invariably because she has been victimized in some way. It is almost as if the songwriters go out of their way to ensure that the image portrayed is not just a female who is tough, bad, and wielding a gun for no reason – and never like Johnny Cash’s “Folsom Prison Blues,” wherein the song’s main character has shot a man “just to watch him die.” One of the most detailed songs that I have encountered to illustrate this point is
Aerosmith’s “Janie’s Got A Gun.” This song is the prototypical scenario of a woman with a gun, who kills a man (her father), but only after years of systematic sexual abuse.

“Janie’s Got a Gun,” by Aerosmith

```
"Janie's got a gun
Janie's got a gun
Her whole world's come undone
From lookin' straight at the sun
What did her daddy do?
What did he put you through?
They said when Janie was arrested
they found him underneath a train
But man, he had it comin' Now that Janie's got a gun
she ain't never gonna be the same.

Janie's got a gun
Janie's got a gun
Her dog day's just begun
Now everybody is on the run
Tell me now it's untrue.
What did her daddy do?
He jacked a little bitty baby
The man has got to be insane
They say the spell that he was under the lightning and the
thunder knew that someone had to stop the rain

Run away, run away from the pain yeah, yeah yeah yeah
Run away run away from the pain yeah yeah
Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah
Run away, run away, run, run away
Janie's got a gun
Janie's got a gun
Her dog day's just begun
Now everybody is on the run
What did her daddy do?
It's Janie's last I.O.U.
She had to take him down easy and put a bullet in his brain
She said 'cause nobody believes me. The man was such a sleeze.
He ain't never gonna be the same.

Run away, run away from the pain yeah, yeah yeah yeah yeah
Run away run away from the pain yeah yeah
```
yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah
Run away, run away, run, run away

Janie's got a gun
Janie's got a gun
Janie's got a gun
Everybody is on the run

Janie's got a gun
Her dog day's just begun
Now everybody is on the run
Because Janie's got a gun
Janie's got a gun
Her dog day's just begun
Now everybody is on the run
Janie's got a gun”

Upon the initial review, another song that is currently at the top of the country music charts, “Gunpowder and Lead,” by Miranda Lambert sounds almost additudinal enough to cash in on traditional masculine badassitudes ascribed to gun use in songs. Here vocals are edgy and direct, and she almost pulls it off. Close analysis of the lyrics reveal, however, the familiar plight of a woman who was pushed too far. She's not just a bad girl for the sake of being a bad girl, or a girl packing heat just because she likes guns.

“Gun Powder and Lead,” by Miranda Lambert

County road 233, under my feet
Nothin' on this white rock but little ole me
I've got two miles till, he makes bail
And if I'm right we're headed straight for hell

I'm goin' home, gonna load my shotgun
Wait by the door and light a cigarette
If he wants a fight well now he's got one
And he ain't seen me crazy yet
He slapped my face and he shook me like a rag doll
Don't that sound like a real man
I'm going to show him what a little girls made of
Gunpowder and lead
It's half past ten, another six pack in  
And I can feel the rumble like a cold black wind  
He pulls in the drive, the gravel flies  
He don't know what's waiting here this time

I'm goin' home, gonna load my shotgun  
Wait by the door and light a cigarette  
If he wants a fight well now he's got one  
And he ain't seen me crazy yet  
He slapped my face and he shook me like a rag doll  
Don't that sound like a real man  
I'm going to show him what a little girls made of  
Gunpowder and lead

His fist is big but my gun's bigger  
He'll find out when I pull the trigger

I'm goin' home, gonna load my shotgun  
Wait by the door and light a cigarette  
If he wants a fight well now he's got one  
And he ain't seen me crazy yet  
He slapped my face and he shook me like a rag doll  
Don't that sound like a real man  
I'm going to show him what a little girls made of  
Gunpowder and, Gunpowder and lead

Once again, similar to the female victim mentioned in the last set of lyrics, systematic abuse is revealed. Instead of the bad girl that the singer appears to be depicting through her forceful and powerful vocal delivery, what we actually have is a woman driven to the gun by a man who has repeatedly “shaken her like a rag doll,” “slapped her face,” and pounded her with his “fist.” Although my lyrics review was far from comprehensive in the rock, country and rap genres, and it is possible that songs lyrics exist that promote the truly empowered, badass woman, it is not what I found. Instead, I found evidence of a type of template-like, controlled gun use scenarios for women, much like what was observed in the field and through popular literature. While discussing this observation
with one of my informants, she suggested that the song “The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia,” by Vicki Lawrence, does, in fact, portray a woman taking up a gun and shooting a man not because she was a victim, but because her brother was victimized. However, there is one fatal flaw with stating that the female, gun wielding character in this classic song was enjoying true gun-related badassedness. It is true that the line “Little sister don’t miss when she aims her gun” does sound like real “cowboy cool.” The failure to cash in on the cowboy cool factor is that although she does shoot and kill someone (not to defend herself, but to protect her brother’s honor – the stuff “real men” are made of), she ultimately does it in a cowardly fashion. The song ends with the woman’s brother being hung for the crime that she had committed – and she never comes forward. True badass cowboys would never let someone else take the fall for their crimes, and they feel no need to hide from their gun use. In the end, this scenario reminded me of one of the scenes in the Gary Cooper classic “High Noon.” The female character played by Grace Kelly is the only woman who ever touches a gun in the movie. Although she ultimately takes up arms to defend her husband and not herself, the way in which her gun use plays out keeps her from claiming any legitimate masculine capital or badassedness from her actions. She shoots an armed man in the only way that every self-respecting cowboy knows you cannot: she shoots him in the back.
CHAPTER VI

A DAY AT THE GUN EVENT

The following section chronicles typical findings at Ohio-area gun shows and shooting events visited from January 2005 to January 2008. The largest gun show in the southwest, which was hosted in Tyler, TX, was also attended to demonstrate theoretical saturation – this was covered in detail in the methods section. The primary purpose of visiting a variety of gun-related events was to make contact with potential research subjects and gain admission into the world of guns. The secondary purpose of this study was to gather enough gun-related data to identify recognizable patterns or categories of interaction pertaining to guns, gun symbolic values and gun use within the context of gun events – and work toward saturation of those theoretical categories. These categories, once identified, will help work toward grounded theory to illuminate specific ways in which guns and their symbolic values might influence gun-related interactions and behavior.

Although gun shows have received little attention from the academic community, this research expands on two previous studies that have unearthed separate aspects of gun shows and their significance. The first notable study was conducted by Stenross (1994), in which she described the business aspects of the gun show, from the perspective of the
vendor and collector, and how they go about integrating guns and legitimate business, albeit for different reasons (i.e. instant profit for the vendor, and possible long-term investment or sentimental value for the collector). The second notable contribution in this area comes in the form of a (1999) report issued by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), wherein detailed descriptions of the types of activities, products and services encountered at gun shows throughout the U.S. were cataloged. To date, however, no research study has offered a thick, descriptive analysis of the symbolism and symbolic interaction surrounding gun culture. The findings reveal that guns have transcended their simple utility as a mechanism for discharging bullets, or in some cases, pieces of collectible art, and are used to facilitate a variety of social processes and interactions.

Guns in the U.S. are big business, and they are all around us. As indicated by a January 29, 2008 report issued by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (referred to from this point on as the ATF), in the year 2006, 1,403,329 handguns, 1,496,505 rifles, 714,618 shotguns and 35,872 “miscellaneous other firearms were manufactured in the U.S. (See table 6.1).

Not including guns that are exported, this total comes to approximately 3,282,803 new guns in U.S. circulation per year. This is just one year’s production totals. A 1995 ATF report revealed that in the range of years from 1899 to 1993, more than 223 million guns were produced for sale and distribution in the United States. This estimate does not
include the unknown quantity of additional firearms that were either seized, destroyed or lost. According to U.S. census population estimates, the U.S. population at the end of 1993 was approximately 259 million – indicating that there were enough guns in circulation to arm about 95% of the population, including infants, with at least one gun. Using these crude production estimates, by 2008, there are approximately 272,242,045 guns at large in the U.S. At this high volume, the exact number is irrelevant for the purpose of this study, as the quantity has far exceeded the point at which the presence of guns is recognizable and felt – half of this amount would still be a very large number. A (2006:1752) international comparative study conducted by Gross, Killias,Urs-Hepp, Gadola, Bopp, Christoph-Lauber, Schnyder, Gutzwiller and Rossler lists the U.S. high atop the list of nations with households reporting a high proportion of gun ownership (see table 6.2). The data reveal that U.S. households are more than twice as likely to own firearms as households in Canada or France, four times more likely than Australia, more than ten times as likely as England, Wales or Scotland, and more than forty times more likely than Japan. Although these raw data do not take individual national histories and cultural differences into account, it is no less revealing about the heightened presence of guns in the U.S.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Proportion of Households with Firearms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England and Wales</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why so many guns? In addition to previously discussed contributing factors such as fear (Zimring and Hawkins 1997) and lack of confidence in the Government and its ability to protect (Jiobu and Curry 2001), another possibility is the extremely attractive bottom line. Hoovers Inc., a company dedicated to informing consumers about revenues generated by each industry reports that the U.S. firearms industry is comprised of about 200 companies. These companies reported a combined annual revenue of over two billion dollars:

“The largest gun manufacturers are Remington Arms and Sturm Ruger. Other companies that manufacture more than 50,000 weapons annually are Marlin Firearms, Mossberg, Smith & Wesson, US Repeating Arms, Savage Sports Corporation, Beretta, and Hi-Point. Winchester Ammunition and Remington are major manufacturers of ammunition…Demand, which has been flat for years, is partly driven by hunters and partly by weapon upgrades by police departments. The profitability of individual companies is closely linked to marketing. Small companies can compete effectively by producing premium-priced high-quality or decorative guns. Although automation has increased, the industry is still fairly labor-intensive: average annual revenue per worker is about £150,000” (Hoovers Inc., 2008).
However, the attractive profits gained by those selling firearms do not reveal anything about the appeal for the buyers/owners. It is clear that there are a lot of guns in circulation - some for sport, some for protection, and some for other reasons to be explored. In this section, I venture into an often controversial arena of the gun that has not been widely explored, although it is an area well known to gun owners: gun shows. As interactions and symbolic meaning pertaining to guns are a central focus of this research, gun shows offered one clear vantage point from which to observe interaction with firearms on a mass scale, in addition to presenting a research population with gun stories to share.

According to a report issued by the ATF in June, 2007, each year, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives investigates gun shows and operations in an attempt to control the illegal selling of guns. The report reveals more than 4,000 gun shows are held each year in the United States (ATF 2007; ATF 1999:1). These gun exhibitions are a place where licensed and private sellers are able to advertise their products to known users. They also serve as a venue where guns, ammunition, gun parts, gun accessories and literature, may be sold, traded and discussed. The Bureau indicates that there are no known definitive sources for the number of gun shows held annually. Their estimates were based on gun shows known to the agency through the continued tracking and monitoring of known events. The number is approximate number due to the unpublicized and unregulated private sales of firearms known to members of the ATF. Although the number of gun shows known to the ATF is high, it is assumed that the number is likely much higher, as shows interested in avoiding official detection (ex. events held or attended by those interested in selling and buying stolen or illegal goods)
are unlikely to advertise via conventional means. For those that are publicized, licensed vendors must complete background checks before the merchandise can be purchased. A similar license, however, is not required for private “collectors” who are selling to individual, private buyers from their own collections.

Table 6.3 illustrates the states holding the most gun shows each year. These data are derived from an ATF (1999) report on U.S. gun show activity. Texas was at the top of the list, hosting almost 500 events per year, and Nevada at the bottom hosting over 120. As the researcher on this project, my primary state of residence and base of operations is Ohio - which is also, conveniently, one of the states hosting the most gun shows in a typical calendar year, at a total of 148 events. So off to the gun shows I went.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Number of Shows</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>472</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Throughout this research adventure, I have found myself in venues ranging from large arenas that also host rock concerts and professional sporting events, to urban malls and even rural fairgrounds. The physical layout doesn’t vary much, no matter whether it is a large show with 500-1000 8ft tables set up with vendor displays and 3000-5000 attendees (based on vendor and show promoter estimates) to the smallest shows attended – which still had 50 to 100 8ft vendor tables and several hundred attendees. The gun show norm is to arrange tables in a large square along the inside perimeter of the event. Within the large square are row after row of tables displaying vendor exhibits and their
wares. No matter how varied the facilities, the goods, services and event set-ups (tables, displays, vendor positioning, etc.) were utterly predictable. Even the initial surprises turned out to be relatively standardized gun show features. In the end, there’s not much to hide here. To quote one vendor selling shotguns at a PRO gun show that was held in the Westland Mall in Columbus, Ohio, “We’ve got a lot of guns!” To be sure, they (the gun dealers) have, indeed, got a lot of guns. There are, however, a variety of auxiliary services provided at gun shows that may momentarily draw your attention away from the fine buffet of cold blue steel. Notwithstanding, the services always seem to be somehow connected to guns or related items, and serve to further color and augment the breadth of the gun world. The final, overall effect of the myriad displays inside of gun shows, even the smaller shows, is comparable to a street fair or carnival midway atmosphere. There is a lot too see, and it takes some considerable effort and time to sort it all out and begin to make sense of it.

Gun events encompass a sea of human emotion. To step into the world of the gun, one must be prepared for a lesson in symbolic value, historical meaning and rich interaction rituals. A gun isn’t always a gun. Sometimes a gun is an antique, a cultural artifact, an aesthetically pleasing sculpture, the memory of loved ones living and deceased, the embodiment of familial pride, and even a god-of-sorts. The following section entails what I encountered at the events listed below:

RESEARCH SCHEDULE OF EVENTS ATTENDED

1. Sharonville Civic Center 175 Exit 15 Sharonville, OH, 12/17/2005
2. Westland Mall Gun Show, Columbus, OH, 10/22/06
3. Roberts Centre, Wilmington, OH, 10/28/2006
4. Veterans Day Gun Show, University Mall, Athens, OH, 11/11/06
5. OU Second Amendment Club “Shoot Your Textbook Day, Athens, OH 11/15/06
7. The Oil Palace, Tyler, TX, 1/1/2007
12. Roberts Centre I71 Exit 50 Wilmington, OH, 6/30/07
13. Cuyahoga Cty Fairgrounds Bagle RD Berea, OH, 7/7/07
15 Summit Cty Fairgrnds Arena Rt 91 & Howe Rd Akron, OH, 9/22/07
16. Eastwood Mall Expo Center Rt 422 West Of Rt 46 Niles, OH, 9/29/07
17. Sharonville Civic Center I75 Exit 15 Sharonville, OH, 10/13/07
21. Eastwood Mall Expo Center Rt 422 West Of Rt 46 Niles, OH, 12/1/2007

WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT TO FIND AT YOUR LOCAL GUN SHOW?

When attending a gun show, the first indication that you have entered into a new world, with its own symbolism, is what you find in the parking lot. The first thing that
caught my eye while pulling up to my first gun event were three very distinctive automobiles parked in close proximity to my car. Two of them, a Mercedes C300 luxury sedan and a BMW 328 convertible, I thought, were very out of place at a gun show. The third vehicle, a Ford F-450 “Super Duty” pick-up truck, was a closer approximation to what I had envisioned. At each event attended, there were, to be sure, plenty of big trucks; however, there were also always new Cadillacs, BMWs, and Mercedes in the mix. What the Mercedes, BMW and Ford F-450 that I parked close to at my first gun show had in common, however, were gun-related bumper stickers prominently displayed on the rear of the vehicle. Without ever meeting them, and prior to ever stepping into the formal entrance of the event, the owners of guns were already communicating something to the outside world through the messages on their varied automobiles. Each owner had his or her own story – a story emphasized or augmented via a fairly inexpensive form of visual media. As I did not actually match the automobile owners up with their respective bumper sticker, the sticker message is listed below by automobile make. Although I recognize that it is impossible to imbue intent and meaning onto a vehicle driver/owner based on no more than a bumper sticker’s text, what is relevant here is the strong, direct imagery setting the stage as a prelude to the world about to unfold before me. These messages were not quite as ominous as a caveat emptor, or Dante’s famous “abandon hope all ye who enter,” but very direct and powerful:

BMW Sticker: “An Armed Society is a Polite Society.”

