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Protective Gun Ownership as a Coping Mechanism

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Abstract

Firearms are one of the central flashpoints in American life, and yet the motivations underlying their ownership have been generally understudied by psychologists. In this paper, I review work from across the social sciences to model the psychological utility that people get from gun ownership. I propose the Coping Model of Protective Gun Ownership, arguing that those who own their weapon for protection are using their gun symbolically as an aid to manage psychological threats - to their safety, control, and sense of belongingness - that come from their belief that the world is a dangerous place and that society will not keep them safe. I discuss the ramifications of this coping strategy and present a research agenda for exploring this framework.

Protective Gun Ownership as a Coping Mechanism

“Since a ‘sense of security’ is inherently a psychological trait, it does no good to argue that the sense of security afforded by owning a gun is ‘just an illusion.’” (Wright, 1995, p. 65)

Guns have a unique place in America (e.g. Hofstadter, 1970; Utter & True, 2000). Roughly 40% of American households own a gun (about 30% of American adults) and half of those Americans who do not currently own a gun can see themselves doing so in the future (Parker, Horowitz, Igielnik, Oliphant, & Brown, 2017). How should we understand the mass appeal of something that is so objectively dangerous (e.g. Anglemyer, Horvath, & Rutherford, 2014; Cuiker & Eagen, 2018; Grinshteyn & Hemenway, 2016)? Until recently (see e.g. Conley & Higgins, 2018; Leander, Stroebe, Kreienkamp, Agostini, Gordjin, & Kruglanski, 2019; Shepherd & Kay, 2018; Shepperd, Losee, Pogge, Lipsey, Redford, & Crandall, 2018; Shepperd, Pogge, Losee, Lipsey, & Reford, 2018; Stroebe, Leander, & Kruglanski, 2017a; Stroebe, Leander, & Kruglanski, 2017b), social psychology has had surprisingly little to say about this question. While much research has focused on the links between guns and aggression (see Benjamin, Kepes, & Bushman, 2017 for a review) and on the attention-getting properties of introducing weapons into an environment (see Fawcett, Russell, Peace, & Christie, 2013 for a review), far less work has tried to understand the appeal of carrying a gun.

Historically American gun culture has not been unitary - there are at least two distinctive gun cultures, one which owns shotguns and rifles for hunting, and one which owns handguns for personal protection (e.g. Azrael, Hepburn, Hemenway, & Miller, 2017; Cao, Cullen, & Link, 1997; Wyant & Taylor, 2007). In recent years, as the American hunting culture has been on the decline (Smith & Son, 2015), the culture of protective gun ownership has become the dominant

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mode in American life, with two-thirds of gun owners reporting that they own a gun for personal protection (Parker et al., 2017).

And yet gun owners rarely use their guns to prevent victimization: reports estimate their defensive use in fewer than 1% of reported crimes involving contact between a perpetrator and a victim (Hemenway & Solnick; 2015; Planty & Truman, 2013). In contrast, bringing a gun into one's home clearly makes it more dangerous: a gun in the home substantially increases the likelihood that a household member will die by a gun, whether by homicide, suicide, or accidental shootings (e.g. Kellerman et al., 1992; Kellerman et al., 1993; Anglemeyer et al., 2014).

What, then, do Americans see in guns that makes them so attractive, despite these risks? One possibility is that the general public is simply unaware of the danger. Another possibility, which I offer here as the Coping Model of Protective Gun Ownership, is a psychological explanation. By modeling the distinct belief structure of American protective gun owners – that the world is a dangerous place, both specifically and generally, and that government or other big institutions are essentially broken and unable to protect individuals from harm – and noting how that set of beliefs evolved historically and politically, I argue that protective gun owners have come to see their guns as a way of managing the fundamental threats that these worries generate: threats to their personal safety, threats to their ability to act freely in the world, and threats to the meaningfulness of their identities. While a gun may soothe these worries in the moment, I argue that guns also have ironic effects; heightening vigilance to threat, increasing the likelihood of unpredictable escalation of interpersonal arguments, and grounding an identity in a deeply-contentious and polarized political debate, all of which exacerbate the underlying worries about the dangers of the world that the gun is meant to symbolically protect against. Drawing from

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frameworks used to understand how people manage stress, and using psychological, sociological, and anthropological evidence, I propose that guns act as a maladaptive coping mechanism, allowing their owners to manage the psychological threats that they face in their everyday lives, but at a serious cost. For their owners, guns may actually be acting like the “one true friend, with six hearts in his body, and who can always be relied on” of an early Colt revolver ad (1860), incompletely helping them to navigate a world full of threat.

Cultures of Gun Ownership

Who owns guns in America? According to Pew (Parker et al., 2017), about 40% of American households own guns. And yet, not everyone owns guns for the same reasons. Within the US, there appears to be two relatively distinct cultures of gun ownership, with their own predictors and determinants (e.g. Azrael et al., 2017; Cao et al., 1997; Wyant & Taylor, 2007). While these two groups are not completely separate (e.g. Lizotte, Bordura, & White, 1981), there seem to be some commonalities within each culture that are not shared across them. On the one hand are the people who own a gun for sporting purposes (e.g. hunting or target shooting). This group is more likely to own rifles than handguns and is far more likely to be rural. For this group, firearms are often thought of, to quote one member, as “a recreational tool, like a badminton racket or a croquet mallet. It’s a tool for fun.” (Homsher, 2001 p. 53; see also Harcourt, 2006).

On the other hand are the people who own a gun for personal protection. This group is more likely to own handguns, to own multiple guns, and to carry those guns outside the home (e.g. Bankston, Thompson, Jenkins, & Forsyth, 1990), and is more evenly spread throughout the country (71% of urban gun owners, 71% of suburban gun owners, and 62% of rural gun owners, per Parker et al., 2017). This group is also more likely to have a loaded gun somewhere close at

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hand, with a full 71% of people who report that they have a gun for protection also reporting that they have an easily-accessible loaded gun at least most of the time, as compared to those people who primarily have a gun for hunting/sporting purposes, of whom a full 64% report *never* having a loaded gun at home (Parker et al., 2017).

Recently, there has been a distinct shift away from a hunting-shooting culture and towards a protection-culture. Almost 70% of new gun owners report owning a gun for protection (Wertz et al., 2018) and almost 80% of gun owners under the age of 30 had parents who owned firearms primarily for protection (Parker et al., 2017). Accordingly, the percentage of Americans holding hunting permits from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has decreased 38% since 1970 (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2019), and the percentage of households with at least one person who identifies as a hunter is down 50% from the late 1970s (Smith & Son, 2015; see also Diaz, 1999). Owning a gun for protection, has become the dominant gun-cultural mode in the US (e.g. Carlson, 2015; Yamane, 2017).

Guns are Dangerous

This rise in the protective culture of gun ownership flies in the face of the empirical evidence for the dangers of guns. Thirty-to-forty-thousand Americans are killed by a gun each year, a rate far higher than anywhere else in the industrialized world - of all deaths across 27 comparable industrialized countries in 2010, 82% of people killed by a gun were American (Grinshteyn & Hemenway, 2016). An analysis of gun deaths from 2016 estimated that approximately 12,800 Americans were murdered by a gun, approximately 23,800 committed suicide by gun, and approximately 900 were killed by accidental firearm discharge (Naghavi et al., 2018). A recent meta-analysis of the literature concluded that a gun in the house doubled the

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likelihood that a member would die in a violent homicide and tripled the likelihood of death by violent suicide (Anglemyer et al., 2014). The U.S., with 5% of the world's population, owns 45% of its civilian-owned guns - an estimated 393 million guns in civilian hands, or approximately 1.2 guns for every man, woman, and child (Karp, 2018). In short, in all likelihood the United States has more gun deaths than other countries because it has more guns (Siegel, Ross, & King, 2013).

