A kind of peace: the real world of firearms owners

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A KIND OF PEACE:
THE REAL WORLD OF FIREARMS OWNERS

By
Zachary W. Miner

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Abstract

This dissertation addresses the topics of stigma and legal consciousness through close examination of the attitudes and life experiences of legal gun owners in upstate New York. Based in the symbolic interactionist tradition, and using a grounded theory approach, this project explores data gathered from participant-observation sessions, and semi-structured interviews with 37 participants. Analysis of this data reveals that respondents highlight safety, responsibility, skillful operation, and fun as the primary values they associate with the ownership and use of firearms. Additionally, in a departure from previous research in this area, respondents reported few individual experiences of social stigma, and engage in very few stigma management techniques surrounding their ownership and use of firearms. However, respondents do experience negative outcomes surrounding their engagement with the political realm, leading to perceptions of disadvantage, especially in state-level politics. Using Ewick and Silbey’s theory of legal consciousness as a framework, respondents’ accounts reveal how their perceptions of the political process as a whole are best viewed using the “with the law” perspective, whereas their attitudes about New York State politics specifically are better described using the “against the law” perspective. These research findings can be applied more broadly to gain understanding about the nature of stigma and its effects on individuals and groups, as well as the conditions under which groups feel engaged with, or disconnected from, legal and political processes.
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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Background

Despite their constant presence in media, politics, and public debate, little is actually known for sure about firearms in America. From the sheer volume of content that exists about them, it would be reasonable to assume that almost everything important there is to know about firearms has already been discussed at length, and that any new developments will be explored ad nauseam across editorial pages, government hearings, and in academic journals. However, the rejoinder to this argument is that even in the most well armed country on earth (Small Arms Survey 2007), what is well known about firearms is concentrated within a very narrow area, and outside of that area relatively little is certain.

One important factor in helping bring about this lack of understanding is the dearth of governmental statistics about firearms. For many important areas of social life – poverty, health care, employment – the federal government regularly issues up-to-date figures and in-depth reports that illustrate important changes and trends. When it comes to firearms, however, government data is distinctly lacking, partially because – since 1986 – federal law has explicitly prohibited the creation of any permanent database linking firearms owners to the firearms they own (Legal Information Institute n.d.), contributing to a lack of authoritative, publicly-available information about firearms owners and the movement of legal guns. Furthermore, legislation promoted by the National Rifle Association in 1996 restricted the federal government from studying firearms in ways that could be construed to promote gun control (Luo 2011). And even though those restrictions were nominally abolished by executive order following the Newtown shooting, the ban still essentially remains in effect (Frankel 2015).
The prohibition on many types of research has not only affected government agencies. As a result of the 1996 law, the government is also prevented from funding external researchers who do work that could be construed as supporting gun control, an outcome that has seriously curbed academic efforts in firearms-related areas. After the law passed, “[y]oung academics were warned that joining the field was a good way to kill their careers. And the odd gun study that got published went through linguistic gymnastics to hide any connection to firearms” (Frankel 2015). With little authoritative statistical data to work with, and few career rewards from generating one’s own data, academics have likely done far less research on firearms than they would have in the absence of these hurdles.

In this way, then, much of what the general public believes about gun ownership is largely unsupported because there is little authoritative data to inform these beliefs. However, I would argue that the public’s understanding is limited also because much of the firearms knowledge that has been generated in recent decades is concentrated within a relatively narrow area. In 1996, the NRA’s goal in pushing for restrictions on federal research was to prevent the demonization of firearms through their negative portrayal in government-funded studies. Ironically, though, in their efforts to prevent firearms ownership from negative public attention, they may have actually facilitated that outcome in the following decades by helping to create a distorted picture of firearms within the general public. One reason for this is because, despite the lack of federal research dollars for most gun-related topics, research was allowed to proceed in the areas of gun crime and gun violence because of their connection to other important governmental interests such as crime control, legislative evaluation, and improving police tactics. Provided that authors were careful not to cross the tenuous barrier separating legitimate gun research from advocacy, they could still carry out funded research.
In a world where the entire panoply of firearms-related topics were available, some of the researchers who flocked to studying gun violence would likely have redirected their efforts elsewhere. However, since such a conversation was not possible given existing regulations, what happened is that a topic that both threatened and captivated the public – and was much more eligible for research funding – got the most attention, whereas less threatening issues (such as legal firearms ownership) got far less. Now, certainly there are academics who have carried out important research in areas such as the subcultural aspects of legal firearms ownership (Anderson and Taylor 2010), the gendered nature of carrying firearms (Stroud 2012), and other related topics. And there are also some notable academics who have carried out research on their own without federal funds (Spitzer 2015). But government grants are important sources of both funding and prestige in academia, and it is no surprise that the area where money was most available became dominant.