Mercedes Sticker: “Ted Kennedy’s Car has Killed More People Than my Gun.”

These slogans were typical of ideologies expressed throughout this data collecting experience. Another commonality of each event that I attended was that there were enough gun-related data on the periphery of the events to make a definitive statement to all who enter. The statement is that the event about to unfold is highly emotional, and one that espouses an odd marriage of inclusion and paranoia. By inclusion, I am referring to the fact that each event is bulging with a variety of both overt and subtle welcome signs to recruit participants. By paranoia, I am referring to the signage and literature directly stating who or what is not welcome, and what participants should fear.

**PARANOIA**

My first exposure to the exclusion and paranoia prevalent at gun events was a sign displayed outside of the main entrance of a PRO gun show in a Columbus Ohio Mall. The sign read “NO GANG COLORS PARAPHANALIA OR BANDANNAS ALLOWED INSIDE THE GUN SHOW.” Interestingly, prior to entering the event, I observed a young man walking around inside the gun show who was dressed in a civil war confederate soldier’s uniform, just on the other side of the storefront window. He was walking around a knife display directly behind the anti-gang sign. My initial impression was that as a citizen, I think that I would prefer seeing guns and knives sold to patrons wearing bandanas than confederate soldier uniforms. There’s just something disquieting about the idea of arming those aligning themselves with soldiers who actively fought to uphold slavery. At least in this case, however, my initial impression was a little off center. I spoke with the attendee long enough to discern that he was not, in fact, a confederate soldier sympathizer. In fact, if anything, he was overtly insistent that his purpose was exactly the opposite. He was a history teacher who had been actively
involved with two separate Ohio-based, civil war reenactment groups, the Ohio 49th Volunteer Infantry, Company H of Tiffin, Ohio, and the 4th Ohio Volunteer Federal Infantry Regiment, Company B of Lima, Ohio. He commented that he wore the confederate uniform as a reminder of “mistakes that we, as a nation, have made as a group.” I later found civil war enthusiasts and re-enactors to be a common feature at gun events. At least one patron in a civil war uniform was present at most of the shows I attended.

Some of the paranoia manifest at gun shows is clearly warranted. Lest any of the attendees forget that they are surrounded by functional weapons and assorted instruments of death, a series of warning signs to patrons and vendors alike were widely posted and circulated both inside and outside of gun events (including event-related websites).

**VENDOR RULES**

Where the vendors are concerned, a series of rules and regulations were posted that protected them, the show promoters and the customers, as well. Although not all of the rules were observed, typical rules for dealers included issues such as: dealers must sign an agreement promising to observe all Federal, State and Local laws pertaining to the sale and transfer of firearms; no loaded guns or ammunition clips allowed inside the physical facilities; dealers must ensure that guns are unloaded prior to handing them to a customer; many shows require that, prior to the purchase and transfer of guns that they remain secured by security devices (such as alarm-activated cables) inside of glass containers; vendor holster displays are not to be displayed with real/working guns – fake or plastic guns are allowed; weapons requiring black powder may be displayed and sold, but explosive black powder is not allowed inside of the physical facilities; all live
ammunition is either to be sealed in its original containers or stored in something like a zip-lock bag; vendors selling portable self-defense containers such as mace or pepper-spray must ensure that it is never discharged by keeping them in their factory-sealed packaging; and tasers (portable, hand-held devices designed to incapacitate an assailant via a mild, non-lethal electric current) are only allowed to be powered-up during pre-scheduled and approved demonstrations (but never when presented to attendees).

Similarly, gun show promoters post signs warning that rule violations are immediate grounds for vendor removal from the premises (with no refund). As a frequent attendee, I was very surprised to find that show promoters continually insisted that all items put on display “must be Gun & Knife show related” (ex. guns, knife, military supplies, hunting and fishing items). Promoters warn than items not conforming to this format are subject to removal unless prior consent is granted by promoter. However, as will be illustrated later in this chapter, vendors do sell a variety of items that have no direct correlation with guns, knives, the military, hunting or fishing, such as bumper stickers, all-purpose t-shirts and hats.

**PATRON SAFETY**

It is clear that in addition to liability concerns for the show promoters, public/attendee safety is at the heart of the vendor rules delineated. There are, however, also rules that are posted more specifically for attendees. In the state of Ohio, where I attended all but one event, and also in Texas, where I attended one event for both comparison and to work toward demonstrating theoretical saturation, attendees were allowed to bring their own guns to the shows to try and trade or sale. In fact, although it is discouraged by show promoters, independent “collectors” and private owners of guns
frequently show up early and try to sell guns or make trades right in the parking lot. This practice, however, is not tolerated from vendors, registered or not. Due to the fact that so many guns are literally walking around, some of the following attendee safety rules are commonly displayed at gun events: make sure that guns remained unloaded at all times; double check all ammunition clips/magazines and weapon chambers to ensure they are empty before entering the show; check your weapons with attendees at the registration area or entrance; ALWAYS keeps weapons pointed safely (up or down), and never at other show-goers; keep gun chambers empty and open or plugged with safety flags/stops so attendants can verify that the gun is empty; vendors and patrons who bring loaded clips/magazines or weapons (intentionally or not) into a gun event will be denied admission (and some signs read that violators may be subject to prosecution, as well); and NEVER attempt to load a weapon on the premises. Other frequent attendee warnings state that anyone familiar with a gun’s operation should leave all handling to trained personnel. Also, for attendees residing in the state of Ohio, signs constantly assert that you must be 21 or older to purchase, sell or handle a handgun and 18 or older to purchase, sell or handle a rifle or shotgun. Finally, although I continually observed children unaccompanied by adults at gun events, posted signs at each event attended specify that all attendees under the age of 18 must be accompanied by a legal guardian aged 21 or older.

INCLUSION

Who are welcome? Judging only by the most frequent signs that I encountered, the following are welcome:
The police
The military
Firefighters
Families with children
Registered Vendors
Women?
Racial Minorities?
Liberal Democrats?

At all of the gun shows I have attended, the police, firefighters, military personnel on active duty and veterans of foreign wars were admitted either free or at a reduced rate. Similarly, children and women are typically admitted free of charge. However, children rarely accounted for more than about 5% of those in attendance. Women appear to be of interest to the promoters of gun shows. There is no shortage of literature and items tailor made for women at these events; and, women do make up approximately 15% of those in attendance, including staff/personnel, (based on observations and vendor accounts).

Most shows have at least two vendor tables set up with designer guns marketed toward women and children, such as the pink or polka dotted.22 caliber “Cricket” rifles. For the modern woman who prefers to pack a pistol, Ohio’s Conceal and Carry Laws just might necessitate a designer “Conceal and Carry Handbag.” Or as one of the vendor signs read, “Get Your Conceal & Carry Handbags Here.” To the left of the table was the typical shotgun broker, and to the immediate right was another vendor selling cookbooks and aprons. One of their signs read, “For those who like to kill it and grill it.”
Many of the exchanges and attitudes that I encountered while making observations at gun events were counter to the words of welcome on the physical signage. As my accounts will reveal in some detail, more often than not, women were the subject of ridicule and relegated to a second-class status in the gun world, at best. Gun vendors are happy to take their money, but would clearly rather deal with men, who they feel will be more likely to result in a sale. I continually encountered attitudes similar to those expressed by a high end pistol vendor at a Cincinnati, Ohio-area show who commented after a woman stopped by to ask questions about a Colt handgun

*I knew she wasn’t going to buy anything. That girl wasted by time and probably cost me at least two potential customers.*

Multiple vendors also expressed that although these shows are really “for the men,” when they see a couple attending together, they feel that they are more likely to close a deal. As a Columbus, Ohio vendor shared

*If he drags her in with him, she is probably looking to buy him a gift...and wants him to pick it out, or he is picking something out for her to learn to shoot or protect herself when he’s not around...*

Even observing interaction surrounding new “designer” guns that are marketed expressly for women and children, I observed that the attitudes expressed by the vendors were very different when pitching their products for men or women. When women were present, The vendors had a tendency to make comments like “you need this cute, little gun,” “isn’t this pretty,” or “this might match your purse,” It is important to note that during the entire course of this research project, the word “cute” was not used even once in the verbal exchanges between two men to discuss the properties of their guns. Additionally,
vendors trying to pitch the same designer guns to men have a very different approach. They will often apologize for the gun being pink. One Roberts Center, Ohio vendor had a whole story line developed to diffuse the less-than-masculine color or the pink and polka dotted “cricket” rifles by appealing to the utilitarian practicality of a pink gun in cold-weather climates. As he explained

Vendor: *Maybe if she has one of these, you’ll get a chance to shoot more too.*

Patron: *I don’t know if I really want a pink gun sitting in my gun rack.*

Vendor: *I’ve heard that some hunters up in Alaska actually prefer these pink guns now for hunting. Hunters are always losing their guns in the snow. Pink really stands out, so she’ll be less likely to lose it.*

**SYMBOLIC USURPTION**

Although I noted the same phenomenon occurring regularly in the context of a gun show environment, it was at the live action cowboy tournaments and other shooting events where I was overwhelmed by the relative ease with which males symbolically empower themselves by usurping the hegemonic masculine capital of the gun. The transactions involving gun-related symbolic capital were seamless, with the final product of the empowered male appearing as natural as breathing. For females, the exchanges were far more awkward, even appearing graceless and forced. The posted signs say “women welcome,” but the often not-so-subtle signs of another type declare in a loud and decisive voice that this is definitely not their world. This section further explores symbolic empowerment within a gun event framework, providing an overview of relevant literature and real-world examples of this highly complex, multi-faceted process in motion.
I made all observations of live action cowboy role players at an old-west style target range called “Desperadoville.” Desperadoville, home of a cowboy shooting club called the “Scioto Territory Desperados” is located on the outskirts of Chillicothe, Ohio. It is tucked away into the hills in an area likely only stumbled upon by those who are truly lost and those who have come to shoot. While driving down a dusty, gravel road to reach the complex, it is not difficult to imagine how the architects of the facility found their creative inspiration. It is a mock old western town, with a saloon that is used for lunch and meetings, and a series of stages (shooting areas) that resemble barns, old banks, country stores, etc (see images 6.1 through 6.4 below).

Image 6.1: Desperadoville Enactment Area
Image 6.4: Desperadoville Staging Area 3

Image 6.5: Scioto Territory Desperados Tournament in Progress 1
“The goal was to make it as fun and authentic as possible for a bunch of us who love to play cowboy or are cowboys at heart,” says Osa Hunter, secretary of the Desperados organization.

Most gender-related research has narrowly focused on the different rates of participation for men and women in specific activities and behaviors (Connell 1987; West 1987). This approach to studying and understanding gender has ignored everything that exists beyond the boundaries of the reproductive arena (Connell 2001). Since the 1970’s, however, many researchers have suggested that gender is not a mere biological distinction. Gender appears to be achieved via a far more complex social process involving culture, structure and interaction (Connell 1987; Martin 1996; Messner 2002; West 1987). U.S. gun culture is a fruitful vantage point from which to analyze the
complex process of gender construction and enactment that has gone, until now, relatively unexplored by the academic community.

Although many researchers have stressed the importance of structural characteristics and resource access in gender construction (Courtenay 2000 and Messerschmidt 2000), most work has focused on the direct effects of biological sex on various outcomes, accepting structural influences as a pre-existing (but largely untested) condition. This approach takes a peak inside of the structures that condition gender, treating gender as a type of “structured action” similar to race and social class that we produce and reproduce contextually, depending on the setting and gender capital available in a given situation (Connell 1987; Messerschmidt 1997; West and Zimmerman 1987).

Building on West and Zimmerman’s (1987) concept of “doing gender,” Messerschmidt’s (1997) theory of gender as structured action, the notion of gender fluidity or a gender continuum is illustrated by Connell’s (1987, 1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. Here, Connell identifies typified, dominant forms of gender that are not determined by biological sex, but are socially reinforced, glorified and constructed in relation to “oppositional masculinities and femininities” (Messerschmidt 1997: 9-10). Not only does this process of doing oppositional gender difference reinforce the erroneous notion of gender distinction by sex (the reproductive arena), it also emphasizes a preference for gender conformity that more closely approximates the typified/appropriate male and female behavior, and facilitates the formation of a sexualized hierarchy and various forms of gender stratification (Martin 1996; Olsen 1990).

**GUNS: A MASCULINE SYMBOL OF POWER**

Although Durkheim (1965/1912) focused on rituals central to religious practices and not gun culture, his approach to rituals is highly applicable to this study. According to Durkheim,
rituals speak to our identity as a common people. They do more than provide a cohesive rallying point to help ensure social cohesion: rituals help us define who we are and how we got here. By approaching any ritual with this understanding, rituals can provide us with valuable insight about the core values, beliefs and prevalent social structures associated with the group practicing a ritual. Equally valuable, however, are notably absent rituals. In this case, that of the female gun owner and user, there are well-defined rituals related to male gun heroes. However, the practices of being a gun person and receiving appropriate gun user feedback appear to assume that the hero wielding the socially constructed instrument of power will be male. According to Amy Cox (2007), the acceptance of guns as an extension of masculinity is directly related to early U.S. history. Cox points out that guns in early America were a practical that was used by men to hunt, defend himself from wild Animals and Native Americans – and protect his family. There was also a connection of guns and bravery, along the same lines as the famous Revolutionary War uttering: “Don’t shoot until you see the whites of their eyes.” Through the course of time the gun has shifted from being a tool of survival into a symbol for masculinity. Many gun owners today consider ownership as a large part of our nation's history, but Cox demonstrated shifts in the symbolic meaning of guns in the U.S. over time. Both subtle and extreme shifts have occurred in areas concerning the protection of family and country. With the outbreak of the revolutionary war guns started being interchanged with words such as freedom and liberty. This made the gun more symbolic because it stood for something else rather than just a utilitarian survival aid. It was also the men who went out and fought the war with these guns. Another idea presented by Cox is the idea of what defined masculinity during this early time period. In colonial times, men were supposed to marry, have families, run a strict household, and protect their families (142). They would constantly use their guns to protect not necessarily shooting trespassers but by keeping
wild animals away from livestock and crops. It is not until the turbulent 20th century, with increased media attention and heightened public awareness of violent gun use (ex. prohibition-era mob violence, violent protests and assassinations surrounding civil rights, gun-related death sensitivity surrounding the Vietnam war, and the media saturation of drug war-related violence of the 1980s) that we see the legitimate, “normal” masculine symbolic value of guns being notably challenged (Cox 2007; Cramer 1999; Korwin 1995). As a direct result, there appears to be no comparable ritual practice of traditional symbolic empowerment for females who venture into the male gun arena or their social audience. Females are indeed “welcome,” at least on the surface. However, unlike the male, who may recognize the symbolic masculine power ascribed to a gun and usurp it as part of his masculine performance, the female gun owner and operator is not similarly situated.

MEDIA IMAGES AS AN INSTITUTIONAL INFLUENCE

As was illustrated in the section on popular culture and popular music, media images pertaining to men, women and guns depict two distinct sets of gun images, expectations and behaviors for men and women. I demonstrated that a variety of layouts and song lyrics characterized males purchasing and wielding guns for the sheer joy of it as well as the “bad ass” empowerment or charge associated with the gun. Females, however, were either depicted exclusively as sport shooters (on rare occasions), and as would-be-victims. When they were empowered by the presence of the gun, it was either as a source of protection, in retaliation for being victimized, or as the student of a man who was teaching her the right was to use a gun.

What is the impact of these separate images of men, women and guns? In Goffman’s (1979) *Gender Advertisements*, he explores the arrangement and use of male and female images in 20th century advertising. His work significantly contributes to our understanding of the way
images may be used to communicate social information. More importantly, for the purpose of studying gender dynamics, Goffman also illuminates the manner in which media images have been incorporated into our social expectations. He described gender advertisements as “both shadow and substance: they show what we wish or pretend to be” (15). This becomes relevant in that we use these images to assign gender value to objects and concepts.