Even if it makes their lives more perilous, some have argued that a gun might still help protect individuals against victimization (Lott & Mustard, 1977). These researchers argue that with more upstanding citizens carrying firearms, especially in public, able to exert retaliatory disabling or deadly force, the costs of crimes such as assault or robbery may be perceived by criminals as too high to rationally pursue, and therefore rates of crime should fall. But evidence suggests this is not the case. In states where laws have been passed to make it easier for citizens to carry their weapons in public, rates of violent crime actually increase (Ayres & Donohue, 2003; Donohue, Aneja, & Weber, 2018; though see Manski & Pepper, 2018; and see RAND 2018 for caveats on the relationship between gun laws and gun casualties). Surveys report that personal weapons are practically never used to prevent crimes (Hemenway & Solnick, 2015; Planty & Truman, 2013), and if anything, guns in everyday life are more likely to be used to victimize others, as a means of intimidation, than to protect oneself (Hemenway, Azrael, & Miller, 2000). In states with higher rates of gun ownership, a person is no more likely to be killed by a stranger, but they are far more likely to be killed by someone that they know (Siegel, Negussie, Vanture, Pleskunas, Ross, & King, 2014).

The evidence, in other words, suggests that guns make the world of their owners comprehensively more dangerous, with little to no empirical protection against victimization.

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And yet, most gun owners don't see their guns as fundamentally endangering themselves or their loved ones. While protective gun owners are aware that their weapons are potentially dangerous and do take steps to mitigate those dangers (Barnhart, Huff, McAlexander, & McAlexander, 2018), studies show that the majority of gun owners believe that having a gun in their house makes it a safer place to be (Gallup 2004; Murray, 2018). These beliefs show little change after mass-shooting events among either gun-owners or non-gun-owners (Stroebe, Leander, & Kruglanski, 2017a; Stroebe, Leander, & Kruglanski, 2017b, Wozniak, 2017), and in fact, there is often an increase in people applying for concealed-weapons permits after mass-shootings (Turchan, Zeoli, & Kwiatkowski, 2017; Wallace, 2015), especially if the victims of the crimes share one's own racial or political characteristics (Depew & Swensen, 2018). Almost three-fourths of gun owners say that they could never see themselves not owning a gun, and even half of Americans who do not currently own a gun can see themselves doing so in the future (Parker et al., 2017). Given the prominent discussions of gun control that happen year after year - according to the poll of U.S. editors and news directors conducted by the Associated Press, mass shootings were the #1 most important story in 2012, #4 most important in 2015 and 2016, #3 most important in 2017, and #1 most important in 2018 (Associated Press, 2012, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018) - how is it that protective gun owners continue to believe that their guns will keep them safe?

Protective Gun Ownership: The World is a Dangerous Place

Protective gun owners tend to think that the world is a dangerous place for them and that the institutions of society are not able to provide adequate protection. With less trust in the

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state's ability to maintain order amidst a deteriorating world, they may see themselves as having no choice but to take their safety into their own hands through protective weapons ownership.

Pew researchers find that 75% of gun owners report that they think the world is becoming a more dangerous place, and 72% of those owners say that they own a gun for protection (compared against just 66% of non-gun-owning Americans who feel the same way). They may not necessarily think that their own neighborhoods are dangerous, but they do think that the world as a whole is worrisome (Parker et al., 2017). In fact, some research has shown that an abstract sense of the dangerousness of the world can be dissociated from a concrete fear of individual victimization, and that both independently predict protective firearm ownership (Stroebe et al., 2017b). In a recent survey of over 11,000 faculty, staff, and students at a large Southern university, it was people who owned a gun for protection (but not those who owned a gun for hunting or target shooting) who reported feeling most unsafe on campus (Shepperd et al., 2018).

When talking about the threat of crime, gun owners often talk about criminals as a sort of irredeemable other, relentless and evil, against which drastic measures must be taken (e.g. Kohn, 2004b; Homsher, 2001). They may also view criminals as African-American (Stroud, 2012). Researchers using the American National Election Survey find that symbolic racism predicts gun ownership above and beyond conservatism, anti-government sentiment, and a host of demographics (O'Brien et al., 2013); and other researchers find that opposition to gun control spikes among racists once they have been primed with faces of black people (Filindra & Kaplan, 2016). This image likely does not line up with actual crime statistics - while the general population tends to worry about death at the hands of strangers far more than at the hands of

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family and friends (e.g. Safewise, 2019), almost 80% of homicides from 1981-2010 were committed by someone the victim knew (Siegel et al., 2014).

The protective gun-owner's sense that the world is a dangerous place is magnified by a distrust in the ability of other institutions to keep themselves safe. Ownership of guns, especially handguns, tends to be predicted by a belief that the government or police aren't able to protect a person from danger. Analyses of data from the General Social Survey have found that opposition to governmental action predicts gun ownership above and beyond conservatism (Celinska, 2007); that people who believe that public officials do not care about them are more likely to own pistols (as a way of substituting private justice for the unavailable public variant; Glaeser & Glendon, 1998); and that distrust of the government predicts gun ownership, even controlling for political orientation, propensity to hunt, geographic locale, and fear of crime (Jiobu & Curry, 2002). This distrust is itself linked to worries about the dangerousness of one's neighborhood: lack of trust in the police (Smith & Uchida, 1988), or in the helpfulness of one's own neighbors (Cao et al., 1997) are both associated with perceiving one's neighborhood as dangerous (regardless of actual crime statistics), which, in turn, is associated with protective firearms ownership (see also Lizotte et al., 1981; Stroebe, 2019 for similar findings; but see Kleck & Kovandzic, 2009, who argue that the homicide rate and objective police activity in the neighborhood predicts increased protective gun ownership, regardless of subjective sense of crime). Similar survey work suggests that the belief that a gun can protect against crime correlates with a distrust of others and a lack of sense of personal independence (Branscombe, Weir, & Crosby, 1991; Warner & Thrash, 2019).

Protective gun owners believe that the world is dangerous and that institutions and systems either don't care enough or are aren't trustworthy enough to do anything about it.

Holding these two interrelated beliefs should strike at the heart of one's psychological well-being (e.g. Pittman & Ziegler, 2007).

Understanding Coping

How do people generally deal with psychologically threatening situations? The examination of "coping" has been central to the psychological project since at least Freud, who made it the main task of a science of the mind, and it has been a fruitful area of study since (e.g., Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001; see also Hart, 2014).

One leading framework, based on an analysis of over 100 papers featuring over 400 distinct lower-level categories of coping, extracts three broad families of stressors. First are threats to autonomy, which involves appraisals that one's ability to act - one's ability to choose one's own path - is being helped or hindered, which focuses coping-related strategies on coordinating preferences and available options. Second are threats to competence, or appraisals that one's control over the environment is threatened, which focuses coping-related strategies on coordinating actions and contingencies in the environment. Finally come threats to belongingness and the availability of trusted others, which focuses coping-related strategies on coordinating social resources (Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003). These categories are analogous to theories that suggest that fundamentally people need to feel as if they belong, as if they're understood, and as if they're effective (e.g. Stevens & Fiske, 1995); and are also similar to the needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness posed by Self Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1991).

In dealing with threat, what can a person do? Coping strategies are often consciously and actively chosen (e.g. Compas et al., 2001; Rippeto & Rogers, 1987), and the act of coping is not

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necessarily just an intrapsychic phenomenon – people can reach outside themselves for resources to manage threats. People rely on the social support of others to help deal with life stresses (e.g. Cohen & Wills, 1985), for example, and this support can even extend to such acute stressors as the fear of electric shock (Coan, Schaefer, & Davidson, 2006). People can also reach out for the comforting power of objects (e.g. Malafouris, 2019). Objects can be used to enhance our capabilities to *do* things (as with tools, which allow us to expand our action capabilities, e.g. Weser, Finotti, Constantini, & Proffitt, 2017), and can be used to enhance our capabilities to *be* things (as with credentials, which allow us to take on certain roles and responsibilities, e.g. Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981). They can also be used to enhance our ability to protect ourselves. Most literally, of course, objects such as umbrellas protect us from rain, and clothes protect us from the cold. But objects can also act to protect us against less literal threats, such as loss of self-esteem (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Cutright, 2012; Noble & Walker, 1997; Unruh, 1983; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). And, when the threat has landed, so to speak, objects and the physical world help us to recover. People may turn to the comforting power of objects when they perceive that people they are close to can't be relied upon (Keefer, Landau, Rothschild, & Sullivan, 2012), and one study finds that people who have been recently ostracized tend to prefer spaces which allow them to cut off contact with other people, allowing them to use the physical world as a way of dealing with their psychological states (Meagher & Marsh, 2017).