It is clear that this largely singular academic and policy focus on the criminal aspects of firearms ownership – along with a seemingly endless string of horrifying, well-publicized shootings – has lent a distorted quality to the general public’s understanding of gun ownership. For many people – especially those who live in big cities where hunting and organized gun ownership are remote at best – the only situations in which they encounter firearms are in stories of routine local gun violence, or in the aftermath of the seemingly endless string of school shootings and workplace gun attacks. And yet, at the same time, firearms remain powerfully connected to masculinity (Kellner 2013; Stroud 2012), self-protection (Carlson 2014), and American values (Kohn 2000; Albers 2003). This leaves Americans profoundly conflicted about firearms, yielding a public understanding that is very inconsistent. Recent research shows, for example, that 85% of people believe that background checks should be expanded, 81% feel that
the mentally ill should be prevented from purchasing firearms, 70% would support a federal database to track gun sales, and 57% would support an outright ban on assault-style weapons (Pew Research Center 2015). And yet, when asked the more general question of whether firearms laws should be stricter than they are now, just 47% of people agreed (Swift 2014). Research also shows that Americans have an increasingly strong belief that owning firearms will make their homes safer, rather than putting them in more danger (McCarthy 2014), but these large-scale shifts in ideas about crime and safety appear to be taking place without any connection to the actual likelihood of being a crime victim (Kohut 2015).

In many ways, then, the public’s understanding of firearms ownership consists of a variety of incongruous beliefs. At times, guns are seen as a monster that needs to be strongly controlled to prevent harm; at other times, though, this horrible beast morphs into a largely benign creature that offers protection for one’s home and family. On the one hand, the public increasingly sees guns as a means to protect themselves from crime, while on the other hand violent and property crime rates are at their lowest point in decades (FBI 2015). I argue that much of this incongruity stems from a lack of authoritative information, the absence of which is filled in with beliefs or opinions formed via political ideology, media consumption, or cultural background knowledge. The combination of these things, without sufficient context from personal experience, not surprisingly yields contradictory outcomes.

Even absent high-quality data, though, it seems as though personal relationships between reasonable gun owners and non-gun owners would provide context, and help resolve many of the misunderstandings we see taking place. Geographically speaking, however, the United States’ population has increasingly moved to urban and suburban areas (Hobbs and Stoops 2002:9), and gun ownership has continued to be higher in rural areas than either urban or suburban areas.
(Hepburn et al. 2007:17), meaning that larger and larger portions of the US population live in locations where they are unlikely to encounter a gun owner who could offer a counter-example to the depictions they have seen in the media and elsewhere. This creates an almost perfect storm of misunderstanding where relatively little authoritative information exists to begin with, and the individuals who could share at least their individual-level experiences and understandings of firearms ownership are often physically and culturally remote from those unfamiliar with that context.

Together, these factors combine to create a public understanding of firearms that is akin to the ancient Greek legend of the chimera: it is an amalgam of several disparate aspects, many of which are confusing, frightening, or bafflingly different from one another, and which do not seem to cohere into a single creature. And yet, that creature stands before us – incongruous, impossible, and yet somehow also living and breathing. One goal of the current research is to help us understand this creature a little better by exploring its many aspects – both real and fantastical – and how it is that they all hold together in a single form.

**Current Study**

Given the challenges discussed in the previous section, my research departs from the status quo in a few important ways. First, I have intentionally chosen to carry out a study that focuses on the experiences of everyday, legal gun owners. These people have grown up with firearms, and have been enmeshed in a gun subculture, and they are therefore in an ideal position to share with researchers a kind of knowledge that is rarely tapped in academic firearms research. Choosing these individuals as my respondents is one small step towards allowing the voices of
the more numerous legal gun owners to be heard above the clamor of the large number of studies focused on criminal gun use.