A certain level of gender capital can be ascribed to a product, idea or event, depending on the way that it is packaged and marketed. Majors and Billson (1992) found this to be true of several activities that were successfully entrenched in a hegemonic masculine identity via effective media image saturation. These activities included “smoking, drug and alcohol abuse, fighting, sexual conquests, dominance and crime” (34). These activities and rituals, according to Courtenay (2000) and Majors and Billison (1992) can be viewed as a side effect of the compulsion to achieve hegemonic masculinity. Lacking other gender resources, these activities become a form of “symbolic empowerment,” or a ready-made source of masculine capital.

Jiobu and Curry (2001) discuss the symbolic empowerment associated with gun ownership. Although Messerschmidt, Courtenay and Majors and Billison do not use the term “symbolic empowerment,” they appear to be addressing the same concept. Masculine resources are in some way threatened or challenged, gun use or ownership and various high risk behaviors become recognizable sources of instant masculine capital.

According to Messerschmidt (1990), the formation and enactment of masculinity or any other form of gender is contingent on available “masculine resources.” Messerschmidt (2000) and Courtenay (2000) also address the notion of “masculinity challenges,” and how structural barriers to achieving hegemonic masculinity can have negative consequences that result in some men and women developing negativistic strategies for claiming gender resources. This also suggests
something very positive, however. If gender is something that we actively work to accomplish, gender responses can be altered by recognizing and modifying contributing structures, rituals, and our subsequent actions. In “High Noon,” Gary Cooper’s character didn’t have to be brave, and it was clear that he didn’t want to be there in the streets at noon. When he put the gun in his hand, he empowered himself. There was no longer a trace of fear in his countenance. His fear presented a “masculinity challenge,” he was able to “symbolically empower” himself with the gun, and his audience was ultimately satisfied with his appropriate, masculine, gendered performance.

**PROTECTING THE MASCULINE CENTER OF GUNS**

Connell (2000) discussed various “toxic consequences” of the ongoing effort of males to achieve some idealized form of masculinity. These consequences range from acts of violence various risk behaviors and unhealthy practices. The underlying commonality appears to be the link between these toxic consequences and the structured performance of gender. As Messerschmidt (1997 and 2000) discusses, as males face masculinity challenges in the pursuit of hegemonic masculinity, they will take advantage of gender resources that are contextually available. Through the process of symbolic empowerment, both the concept of gun ownership and the physical object, the gun itself, have been ascribed a certain level of masculine capital that are available to be claimed – by men. Messner (2002) writes about the masculine center of sports, and the difficulty of females to negotiate the center. This notion of the masculine center is highly applicable to gun culture. Men will actively protect the masculine center of sport (Messner 2002).

The vignettes below demonstrate the validity of the proactively protected masculine center of guns and guns use, the toxic consequences of doing masculinity and the difficulties women face while negotiating the masculine center of gun culture. These conversation fragments took
place during a shooting tournament at the Scioto Territory Desperados “Desperadoville” complex, as a female and male informant tried to fill me in on the wide-range of participants at the site:

Female Informant – “They let several women shoot here, and did you see our girl? Oh she’s just so cute. She’s only ten. You’ve got to see her shoot that big double-barrel. She’s not scared at all.”

Male Informant – “Have you seen the Kid?” He’s great! Only 14, and the boy’s a natural. That kind of skill is rare. He can empty a gun faster than I can squeeze off two rounds.”

There are a few recurring themes illustrated by these two examples. In terms of the center of guns being masculine and protected, here we have another example of women finding it difficult to simply empower themselves by taking up arms. Focusing on the language, we can see that the female informant who is wanting me to know that women are treated as equals at least at this particular venue didn’t catch that she was telling me that “they” (the men) “let” the women and girls shoot there – implying than men are still in the dominant position and women must have their permission to be there – or anywhere. Also, similar to what was noted in the magazine and song analyses, when the girl is the subject matter, she is reduced to being “cute,” and it’s a big deal just that she isn’t terrified of the gun. In the case of the boy, he’s “a natural,” he’s got rare “skill,” and he’s “the kid,” a very cool cowboy, respectful moniker. Another patron referred to him as “Cool Hand Luke,” which is another reference to media, and a bold and gutsy character portrayed by Paul Newman in a 1960s movie of the same name.

DEFERENCE AND DEMEANOR-BASED GUN RITUALS

In the course of collecting gun stories and the meaning of guns from gun collectors, a series of ritual themes emerged through both the active telling of their stories
and observations of ritual activities surrounding the use and ownership of guns. This section provides a candid look at these rituals and their function in gun culture. The standard for studying rituals in the social sciences was established by Emile Durkheim with his (1965/1912) *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Durkheim depicted rituals as both “determined modes of action” (51) and “rules of conduct which prescribe how a man should comport himself in the presence of sacred objects” (56). Building on Durkheim, Spencer and Comte’s social evolutionary models of human development, Turner (2000) and Goffman (1967), asserted that at our current state of social evolution, it is impossible for human social interaction to exist without the assistance of “interaction rituals.” Rituals, which are typically “emotion-arousing,” are used to begin and end all interactions, and also set the stage for everything that occurs socially in between (Turner 2000). Goffman (1967) expanded on Durkheim’s sacred-centric definition of rituals, adding that rituals “represent ways in which the individual must guard and design the symbolic implications of his acts while in the immediate presence of an object that has a special value for him” (57). Birrell (1981) argued that Goffman’s broader definition promises greater application value of rituals as a site of social observations, in that it is not limited to rare subject matter that is set aside as sacred. Guns present an interesting vantage point from which to observe rituals, in that they lend support to both Durkheim and Goffman’s approach to studying rituals. In true Durkheimian fashion, some of the gun owners clearly depict their guns as sacred objects that are “awe inspiring,” and something to be set aside and revered. Others gun owners, however, lean far more toward Goffman’s point of view, describing their guns as important, meaningful and “special,” but by no means on the same level as an authentic object of religious worship.
Whether depicted as “sacred” or simply “special and meaningful,” the world of the gun is rich with ritual activity surrounding their use. Goffman (1967) argued that ritual activity contains certain basic components (56). Two such ritual components that Goffman identified are “deference” and demeanor.”

_Deference_ is characterized by Goffman (1967) as “the appreciation an individual shows of another to that other, whether through avoidance rituals or presentational rituals (77). Much deferential behavior comes in the form of something paid by subordinates to those in charge (59). There are cases, however, when those in positions of relative authority also owe deferential treatment to their subordinates; such as: a boss giving annual reviews and raises for a job well done; everyone, regardless of rank, honoring the dead or offering compassion to the terminally ill, etc (59). Finally, deference may also be extended to someone perceived as an equal or even subservient, when praising them for some perceived skill or talent (59). Ritual _demeanor_ is what Goffman refers to as (that element of the individual’s ceremonial behavior typically conveyed through deportment, dress, and bearing, which serves to express to those in his immediate presence that he is a person of certain desirable or undesirable qualities (77). These qualities are ultimately conveyed to announce to other recipients engaged in the ritual how to respond to the “demeaned individual.” More specifically, Goffman observed that these two separate components of ritual behavior “represent ways in which an actor celebrates and confirms his relation to a recipient” (1967: 56-57). Although Goffman focused his attention exclusively on individuals as recipients of such celebratory treatment and respect, he concedes, however, that the social and recipient are not necessarily both individuals. There are some well-documented instances of individual social actors offering up
respectful treatment to objects, such as crucifixes and altars, and even non-spiritual objects, such as saluting a flag – and in the case of this research project, guns (57). In this section, I identify specific rituals observed among my gun informants. Although deference and demeanor are complementary, and not mutually exclusive in ritual activity, without exception, these two components are present and operating as part of the gun-related rituals discussed herein.

CELEBRATING THE GUN

One series of ritual themes manifest in these data actively seek to celebrate a gun or guns in different way. Most notably are rituals surrounding the presenting, talking up, retiring and naming of guns.

PRESENTING RITUAL

Whether it is in the homes of gun collectors, a gun show exhibit hall or a shooting event, rituals involving the presenting of guns are undeniable. Some forms of presenting are more overt, such as the tendency of guns to be displayed in cabinets or case displays based on their relative value or importance to the owner or seller. The colt single action army 1873 model (see image 6.7) featured on display at an Ohio Gun, Knife and Military show is typical of guns of this type displayed for sale at gun shows. The glass case (and typically an armed alarm cable) may seem a reasonable presentation showcase for a gun that can command up to $60,000 in excellent condition, and even $10,000 in poor condition (Sildeler, 2008).
Images 6.8 and 6.9 highlight an even more extreme mode of presentation, in the form of the rare but available, rotating pedestal/lighted and pressurized multi-gun cabinet. These cabinets sell for as much as $15,000, and feature the displayed guns as nothing less than a genuine object of awe, majesty and worship. The deference shown these guns is manifest: quite literally, they are something to be placed on a pedestal and admired.

Image 6.8: Rotating pedestal/lighted and pressurized multi-gun cabinet
As more than one informant explained to me, the position of the gun within the cabinet also says something about its significance. The most prized will occupy a specific place of honor. Also, as my informant with the largest collection of guns stressed, “the fact that a gun is even in one of my cases of gun safes means something. I’ve got hundreds that are just crated. The ones that are out are intended to be seen.”

There are, however also presentations related to guns that don’t involve their physical housing or display. Just in the simple act of a gun owner handing a gun to someone else to view, a deference and demeanor-guided ritual takes place. At gun shows, for instance, the vendors don’t just hand guns over to would-be clientele. They make a show of formally presenting the gun as something highly valued, desirable, and precious to hold. Great care is taken in the handing over of the gun. It is never just shoved into someone’s hand. Guns are exchanged with a great deal of reverence, as if something delicate, and not a piece of metal and wood is being handled. The demeanor of the vendor indicates that this is something to be taken seriously, and that they are to be taken equally seriously. The presenting of the gun and handing off of the gun was
typically immediately preceded or followed-up with a comment like “isn’t she a beauty,” “check out the weight on that baby,” “note the fine attention to detail and exquisite craftsmanship,” “our ancestors sure took pride in their work,” etc. The deference to both the guns and the audience is also well defined. The gun is precious and to be treated as nothing less. The audience, depending on how they present themselves, with either the demeanor of an amateur or expert, receives the deference appropriate for a student/trainee, or accomplished and skilled expert, respectively.

In the homes of collectors, I noticed similar types of interactions. As guns were being passed from the hand of the owner to my own, whether is was a $200 single action Ruger .357 single action revolver, or rare Colt Dragoon worth thousands, they were handed over in a presentational manner, typically with both hands under the gun, and always with a look of pride and reverence. This set the stage for me, the audience, in signaling to me that I was in receipt of something to be respected. I was also being informed, depending on the history of the gun, that I was the submissive either to the presenter for their expertise (or out of appreciation of the desirable item they possessed), or the awe-inspiring gun because of its special qualities. The end result of deference paid to the gun or being appropriately demeaned toward the owner for his knowledge, skill or expertise is essentially the same: the owner/presenter of the gun has used the gun as part of the interaction to be in receipt of deferential treatment. It is in violation of interaction rules for him/her to defer to themselves, but they have effectively used the gun to ask for and receive it. The owner has essentially not only presented a gun possessing fine qualities to the audience, but what he/she considers to be among their finest or desirable qualities, as well.
At gun shows, there is also a tendency for gun presentation to be influenced by the rank or pecking order of the vendors. These events are highly stratified, with high-end dealers typically getting prime locations along the perimeter walls, stand alone displays, and set apart from what I often heard referred to as “junk brokers,” (ex. those selling random, inexpensive shotguns or pistols, books, knives, hunting supplies and clothing). I have observed that not only does the demeanor of the high-end vendors suggest that the items they have to present are superior to the “junk vendors,” the “junk vendors,” with their deference to the high-end vendors suggests that they are in an accord. As I heard one vendor quip at a customer: “I’m not selling art, just cheap, used guns. If you want something nice, see the antique brokers on the corner booths.” I also noted, however, that this self-proclaimed “cheap, used gun” dealer, when handing over arms to a customer for inspection, handed them over with the same care as the “antique” dealers located in the corner booths.

The Scioto Territory Desperados demonstrated additional aspects of presenting as a type of celebration. Here the deference and demeanor surrounding the presenting of a gun for inspection was based on a combination of the rarity and value of the gun, and the acknowledged skill level of the cowboy marksman. The best of the best tended to have a decidedly more cocky and elitist demeanor. I still found them to be approachable, but the way in which they presented their guns for show suggested that you (the audience) was supposed to offer up a high degree of deference, and recognize the privilege being offered up. When these cowboys handed over their guns, they always offered up technical specs about the guns, such as the model, how many were manufactured, and often how much it cost, as well. One cowboy shooter told me that he had loved the Lone
Ranger’s pearl handled pistols as a kid and modeled his collection accordingly. I got the distinct impression when I was handling the guns that I was supposed to be as moved to hold them as I would if I were actually holding the pistols wielded by the Lone Ranger himself. I also noticed that the participants who shot using less-expensive replicas offered up a higher degree of deference to those who had vintage weapons – as if only those with authentic models could be real cowboys, worthy of deference. In fact, many of those shooting with less expensive replica models were apologetic that they did not have “fancier” guns to show me. None-the-less, although these cowboy shooters showed one another varying levels of deference and demeanor based on skill level and ordinance type, it did not change the fact that the least-skilled shooters, and those with the least-expensive models handed over or presented their guns with a high level of care and respect for the gun – even if they were ultimately apologizing that the gun was “not fancier.” In the end, even the least presentation-worthy guns received what I would consider to be a high-degree of deference from the presenters.

TALKING UP THE GUN

The next celebrating ritual observed among my informants and other gun culture observations was the active “talking up” of the gun. By talking up the gun, I am referring to verbal exchanges wherein the owner or representative of the gun engages the recipient in a type of bragging rite. This rite, however, is not the gun-occupying individual directly bragging on his/herself (although, as discussed in the last section, they may well be bragging on their own desirable qualities “through the gun”); instead, they direct all attention to the remarkable qualities of the gun. During this ritual, guns are spoken of as if they posses human or even super-human qualities. As such, guns are spoken of in the
third person – just as if discussing or addressing an individual. “You’ve never seen
anything like her. I don’t think that she’s ever missed,” commented one informant about
his Stevens/Savage 12 gauge shotgun. Another gun owner, in commenting on a deer kill
that he had made from 100 yards, “this baby is amazing. Her sights are dead as nails
accurate.” When asked to explain “dead as nails accurate,” he replied that if something
stands in front of it and I pull the trigger, then anything on the other end is dead as nails.”

Another informant talked up one of his guns as if to describe it as a celebrity – or at least
a true celebrity among guns to be selected (see image 6.10):

“The m1941 is among the rarest US WWII guns produced. They made fewer than
20,000 compared to over 3,000,000 each of the M1 Garand and M1 Carbine. A
friend I met at the shooting club called me to ask if I had ever heard of a
"Johnson Army Rifle" he’d never heard of it, but someone wanted to trade him it
for a shotgun worth about $600. I told him I would buy it sight-unseen for at least
twice that. At the time they were selling for around $2500 if you could find one.
About four months later a well known author Bruce Canfield published a book on
them, and suddenly everyone wanted one. Overnight they began selling at
auctions in the $5000 to $8000 range. I have had many offers on mine, but have
no intention of parting with it. Two days after I bought it my first son was born,
and if I have my way it will be his some day. Acquired: November 2001. The
significance of the gun is historical - rarity, and financial. I'll admit that I enjoy
most the fact that even most serious WWII US gun collectors don't have one.
When a collector sees an M1941 Johnson in your collection they think "this guy
must have everything". It is the type of thing that separates a collection or a
display from others”
Even stronger emphasis on bragging rights and talking up the gun are emphasized in the following account:

“The Russian Nagant (see image 11) is it’s self an interesting gun, but the so-call KGB model is a particularly special and rare variation. The 1895 Nagant has a unique design for a revolver in that the cylinder moves forward to seal against the barrel. Some have said it shot more Russians than Germans in WWII because it was issued to political officers to discourage retreat. The "KGB" version was actually developed for its predecessor the NKVD. It has a smaller grip and barrel than the standard 1895 Nagant and is rare enough that most collectors have never seen one. My father was at a local gun show just a few years ago when he saw it on the table of a fellow collector. Neither my father nor the collector knew what it was, but the collector wanted $350, about twice the value of a normal 1895 at the time. My father didn’t have the money so he went home without it. When he got home he did some research and learned how rare it was. He rushed back to the show still not having the money he took with him a pistol
worth about $700 hoping the fellow collector would trade. The man was more than willing to trade his $350 gun for my father’s $700 gun. I have since been offered $3000 for it but I wouldn’t sell it for twice that. From time to time I find myself talking to a collector with a more extensive collection than my own. I can always say "...sure but I bet you don’t have one of these" then I show them the KGB model 1895. So far I’ve not come across another collector that has one. So the pistol of Stalin’s heavy-handed secret police is now my secret weapon in the light-hearted battle for bragging rights."