Just as these other objects or spaces may be used to help people cope, guns may be working in a similar sense, as a sort of totem or charm wielded against the forces of anxiety or threat. The anthropologist Abigail Kohn suggests as much when talking about the way that her interviewees use their weapons:

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One of the ways that shooters cope with the instability and anxiety of contemporary society is to grasp onto objects of safety, control, and profound symbolic meaning: guns. The value of guns lies in their historic and contemporary sociocultural meaning as much as their solid crime-fighting allure. (Kohn, 2004b, p 111)

Guns, for these individuals, are being used as symbolic objects, helping them to cope with the consequences of a dangerous world.

The Psychological Consequences of a Dangerous World

The fundamental worries created by the belief that one's world is dangerous and institutions are unwilling or unable to help is reflected in challenges requiring all three coping families: autonomy, competence, and belongingness. Belief that the world is dangerous, and that therefore one's safety is at risk, opens up questions about one's ability to act freely (i.e. autonomy, see e.g. Hart, 2014; Kenrick, Griskevicius, Neuberg, & Schaller, 2010; Neel, Kenrick, White, & Neuberg, 2016; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997 for the role of self-protection in self-actualization). Belief that institutions are unwilling to help, and therefore that one's importance to society is threatened, opens questions about one's ability to control one's environment (i.e. efficacy), both through the hit to self-esteem that comes from being overlooked by society (see e.g. Crocker & Major, 1989; Inzlicht, McKay, & Aronson, 2006; Major & O'Brien, 2005 for the negative effects of discrimination on self-esteem; and see e.g. Bandura, 1977; Howell, Sosa, & Osborn, 2019; Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2002 for the link between self-esteem and self-efficacy); and from feeling that one cannot trust other members of society, and therefore cannot participate in the life of the community (see e.g. Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Gabriel, 2017; Keele, 2007 for the interdependent links between trust in government and

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civic participation/social capital). The combination of worries about one's safety and one's place in society each opens questions about one's belongingness (see e.g. Hart, 2014; Pittman & Ziegler, 2007; Pyszczynski et al., 1997 for links between feeling unsafe and striving for belongingness; and see e.g. Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Murray, Bellavia, Feeney, Holmes, & Rose, 2001 for links between feeling unvalued and striving for belongingness).

Together, then, by their belief that the world is dangerous and society unable to keep them safe, protective gun owners set the groundwork for threats to all three classes of fundamental needs. In their guns, however, they may see a means of dealing with these threats. As one owner, has it:

In Greg's view, threats to the individual are omnipresent in society and have been for centuries. The individual's experience of those threats is felt as a generalized sense of anxiety or fear, not related to specific people or events, but what could be thought of as 'free-floating anxiety'....Greg feels strongly that it is not only the literal threats that people experience in their daily lives that hinder their ability to do what they want and be who they want. These fears prohibit people from achieving self-actualization. Threats are internalized and become symbolic obstacles, equally threatening, though not as concrete....A gun can ensure your personal sense of safety. By literally protecting the body, the individual can literally and metaphorically actualize the self." (Kohn, 2004b 71-2)

By helping to protect the self from outside threat, guns also help to protect the self from "free-floating anxiety." Guns, in this understanding, are tools for dealing with multiple threats, physical and not, including the feeling that one is symbolically incomplete or lacking. A recent paper provides some empirical evidence for this supposition. In a series of studies, gun-owning

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participants who were reminded of guns, due to the temporal proximity of mass-shooting events, and whose self-efficacy was experimentally lowered, found their guns were more empowering and their place in society more secure than those without the reminder of guns or the hit to their self-efficacy. Being reminded of their guns was similarly empowering for those who dispositionally felt that their groups were disadvantaged in society (Leander et al., 2019). In bringing their guns to mind, these participants were able to fend off the threat to their fundamental needs presented by the experimenters or experienced in their everyday lives. Protective gun owners, in other words, are using their guns to help cope - a possibility alluded to by Barack Obama when he talked about those who “cling to guns” in response to their frustrations at being left behind by society and government (Obama, 2008).

The Coping Model of Protective Gun Ownership

I propose that protective gun owners’ beliefs that the world is a dangerous place and that society doesn’t care enough to protect them leads to worries about their safety, their control and self-efficacy, and their belongingness. Protective gun owners use their guns as a means of coping with these threats, but ironically in doing so, they may be reinforcing beliefs that the world is dangerous and that society won’t protect them (see Figure 1).

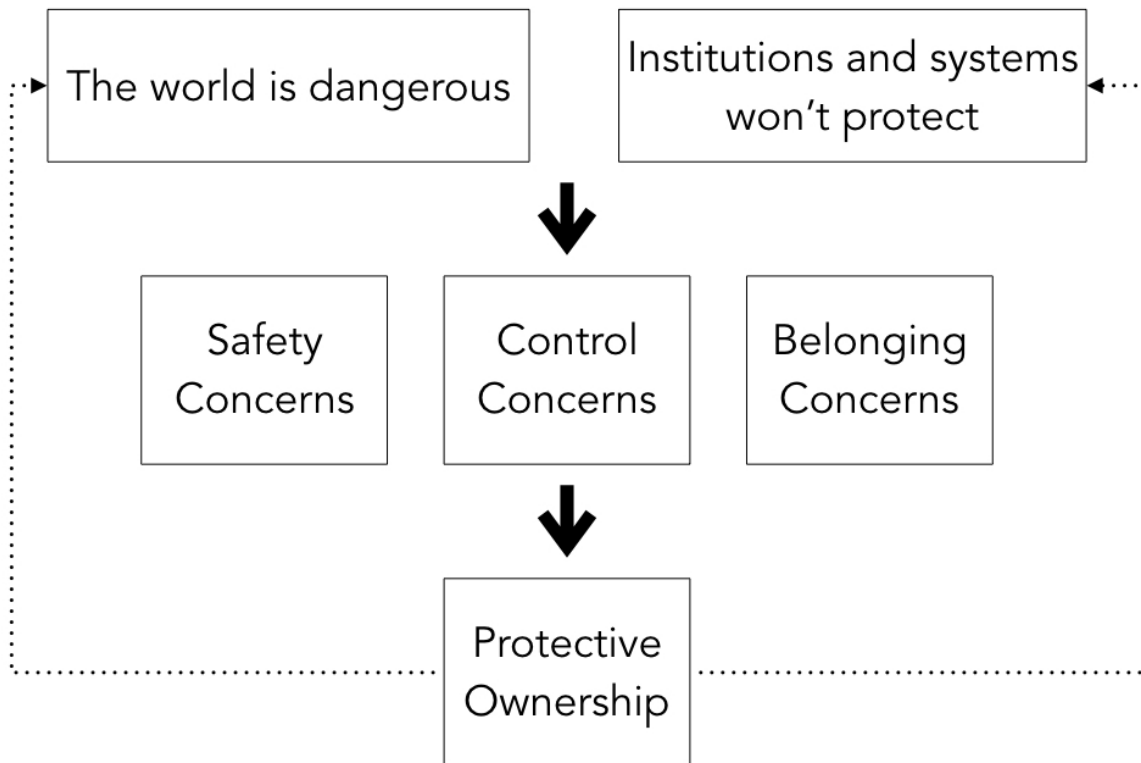


Figure 1. The Coping Model of Protective Gun Ownership. In the Coping Model of Protective Gun Ownership, a worldview that sees the world as dangerous institutions and systems as unable or unwilling to protect leads to worries about one's safety, one's control, and one's sense of belonging, which motivate protective gun ownership. The use of a gun as a coping mechanism, however, ironically reinforces beliefs about the dangers of the world and the inability of society to keep one protected.