Secondly, I have chosen to use a qualitative methodology. One reason for this is because this type of method is underutilized in the field and could therefore produce novel findings that might not be revealed through use of a quantitative method. Also, the type of information I am seeking – e.g., attitudes and beliefs about gun ownership, detailed accounts of respondents’ experiences with the law, viewpoints on whether gun owners are viewed positively or negatively – is best gathered by allowing respondents the chance to talk in an open-ended fashion about their experiences, and fully describe what those experiences mean to them. Furthermore, qualitative methods – especially those using a grounded theory approach where respondents’ accounts are closely analyzed to create theory from within the data – are designed to allow respondents’ voices to be heard clearly throughout the study. This enhances the legitimacy of the conclusions of the research, as will the fact that the methods of analysis are fairly straightforward and understandable. (See Chapter 2 for a full discussion of the methodology.)

In the end, no single study can hope to change the direction of an entire field of research. However, hopefully the conclusions that I reached in this research will at least help demonstrate the benefits of taking a different approach in this field. If others then follow my lead and increasingly begin utilizing qualitative methods, and seeking legal gun owners as respondents, so much the better.

**Previous Research**

Having laid out the basics of my research, I will now make a quick survey of what is already known in this research area. In broad brushstrokes, this section will acquaint the reader
with some of the major topics and debates addressed recently in the field of firearms research, and some implications of these findings. It will also allow the current study to be placed in a better overall context based on how it meshes with previous work.

To begin this discussion, it is important to quantify the prevalence of guns in the United States. In the mid-2000s, researchers estimated that Americans owned somewhere between 250 and 290 million guns (Small Arms Survey 2007), meaning that “[w]ith less than 5 per cent [sic] of the world’s population, the United States is home to roughly 35–50 per cent [sic] of the world’s civilian-owned guns” (46). More recent estimates suggest that the US gun stock has probably increased to over 300 million (Krouse 2012). However, as the number of guns has increased dramatically, the distribution of these firearms within the population has become more compact. In the mid-1990s, research suggested that as many as 50% of households owned firearms (Kleck 1997), but that number has since been in decline. Since 2000, a range of polls has consistently shown household firearms ownership declining into the high-30% / low-40% range (Gallup 2016), with some estimates showing it dropping into the low 30%-range (Smith et al. 2016). Survey data also indicates that gun ownership is highly concentrated, with “the top 20 percent of firearm owners” possessing approximately 55% of the total gun stock (Cook and Ludwig 1997:2). To determine who owns these firearms, there have been a few national surveys conducted with the goal of describing the demographic characteristics of gun owners in the US. The results of these surveys indicate that those most likely to own firearms are males, conservatives, and people in rural areas; gun ownership also appears to increase with age at least until age 65 (Cook and Ludwig 1997; Smith 2001; Hepburn et al. 2007). Outside of these results, however, the few surveys that exist tend to produce contradictory or unclear results about things like the effects of race, education, and income on gun ownership. This lack of clarity is caused
partially by the small number of nationally representative surveys of gun owners, and also partially by a lack of standardization in their survey methodologies.

With these general aspects of gun ownership established, the next area to explore is the one where the most research has occurred: criminal firearms use. Exploring this topic will help establish a baseline of what is known, and show the areas where additional understanding is needed.

One of the most pressing concerns regarding criminal use of firearms – almost all of which are manufactured and sold legally – is how these legal weapons get diverted into criminals’ hands. Research has discovered that criminals obtain their firearms from a variety of different sources, including similar numbers who get them directly from illegal sources (such as theft, or purchasing on the street), and those who get them from friends and family; a much smaller number of offenders report purchasing their firearms legally through retail outlets or gun shows (Harlow 2001; Planty and Truman 2013). Research also shows that offenders’ preferred source of crime guns may shift over time with changes in their access to different types of people and settings, as well as the progression of their criminality (Harlow 2001; Webster, Vernick and Hepburn et al. 2001). Even when stepping up to a higher level of analysis to examine gun trafficking, while it remains contentious exactly how this topic should be studied, most researchers have tended to agree that criminals obtain firearms via a number of different methods, and that most gun trafficking is relatively small in scale (Braga et al. 2012; Kleck and Wang 2009). Some research has also indicated that gun trafficking often involves a large number of intermediaries between the dealer and the criminal user (Cook et al 2015). Given the variety of pieces in this puzzle, researchers have typically concluded that there is no one best method by
which criminals can be prevented from getting firearms. Instead, a range of solutions needs to be implemented, in a number of different ways, in order to effectively address this problem.