Image 6.11: Russian Nagant M1895 "KGB" Model

Although the examples discussed above were commonplace, there was another, notable component to “talking up the gun,” that goes beyond the simple bragging on the gun and what it can or has done. One pattern that emerged was gun owners describing a type of cooperative relationship between them and the gun. A good kill or shot was not the simple matter of an adroit and prepared marksman with good timing. It took more
than just their (the marksman) good efforts – the gun had to perform well too. As one subject was relaying a hunting story to another attendee at a Dayton gun show about an impressive deer “harvest” made on a hunting trip in Indiana with his “prize” Thompson/Center Encore rifle, I heard him state “yeah baby, look what you did.” The “you” in this story was the Thompson rifle. When I commented to the gun owner “but you’re the one who made the shot,” he explained to me that “every shot has limitations.” He went on to explain that “it doesn’t matter how good of a shot you are, you and the gun have to be working together…You have to show up, be controlled and make the shot, but that doesn’t matter if the gun isn’t capable of delivering results.” Still another informant, a Columbus, Ohio-area highway patrolman, in discussing the guns he selected to use on patrol (a Glock model 27, and 45 back-up) observed that in addition to preferring something that was relatively comfortable as part of his uniform with decent “magazine capacity,” he needed to know the “guns would be dependable, reliable, accurate and ready to perform.” He went on to explain that you “really have to form a partnership with your gun in the field.” User accounts like these go beyond an appreciation of guns in certain contexts, by assigning them a human-like (and sometimes super-human) quality. They are discusses as someone upon whom we rely for results…to perform…to achieve success.

Finally, though it is not technically talking, at the live action shooting events, I repeatedly observed that after a good performance, the cowboy marksmen will kiss their guns. I lumped this together with “taking up the gun,” because the kiss was never delivered in silence. There is always a prelude to a kiss, or post-kiss commentary
involving the active praise of the gun. Some observed pre and post-kiss comments included: “That a girl;” “Thanks old reliable;” and “You’re good as gold.”

NAMING THE GUN

Although I did not find this to be a dominant ritual among my informants, another type of gun celebrating ritual observed involves the names that some owners bestow upon their favorite guns. Naming practices appear to be reserved for guns prominent in the lives of the owners. Some are sidekick names, indicative of the cooperative relationships forged between the gun and user – as discussed in the previous section. One informant, an Ohio insurance agent, gun collector and “avid shooter,” spoke fondly of a set of Ruger Colt-45 replica “New Vaquero” revolvers. He named them “Pancho and Cisco,” after an early 20th century western tv series called “The Cisco Kid.” He had only ever fired “Pancho,” because “Pancho was the trusty sidekick.” Another live action cowboy shooter had a single-action 45 that he named “Tonto,” – named after the famous sidekick of the Lone Ranger. Not all of the nicknames signaled a working relationship, however. Some of the names given to the guns celebrate some humorous aspect or some other quality or characteristic the gun was believed to posses. A Texas gun collector, a retired engineer from North Texas, for instance, had a Luger model .22 pistol in his collection that he called “the Little Nazi.” This name was based exclusively on the history of the gun, as this particular model had been used widely by the German military during the Second World War. Other gun names combined both humor and physical gun attributes. A gun collector and hunter from southeastern Ohio had a .50 caliber Hawken muzzle loaded rifle in his collection that he called “Rowdy Yates.” He picked this name for a few different reasons. One, because the character Rowdy Yates was played by Clint
Eastwood on the 1950s tv series “Raw Hide.” The collector not only “loved westerns,”
but “Rowdy Yates was a bad mother fucker, and Clint Eastwood, let’s face, it the coolest
cowboy ever.” He had settled on the name for one other reason, however, and that being
that “the gun was so damn loud, the name Rowdy just seemed to fit.” Finally, a gun
broker at a show in Berea, Ohio had a 1780s and 1820s model Blunderbuss muzzle/loaded
flintlock that he had named Bea Arthur and Hillary Rodham Clinton, respectively. “I
named the one Bea Arthur because she’s just a little bigger and intimidating than most of
her type and she’s old and ugly…I call the other one Hillary Rodham Clinton because
this model shoots from the hip, but she’s also a loud bitch that shoots her mouth off.”

RETIRING THE GUN

The ultimate celebrating of guns is displayed as part of a formal retiring of guns.
Only guns that occupy the most special and honored positions among not only guns but
other aspects of a gun owners life are subject to a retirement. Gun retirement’s take a few
different forms, ranging from being set aside to be passed down to children or
grandchildren or made into a trophy/shrine to the gun. Retirements also occur for reasons
as varied as retirement for “exceptional service,” to considerations of “extreme old age
and deterioration.” The most common reason that I found for guns being retired was that
they had become special to the owner due to the gun’s history. Sometimes it had been
passed down for multiple generations, and often, valued not only for sentimental reasons
of ancestral pride, but also because of its history of great service within the family. As
one Columbus Ohio gun collector explained to me, “you want to retire your special guns
while they still perform well…After a big or special kill or good tournament showing is
best.” As is observed in image 6.12, some gun owners actually manage to capture part of
the special moment that warranted the retiring of a gun, by incorporating the desirable qualities or “capabilities” of the gun into its final resting place (case, gun rack or integrated rack/trophy).

Image 6.12: Retired 30-30 Caliber Deer Rifle Integrated Into Last Trophy Kill

However, the retiring of a gun is often considered to be temporary, as the preparation for the presentment of the retired arm to the next generation. It is essentially the retirement of the gun for one generation only. They step down and endeavor to preserve the gun while it is still in good form and still possessing worthwhile “capabilities.” At the same time, some of the value and memories tied up in the gun are perceived as far too precious to risk damaging, diminishing or losing before it can be shared with the next in line to be in receipt of the gun. This sentiment was expressed by a variety of gun owners who had “retired” a gun from their own personal use, but eagerly awaited the appropriate time to pass them along to their sons, daughters or grandchildren.

**GUNS AS EMOTIONAL CATHEXIS**

According to Connell (1987 and 2000), our gender performances are, at least in part, tied to our emotional attachments or cathexis. On a general level, cathexis is the active clinging to or embracing of ideas and objects on a deeply meaningful level. In the time honored traditions of typical Judeo-Christian wedding vows, the notion of “to have
and to hold” exemplifies the deep, “cathetic” embracing of something. Ritual activity involving guns as emotional cathexis was readily apparent among my informants.

In order to have and to hold the symbolic power imbued in a gun, there first must exist a unique level of deference to the gun, as well as an acknowledgement of the symbolic power or significance of the gun. Most of the clinging fast to guns that I noticed centered on memories tied to specific guns, the longing for times past, values associated with gun use – such as the right to bear arms – and other values and traditions related to guns and their history. In sharing stories about his three favorite guns, one of my collectors addressed various aspects of cathexis, including deference to the gun’s performance, shared experiences with the gun and the importance of deep family memories tied directly to the guns (see image 6.13 for a photo of the guns in the order discussed below).

“My Hawken 50 Caliber Muzzleloader was built by my father. It is as fine a gun that you could ever want. Dad took it hunting once after he built it and missed a deer in the pouring rain because of a misfire. He decided that he was done hunting after that. I eventually bought the gun from him. I fired it twice and it was as accurate as it was good looking. I remember watching dad build the gun, how his hands looked as he fit, polished and blued the metal, how he meticulously fit the wood and the metal together, and the attention that he paid to detail in the final finishing of the gun. This gun reminds me of my dad. It is an example of the care that he took to do things as good as they could be done. He is still alive but his memories are escaping from him now and he can no longer fix things or build fine guns.”

“I used my Marlin Model 25, 22 Magnum rifle a lot at a time when I had very little money. I had just moved back to South East Ohio from California and had not yet started a job. Luckily it was in the autumn of the year. I had maintained my membership in a local shooting club and had 40 plus acres where I could hunt and fish. In addition I had access to family owned land. I used that little rifle to take as many squirrel as I could eat, as many rabbits as I saw, and would have used it for deer had it been legal to do so. It kept me in meat for as long as the season lasted and I had started a job. It is not a fancy gun, just a bolt action; clip
fed 22 magnum rifle which has a low power scope. Whenever I pick up this gun, I know that I can depend upon it."

"The 50 Caliber H & R Sidekick Muzzleloader was the first “modern” muzzleloader that I owned. It was a discount clearance buy from a sporting goods catalog. Whenever I pick it up, brings back the memories of several years in deer camp with my brother and friends. That gun never let me down. I think that I took every deer that I shot at with that gun. The last time that I used it was a cold, quiet day with heavy snow coming down. I sat on my favorite deer stand, just enjoying the quiet and the beauty of the woods. Memories of the hunts, and the time spent with good company are there anytime I handle that gun."

In the details about the first gun, the owner’s accounts about the memory of his father working with the gun, the way his father’s hands looked when handling the gun, and the importance of preserving memories of a time when his father was healthier and more youthful come through strongly. The account of why he valued the second gun, a rifle
that was “not fancy” or valuable in terms of monetary worth, we can see a little overlap of celebrating the gun and a partnership forged with the gun. It is clear the owner felt indebted to the gun for helping to keep him fed when times were hard and he literally struggled to keep meat on the table. With the third gun, the owner states that he can’t pick up the gun without memories of good times and good friends being evoked. He also describes the gun fondly, like an old friend – or at least the way I think most friends hope to be remembered – as a friend who “never let him down.”

**GUNS AS CATHARTIC**

Many observations revealed guns owners using guns to cling to something they held dear, whether memories or values, as discussed in the preceding section. There is, however, another category of gun-related ritual that serves the polar opposite function of enabling the gun owner or operator to hold fast to something: the release or emotional purging that comes with the firing of a gun than many report finding cathartic. I made the connection to firing guns and catharsis fairly early on in the data gathering process, when an instructor at the Ohio State Highway Patrol Academy commented that whenever he took groups of cadets out to the firing range, he could “actually see the stress and tension leaving their faces,” that it was “always cathartic for them after a stressful day or week.” I encountered this phenomenon at each live shooting event that I attended. Recall the account of the woman who exclaimed “happiness is a warm gun” with a big smile on her face at the conclusion of her event with the Scioto Territory Desperados. She had the look of someone who was indeed satisfied and at total peace. Another good example of this type of ritual gun use unfolded prominently at the “Shoot Your Textbook
Day” hosted by Ohio University’s Second Amendment Club. Image 6.14 below is a copy of a flier circulated to advertise one of the Clubs’ “Shoot Your Textbook” days.

At this event, I spoke with a wide range of target shooters, all university students with the exception of the NRA representatives onsite for training and instruction. Although it was a rainy day, in the two hours that I was in attendance, I counted 58 students in attendance (40 male and 18 female). The students assembled at a University firing range a few miles away from campus at high noon, in true cowboy fashion. Although the event organizers had some targets set up on the range when we arrived (traditional paper targets and bowling pens), the majority of the students showed up with book in hand and ready to let the book “have it” (see image 6.15). When the event was first brought to my attention, the thought of shooting books brought images of nazi-esque book burnings to mind. However, after speaking with event organizers and attendees alike, it was clear that no one at this event was trying to make a statement about the censorship of reading materials. Some explained to me that “shooting the books” was meant to send a “powerful statement” to local bookstores with unfair practices related to buying books back. For them, it was a release to pull the triggers and obliterate something that they associated with unfair treatment (see image 6.16). The use of the gun, the ultimate power symbol, seemed a reasonable way to send a message of disdain. Another form a cathartic release came from students who were shooting books in order to shoot a bad class experience and blast its memory out of existence.
Image 6.15: “Shoot Your Textbook Day” Targets (books in foreground)

Image 6.16: “Shoot Your Textbook Day” Event in Progress
One student commented that she selected her target book, an Anthropology text, because “it was a required purchase and the professor never lectured out of it.” Another student brought a calculus textbook to shoot after having to take the class three times before passing it. Other people had simply stepped onto the firing range to see what it was like to “squeeze the trigger,” or because they “loved to shoot.” Whatever the reason, it is clear that emotions of varying type and degree are released on firing ranges as guns are discharged. It should be noted, however, that the cathartic release accompanying the discharging of a gun does not necessarily exist separately from the cathexis other gun owners have achieved through their guns. A gun may house a variety of precious memories held near and dear to a gun owner, who also find it to be an emotional, stress or tension release to pull the trigger.

_GUN CLEANING: A PRIVATE RITUAL_

Up to this point, the ritual behavior discussed has focused on a type of public ritual behavior, in that they are ritual activities in which the gun owner shares the gun or experience, openly, with an audience. There exists, however, at least one prominent ritual among gun owners wherein the ritual behavior appears to be a personal matter; and, although visible, at times, to a social audience, the recipient of all ritual deference appears to be only the gun and the precious qualities (ex. memories, freedom, faithful service, loyalty, etc.) that it represents to the handler.

I had noticed in the more than twenty years that I spent as a working musician that guitarists will often take a great deal of care to meticulously clean their instruments after each session. This stands to reason, as instruments, like guns, can be very costly. Keeping them clean just ensures career longevity and performance. With gun collectors,
however, I observed something going far beyond the simple cleaning or a tool, or even the care of something appreciated. Time and time again, as gun collectors were regaling me with the stories of their guns and what their separate guns mean to them, as the guns were being discussed, the owners held them so gently, as if caressing a babe in arms – holding them the way one might hold something believed to be the most precious thing on earth and the only one of its kind.

In addition to caressing their favorite guns in such a loving manner, I also noticed that they would also clean their guns while they talked – sometimes just lightly with a small and thin cloth cleaning patch, but frequently in a detailed, elaborate, ritual manner. This tendency was not only observed one-on-one with gun collectors who were sharing their stories, however, but also in the field, at the live shooting events. After completing a tournament round, the most common tendency among the participants was to immediately spend some one-on-one time cleaning their guns – often using a portable gun station or bin as depicted in images 6.2 and 6.4).

For most of us, images evoked by the word cleaning are both unpleasant and undesirable. And, to be sure, not all cleaning associated with guns and gun use is taken on with the same zeal and relish. However, for those cleaning a favorite gun – tantamount to a best friend or perhaps something even more precious to some – there was indescribable pride and joy present, and intimate affections shared by the demeaned gun owner with the gun as extreme recipient of deferential treatment. The following is a general compilation of cleaning rituals that I observed unfolding in the field.

As the cleaning began, my gun owners typically started by producing an Outers brand cleaning kit. These and other kits that I observed included a sectional aluminum
cleaning rod (the rods used are for the specific caliber and barrel diameter of the gun to be cleaned), a bottle of cleaning solvent (or prolix lubricants), one or two bottles of gun oil, cloth cleaning patches, tips that hold the cleaning patches, and a coarse tool called a bore brush. Although I did not see them in all of the kits used, some included gun grease, a “bore light” to make it easier to see throughout the barrel and breach, and an additional shotgun cleaning accessories called a bore swab and in place of light, oiled rags, a light silicone cloth. As one informant explained “the silicone cloths are for when you want to give the gun a little special lovin’. They keep the fingerprints off and prevent rust better than those old rags.” As they sit, carefully eyeballing their guns, the owners either lovingly apply the solvent or lubricant spray- carefully working it through the cylinder chambers and up and down the barrel, inside and out, paying particular care to remove any gunpowder residue/deposit known as “fouling.”