Proposition 1: Guns Maladaptively Protect Against Threats to Safety

The belief that one's safety is endangered, whether from dominance by other individuals or from their image of a tyrannical government, should trigger threats about one's autonomy.

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Gun ownership is held out as a potential salve for this worry; the idea that carrying a gun acts as a deterrence against victimization is commonly reported by protective gun owners: of the quarter of handgun owners who regularly carry, a full 82% report doing so for protection (Rowhani-Rahbar, Azrael, Lyons, Simonetti, & Miller, 2017). Handgun owners tend to believe that their weapons will effectively defend them against crime (Stroebe et al., 2017b), for example, and Harcourt (2006), in his coding of interviews of incarcerated men, finds that guns-as-deterrence is the single most frequent element of his coding scheme. To quote one of his interviewees: “Trouble come automatically when you don’t have a gun.” (Harcourt, 2006, p. 32). Even if they, themselves, are not carrying a weapon, gun owners tend to believe that their environments will be safer if someone is carrying a gun, even if that person is a stranger (Wallace, 2018).

However, in using their guns to help manage the worries about their own safety that arise from their sense that the world is dangerous, protective gun owners are engaging in a maladaptive coping strategy. A coping strategy can be said to be maladaptive when it acts to make a person feel better about their immediate situation at the cost of exacerbating the underlying problem (Rippeto & Rogers, 1987). Gun owners, when faced with their fear, turn to a strategy that boosts their self-esteem in the moment, but which does nothing to actually control crime in their neighborhood or make the world a safer place. Recall that prior research suggests that carrying a weapon is almost never used to prevent crimes against one’s person (Hemenway & Solnick, 2015; Planty & Truman, 2013) and that an increase in concealed carry actually increases crime in an area (Ayres & Donohue, 2003; Donohue, Aneja, & Weber, 2018).

Carrying a gun around may make people feel that their world is even more dangerous, with only their gun able to keep their heightened fears in check. In one study, researchers found that those who were more afraid of crime initially were more likely to own a gun in a subsequent

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wave, but that, surprisingly, owning the gun didn't materially change owners' level of fear. However, while acquiring a gun did not reduce fear, losing a gun seemed to make people more fearful (Hauser & Kleck, 2013). Or, as one gun owner put it, after thinking about what it would mean to lose their gun, "I would have to live back in that fear, being afraid to walk, being afraid to go out. If you take it away from me, now I've got to walk a little faster, look over my shoulder a little bit more" (Homsher, 2001, p. 8).

This emphasis on avoiding harm, and the ensuing sense of vigilance is predicted by Regulatory Focus Theory (Higgins, 1997). Those focused on prevention, worried more about preventing bad things from happening than on seeking out good things, are especially concerned with their own safety and security, and are likely to exhibit more vigilant behaviors (e.g. Higgins et al., 2001), leading to a higher sensitivity to threat (e.g. Stroessner, Scholer, Marx, & Weisz, 2015). Gun owners have been shown to be more prevention-focused than non-gun owners (Conley & Higgins, 2018), and they consistently report feeling more aware of their surroundings when holding their guns (e.g. Kohn, 2004b). And while gun owners report worries about victimization when they aren't carrying their weapon, they also frequently report worries about victimization if people find out that they are carrying, fearing being targeted by criminals or "anti-gun nuts" (Barnhart et al., 2018).

Holding a gun may induce fundamental changes in the way a person perceives the world, particularly as it relates to threat. If "perceiving is for doing" (e.g. Gibson, 1950), this makes sense. Holding a gun radically changes the things a person can do, making it far easier to project force, and one would expect this change in ability leads to changes in perceptual processes as well. For instance, studies show that holding a gun in a shooting position, as opposed to simply having it holstered to one's side, makes participants more likely to focus on the faces of other

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people (Biggs, Brockmole, & Witt, 2013); more likely to detect guns in a shooter task (Witt & Brockmole, 2012); and potentially decreases susceptibility to change-blindness illusions (Taylor, Witt, & Pratt, 2017). Carrying a gun, in other words, seems to increase vigilance and orient people towards threat.

This increased vigilance likely comes at a cost – as one is more alert to threats, one is more likely to detect them (e.g. Jonas et al., 2014). Carrying a gun in order to assuage worries about being dominated may actually be a sort of affective forecasting error (Wilson & Gilbert, 2005). People think that getting a gun will make them less fearful, but they don't take into account the increased vigilance that comes along with the gun and the concomitant upregulation of the threat-detection system, which thus cancel out any real psychological benefits. Thus, gun-owners may go through the day on higher alert, using the symbol of the gun to manage the increased feelings of danger which their increased vigilance has exposed them to. Once the gun is taken away, that system may stay somewhat stuck in heightened-vigilance mode, especially if the ex-gun-owner is in the same environment that their gun helped them construe as being so dangerous, and, without the gun to help them cope with their baseline threat, they may feel especially helpless. In using their gun to protect against the perceived threats to their safety created by their sense that the world is dangerous, protective gun owners inadvertently reinforce their belief that the world is dangerous.

Proposition 2: Guns Maladaptively Protect Against Threats to Control and Self-Efficacy

If one sees the world as dangerous and doesn't trust the government or other systems to protect against it, then one should be worried about one's freedom to act amidst disorder.

Protective gun owners may be turning to their guns as a way of asserting and maintaining control

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and self-efficacy: 74% of gun owners say that owning a gun is essential to their freedom (Parker et al., 2017).

When control is threatened, fluid-compensation models of coping, such as the Compensatory Control Model (Kay, Whitson, Gaucher, & Galinsky, 2009) propose that people look for other ways of asserting control, whether it be at the individual level ('I am in control') or at the systemic level ('things, in general are under control'). This affirmation of compensatory control can help reduce the anxiety which comes from uncontrollability (e.g. Greenaway, Louis, & Hornsey, 2013; Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008. Compensatory control may have a dark side, however, as feeling disempowered, especially when a person perceives that the broader social system is disorderly, may also lead to conspiratorial thinking and the identification of powerful enemies as an alternate method of reasserting control (Sullivan, Landau, & Rothschild, 2010; though see van Elk & Lodder, 2018).

Affirming compensatory control may be an especially appealing path for protective gun-owners, who tend to believe that things, in general, are not under control - that there is general disorder and that the government can't be trusted to put it right. Gun owners, particularly those who regularly carry their weapons in everyday life, may be more prone to conspiratorial ideation (Freeman & Bentall, 2017). Given these attributions, imbuing an object with the power to grant control should help these individuals to cope with what would otherwise be a deeply threatening sense that their world is uncontrollable.