Setting aside the issue of how criminals get their guns, much of the remaining research focuses on understanding and attempting to control gun crime. One way this topic has been approached is through using quantitative methods to evaluate the effectiveness of various gun control laws, whether individually or in aggregate. This is an especially difficult area in which to draw definitive conclusions because many articles reporting significant findings about some aspect of gun control will subsequently be contradicted by a similar study using a slightly different statistical approach. This is how, for example, Moorhouse and Wanner (2006) came to the conclusion that “empirical analysis … provides no support for the contention that gun control reduces crime rates” (121), when less than a year earlier Kwon and Baack (2005) used a different type of analysis to conclude that “comprehensive gun control legislation indeed lowers the number of gun-related deaths anywhere between one to almost six per 100,000 individuals in those states that have the most extreme gun-related legislation” (533). Some of the most prominent articles of this type are subsequently followed up by lengthy back-and-forth commentaries between the authors and their critics, exploring the minutiae of their competing analyses. This means of pursuing the debate tends to create an air of uncertainty around the legitimacy of any particular set of findings, and emboldens laypersons and advocacy groups alike to simply dismiss conclusions with which they disagree, believing that the findings they dislike have been thoroughly debunked by knowledgeable critics.

One place where this pattern is especially evident is in the debate over defensive gun uses (DGUs) – instances where gun owners use their personal firearms to thwart crimes against themselves and others. Much of the research in this area has been undertaken using retrospective
survey methods where respondents are asked if they have used a firearm to prevent a crime and, if so, to give details about the most recent instance they can recall. Results from Kleck and Gertz (1995) indicated that as many as 2.5 million such incidents occur per year, which is a staggering figure. However, subsequent research has demonstrated that the methodology used to arrive at these figures is problematic in that it contains insufficient controls to prevent inaccurate, or completely untrue, accounts of DGUs from slipping through. In a follow-up article, Cook and Ludwig (1998) showed how a study of this type yielded results that implied implausibly large rates of self-defense with firearms, including the implication that in the US, 23% of robberies, and more than 100% of rapes, are successfully resisted using firearms. The debate over the merits of this type of methodology extended for years, and finally petered out only after it became clear that it was very unlikely that researchers could accurately measure the true number of DGUs using a retrospective survey methodology (Smith 1997; Wellford, Pepper and Petrie 2004). And yet the NRA, and numerous other pro-gun websites, continues to cite the figure of 2+ million defensive gun uses per year as if it were a credible number (Lapidos 2013), just as pro-gun-control sites continue to vigorously critique this figure (Gilson 2013).

A similar pattern can be seen regarding another controversial topic addressed in John Lott’s book, More Guns Less Crime (2010). The essential argument in Lott’s book is that when states loosen their laws about carrying handguns, the resulting uptick in rates of firearm carrying contributes to a significant reduction in crime via an increased number of DGUs, as well as via general deterrence processes. The first edition of the book was published in 1998 and its findings have been critiqued and re-analyzed across multiple journals and in the popular press ever since. Every time a critic detected mistakes in Lott’s datasets (Ayers and Donohue 2003), or published a critical analysis using different statistical techniques that seemed to discredit the main
hypothesis (Martin and Legault 2005), Lott and various co-authors would vigorously dispute the validity of the critiques and often follow up with a new analysis that purportedly confirmed the original findings (Mooney 2003). However, as important as discussions about these issues are to the public debate over firearms regulation, the public has been largely shut out due to their inability to understand the complicated statistics involved. Many modern quantitative studies “make arguments so complex that only other highly trained regression analysts can understand, let alone refute, them” (Goertzel 2002:23). Despite the fact that more recent, updated analyses tend to show that Lott’s hypothesis is not supported (Aneja, Dononhue, and Zhang 2014) his conclusions remain popular with gun advocates. And regardless of the truth of Lott’s position, it is merely another example of the pattern of controversial gun research where subsequent studies – up to and including detailed critiques – tend not to change the opinions of those who prefer a given outcome. These holdouts either wait until a newly published analysis offers renewed support for their position or simply ignore the critiques entirely and continue to believe the conclusions of the original work.