The part of the cleaning that always interested me the most was the cleaning of the inside of the barrels. This was achieved by either running the cleaning rod and attached cloths repeatedly through the barrel until it was clean; or, as I observed often in the cleaning of rifle and shotgun barrels, the use of a bore solvent and pipe cleaner-like product called a “bore snake.” These products look something like a wide pipe cleaner, several feet in length. They are inserted through the breach and fed through the end of the barrel. After the guns have been silently and carefully inspected, inside and out, gazing up and down the barrel and throughout the chambers, once it meets approval, either a type of dry coating protective lubricant is applied, or the gun oil. This final coating is dabbed with painstaking tenderness until it is evenly applied and the residue shine is minimal.
It is clear that there are “celebrating” and “presentation” elements involved in these cleaning rituals; but, as to the intimate and private aspects of the ritual, there are also aspects of pure deferential appreciation and loving respect being paid to these guns as revealed through the servant-like demeanor of the individuals carrying out the rite. Why was so much visible love and respect going into the cleaning of these pieces of wood and metal if not for show? The details supplied by my informants suggest that this private, intimate ritual of cleaning favorite guns is an affirmation of both cartharsis and cathexis. On informant revealed a commonly-expressed sentiment about cleaning as catharsis in stating that “on cold and rainy days I like to clean my guns and fuss over them. They bring me a sense of peace.” It’s a stress release because it is a peaceful activity, and one not typically expected to do in a crowd – something that requires attention and focus. Still, another respondent spoke more of a cathexis-based motivation when he mentioned that he liked to sit alone and clean some of the guns that had been passed down from his grandfather, to his father and then to him. “My grandfather is no longer living, and my father’s health is not so great these days. Sitting here, cleaning these guns is kind of like traveling back in time…to good memories with them at their best.”

There is one aspect of the gun cleaning ritual that is by no means a private ritual and has nothing to do with cathexis or sentimental gun values. It is possibly a type of catharsis, of sorts, for the cleaner of the gun, however. This type of gun cleaning ritual involves an activity mentioned in the section on guns in popular music and popular culture, and appears to have more to do with the presenting of the gun as a warning than the actual cleaning. It is the intentional, deliberate, highly visible use of gun cleaning as
part of the dating ritual. This is not a ritual for just any date. It involves a boy picking up a girl for their first date. During the course of picking the girl up, the scenario requires that the boy meet and receive a speech from the girl’s father while he just happens to be cleaning a gun. Whether the display is serious or not, it overtly states “I’m here, with this gun, and ready to use it if you harm that girl.” This type of ritual has been celebrated in song, and was also mentioned by a couple of my collectors. One collector counted a gun related to this dating ritual among his favorites. He explained that the Colt .357 magnum revolver was one of his favorites because “this is reported to be the gun my grandfather was "cleaning" in the living room when my father picked up my mother for their first date. The value is purely sentimental: I really have little interest in this type of firearms, because it is not military and not good for target shooting. Still I value this above most in my collection because of the story associated with it.” Interestingly, in this case, although the grandfather had used the gun a generation earlier as a form of cathexis related to his daughter dating, it went on to be a source of cathexis, an item to be held close and cherished by another.

As the preceding ritual examples demonstrate, guns are directly used as props to facilitate social interactions involving a variety of emotions, values and activities. Further, these interactions include a series of complementary, integrated deference and demeanor components. Even looking back to the bumper stickers observed at the start of this chapter, the components of deference and demeanor permeate the gun world. The simple act of the Mercedes driver showing up at the gun event displaying a bumper sticker with a gun-related message included equal aspects of deference and demeanor. In deference to guns, the car owner went out of his/her way to prominently display a pro-
gun message on a very expensive automobile. The demeanor of the car owner is, at least in part, tied to the message itself: “Ted Kennedy’s Car has Killed More People Than my Gun.” The simple message reveals the demeanor of a gun enthusiast with a sense of humor, most likely not inclined to vote as a democrat, and openly reverent toward his own “gun.”

Personally, I think that the greatest potential application value of identifying the presence of deference and demeanor components in motion and their functions rests on an observation made by Goffman himself. Goffman (1967) argued that we are socially evolving in such a way as to continually do away with more higher powers, and present ourselves in more of a deity-esque light. He also noted, however, that in our current state of social evolution, it is not considered socially appropriate to offer deference to ourselves.

Instead, we must receive deference from others, as deserved from our level of demeanor, and as socially responsive feedback from our social audiences based on the deference we are seen bestowing on the individuals, objects and ideals in receipt of our active recognition. So although it may be considered vulgar for us to praise ourselves, it is not, however, counter to an established moral order to enact appropriate enough “humble” demeanor to convince our social audience that something like a special gun is worth of praise. The appropriately-demeaned individual is then in position to receive praise of the gun and him/herself, for the beauty, special qualities, or wise acquisition of the gun. In the end, the individual has still, in effect, asked a social audience for praise and received it. The process is just channeled through a gun and facilitated by an intricate web of deference and demeanor-based acts.
I must note, however, that although I did witness appropriately demeaned gun owners talking up their guns instead of themselves directly, there were also several instances wherein it was not the presenter that appeared to be seeking praise for themselves (through the praise of their gun’s special qualities), but seeking praise for someone else special to them that they associated with the gun. So although Goffman’s claim about turning ourselves into little deities, in an interactional sense, does appear to have some merit, here we also have the Durkhemian turning of the gun into something awe inspiring as well as something new: the gun (as object) being used to achieve an acknowledgement and awe inspiring status for others. In a sense, by studying the ways in which deference and demeanor are used in a context as simple as a gun event, we have an opportunity to gauge changes in subtle but important interaction rules, and track our social evolutionary progress. Monitoring and tracking social interaction changes, in general, is too mammoth an undertaking to be practical or useful. Tracking changes to interaction rules within specific contexts, such as gun culture, is feasible. It would be a fairly simple, but long and drawn-out process of tracking changes in self-deference granting over time. In other words, we would be able to address questions about our progress as a people in asking questions such as: are we moving toward a reduced need to seek deferential treatment from others by enacting elaborate demeanor exercises, and entering a new phase of social evolution permissive of self-love and self-deference?
CHAPTER VII

MANAGEMENT OF SUSPECT IDENTITIES

Although the preceding chapter focuses on ritual categories observed at gun events and among gun owners and users, there was one special type of ritualistic behavior observed within gun culture that was so dominant that I thought it deserving of its own chapter. This special type of ritual behavior centers on the management of suspect identities. While speaking with my informants on this project, it was far more common than not for the subjects to acknowledge or reference some aspect of the stigma associated with gun ownership. This chapter explores the acknowledgement of stigma, reaction to it, and even, at times, efforts to trade on or cash in the stigma for a perceived social reward.

Many people would question the sanity or moral character of someone who own or collects guns. Consider, for instance, the following gun collector’s story of what he felt was an all-too-common experience:

A while back, my brother had his girlfriend over to meet me. Somehow over the course of the evening, the subject of my gun collection came up. I took them down into the basement, where I keep the vault with some of my favorite guns. Some of
my military collection includes guns owned by both Japanese and Nazi soldiers. She was already looking at me different when she saw my guns, like I was creepy or something. I know some people feel uncomfortable around guns, because they think that we’re (gun owners) all a bunch of freaks. But when she saw that some of my weapons were Nazi weapons, she wasn’t just looking at me like she thought I was weird, she looked terrified… She said she couldn’t believe that I had that kind of stuff, guns and war items, and she made my brother take her home. . .She never really warmed up to me after that.

Recounting his experience, he concluded, “It’s just easier to not let people know about my gun stuff. . . You never know when someone is going to react like that.”

Another subject who is an Ohio State Trooper shared the following:

On more than one occasion, while I was still living alone in an apartment, I would keep my work gun and belt close to the front door… People would come by sometimes trying to get me to buy things or fill out surveys…. I remember a few different women commenting on the guns when I opened the door, saying things like “what’s with the gun?,” or “doesn’t it make you uncomfortable to have a gun sitting out like that?” They always looked very uncomfortable, like they were looking at some sort of monster, until I put them at easy by explaining that I had the gun because I was an officer. I remember one of them commenting that it (the gun) was just “scary looking.”

As the preceding vignettes illustrate, to be a gun collector or enthusiast is, at least frequently, to be cast in a suspect light, or in Everett Hughes’ (1945) terms, to be placed in a master status associated with undesirable auxiliary traits. For the gun collector or
enthusiast, a maladjusted, “creepy” man gruesomely fascinated with the morbid tools of death.

As I have indicated throughout this project, academic treatments of gun-owning subcultures are sparse and unbalanced. Gun ownership research, for instance, has focused primarily on the demographics of gun ownership and the symbolic value of guns in the American ideology of self-defense and preservation (Squires 2000 and Jiobu and Curry 2001), or viewed from the perspective of the dealers and characterized as anything ranging from art dealers to junk or death brokers (Stenross 1994). None of the extant social science literature on these groups has examined issues of stigmatization and stigma management.

However, as the vignettes with which this section began demonstrate, issues of stigma management are significant features of the social landscapes of this subculture. This became apparent while studying gun shows and repeatedly encountering social psychological challenges and engaging in stigma management techniques that have been reported across a range of other social groups, as well. In this chapter, I present an ethnographic analysis of in-group stigma management in which I draw upon concepts from previous research on stigma management to illuminate aspects of the social worlds of gun collectors that have not previously received analytic scrutiny. In turn, the findings expand and enhance empirical and conceptual treatments of this generic social process (Prus 1996).

A key tenet of ethnographic research is that the researcher’s “fieldwork role” or position vis-à-vis the group influences the kinds of data and perspectives they will be able to access. This would seem to be especially the case in relation to such audience-
sensitive topics as stigma management. In comparing the fieldwork roles and “informational yield” (Snow et al. 1986) associated with the group discussed in this chapter, I find that the more “peripheral membership role” (Adler and Adler 1987: 32-37) used, not surprisingly, yielded significantly more stigma management data related to out-group interactions. In particular, the initial stages of interviews frequently included defensive efforts by individuals to portray themselves as “normal,” in spite of their affiliations with gun culture. At the same time, interviewees also often lashed out with statements of distrust or rejection of outsiders, including academic researchers. At such moments the researcher was particularly sensitized to the importance of convincingly presenting himself as a “sympathetic” outsider who was truly interested in the views and experiences of group members.

While the foregoing informational biases were evident in relation to the primary fieldwork roles used in this project, the study was pursued with an eye toward achieving empirical and theoretical saturation (Charmaz 2006; Glaser 2001; Lofland et al. 2005) of relevant analytic categories. Further, I have sought, when possible and appropriate, to move across different observational roles (e.g., as audience members at gun shows or as a formal student at a gun shooting event) in order to gain a broader set of data and analytic sensitivities. As a result, I am confident in the general scope and depth of the data, especially in regards to the topic of this chapter.

While I have witnessed the frequent reluctance of members of this subculture to talking with non-peers (including at times, the novice insider), I have also found that once I was able to establish rapport with members of these groups, they often became quite enthusiastic and forthcoming. As Anderson and Calhoun (1992), noted, members of
deviant groups frequently enjoy uncritical attention and interest, and may warm up nicely to the chance to “tell their story” once they feel confident in the researcher’s genuine interest. Such has certainly been my experience with gun owners and enthusiasts.

FINDINGS

STIGMATIZATION

Stigmatization, to one degree or another, is widespread throughout American society. Indeed, part of what has made Goffman’s *Stigma* such an influential work is the applicability of many of his concepts to a broad swath of humanity. Still, the extent and intensity of stigma vary considerably among social groups and individuals. It is important, therefore, to substantiate the claim that gun collectors perceive themselves, and are perceived by others, as stigmatized or deviant groups.

Consider first the case of gun collectors who commonly perceive themselves as negatively characterized by the media. In summarizing media treatments of gun owners and issues in general, Bane (2001) has documented the dominance of pejorative portrayals. Some of the findings he cites come directly from complaints from pro-gun constituencies, as in claims from the Media Research Center, a conservative media watchdog group, that during a two-year period in the late 1990s, the ratio of anti-gun to pro-gun stories on major television networks ran almost 10 to one in favor of gun control (19). The biggest "offender," they report, was ABC's *Good Morning America*, which ran 92 anti-gun stories and only one pro-gun story. More academically-oriented studies have also found a predominance of negative portrayals of, and attitudes toward, gun-groups in the mainstream media, as in Patrick’s (1999) report that the National Rifle Association was portrayed negatively in editorial and op-ed pieces 87 percent of the time. Not
surprisingly, gun collectors lament what they feel is an unbalanced caricature of gun culture and gun owner values. At the same time, however, other images of guns, the images of the cool cowboy and heroic soldier and police officer also permeate the cable channels and movie screens. This sets guns up to be something both stigmatized and desirable – depending on the social context.

Gun owners also tend to see academic researchers as harboring “liberal agendas” and negative attitudes that find their way into print. Throughout the course of his study, the investigator was consistently reminded that “reporters,” including social science researchers, were viewed with distrust. Some informants shared personal accounts of how they had been mislead by previous researchers who came to them with the promise of neutrality toward the issue of gun ownership, only to later depict the same gun owners in a less-than-favorable light. As one research subject who is a member of the NRA, PRO (Peoples Rights Organization) and OGCA (Ohio Gun Collector’s Association) explained,

> There are some of your questions that I won’t answer, simply for security reasons. I am not surprised you aren’t getting much response from OGCA members. Most tend to be wary of those they don’t know. Too often reporters or academics have used this type of information, out of context, to paint Gun Collectors as extremist or nut cases. The OGCA is about the nicest group of people you will ever meet, but many won’t be comfortable opening up to you until you gain their trust, and they know your motivations.
As the foregoing discussion illustrates, gun owners are well aware that many people look on their activities as deviant. Still, members of these groups do not simply accept stigma and the devalued selves it implies. Rather, like members of other stigmatized groups, they routinely engage in activities directed toward managing their interactions with others in order to mitigate negative stereotypes or at least to minimize the application of those stereotypes to them personally. The following is an exploration of this type of activity.

MANAGING STIGMA

In his classic work on stigma management, Goffman (1963) distinguished between out-group strategies that are used in interactions with those who are outside the stigmatized group and in-group strategies that are used to soften stigma in interaction with one’s peers. In this chapter, the primary focus is on out-group stigma management – as it was encountered the most heavily, with additional considerations of in-group strategies, as well. The goal of out-group stigma management strategies is to avoid being perceived as morally or socially flawed by virtue of one’s identification with a particular stigmatized status or activity. In-group stigma strategies are an extension of the same subject. However, instead of working to avoid detection and negative treatment from society at large, in-group strategies involve a type of mutual support that similarly situated (in terms of being the recipient of stigmatization) peers provide to one another to cope with their stigma. One key aspect of successful stigma management is strategic control over what information is revealed to, or withheld from, non-peers. A second
dimension of out-group stigma management involves providing an interpretive frame within which potentially stigmatizing information is either neutralized or presented in a positive light. Both of these orientations toward out-group stigma management play important roles in the social activities of gun collectors. In the following discussion I begin by examining two kinds of individualized strategies, one directed toward information control and the other involving verbal techniques for defining one’s identity and activities in non-stigmatizing ways. Next, two forms of collective out-group stigma management are addressed, one of which emphasizes the dramatic countering of stigmatizing stereotypes while the other focuses on creating positive associations and connotations for the gun collectors’ identities and activities.

**INDIVIDUAL STIGMA MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES**

**PASSING AND AVOIDANCE**

The strategy of passing involves “the management of undisclosed discrediting information about self” (Goffman 1963:42). While successful passing may require substantial effort on the part those whose stigma is readily apparent, for gun collectors it is relatively simple, often involving little more than avoiding disclosing one’s avocational identity and activities to others.