Guns may be able to provide this boost to feelings of control. Research shows that conservatives (but not liberals) report higher levels of control when imagining holding a gun, and are more likely to believe that adding armed civilians to a chaotic mass-shooting event would make the situation more orderly and controllable (Shepard & Kay, 2018). The notion of a gun as

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an “equalizer,” something which allows a person to overcome restrictions on their ability to act, is commonly referenced by protective gun owners (e.g. Browder, 2006; Carlson, 2016; Kohn, 2004b). Enhancing this ability to act goes beyond simply protecting oneself against criminals, and extends to one’s ability to affirmatively enforce one’s will on the world. Gun owners seem commonly to use their guns in order to create and reinforce ideologies of interpersonal domination (e.g. Carlson, 2013; Harcourt, 2006; Kohn, 2004b), and to prevent that domination from being taken by others by granting them an enhanced ability to “fight back” (e.g. Carlson, 2013; Harcourt, 2006; Kohn, 2004b). Take the experience of John McGuire, as described in the Washington Post:

What he said he loved most about guns was not the hunting, or the culture, or even the thrill of pulling a trigger. It was the way that holding a weapon in his hand could make him feel in control when so many other aspects of his life did not...McGuire bought guns, because he said they made him feel as if he was protecting his family, even as his daughter’s cancer rendered him powerless. His daughter started chemotherapy, and he bought four revolvers from the Norwich police department. She started radiation, and he purchased a combat rifle from a dealer in Florida. Doctors removed a kidney, and he bought a .44 magnum. They took out part of her intestines, and he bought a pistol that looked like one made famous by James Bond. His collection grew over three decades of his daughter’s health emergencies — through 11 surgeries and dozens of infections, until the one that killed her at age 46 in the spring of 2015. (Saslow, 2018)

Protective gun owners may even be using their weapons as a means of dealing with their worries about the trustworthiness of broader social systems. Anthropologists write about gun owners attempting to use their guns to reassert their ability to act against a rapacious state (e.g.

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Kohn, 2004b), against lost masculinity (e.g. Stroud, 2012), or against a sexist society (the idea of “power feminism, Browder, 2006; Stange & Oyster, 2000). People arm themselves when faced with insecurity (Kleck, 1997), and White Americans who feel economic threat are more likely to affirm that guns make them feel more safe, responsible, patriotic, respected, and in control of their fate (Mencken & Froese, 2017). It is no surprise, then, that economic inequality, which drives many of these senses of powerlessness (e.g. Buttrick & Oishi, 2017) correlates strongly with firearms ownership in America (Kennedy, Kawachi, Prothrow-Stith, Lochner, & Gupta, 1998).

In relying on the possession and carrying of a deadly, dangerous object in order to reaffirm the sense of personal control, protective gun owners are again maladaptively dealing with the perceived threat, addressing their immediate sense of disempowerment without addressing the underlying causes. While guns do seem to give their owners a sense of agency, if only the capability to inflict deadly force, they do not seem able to address the sense of societal disempowerment arising from their owners’ sense that systems are not interested in protecting them - the very thing creating that threat in the first place. And, in arming themselves, protective gun owners are making their immediate environments more uncontrollable and increasing the likelihood that they will be injured. Guns are more likely to escalate everyday disagreements, potentially with fatal consequences, than in self-defense (Hemenway, Miller, & Azrael, 2000), and even protective gun owners seem to believe that bringing a gun on campus would make heated exchanges more dangerous and harm classroom debate (Shepperd et al, 2018). Even in the very rare case when a person may be called upon to be a ‘good guy with a gun,’ police recommend keeping holstered to avoid shooting innocent bystanders and being shot by police in turn (Blair, Nichols, Burns, & Curnutt, 2013). In reinforcing the potential disorder in their midst,

protective gun owners may be tempted towards conspiratorial compensatory control, creating a commonly-reported sense amongst protective gun owners that powerful others are attempting to manipulate systems in ways that will make they, the gun owners, less safe (Browder, 2006; Kohn, 2004b; Stange & Oyster, 2000).

By using a gun to reaffirm a personal sense of control, protective gun owners ironically make their immediate environments more uncontrollable, worsening the very thing they mean to protect against, reinforcing the sense of systemic injustice that creates the sense of disempowerment in the first place.

Proposition 3: Guns Protect Against Threats to Belongingness

Living in a world in which you do not trust elements of the prevailing social structure and do not feel valued naturally leads to worries about whether or not you belong. Protective gun owners may be using their guns as a way of defining a role for themselves and marking their place in a broader community of like-minded individuals. Protective gun owners are twice as likely as hunters to say that owning their guns is important to their overall identity (Parker et al., 2017).

For some, gun ownership may even end up becoming the constituent part in the way that they relate to others. The notion of gun ownership as a key part of one's identity has been developed across the second half of the 20th century, driven, at least in part, by aggressive advertising (e.g. Lacombe, 2019; Yamane et al., 2017). The sociologist Jennifer Carlson argues that, for some, carrying a gun has become something of a civic act, as a way of taking on the role of what she calls a "citizen-protector," acting out a perceived moral duty to protect oneself and others and, by reclaiming powers lost to such threats as joblessness and the changing role of men

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in society, to uphold societal values against increasing disorder (Carlson, 2016; see also Leander et al., 2019). In the face of a society which is seen to have taken some roles away from them, these citizen-protectors are crafting a new way of relating to their loved ones and their communities - as those who, thanks to their protective weapons, can exert self-efficacy and maintain order by keeping people safe - metaphorical “sheepdogs” protecting defenseless sheep (civilians) against wolves (criminals; see e.g. Grossmann & Christensen, 2004). In dealing with an uncertain and changing world, they find refuge in distinctive ideological groups as a way of refinding a place in the world (e.g. Hogg, 2007; 2014).

One consequence of making guns a marker of identity is that arguments about gun control become arguments about identity. When deeply-held beliefs come under threat, people may react by making those beliefs unfalsifiable, resting them not on facts, but on issues such as moral principles (Friesen, Campbell, & Kay, 2015). Moral conviction is a strong motivator for gun control beliefs and actions, both for gun-rights and gun-control advocates (Skitka, Hanson, & Wisneski, 2017); protective gun owners, with their ownership a key part of the way they identify, may similarly be shifting from grounding their ownership in falsifiable arguments to grounding it in calls to broader identity. Many researchers (e.g. Braman, Kahan, & Grimmelmann, 2005; Kahan & Braman, 2003; Kleck, Gertz, & Bratton, 2009; Sears, Lau, Tyler, & Allen, 1980; Whitehead, Schnabel, & Perry, 2018) have argued that firearm regulation has become an essentially symbolic enterprise; that many gun owners oppose further regulation not because they oppose it in principle, but because regulation threatens their symbolic selves or views of their group (but see Wolpert & Gimpel, 1998, who argue that self-interest also plays at least some role in gun-owners’ reaction to changes in gun laws). A recent large-scale survey found that cultural beliefs, such as believing that other gun owners are part of one’s ingroup, are

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a key factor in understanding the relationship between protective gun ownership and the attitudes that protective owners have about guns and gun control (Losee, Pogge, Lipsey, & Shepperd, 2019).

Identity-related concerns may even shape the way that gun owners acquire and process information, not just how they respond to arguments about gun control. When people have conclusions that they want to reach, they can engage in any number of processes of biased information search, argument construction, or belief evaluation - the phenomena collectively known as motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990). For example, one survey found that gun owners are much less likely to blame the widespread availability of guns for mass-shootings than non-gun-owners, tending instead to blame a degenerate popular culture or poor parenting, especially to the extent that they belong to groups with stronger attachments to guns-as-culture; and are similarly less likely to advocate for changes in gun laws (Joslyn & Haider-Markel, 2017).

Yet this use of guns to help protect against threats to one's sense of belonging and community is maladaptive. Worries about one's belongingness may draw people into focusing on their own safety and security (Park & Baumeister, 2015), potentially increasing reliance on a tool that is held out as a salve for those worries. And living in a world in which at least some portion of society wishes to restrict their freedoms by "taking away" their guns, those very objects which symbolize who they are and the communities they belong to, means living in a world where one's fundamental identity is constantly subject to question. Take the example of Harold, a gun owner interviewed by Abigail Kohn:

Harold now perceives himself to be in a minority position, and it is an unfamiliar and uncomfortable place. He perceives himself embodying certain 'intrinsic' social attributes that denote authentic American identity (i.e. he is white, male, middle class, a small

business owner, a conservative, and a gun owner)....Because guns have come to symbolize for Harold everything that he believes the real America stands for (i.e. freedom, individualism, and equality), those who are antigun are not real Americans. These gun control advocates also have several other attributes Harold identifies as ‘less’ or even ‘un-American’ (i.e. they are nonwhite, non-English-speaking, female, and antigun), all of which makes the situation that much more outrageous and intolerable for him. (Kohn 2004b, 66-67).