The gun collector’s story at the start of this paper about his brother’s girlfriend’s hostility toward him once she saw his guns makes it understandable why gun collectors would engage in information control to limit others’ awareness of their activity. Still,
like other stigmatized groups reported in the literature (e.g., Schneider and Conrad 1980; Herman 1993; Thorne and Anderson 2006), gun collectors reported that their efforts to pass involved “selective concealment.” In particular, gun collectors often mentioned their residential neighbors and their co-workers as audiences from whom it was important to withhold information about their potentially stigmatizing activities. So, for instance, a Cleveland-area gun collector and car salesman explained,

> My neighbors have no idea about what’s in this vault (gun safe), and I don’t want them to find out. This is a pretty quiet neighborhood, and we try to help one another out when we can, but people around here can really talk some shit about each other. The last thing I need is people running around saying that I’m some kind of gun nut, with my neighbors thinking that I’m going to go on some kind of rampage.

Yet another interviewee, a southeast Ohio accountant, spoke of his desire to keep his gun collecting hidden from his co-workers. Using his experience with his religious activities as an analogy, he explained,

> When I’m … around other collectors or shooters at a tournament or show, I get into it as much as anyone. I have no problem with anyone there knowing that I’m a gun owner. I’m proud to be one. When it comes to people I work with, it’s kind of like church. If you’re in church on Sunday, you have nothing to hide about your religion when you are there with those people, worshiping the same thing . ..
There you are safe. With your guns, if you are with other gun people at a show, you are safe to be enthusiastic about guns and sing their praises. Now I’m not going to go around my office trying to convert my co-workers to my religion. They might think I’m a freak for doing that just the same as they would if I told that about my guns. It’s just not worth the risk.

In addition to avoiding stigma, gun collectors often feel that hiding their gun collecting serves another purpose as well. Since the guns in their collections may range in monetary value up to $10,000 and more, gun collectors may see it as unwise to publicize the fact that such guns are stored in their homes. “We might as well just yell out ‘Come and get it!’” said one informant. Indeed, the combination of fear of stigmatization and security issues leads many gun collectors to be secretive and distrustful.

My findings that gun collectors engage in passing behavior provides one glimpse into their efforts to manage the stigma they experience. Yet passing is not always either possible or acceptable. For one thing, unlike deviant “loners,” such as the self-injurers studied by Adler and Adler (2005), gun collectors must pursue their goals through social activities. While self-injurers can act in isolation, gun collecting requires co-participants. Further, a significant part of the pleasure and motivation of gun collecting lies in a degree of social recognition associated with the avowal of these specific avocational identities, both from peers and non-peers. Even though many outsiders may view gun collecting as suspect activities, there are other, more curious, outsiders who are open to seeing these activities in a positive light. Being a completely closeted gun collector, even if it were
possible, would dramatically limit one’s opportunities to reach out to non-peers who might be recruited to the activities or at least show an interest in them. By virtue of this, gun collectors find themselves interacting with non-peers, and managing their potential stigmatization in those encounters. The other kinds of stigma management discussed in this section are all directed specifically toward actively managing interactions with non-peers.

DISCLAIMERS AND TECHNIQUES OF NEUTRALIZATION

When individuals face stigma in interactions with others, they often invoke verbal techniques to justify or explain their untoward behaviors of conditions in ways they hope will mitigate their stigmatization. Sociologists have examined the use of many different kinds of overlapping rhetorical strategies in managing stigma, including vocabularies of motive (Mills 1940), techniques of neutralization (Sykes and Matza 1957), accounts (Scott and Lyman 1968), and disclaimers (Hewitt and Stokes 1975). Among gun collectors I found disclaimers and techniques of neutralization to be particularly common.

As Hewitt and Stokes conceptualized disclaimers, they are statements made to ward off the imputation of deviance in the face of forthcoming problematic actions or information. The use of disclaimers was frequently observed in the gun collector research. Most often, disclaimers were offered at the very beginning of an interview, as interviewees sought to distance themselves at the outset from deviant stereotypes of gun collectors. So, for example, one informant prefaced his interview by stating, “Before we begin, I would just like you to know that I’m not a freak. I don’t want to start a militia or
anything.” As the preceding quote reveals, such disclaimers do not necessarily deny the existence of the stereotypical deviant, but rather, seek to establish the respectability of the individual him- or herself. This point is further illustrated by another interviewee who explained his interest in gun collecting by saying, “I’m just collecting history here,” while quickly adding, “I’m not one of those weirdoes that you hear about on the news.”

Another kind of verbal response to potential stigmatization involves what Gresham Sykes and David Matza (1957) refer to as techniques of neutralization. Techniques of neutralization were originally conceived by Sykes and Matza as cognitive rationalizations that enabled individuals to overcome potential moral constraints, thus facilitating their participation in deviant acts. But it is widely acknowledged today (e.g., Cromwell and Thurman 2003) that techniques of neutralization also serve as forms of stigma management, providing explanations and “accounts” (Scott and Lyman 1968) that justify suspect or questionable behavior. Members of the subcultures reported in this paper commonly invoked three particular techniques of neutralization: “denial of injury,” “appeal to higher loyalties,” and “condemnation of the condemners.”

Among gun collectors, the most pervasive technique of neutralization was “denial of injury.” A full 90 percent of the study population went out of their way (often before the interview questions had even begun), to assert that their guns were not harming anyone. A case in point is that of a building contractor from central Ohio who commented,

I know that guns are used as weapons to kill people every day. Those aren’t my guns. The world is safe from my collection. I own over 100 guns. Some of them
have been in my family for over 120 years. To my knowledge, none of them have ever been used for anything other than sport.

In using an appeal to higher loyalties, individuals make verbal claims that their deviance is not in fact deviant, but rather, that it represents their commitment to more important responsibilities and values. Most gun collectors framed the purpose of their collection in the context of a higher loyalty that made collecting guns not only understandable in their eyes, but a moral responsibility. For some that loyalty was to their family and its history. As one subject described this connection, “With part of my collection, I’m carrying the torch for my family. Some of the people who owned these guns are dead. All that I have left of them is their memories and these guns. . . Now you take away these guns, you’re taking away memories.” The most common invocation of higher loyalty among gun collectors, however, was to a broader national “right to bear arms” and the recognition of sacrifices that have been made to maintain this tradition. As another informant explained his commitment to gun collecting, “We seem to forget that people literally died to give us the right to own these guns.”

The “condemning of condemners” can also serve to justify one’s own suspect behavior by pointing out the moral failures and inconsistencies of those who would demean that behavior. The condemnations directed toward condemners may challenge opponents for failing to embrace the loyalties to which stigmatized individuals are themselves deeply committed. An excellent example of this was provided by the gun collector above who explicitly linked his gun collecting with people who “died to give us
the right to own these guns.” Lashing out at those who oppose gun ownership, this collector angrily asked, “Are we supposed to piss on the freedom they gave us just because the occasional jack ass doesn’t lock up his piece?” Implicit in his comment is the assertion that those who oppose gun ownership are, indeed, disrespectfully “pissing” on that freedom. Even the researcher in this study, by virtue of being an academic, and therefore an assumed “liberal,” the research in this study even found himself at times being the focus of direct condemnation, such as that captured in the words of an interviewee who told him, “You liberals just want to take away our heritage. I’m more of a true American than most people. How far back can you trace your ancestry? I’ve had relatives here since the 1500s. Can you say that?”

COLLECTIVE STIGMA MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

The stigma management practices discussed so far in this paper are techniques that are used by individuals. At times, however, stigma management can take a collective turn, with members of a stigmatized group working together to manage the impressions that others have of them. The next section is an examination of such collective strategies to challenge discrediting images and perceptions.

DRAMATURGICAL STEREOTYPE BUSTING

The first type of collective stigma management explored is what I refer to as “dramaturgical stereotype busting.” This form of stigma management involves a staged
or dramatized performance designed to counter negative stereotypical notions of relevant types of people and activities. Gun subcultures have displays and performances that dramatize concerns that are designed to challenge stereotypes of them. Given public beliefs about the dangers associated with guns, many of the stereotype busting displays and performances of these groups are explicitly directed toward highlighting their attention to safety.

Examples of dramaturgical stereotype busting were highly visible at the two dozen gun shows that the researcher attended in Ohio and Texas. Each show, without exception, promoted regional safety issues, relevant gun laws, and community awareness. At NRA and PRO gun events, for instance, promotional displays and handouts consistently included publicity and sign-up forms for local courses that provide training in various safety techniques. It is also common for NRA events to display materials from their Eddie Eagle GunSafe® Program directed toward children in pre-kindergarten through third grade. This program offers a curriculum with instructional materials, workbooks, and an animated video featuring the “Eddie Eagle” mascot to schools interested in teaching the program. As illustrated in image 7.1 below, Bumper decals and student reward stickers prominently proclaim the four simple rules for children who find a gun: “STOP! Don’t Touch. Leave the Area. Tell an Adult.” The following image is of a lapel sticker collected by the researcher at a gun show in Columbus, Ohio.
As their promotional materials explain, “Just as Smokey Bear teaches children not to play with matches, Eddie Eagle teaches them that firearms should not be touched” (National Rifle Association 2008).

Here we observe gun collectors acknowledging the potential reality of gun-related dangers and presenting themselves as extremely serious promoters of safety while at the same time embracing gun rights and ownership. Dramaturgical stereotype busting is even more dramatically enacted in many gun club activities in which many gun collectors participate. In gun clubs with “live action” role players, for instance, there are explicit safety rules that are often read aloud not only at the start of the day’s activities, but prior to each specific shooting event. Among the safety rules that are consistently repeated at each event in Cowboy Action Shooting matches sponsored by SASS (the Single Action Shooting Society) are the following:

1. Treat and respect every firearm at all times as if it were loaded.
2. Muzzle direction is important between, before, during, and after shooting a stage. Failure to manage safe muzzle direction is grounds for disqualification.

3. All firearms shall remain unloaded except when under the direct observation of a Range Officer on the firing line or in the loading area.

4. No cocked revolver may ever leave a shooter’s hand.

5. Once a revolver is cocked, the round under the hammer must be expended in order for it to be returned to a safe condition. (Single Action Shooting Society 2008)

The highly visible and repetitive ritual in which these rules are publicly pronounced serves as a dramaturgical display to counter negative stereotypes. Further, not only are the rules read aloud at the start of each shooting event, but they are often closely enforced, as in the case spotters who are posted directly behind the shooter with orders to disarm any shooter who violates the “170 Degree Rule” that stipulates that gun muzzles must always be pointing down range from any possible audience. According to official SASS rules, movement directly toward the crowd with a loaded firearm is to be interpreted as an unexpected and dangerous act of aggression and hostility. Spotters positioned behind shooters in the staging areas are typically on hand to “disarm” anyone who violates this rule. As one shooter at a tournament in Chillicothe, Ohio emphatically told the researcher,

_We recognize that the average person will assume that we are reckless, dangerous, and either likely to get hurt or hurt others. For this reason, we take safety and safety precautions very seriously. Anyone violating the 170 degree or_
other safety rules will be escorted, by the group, to the entrance and permanently banned. Participants who are reckless with their guns, or anything but serious around here, are in no way welcome!

In highlighting the ways in which the foregoing activities serve as public relations performances, I do not mean to suggest that they are merely public relations strategies. The activities described here are not just window dressing; they are directed to real safety concerns. None of the gun collectors in my study denied the risk of serious harm or death associated with their avocational interests. Indeed, members of these groups have developed the activities discussed here specifically to reduce those risks. But, especially in their more public forms, these activities also carry expressive implications about who gun collectors are—that they are not irresponsible risk-takers, but may in fact be as vigilant, or more vigilant, about safety than are most of the people who would criticize them.

**TRANSCENDENCE AND IDIOSYNCHRACY CREDIT**

Destigmatization is a term developed by Carol Warren (1980) to refer to ways in which those who are openly known as members of a stigmatized group may overcome their definition as deviant. One particular form of destigmatization is what Warren calls transcendence, where members of a stigmatized group “rise above” the deviant stereotypes of “people like them.” I am interested in collective stigma management that involves members of the groups I have studied, and how they might work together in order to achieve destigmatization.
One particular form of destigmatizating transcendence that I have repeatedly observed throughout this study is associated with the building of what Hollander (1958) termed “idiosyncrasy credit”—a process through which a morally suspect individual or group improves their reputation through some form of community service and association with a “good cause.” Just as David Snow (1979) found that Nichiren Shoshu Buddhists sought to enhance their reputation through visible association with well-regarded causes and values, I find similar activities among gun people. The Ohio Gun Collectors Association, for instance, has organized its Disabled Shooting Championship and various youth outreach programs both as a way to increase interest in gun-oriented activities and to demonstrate its commitment to broader civic responsibilities. Gun and shooting clubs also frequently use events to raise money for specific causes, such as breast cancer and multiple sclerosis research or for college scholarships. Among the most widely publicized charity causes that has been organized in recent years is “Sugarbugs Celebrity Shoot,” a clay target shooting event features various celebrities and politicians and raises money for the treatment of childhood diabetes. An article on WomenandGuns.com summarizes the event, by proclaiming, “Celebrities, politicians, shooters, guns, targets, and a good cause. What better way is there to spend a weekend?” The importance of the public relations component of such events is captured in the words of a gun club participant in his description of the resounding success of a large annual SASS called the End of the Trail. “The event,” he reported, “received local and national news coverage and there even were television crews from Europe and Japan.” He continued:
To top it off, End of Trail donated $10,000 of the match proceeds to the Roy Rogers and Dale Evans Happy Trails Children's Foundation. In all, End of Trail has donated more than $100,000 to the organization. You can't buy this type of positive press which benefits the entire shooting industry (Huntington 1997).

By associating themselves with humanitarian concerns, gun collectors present themselves as “more than” just hobbyists involved in their respective subcultures. In showing their altruism and social responsibility, they present yet further evidence to counter stigmatizing stereotypes of them.

IN GROUP STRATEGIES

As previously mentioned, as an outsider of the gun world, I was far more likely to directly experience stigma management strategies that were applied to outsiders (i.e. me and other outsiders discussed by my informants) than those in group strategies shared among similarly (in terms of relative stigma) situated gun collectors. The following entails my direct observations pertaining to in group strategies to which I was privy as an observer and passive participant.

NORMALIZING FEAR

As noted by many of my research subjects, gun enthusiasts are well aware of the primary images of horror associated with gun ownership by the nay sayers:

“Kids with guns scare the shit out of people.”

“If you’re going to arm the morons, you have to arm everyone.”
Similar sentiments were shared by the overwhelming majority of the research subjects when discussing the perceived concerns of the opposition. Interestingly, major proponents of gun ownership, including the nation's two largest gun advocacy groups (NRA and PRO), popular trade publications, and even some of the large live action gun clubs have organized around these issues, and in some ways even profiting directly from these public concerns and sources of stigmatization. Starting with the first issue addressed—the concern over children coming into contact with firearms—the general response to this issue might appear counter-intuitive at first glance. However, upon close scrutiny, the rhyme and reason are unveiled. The NRA and PRO have responded to the first two issues listed above by essentially saying it’s all about the safety. If kids with guns scare you, then train them how to use guns properly (make sure that you are trained first), be aware of community safety issues, familiarize yourself with gun laws, and use some common sense to ensure that anything dangerous is properly secured/locked-up. Further, if you or anyone else comes across a situation involving guns that are dangerous, report it. These values are heavily promoted in PRO and NRA publications and gun show literature. In general, safety and inclusion are two of the most ever-present scenes at their gun events. Instead of buckling to public pressure to keep guns out of the hands of kids, these organizations say take away the concern through awareness and education. Arm everyone. Arm your family, your wife, kids, everyone who can learn the RIGHT way to handle a gun. Each group promotes a series of events each year the attempt to draw in more families and children. Accordingly, promotional materials (see image 7.1) marketed exclusively for children are circulated at NRA and PRO events. Similarly, large live action shooting clubs, like the Scioto Territory Desperados actively recruit
families and even young children to participate in their shooting events. While visiting the club for the first time, one research subject, a female dental hygienist from central Ohio commented about a 10-year old girl that was shooting that day. “What did you think of her? We know that some folks are a little shocked and uneasy when they come here and see kids this young shooting in a tournament – especially little girls.” Not only has this organization embraced the family and children inclusion views espoused by the PRO and NRA, they celebrate it. Pictures of these children shooting rifles and pistols (granted in the most controlled safety environment that I have witnessed in my life) are often proudly displayed on the group’s website (http://www.sciotodesperados.com).