Feeling that one’s group is in conflict with the broader dictates of society and that one’s relative status has been or is about to be devalued may awaken a “quest for significance,” a state in which a person is especially concerned with finding meaning in their lives (Kruglanski et al., 2013). Meaning in life has been theorized as a feeling that one’s life is significant, that it makes sense, and that one is able to reach valued goals (Heintzelman & King, 2014a; Heintzelman & King, 2014b). Protective gun owners may be turning to their weapons as a means of buffering their existential angst--a perceived loss of significance, senselessness, or thwarted goals--allowing them to continue to think of their lives as meaningful. Research shows that ideologies such as right-wing authoritarianism (an ideology which is associated with attitudes about protective gun ownership, especially among men; Cizmar, Layman, McTague, Pearson-Merkowitz, & Spivey, 2014; Lizotte, 2019) can help people to maintain the belief that their lives are significant, and therefore meaningful, in the face of psychological threat (Womick, Ward, Heintzelman, Woody, & King, 2019). Protective gun owners, especially those who have taken up the mantle of “citizen-protector” or “sheepdog,” may be similarly using the protective power of their weapons as a way to assert the significance of their lives.

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This notion of guns as, by protecting identities, protecting cherished values is rife in the understanding of guns as a culture (e.g. Utter & True, 2000), and by questioning one's guns then, one is questioning one's identity, and ultimately one's sense of global meaning (e.g. Janoff-Bulman & Frantz, 1997; Koltko-Rivera, 2004; Mischel & Morf, 2003). When that questioning happens, one's sense of meaning may be lowered, which has been theorized to lead to self-regulatory attempts to increase meaning (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Heintzelman & King, 2014b; Tullet, Teper, & Inzlicht, 2011; Park, 2010; Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012).

This meaning-threat leads gun owners, unable to come to terms with a gun-control threat that authority figures have described as apocalyptic, or to construct new core narratives, to address the identity threat that comes with the questioning of their weapons by doubling down on the meaning they find in guns, an option which is more than psychologically plausible (e.g. Major, Kaiser, O'Brien, & McCoy, 2007; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). This same prediction also aligns with reactance theory, which would suggest that attempts to restrict a person's freedoms lead individuals to work harder to regain that lost freedom (Brehm, 1966; Steindal, Jonas, Sittenthaler, Traut-Mattausch, & Greenberg, 2015), or through significance-quest theories, which suggest that an activated significance-quest guides people deeper into the threatened group identity (Kruglanski et al., 2013).

This potential worldview doubling-down may help explain why, as mentioned above, applications for concealed-carry licenses seem to increase after mass shooting events, why attitudes towards guns, especially among gun owners, seem not to change after such tragedies, and why threats to their political power makes protective gun owners want to acquire more weapons (Steidly & Kosla, 2018). When those identities come under threat, the dominant psychological response may simply be to buckle down. This use of guns to craft an identity may

be backfiring, causing gun owners to reorganize their cultural affinities around their gun ownership, in opposition to a perceived elite culture at large that is untrustworthy and does not have one's interests at heart. By using a gun to define relationships, protective gun owners are exacerbating the underlying worry, that society does not care about them, that caused the threat to belongingness in the first place. It may be no accident that gun-ownership is so tightly socially clustered in contemporary America (Parker et al., 2017) - it may be a direct reflection of this meaning-maintenance process.

Why Use Guns to Cope?

Of all the ways to deal with these diverse threats to the self, why choose a gun? While, to their owners, they mean power, control, discipline, community, and safety, there are plenty of other tools, both physical and social that people could use to fill those same needs, at far less potential cost to themselves and others. Are guns inherently protective objects, or has their coping function been culturally and historically constructed?

The underlying worries that protective gun owners are protecting against - that their worlds are unsafe and institutions aren't able to help - are not uncommon throughout the world. An analysis of Wave 6 of the World Values Survey, looking at comparable nations¹ shows that the beliefs of weapon-carrying Americans about the security in their neighborhood (20.1% feel not very or not at all secure) and their confidence in the police (34.3% report not very much to no confidence) is actually right around the median for citizens (weapon-carrying and not) of other developed countries (16.7% feeling insecure in their neighborhoods and 36.7% lacking

¹ I looked at the permanent members of the G20 surveyed in the WVS, plus those countries that sent delegates to the 2018 meeting, comparing the US to Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Chile, China, Germany, India, Japan, South Korea, the Netherlands, Russia, Rwanda, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, and Turkey.

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confidence in the police). While 74.7% of weapon-carrying Americans report not very much or no confidence in their government (above the 52.2% feeling similarly in the median country of the sample), it's a percentage not radically higher than the 68.3% of Australians who report feeling the same nor the 77.9% of Spaniards. And yet American protective gun ownership is unrivaled among comparable nations - among the original 15 members of the European Union, just 11% of gun owners report owning their weapon primarily for protection (Eurobarometer, 2013). Why is American protective gun culture so unique?

Part of the answer likely lies in simple availability. For a coping mechanism to be useful, it must be available. Even if citizens in other countries wanted to own a gun for their own self-defense, laws likely restrict their ownership or prohibit them from owning them explicitly for self-defense (see Santaella-Torino, Cerdá, Villaveces, & Galea, 2016, for a comparative review of international firearms laws). The U.S., with its permissive laws and massive supply of firearms, makes it far easier for people to own a gun if they want.

Another part of the answer is likely the result of effective marketing, as the rise in American protective weapons ownership is a surprisingly recent phenomenon. While the mythology of the early American period has portrayed a romantic idea of the self-reliant frontier gunman (e.g. Hofstadter, 1970; Tonso, 1982), the reality appears to have been very different.

Until the mid-20th century, the vast majority of Americans did not own firearms. Evidence from probate records suggests that up through the 1830s, no more than 15-20% of Americans owned a gun, even on the frontier (Bellesiles, 1996). Though early American militias ostensibly required that all members own a gun, fewer than half of militia members seem to have actually had one, owing perhaps to the fact that guns of the era were difficult to operate, expensive, and needed constant maintenance. Among those militiamen who did own a gun, the

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majority seem to have essentially let their guns rot, a problem which continually seems to have vexed militia commanders and generals in the pre-Civil-War period (e.g. Higgenbotham, 1988; Pitcavage, 1993). Gun ownership and maintenance was so poor that one way to make yourself very popular as a militia commander was apparently just never to call the militia to order so that no one had to humiliate himself by presenting or trying to fire his rusted-out musket. Those militias unlucky enough to meet were roundly mocked for their terrible marksmanship -- so much so that actual laws were passed in South Carolina, with fines and jail sentences, for anyone heckling the militia (Bellesiles, 1996). “Judging from the popular literature of the day, the public seemed completely uninterested in firearms.” (Bellesiles, 1996, p. 439)

While the Civil War radically changed the quality and frequency of firearms (Haag, 2016), most advertisements of the period treated guns as just another tool. The firearms company Remington, for example, also manufactured objects such as sewing machines and agricultural implements, and in ads of 1870s, all three types of products would be featured on the same page, with similar templates and similar language advertising for each (Burbick, 2006). Ads of the time targeting female buyers “showed guns to be safe tools to be used as equipment for healthy recreation” (Browder, 2006, p. 9; though self-defense did start appearing in ads as early as 1866, see Henning & Witkowski, 2013). Even as late as the immediate post-WWII era, handguns, used largely for personal protection, were a fairly small minority of the total number of firearms manufactured by American companies. Only about 10% of all guns available to civilians were handguns, and it was not until 1968 that the number of handguns produced in the U.S. overtook the number of rifles and shotguns (Diaz, 1999).

Nowadays, assault rifles, and handguns (increasingly driven by the sales of especially deadly high-caliber pistols, which quadrupled in production between 2005 and 2015) dominate

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the American gun market (ATF, 2017; Diaz, 1999; Smith et al., 2017). While some firearms (especially those used for hunting) are still advertised as “tools, sports equipment, or lifestyle accessories” (Saylor, Vittes, Sorensen, 2004, p. 430), the majority of guns today are far more likely to be marketed as a means of self-protection or as a guarantor of liberty (Meltzer, 2009; Winkler, 2011). This is exemplified in the advertising push to encourage women to buy guns, beginning in the 1980s, “as a defense against anonymous violence, a task that the government is clearly not up to” (Browder, 2006, p. 10), and the NRA’s “Refuse to Be a Victim” program (see also Glick, 2017; Middlewood, Joslyn, & Haider-Markel, 2019). A content analysis of one hundred years of advertisements in the NRA’s flagship publication *The American Rifleman* demonstrates this historical trend. Ads in the mid-1970’s and 1980’s overwhelmingly focused on hunting and sport shooting, with almost no ad space dedicated to personal protection. Starting in the 1970’s, perhaps in part as a reaction to the decline of hunting in America, perhaps in response to the images of black militancy in the aftermath of the 1965 Watts riots and the ensuing racialization of perceptions of crime (Osnos, 2016; see also Diaz, 1999), advertisers began to emphasize the self-protective functions of their goods, and as of 2015, ad space devoted to protection has reliably appeared more frequently than ad space devoted to hunting (Yamane, Ivory, & Yamane, 2017; see also Lacombe 2019 for an analysis of the political content of NRA magazines).

This transition in advertising is reflected in what people report about their gun ownership. As late as 1978, just 20% of American gun owners listed self-defense as their most important reason for owning a gun, far fewer than those owning guns primarily for hunting (54%) and not that much more than those owning a gun primarily for target practice (10%; Wright, Rossi, & Daley, 1983). In contrast, the most recent Pew survey on guns in America found that 67% of gun

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owners reported that protection was a major reason they owned their guns, while hunting had slipped to just 38% of owners (Parker et al., 2017).

Cross-nationally, Americans now appear more likely than Australian or British respondents to think that guns protect a person from crime, while Australians and Brits seem more likely to think that guns stimulate crime (Cooke, 2004; Cooke & Puddifoot, 2000; Puddifoot & Cooke, 2002). Local and national news may be amplifying this message: a recent study found that higher consumption of news by Americans was associated with stronger beliefs that the world is dangerous and that oneself is at a higher risk of being harmed, which both in turn predicted whether or not a person was a protective gun owner (Stroebe, 2019).

This complex of messages may have also resonated especially well with a certain set of the population. Politically, there is a relatively robust relationship between gun ownership and conservatism: 57% of Republican households own a gun, as compared to just 25% of Democratic households (Parker et al., 2017); a relationship that has dramatically strengthened since the 1970's (Joslyn, Haider-Markel, Baggs, & Bilbo, 2017; see also Conley 2019). Views that the world is a dangerous place are associated with right-wing beliefs (Duckitt, Wagner, du Plessis, & Birum, 2002), and political conservatism is strongly associated with both needs for safety and certainty (e.g. Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2013; Kay & Eibach, 2013), and sensitivity to threat (e.g. Oxley, et al., 2008). Once threatened, Americans as a whole may be more likely than other cultures (especially East Asian cultures) to prefer individual-level coping strategies, handling their problems by themselves as opposed to seeking social support or relying on strategies which involve boosting the groups to which a person belongs (e.g. Kashima & Triandis, 1986; Schaubroeck, Lam, & Xie, 2000, see Kuo, 2011 for a theoretical review on cross-cultural differences in coping strategies). In addition, American conservatives may also be

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more likely than American liberals to search for causes of behavior within the individual as opposed to within the situation (Skitka, Mullen, Griffin, Hutchinson, & Chamberlin, 2002; Tetlock, 2000). Combined with the distrust of government which characterizes modern American conservatism (e.g. Reagan, 1981), a coping mechanism which holds itself out as an individual-level response to threat, especially in an uncertain world, seems likely to be especially attractive to a group of self-perceived rugged American individualists.

The rise of protective weapons ownership as a coping strategy in contemporary American society, in other words, was neither inevitable nor was it accidental. While historical and cross-national surveys suggests that there is nothing inherently protective about firearms ownership, it is also the case that gun manufacturers and the gun-rights lobby actively constructed a symbolic function for gun ownership from raw materials that already existed in American society.

Finally, the use of the symbolic function of a gun to defend against threats is very difficult to falsify. Gun owners tend towards overconfidence in their ability to responsibly own and use their handguns: one nationally-representative survey found that 97% of gun owners think that they are more responsible owners than average, with 23% putting themselves in the top 1% of responsibility (Stark & Sachau, 2016). Protective gun owners are practically never required to use their gun, whether by brandishing or firing, in actual self-defense (Hemenway et al., 2000; Hemenway & Solnick; 2015; Planty & Truman, 2013), and therefore they can rely on their mental simulations of how they would respond in such situations, simulations which often construe such encounters as simpler, less ambiguous, and more predictable than they likely are (Barnhart et al., 2018). With little access to the experiences that would disconfirm the utility of their weapons ownership, protective gun owners can rely almost completely on the symbolic functions of their guns without having to test their practical efficacy.

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A gun culture, once established, may be hard to roll back. Recent survey work suggests that American beliefs about gun-rights and gun-owning identity may now be driving political orientation and engagement as much as being driven by it, further driving the enshrinement of gun rights as central to one of the two primary American political parties (Conley, 2019; Lacombe, Howat, & Rothschild, 2019). It may, however, not be impossible to roll back, as the case of Australia demonstrates. Australia is culturally similar to the US, in terms of national mythology (both countries boast of their frontier spirit, stressing individualism, egalitarianism, and radical self-reliance; as opposed to counting on others for protection; Kohn, 2004a), and in terms of measurable cultural syndromes (e.g. Individualism, Uncertainty Avoidance, etc.; Hofstede, 2010). Through the 1970s, the Australian gun culture was fairly similar to the American one, with slightly lower levels of gun ownership, 25-30% of all households in Australia (Harding, 1981) as opposed to 40-45% in the US (Gallup, 2016), but with similar percentages reporting owning a gun for protection, 23% in Australia versus 20% in the US (Harding, 1981; Wright et al., 1983). As late as the early 1990s, according to one observer, Australia possessed “a powerful gun-rights movement, rivaled in the English-speaking world only by the American gun movement.” (Kopel, 1992, p. 206)

This all changed in 1996 when, in response to the mass-shooting in Port Arthur, Tasmania, the Australian government passed a sweeping gun control act that tightened licensing requirements, banned semi-automatic rifles and pump-action shotguns, and required that prospective gun owners demonstrate a “genuine reason” why they needed the weapon. “Personal protection” was not considered a valid cause. As part of a 12-month window to comply with the new law, the Australian government bought back any firearm rendered newly illegal. Over the next year, the buyback reduced the number of privately-held firearms by about 20% and roughly

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halved the number of households owning a gun. By 2005, only about 6% of Australian households still owned a gun (Alpers & Rossetti, 2016), and the understanding of what a gun was good for had returned to pragmatism. As one anthropologist, who has studied gun cultures in both the US and Australia put it: “Whereas American shooters perceive gun ownership to be a firm part of their identities as Americans, symbolizing self-reliant individualism, Australian shooters perceive guns simply as sporting equipment” (Kohn, 2004a, p. 179).

There is even some evidence that attitudes within the United States may be primed for change, with the incessant pace of mass shootings shifting the tenor of the gun control debate. Support for stricter gun control jumped almost 20 percentage points from 2014 to 2018 (Reinhart, 2018), and in October 2019 the Democratic Party recently held its first Presidential town hall devoted to gun reform in this century. There may be something especially indicative in the reactions of those targeted in the Las Vegas at the Route 91 Harvest Festival country-music concert in 2017. In the aftermath, several of the performers, self-proclaimed “Second Amendment People,” told reporters that the mass shooting had changed the way they thought about guns and gun-control (e.g. Gstalter, 2018; Watts, 2018). To quote Caleb Keeter, guitarist for one of the bands playing the festival:

I’ve been a proponent of the 2nd amendment my entire life.