CONDEMNING THE CONDEMNERS

Subcultural members who share stigmatized status are often particularly open to demeaning the opposition: condemning those who would condemn the subculture in under consideration. Although I have demonstrated how this may be observed directly as an out group management technique, it is also commonly employed as an in group activity. For instance, throughout my field research, I was continually confronted by the anti-liberal sentiment ubiquitous in gun culture. From various accounts from my many informants about how liberals are “out to get their guns” and anti-liberal bumper-sticker rhetoric to t-shirts, liberals are clearly being condemned by the gun collecting audience. They are being condemned for being too weak, blind, cowardice and bleeding heart to recognize the real dangers they are perpetuating by failing to support gun ownership. No where is this illustrated more clearly than the highly popular rendering of the hippie peace symbol of the 1960s as the “footprint of the American Chicken.” This popular t-shirt equates peace with the ultimate form of weakness: being a coward - And not just
any coward, an un-American coward. In one of its advertisements to sell the t-shirt, the marketing company Life, Liberty, Etc., has the following to say about those who pick up the peace symbol instead of a gun:

“Often found in dense urban areas, the American Chicken can be identified by its distinctive mark and complete lack of understanding. However, when confronted with heavy caliber truth and large volleys of common sense, they will often retreat back to their hippie communes while ranting incoherently. This t-shirt will help you identify these radical individuals so they can be avoided when possible and confronted when necessary” (www.info@lifelibertyetc.com).

This short paragraph is full of so much rich, candid and accurate detail of the sentiment expressed by so many within the world of the gun. Anyone who speaks of peace must not only be a liberal, but the enemy - not only the enemy, but an urban dwelling, stupid enemy that may need to be confronted. I do not want to misrepresent the truth by stating that most of my informants spoke negatively of society at large, and certainly none among them spoke of any radical desire for any kind of revolution or violence. However, it was very common for the assertion to be made that non-gun folk are cowards and that they are clueless – who are doing more harm than good to society by attempting to disarm it. I’ve heard the idea expressed a variety of different ways, but the following statement made by a shotgun vendor at a Cleveland-area gun show says it all:

“The idiots don’t realize that if you take guns away from law abiding citizens that only the cops and the crooks will be armed.”

A highly-animated hunter from Logan, Ohio, who referred to me as a “city boy,” stated the following:

“You people don’t want to see me drivin’ around with my guns in the truck now. When those terrorists show up again, I bet you don’t think I’m so weird then. Then ya’ll want us to take care of you.”
Here, not only do we see the pro-active condemning of the condemners once again, the gun owner aggrandizes himself to be not only on the right side of the issue, but in the role of savior.

TRADING ON STIGMA

One of the truly magical benefits of conducting research based on the grounded theoretical approach is that the researcher is afforded the opportunity to get out of the way of the data, stand back, and see what unfolds. From the seamless, chaotic yet beautiful ballet of social interaction surrounding gun-related activities, there emerges something unique and noteworthy in the realm of stigmatization. Unlike the typical documented sources of stigmatization, such as mental illness, homelessness, and bankruptcy, which elicit a host of previously discussed management techniques that are also employed by gun enthusiasts, the gun enthusiast has the rare ability to trade on his/her stigmatized identity at will. As previously discussed, stigma management strategies are typically utilized to lessen the negative impact of a denigrated and suspect identity. As demonstrated in the previous sections, in certain social contexts, gun enthusiasts also find it necessary to practice stigma management strategies and fade into the “normal,” bland background scenery, when they find themselves at odds with a social audience perceived to be more closely aligned with the moral order. However, there are also clear, observable instances in which the gun enthusiast derives positive social status directly from the negative or stigmatized properties of these unique hobbies.

It is not uncommon for the owner of a gun to base the value of the weapon not only on monetary appraisal, but also on its violent history. For instance, according to a December 27, 1999 article in the New York Times, the 38.-Caliber, snub-nosed Colt Cobra revolver that Jack Ruby used to kill Lee Harvey Oswald was sold for $220,000.
The 2008 Official Gun Digest Book of Guns and Prices lists the monetary value for a gun of this type at less than $300 (268). This phenomenon was illuminated by one of my research subjects in a June, 2007 interview. He discussed his passion for “weapons that were used in combat,” and noted that he assigned value to the guns based on “how close they made him feel to the action.” Among his collection was a Japanese Nambu 8mm pistol (see image 7.2). The subject stated that he had only paid $200 for the pistol. It was a notoriously unreliable gun, and typically not highly valued among collectors.

Image 7.2: Japanese Nambu 8mm Pistol

Although he had guns with estimated values of over $5,000 in his collection, he stated that he considered this gun as one of the most valuable to him because “it had been taken
from the body of a dead soldier, so it put him (the collector) directly at the battle scene.”

The collector liked the idea of a gun that “put him closer to the battle scene.” He
disclosed that he had supporting evidence that the gun had been taken into battle and that
the soldier’s life had been cut short based on some wadded up paper that he found in the
bottom of the holster.

Image 7.3: Supporting Paperwork of Japanese Nambu 8mm Pistol’s Living History

He said that he had the Japanese Dept. at Ohio State University translate what turned out
to be the text of an ad for real estate that the soldier was trying to sell. The idea that the
ad was never posted, but he knew something about the intimate goings on of the soldier
at the time of his death intrigued the collector. I forwarded a copy of the document (see
image 7.3) to Dr. Hiroyuki Oshita, Graduate Chair of Linguistics and Professor of Japanese at Ohio University. Dr. Oshita confirmed that the document is indeed a draft of an ad copy listing two properties in Naha City, Okinawa. Another example of trading on gun-related stigma was cited by many of the hunters in the sample population. As one of them noted, “I think that the average person is probably pretty disgusted by the idea of the Bambi killer aspect of deer hunting. Most of them would probably be even more disgusted if they knew that me and most of my buddies value our rifles based on performance and accuracy. That means that the more deer that we take or harvest (kill), the more the gun means to us.” These two varied accounts suggest that the active trading on suspect identities is, indeed, a part of gun culture. Additionally, this is an area of gun culture that has yet to be researched in any notable way by the academic community.

**WARRIOR NARRATIVES AND BADASSITUDES**

As was illustrated in the preceding section by the account of the collector who liked the idea of a gun’s history putting him “closer to the battle scene,” it was a common practice for my informants to engage in a type of warrior narratives - or expressing what I call “badassedness” or “badassitudes” as derived from Katz (1997) exploration of badass ways – as a means by which to “trade” on gun stigma with like-stigmatized gun owners and operators.

In chapter two, I explained that warrior narratives are the running scripts lived out by individual social actors that unfold during the course of performing some aspect of masculinity (Jordan and Cowan 2007). Just as Jordan and Cowan (2007) observed warrior narratives used by children in a Kindergarten classroom to negotiate aspects of gender along a variety of basic tasks, leisure activities and general social exchanges, I
have continually observed adult gun owners trading warrior narratives surrounding the use of their guns. The guns and stories or accounts about guns are directly traded in to facilitate a perceived aspect of masculinity. The specific aspects of masculinity constructed typically centered around the tough and cool, and paralleled the reflections provided by the male prisoners in Evans and Wallace (2008) study, wherein they persistently encountered narratives including similar themes of “emotional suppression,” “hardness,” “power,” and a need to mask any and all weakness at all times.

The warrior narratives under consideration are very similar to what Mills and Tivers (2001) and Hunt (2008) describe as living histories. Typically referring to past events that are reconstructed through “serious leisure,” with a specific place (such as a battlefield) in mind, a living history Hunt has argued that “traditional masculinities” are “negotiated and manufactured” through a “site of a serious leisure pursuit that attempts to draw boundaries with the feminine” (Hunt 2008: 460). Here she is talking about specific sites, such as battlefields, where a known type of masculinity is actively performed, through the leisure of detailed outdoor performance – with an effort to do the masculinity in an historically accurate way. Warrior narratives, interestingly, achieve essentially the same basic ends, with actual research subjects, in real time, providing living narratives surrounding any specific place, activity or aspect of culture (such as a gun) that the researcher is lucky enough to observe. I have maintained through theoretical elaboration and varied observations that guns are ascribed symbolic value based on their living histories. In the case of the gun, it becomes a type of historical site, and I have captured narratives surrounding its use for further analysis below.
There are undeniably special considerations to be afforded soldiers and members of law enforcement agencies who must call upon their trusty arms (or at least the potential is there to do such) in times of high risk and danger, for their preservation or the preservation of those they are sworn to protect and defend. The life of a true warrior might even require the use of a warrior narrative in the course of regular daily life. Irrespective of that fact, the warrior narratives I’ve observed from non-law enforcement and military personnel, at least in the case of this study, are a close approximation.

“I take some comfort for myself and my wife in knowing that my Glock will bring down a large man.”

The statement above was made by an Ohio Law Enforcement Officer who was explaining some of the inter-personal difficulties of wearing a gun as part of his work uniform. In addition to people viewing him with “more suspicion” and “acting different towards him” when he wears the gun,” “they react to the gun,” he was more concerned about the impact it had on his wife and family. The gun was a “constant reminder” of the dangers of his job, and he needed to be able to reassure them and himself that he was well-protected by his gun. This is understandable. I have noticed, however, that my hunter informants and other collectors of military weapons use almost identical types of warrior narratives (comments similar to “bring down” a man) in discussing what favorite guns mean to them and sharing their gun stories. It was often the number of kills, or the gun’s life history of efficient killing that gave it its position of prominence within a collection.

“It is a fine shooting gun and I have taken several deer with it.”

“I’ve dropped a lot of big game with that Winchester.”
“My dad and I were trying to figure up a count recently, and I’m pretty sure that I’ve harvested over 40 (deer) with my Thompson. That’s why it’s one of my favorite.”

These accounts taken from among my hunter/collectors are fairly representative of comments to which I was privy at a variety of gun events. The more killing, the more valued the gun that delivered the shot. Note the use of the similar warrior narrative language that was expressed by the officer in the first example of the section. I have “taken;“ “I’ve dropped;” and “I’ve harvested.” These are all expressions used in the world of sport shooters to convey the killing of live game, and mean the same as the officer’s comment about being able to “bring down” a man. We are not, of course, talking about something akin to the killing of a man, but the narrative style is almost identical.

The final observations that I have made pertaining to the use of warrior narratives surrounding guns actually comes form the ritual practice of “blooding.” I did not include a separate description of blooding in the ritual section, simply because I was focusing on rituals that I believed to be fairly common – and to my knowledge, blooding rituals are not widely practiced. I only encountered the practice as being referenced twice during my data collection, but given the extreme nature of the practice, I thought it worth mentioning. Blooding rituals in gun sports have been referenced in academic literature as far back as Flugel’s (1931) study of Fox Hunting Rites. According to Flugel, the practice of blooding typically involves a first-time hunter who has killed large game, such as deer or a fox. In keeping with the ritual, the hunter who takes the game will either drink a small amount of the animal’s blood, bite/eat a small piece of raw flesh or organ, or smear some of the blood on their cheeks (similar to native American war paint). The hunter is
then to offer up some sort of barbaric war cry as a sign of their masculinity. Two of my informants shared stories of observed blooding rituals as part of a deer harvest. One informant stated that his uncle and father had him drink a small amount of the deer’s blood on the occasion of his first harvest. The other informant was not personally blooded, but he was part of a hunting party wherein one of his friends, a hunter named Brian was goaded relentlessly by the hunting party until he bit a piece of raw liver that was taken from his first harvested deer. In each case, possibly more relevant than the highly warrior-like ritual involving the eating of raw meat and smearing of animal blood, is that after this ritual was completed, the participants in the group took turns sharing “best of” stories about kills and incredible shots made with their favorite guns. They celebrated their own warrior achievements and qualities, actively embracing them (qualities that would horrify if not repulse much of the general population) by reaffirming the warrior achievements and qualities of their guns.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter I have broadened the application of stigma management concepts by demonstrating the relevance of social groups that have not previously been examined from this analytic perspective. I have presented evidence that gun collectors (rightfully) perceive themselves as often subject to stigmatizing public stereotypes. They respond to this stigmatization by adopting a range of strategies to counter or mitigate negative stereotypes in their interaction with others. At the individual level they often try to pass and avoid bringing up their suspect identities and activities. Individuals also invoke
verbal disclaimers and techniques of neutralization, prominently including appeals to higher loyalties, denial of injury, and condemning of condemners. At the collective or group level, I identified two other forms of stigma management: dramaturgical stereotype busting and destigmatization through the building of idiosyncrasy credit.

By illustrating the applicability of concepts developed across a wide range of stigma management studies to groups that have not previously been examined from this perspective, my analysis represents what Snow et al. (2003) have referred to as “theoretical extension” in ethnographic research. One clear implication of this section is that the interactionist literature on stigma management may be valuable for illuminating a broader range of social groups than typically recognized. Indeed, this observation is consistent with Goffman’s wry (albeit unnecessarily gendered) observation over forty years ago that the only American male free of stigma is the “young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college educated, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports” (1963:128).

Still, while stigmatization and stigma management are widespread, it is clear that the experience of stigma and the strategies used to manage it can vary widely, depending on social contexts and resources. One important contextual feature for the groups I have studied is their rich and extensive subcultures. By virtue of their longstanding subcultures, gun collectors have social and symbolic resources at their disposal that are quite different from those of more isolated deviants, such as self-injurers (Adler and Adler 2005) or bankrupt debtors (Thorne and Anderson 2006). This is particularly evident in their use of collective stigma management strategies. However, it is important to recognize that subcultures themselves may also vary significantly in their
organizational contexts and resources. Some subcultures, such as those of the homeless (Snow and Anderson 1993) or the mentally ill (Estroff 1981; Herman 1987) arise as secondary adjustments to oppressive conditions and provide relatively weak social and material support to their members. Yet others, perhaps most notably gay and lesbian subculture, are organizationally far richer and more multifaceted. As this chapter has demonstrated, subcultural organization enables the development of collective out-group and in group stigma management. Although the specific manifestations of these strategies may vary, many of the same basic types of practices are used across a wide range of social groups.

Additional comparative examinations of both out and in group stigma management techniques conducted using similar methodologies could be expected to reveal further similarities, as well as patterns of variation, across a range of deviant populations, from the intensely stigmatized to those whose members are viewed with only modest or ambivalent disapproval. The goal of such analyses, as with this paper, should be to develop a richer sociological understanding of the range of stigma management strategies and the conditions under which different patterns are likely to emerge. Continuing ethnographic examination of stigma management will only serve to complement our existing knowledge of the “deviance process” (Pfuhl 1986).

But such studies make yet another important sociological contribution. Studies such as this suggest the relevance of key concepts in the sociology of deviance for illuminating a far wider range of social relationships and interactions. As Adler and Adler have noted, deviance “has always been, and will always be, one of our most encompassing sociological tools” (2006, p. 144). In this chapter I have supported their
claim by demonstrating the value of the interactionist analysis of stigma and stigma management for illuminating previously neglected dimensions of the social worlds of gun collectors and enthusiasts.
CHAPTER VIII

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Given the June 26, 5-4 decision handed down by the Supreme Court, it is clear that we, as a nation, will continue to add to the over 200,000,000 guns already in circulation. Supporting data suggest that existing guns are distributed among close to half of all U.S. households. Although their presence is not appreciated by everyone equally, their presence and impact on U.S. culture is undeniable. As I have demonstrated throughout this ethnographic account, through the telling of gun owner stories and examples of gun symbolism that permeates U.S. social institutions in the form of family influence, media exposure, history and political ideologies, we are all touched, to varying degrees, by the presence and meaning of guns.

It is clear that the presence of guns in the United States cannot be reduced to notions as simple as a second amendment right to bear arms or need to disarm the population due to safety concerns. Project data reveal that guns remain as a source of masculine social capital, a highly patriarchal and protected social arena, a source of both stigmatized and valued social capital, and a common site around which social rituals are performed. More specifically, the data reveal some interesting patterns, which are not limited to the following: 1) Guns, as an aspect of culture, or product of social interaction,
are rich with multifarious symbolic values; 2) For many gun owners, the value placed on
guns is far more emotional in nature than monetary; 3) The symbolic value ascribed to
guns by their owners appears to influence the way in which gun owners interact with
their guns as well as their social audience; 4) Gun owners recognize a unique type of
stigma or suspect identity associated with these cultural products, and respond through a
complex series of stigma management techniques; and 5) U.S. gun culture involves a
series of deference and demeanor-filled rituals; rituals pertaining to being the gun owner,
the gun user, and possibly even the gun as an object of near-worship. These ritual
activities surrounding guns present rare opportunities for males to express what are often
otherwise suppressed emotions – such as expressing how loved and important other
influential males are to them by talking up a shared gun experience instead of addressing
the loved one directly.

Although this ethnographic account touches only on one small sample population
of gun owners, collectors and enthusiasts, the data reveal that attitudes, values, meanings,
beliefs and actions pertaining to guns and gun use are far more complicated than most
academic treatments have surmised. Through the thick, descriptive practice of having
gun owners “tell the stories of their guns,” and conceptualizing guns as historical sites
(with histories to be shared) while making detailed observations of how guns are situated
and related to during interactions involving their use, I was enabled to gain a richer
perspective on guns and their symbolic value than previous studies have provided.

Previous literature on the symbolic value of guns has focused narrowly on what
the simple concept of gun ownership means to collectors and enthusiasts. This overlooks
the possibility of intra-individual variability, and that guns with different living histories
and varying symbolic value might also have different outcomes (i.e. one gun might only ever be viewed as a piece of art, while the history of another ensures that it is seen only as an instrument of death). The bottom line is that it is clear that all guns are not equally likely to be used in the commission of violent acts.

Existing research on gun ownership and presence, in general, has focused on the direct correlation between U.S. gun volume (availability per household) and related acts of violence and injury, directing policy attention primarily toward licensing and private ownership of guns. These existing research efforts will be informed and complemented by the present study. An understanding of the everyday, lived reality of gun-related behavior will help us to comprehend how people conceptualize their use and ownership of guns, and enhance our understanding of the probability, desirability and necessity of various gun-control measures.

The assumption that more guns equal more violence proceeds with the faulty premise that each gun is equally likely to be used to commit an act of violence. Based on my data, I suggest that every gun within a collection has the potential to hold a separate symbolic value for the owner. These symbolic values are contingent on the gun’s living history; and, consequently, have the potential to influence the interaction rituals and behavior of the owners in very different ways. I argue that the living history and symbolic value ascribed to each gun has a direct influence on the outcomes associated with each gun. Additionally, as was revealed in this study, many gun collectors, who own hundreds of guns, not only commit no crimes with them, but have nothing but disdain for anyone who would “disrespect a gun” by using it in a threatening, unsafe or otherwise inappropriate manner.
Future gun-related research will only benefit from further consideration of the symbolic value imbued in individual guns, the ways in which social institutions, such as family and media inform these values, and the resulting deference and demeanor-based rituals involving the ownership and use of guns. In order to capture these data, guns must be conceptualized not only as an object capable of unleashing awful power, but also a site around which living histories are built and rituals conducted. For the purpose of this study, gun-related data were collected by following the lead taken by Hunt (2008) who emphasized the significance of capturing a “living history” by being enmeshed in the process of “serious leisure” surrounding the historical sites of interest. Instead of looking to historical sites such as battlefields, I simply treated guns as a site or place to be reconstructed and their respective stories as the history to be understood. I recommend this technique for future research projects. However, it is also possible that survey instruments could be expanded or developed to gauge a deeper level of symbolic meaning ascribed to various guns owned by research subjects – asking subject to reflect not only on what the concepts of guns and gun rights mean to them, but to list their guns and their meanings (ex. family security, right to bear arms, family history, monetary value, distrust of law enforcement/Government, etc.). In doing so, researchers will then be in a better position to ferret out relationships between specific gun-related symbolic values and gun crimes/violence.

The serious leisure pursuits studied throughout this research project involved gun owning and collecting. My fieldstudy on gun owners was conducted from January 2005 to January 2008. Field research included approximately 250 hours of direct interaction with research subjects in a variety of leisure settings, including gun shows and live action
play groups (e.g., “cowboy clubs”). A total of 52 semi-structured interviews (see interview schedule in appendix A) of varying length were conducted with a range of gun collectors and other gun owners in venues that included gun collectors’ homes, different kinds of shooting events, and public gun shows throughout the Midwest.

An analysis of symbolic gun representations in popular magazines and music lyrics was also conducted. My review of gun images in popular gun-related magazines supported Vigorito and Curry’s (1998) and Carter and Steiner’s (2003) findings that gender identity in popular magazine depictions still point to separate social expectations for men and women. Although guns as a source of symbolic empowerment was established by Jiobu and Curry (2001), and guns as a masculine power symbol by Brown (1994), gender expressions of guns in music is an unexplored area of social inquiry. My findings reveal that similar to popular magazine depictions of males and females, popular song lyrics involving guns reveal a decidedly gendered world, highly patriarchal and protective of traditional masculinity.

Although this project only analyzed two forms of popular culture, as this served the purpose of illustrating the separate treatment of men and women in multiple media outlets, additional research in this area might consider gun representations of gender in other forms of media entertainment. Gun references are by-no-means limited to song lyrics and magazines. According to the June 30, 2008 International Movie Data Base listings (http://www.imdb.com/chart/), 6 of the top ten grossing films of the week featured characters with guns (Wanted, Get Smart, The Incredible Hulk, Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull, and You Don’t Mess With the Zohan), as did seven of the top ten DVD rentals (Rambo, National Treasure: Book of Secrets, Mad Money,
Untraceable, Grace is Gone, Cleaner and First Sunday). Nielsen broadcast television ratings for the week of June 16, 2008 lists shows featuring characters with guns (CSI Miami and CSI NY) as being the fifth and sixth most watched, respectively (www.nielsenmedia.com). Even in media entertainment outlets as far stretching as Broadway shows are relevant for further consideration. Sammy Davis Jr. could once be viewed singing, dancing and punctuating his sentences with the bullets fired from a Tommy gun in the 1950s musical Guys and Dolls. These are untapped but important aspects of U.S. gun culture that have the potential to reveal a more detailed understanding of guns and gun use in the U.S., and deserve the attention of future research studies.
REFERENCES.


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APPENDIX A

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Ohio State University IRB Exemption 2007E0255
Interview Questions: U.S. Gun Culture

1. Do you own a gun (y/n)? (if the answer is no, skip to question 8)
2. At what approximate age did you receive your first gun?
3. Was it a gift, or did you purchase it?
4. If your first gun was a gift, who gave it to you?
5. If you purchased your first gun for yourself, what made you decide to purchase it?
6. Do you subscribe to any gun-related publications (ex. Magazines), y/n? 
   If the answer is yes, to which gun-related publications do you subscribe (if no, skip to question 8)?

7. Do gun-related publications influence your decisions related to gun purchases?
   If you answered yes, how so?

8. Was your first gun a pistol, rifle, shotgun, or other (if other, please describe)?
9. How many guns do you currently own? Pistols_____, Rifles_____, Shotguns______, others (please list)
10. Do others within your household own guns (y/n)? If the answer is yes, approximately how many additional guns, other than those in your own collection are in your household (y/n)? Please tell me about them. What other guns are in your household (please fill in the approximate quantity)? Pistols_____, Rifles_____, Shotguns______, others (please list)
11. Have you ever attended another gun show or gun event (y/n)? (If yes, approximately how many? If no, skip to question 11)
12. Please fill in the approximate number of times you have attended the following types of gun-related events: gun clubs _______, shooting tournaments _______, live action role play events _______, other (please describe) ________
13. What is your age?
14. What is your state of birth?
15. In which U.S. state do you currently reside?
16. Which best describes the community in which you were raised (circle all that apply)? Rural, urban, suburb, or mid-size town (population between 25,000 – 50,000)

17. Which best describes the community in which you currently live (circle 1)? Rural, urban, suburb, or mid-size town (population between 25,000 – 50,000)

18. What is your highest level of education completed (circle one)? High School, Junior/Community College Certificate or Associates Degree, Four Year Degree, Graduate/professional School?

19. Do you use a gun as part of your profession/job?

20. Do you have a favorite gun? (If yes, why is it your favorite? If no, skip to question 20)

__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________

21. Does your favorite gun have a name? (If yes, what did you name it?
__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________

22. How/why did you pick this particular name? __________________________

23. What would you say guns mean to you?

24. If you have stories related to any of your guns (ex. First hunting or shooting experience, or something special about one or more of your guns), please share your story or stories with me. Try to be as specific about the style, type and model of gun as possible. Use extra space if necessary.

25. Please list your guns in the order that you received or purchased them (that is, arrange them in order by how long they have been in your possession, from longest time in your collection to most recent acquisition). Please provide the caliber and brand/model of each if known. Next, indicate which of your guns you consider to be the most valuable, and why? (Please be sure to state if the value that you place on the gun is based on actual/monetary value, or more personal/sentimental reasons).
APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

The Ohio State University Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: Gun Shows, Gun Collectors and the Story of the Gun: An Ethnographic Approach to U.S. Gun Culture

Researcher: Timothy J. Curry

Purpose:
You are being asked to participate in this study on U.S. gun culture. The purpose of this study is to collect the individual stories of gun collectors, gun enthusiasts, and second amendment advocates, in order to gain a better understanding of U.S. gun culture, gun-related traditions, and the values that individuals assign to guns. Guns have had a unique presence in U.S. history, and relatively little is known about the culture and deep social meaning associated with guns and gun ownership. The more that is known about guns and gun owners, the better understanding we will have of ourselves as a common people.

This is a consent form for research participation. It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate.

Your participation is voluntary.
Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and will receive a copy of the form.
Procedures/Tasks:

Participants will be interviewed about their guns or gun-related activities on a strictly voluntary basis and asked to fill out a brief questionnaire. In addition to filling out a questionnaire, gun owners will be asked to set up a time to share stories about their guns, how they came to be gun owners, and what their guns mean to them. Additionally, owners of gun collections or rare firearms will be asked for permission to photograph their guns, in order to illustrate the symbols, craftsmanship, artwork and general detail that will be described by the gun owners. Gun owners will not be filmed or photographed, only the guns and gun displays. Interviews will be audio taped. The tapes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researchers office, and no one else will have access to the locked cabinet. Tapes will be kept until the information is transcribed, and then erased. If photographs are taken of individual gun collections and displays, there is a possibility that they will be used in published journal articles, books, or other scholarly publications. All photographs will be saved in a password-protected database in the researcher’s office. No one else will have access to the photos.

Duration:

It will take approximately 20 minutes to complete the initial questionnaire. It is estimated that each interview session with a participant will last no longer than two hours. It is estimated that each participant will be interviewed no more than three times. Basically, the length of each interview session will be determined by the participant and not by the researcher. Great attention and care will be given to the participant’s comfort level, age and ability to continue discussion on the topic.

You may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision will not affect your future relationship with The Ohio State University.

Risks and Benefits:

No risks are anticipated, and there will be no direct benefit to individual participants. However, generally it is anticipated that this research will add to the general body of knowledge about gun culture in the U.S. Presently, very little is known about gun culture in the U.S. By learning more about how guns are thought about in the U.S. as symbols and as cultural artifacts the researchers hope to gain a better understanding of traditions and customs associated with guns and gun use.
Confidentiality:

Your name and other identifying information will not be published with the research findings.

Incentives:

You will not be paid to participate in the study

Participant Rights:

You may refuse to participate in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you are a student or employee at Ohio State, your decision will not affect your grades or employment status.

If you choose to participate in the study, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. By signing this form, you do not give up any personal legal rights you may have as a participant in this study.

An Institutional Review Board responsible for human subjects research at The Ohio State University reviewed this research project and found it to be acceptable, according to applicable state and federal regulations and University policies designed to protect the rights and welfare of participants in research.

Contacts and Questions:

For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study you may contact Jim Taylor at 614.784.0936, or Professor Timothy J. Curry (Supervisor) at 614-292-7560.

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251.
Signing the consent form

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.

______________________________________________________________________________
Printed name of subject                                               Signature of subject       AM/PM
______________________________________________________________________________
                                                      Date and time

______________________________________________________________________________
Printed name of person authorized to consent for subject
(when applicable)                                                Signature of person authorized to consent for subject
(when applicable)                                           AM/PM
______________________________________________________________________________

Relationship to the subject                                               Date and time

Investigator/Research Staff

I have explained the research to the participant or his/her representative before requesting the signature(s) above. There are no blanks in this document. A copy of this form has been given to the participant or his/her representative.

______________________________________________________________________________
Printed name of person obtaining consent                           Signature of person obtaining consent       AM/PM
______________________________________________________________________________
                                                      Date and time
APPENDIX C

GUN TERMS GLOSSARY

Common Terms Associated with Firearms

TYPES

**Handgun** - A weapon designed to fire a small projectile from one or more barrels when held in one hand with a short stock designed to be gripped by one hand.

**Revolver** - A handgun that contains its ammunition in a revolving cylinder that typically holds five to nine cartridges, each within a separate chamber. Before a revolver fires, the cylinder rotates, and the next chamber is aligned with the barrel.

**Pistol** - Any handgun that does not contain its ammunition in a revolving cylinder. Pistols can be manually operated or semiautomatic. A semiautomatic pistol generally contains cartridges in a magazine located in the grip of the gun. When the semiautomatic pistol is fired, the spent cartridge that contained the bullet and propellant is ejected, the firing mechanism is cocked, and a new cartridge is chambered.

**Derringer** - A small single- or multiple-shot handgun other than a revolver or semiautomatic pistol.

**Rifle** - A weapon intended to be fired from the shoulder that uses the energy of the explosive in a fixed metallic cartridge to fire only a single projectile through a rifled bore for each single pull of the trigger.

**Shotgun** - A weapon intended to be fired from the shoulder that uses the energy of the explosive in a fixed shotgun shell to fire through a smooth bore either a number of ball shot or a single projectile for each single pull of the trigger.

FIRING ACTION

**Fully automatic** - Capability to fire a succession of cartridges so long as the trigger is depressed or until the ammunition supply is exhausted. Automatic weapons are considered machineguns subject to the provisions of the National Firearms Act.
Semiautomatic - An autoloading action that will fire only a single shot for each single function of a trigger.

Machinegun - Any weapon that shoots, is designed to shoot, or can be readily restored to shoot automatically more than one shot without manual reloading by a single function of the trigger.

Submachinegun - A simple fully automatic weapon that fires a pistol cartridge that is also referred to as a machine pistol.

AMMUNITION

Caliber - The size of the ammunition that a weapon is designed to shoot, as measured by the bullet's approximate diameter in inches in the United States and in millimeters in other countries. In some instances, ammunition is described with additional terms, such as the year of its introduction (.30/06) or the name of the designer (.30 Newton). In some countries, ammunition is also described in terms of the length of the cartridge case (7.62 x 63 mm).

Gauge - For shotguns, the number of spherical balls of pure lead, each exactly fitting the bore, that equals one pound.

Hello, my name is Jim Taylor. I am a graduate student in the Sociology Department at Ohio State University. I am doing research, speaking with gun collectors and gun enthusiasts about their stories and thoughts on guns. Primarily, I am interested in seeing gun collections, photographing them, and in audio-taping gun collectors as they tell stories about their guns and gun-related experiences. It is anticipated that no interview session will run longer than two hours, and the collector can name the location, date, and time of the interview.

Would you be willing to talk with me or do you know of someone I could contact who might be interested in talking to me?
APPENDIX E

Me Out In The Field