Until the events of last night. I cannot express how wrong I was. We actually have members of our crew with CHL licenses [NB: Concealed Handgun Licenses], and legal firearms on the bus.

They were useless [...]

We need gun control RIGHT. NOW.

My biggest regret is that I stubbornly didn't realize it until my brothers on the road and myself were threatened by it. (Keeter, 2017)

Empirical Predictions: A Research Agenda

In this paper, I have argued that the protective-culture of gun ownership is using its guns to cope. Viewing the world as a place full of danger, and distrustful of the power of institutions, they use their guns to help manage threats - not just to their person, but also to their self-efficacy and belongingness. They see their guns as boosting their ability to act freely in the world, and, spurred by aggressive marketing and early socialization, have recontextualized guns as fundamental to their identities as good Americans. I argue that this coping strategy is maladaptive, however, resting on a fundamental misperception of what guns can and cannot do. While guns may make their owners feel better in the moment, they cannot address the fundamental sources of gun owners' threat, and instead reinforce those threatening beliefs, creating a cycle in which protective gun owners, using their guns to attempt to cope with ever-increasing stress and unable to divest from the gun culture that has become so central to their identity, have trouble disengaging.

Empirically, what would we then expect to see? What sorts of studies would provide evidence (positive or dispositive) for this set of claims?

The first set of tests are the most basic. Regardless of the precise details of the coping mechanism, are protective gun owners using their guns to cope in any way at all?

H1: If protective gun owners are using their guns to protect against the myriad of threats proposed, they should be more likely to think of their guns when psychologically

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threatened (i.e. more cognitively accessible). A coping mechanism is not useful if it does not come to mind as part of the menu of coping strategies.

H2: If protective gun owners are using their guns to protect against threat, they should feel less immediately threatened when possessing a gun than not. If a coping mechanism doesn't reduce threat in the moment, then it's not really a coping mechanism.

If gun owners are using their guns as a means of dealing with threats, then the intrapsychic predictions of the model come into play. The threats that protective gun owners are hypothesized to deal with come as a function of their beliefs that the world is dangerous and that society is not willing or able to protect them, and the model predicts that being reminded of one's gun acts as a palliative against the ensuing fundamental worries.

H3: Being reminded that the world is dangerous and that society will not protect them should lead to increased worries among protective gun owners about safety, about control and self-efficacy, and about belongingness. This basic process should be demonstrable both within lab settings and as a function of real-world occurrences such as mass casualty events (the world is dangerous) or national shifts in political power (see e.g. Steidley & Kosla, 2018; society will not protect you).

H4: Possessing one's gun should reduce the immediate sense of worry about safety, control/self-efficacy, and belongingness that are generated from the belief that the world is dangerous and society unable to protect.

The model proposes that this coping process is maladaptive and actually exacerbates the underlying cause. While a gun may reduce a momentary sense of direct threat, the model predicts that the use of a gun as a coping mechanism should increase vigilance to threat and make broader worries more salient.

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H5: Possessing one's gun should make protective gun owners more likely to view the world as dangerous and society as a whole as uncaring.

Conversely, directly addressing the core worries of protective gun owners about the dangers of the world or the ability of society to protect them should reduce the need to use their guns as a coping mechanism. With less of a need to cope, the gun is less valuable, and therefore protective gun owners should be more willing to have it regulated.

H6: Convincing protective gun owners that the world is safer, or that society (not just government, but also communities and other informal institutions) is able to protect them, should increase support for gun reform.

If the primary use of a gun in the hands of a protective weapons owner is for coping, then degrading the ability of firearms to symbolically deal with these threats should make them less appealing to owners. While this may be quite difficult, given the ways that identity is woven through gun ownership, if the gun is no longer able to symbolically protect its owner from these psychological stressors then much of its value as a coping mechanism, and therefore its value overall should be lost, especially if it can be shown that the gun is harmful to one's fundamental needs.

H7: Reminding gun owners of the ways that their guns are antithetical to their safety (perhaps through the publicization of gun suicide statistics and the fact that most gun deaths in America are deaths by suicide; Naghavi et al., 2018), to their ability to autonomously navigate their worlds (perhaps through a reminder of all the spaces that are closed off to them when they carry), or to their close relationships (perhaps by informing an owner that their friends and family do not feel safer when the owner is carrying but in fact feel more at risk, or the publicization of the finding that the overwhelming majority

of homicides are committed by people the victim knew; Siegel et al., 2014) should make them more likely to support gun reform.

H8: Giving protective gun owners experience of the dangerous situations that they have previously only been able to imagine, in the likely event that reality is more complicated than fantasy (e.g. Barnhart et al., 2018), should lead to a re-evaluation of the utility of their weapons to keep them safe in such situations. This should therefore undermine the various protective symbolic functions of the gun, which should make protective gun owners more likely to support gun reform.

Similarly, the model predicts that presenting protective gun owners with other sources of coping hydraulically reduces the psychological need for the gun. The substitution of other ways of addressing fundamental needs, such as the use of self-affirmation to buffer self-esteem against threat (e.g. Sherman & Cohen, 2006) or the redirection of a significance quest (e.g. Kruglanski et al., 2013), may help gun owners manage threats without resorting to the symbolic power of their firearms, functionally substituting for the gun, and thus rendering it less central to the self. If protective gun owners can replace the psychological function of the gun, it should be easier for them to disengage from the gun's identity-relevant elements, and thus may make them less enamored of their weapons.

H9: An affirmation of core values unrelated to gun ownership should make protective gun owners more likely to support gun reform.

These hypotheses, critically, should only apply to those Americans who own weapons for protection. Non-Americans who own weapons for protection may not be using their guns in the same way as American protective owners, lacking the cultural context and extensive marketing history as their American brethren, and therefore imbuing their weapons with a different

penumbra of symbolic associations. American hunters, target shooters, gun collectors, and those who need to own a weapon for their jobs, on the other hand should not have the same set of underlying worries, and should not be under the belief that the weapons they do own can help them deal with threats to their safety, self-efficacy, and belongingness that come about in their daily lives. Lumping all American gun owners together may even make discussions around gun reform more difficult - if hunters or target shooters feel overly-threatened by gun-control advocates, they may, as a form of reactance (e.g. Brehm, 1966), become polarized into the now-dominant protective gun culture, and therefore may adapt the culture's attitudes towards gun control.

Conclusion

The contemporary American desire to own a gun to keep oneself safe is an outlier, both historically and among similarly-developed nations. It is a desire with consequences - America has more civilian-owned guns than any other developed nation, and as a direct result has a level of gun-related deaths unmatched by any other developed nation. In this paper, I have marshalled evidence from across the social sciences, proposing that, at the root, this desire to own a gun springs from two related assessments of the world: that it is a dangerous place, and that the usual mechanisms that society uses to protect its members from that danger are not up to the task. These assessments, especially in tandem, threaten fundamental psychological needs - the need to be safe, the need to have self-efficacy and control, and the need to belong. I argue that protective gun owners are using their weapons to cope with these worries, finding safety, power, and a valued interpersonal and group identity in the symbolic power that American culture has granted to firearms. This symbolic power is not inherent to the weapon, as historical and cross-cultural

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investigations demonstrate, rather it is something that has been affirmatively constructed, largely across the second half of the 20th century. And, this use of a deadly weapon to do the work of psychic defense may, ironically, worsen the very worries which root the psychology of protective gun ownership, making the world seem even more dangerous and society even less willing or capable of defending against those dangers. In situating protective gun ownership as a coping strategy, I hope to shed some light on why the American gun culture has diverged so sharply from other developed countries and to provide a tool for researchers as they explore this critical flashpoint in contemporary American life and what to do about it.

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