This pattern is frustrating not only because it makes it difficult to determine the truth about key issues related to gun crime, but also because it tends to trivialize the entire enterprise of firearms research. Even in areas of gun crime research that are relatively well-documented – showing that gun buybacks tend not to reduce crime (Callahan, Rivara, and Koepsell 1994; Kuhn et al. 2002), or that targeted police anti-gun enforcement can be effective (Decker and Rosenfeld 2004; Rosenfeld, Deckard, and Blackburn 2014), or that multi-agency community-based interventions with gun offenders are more effective than single-element programs (Makarios and Pratt 2012) – there are often those who continue to critique these findings for a variety of reasons. And this tendency is magnified in the case of research where the evidence has been
equivocal – such as in the case of the effectiveness of programs intended to prosecute gun criminals at the federal level (Fahey et al. 1999; Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services 2003; Raphael and Ludwig 2003; Rosenfeld, Fornango, and Baumer 2005; Berk 2005) – or where statistical or practical limitations do not allow definitive conclusions to be drawn, such as in evaluations of the US Assault Weapons Ban (Koper, Woods, and Roth 2004) and the Australian National Firearms Agreement (Leigh and Neill 2010).

In contrast to the main thrust of firearms research that has focused on criminal use, there has been a small – but important – push to explore legal aspects of firearms ownership as well. Several researchers have explored the legal gun ownership of firearms, including areas such as how gun owners perceive and experience their firearms enthusiasm. Kohn (2000), for example, found that her respondents saw gun ownership as having a meaningful connection not only to America’s frontier past, but even further back to the founding values of Colonial America. Specifically, they felt that they “embodied the state,” leading them to “internalize a sense of civic duty and responsibility” (386). This perceived duty tended to manifest itself in the imperative to keep and bear arms to protect themselves, and the nation, in service of what they see as the public good. Albers (2003) also found common values among gun owners and identified some “practices and values” that his respondents described as being central to an understanding of the gun ownership subculture including, “(1) firearms safety; (2) respect for animal life; and (3) individual liberties” (109). Albers’ respondents also revealed how firearms “perform an interactive function in the cultivation of identity” (150), allowing respondents to “embod[y] martial prowess, masculinity, and independence” (151) through their selection of firearms that are esteemed within the subculture. These results are largely in accord with Taylor’s (2008) findings that guns are “rich with symbolic values” and that value that gun owners place on their
firearms is “far more emotional in nature than monetary” (ii). Anderson and Taylor (2010) tended to confirm these findings, with their respondents’ identities revolving around themes of “cowboy bravery and toughness, expert knowledge of firearms, and skillful ability to handle lethal weapons” (54).

One important component of the gun ownership subculture that a few researchers have investigated is the experience of stigma. Many of the same studies that explored gun ownership subculture revealed that stigma is a common experience among gun owners. Anderson and Taylor (2010) reported that their respondents experienced “negative perceptions of them and their activities” and that “their leisure activities are misunderstood in the broader society” (46). In his earlier work, Taylor (2008) found that gun owners deal with these negative perceptions by passing as non-gun owners, or simply not being open about their status even with neighbors and co-workers. His respondents also report using “disclaimers and techniques of neutralization” to “distance themselves from negative stereotypes” (157). These results broadly align with Albers’ (2003) findings highlighting the use of “selective disclosure” in order to “avoid risk of censure” (129). However, Albers also documented selected cases of “preventive disclosure” (132) as well, indicating that the issue of stigma management may be more complicated than it first appears.

While Kohn (2000) does not address stigma at length, she identifies a number of stereotypes that were associated with gun ownership, the most prevalent of which were the association of gun ownership with both violence and racism. To counter these stereotypes, Kohn’s respondents tended to offer “dignifying accounts” (45) meant to differentiate positive, legal gun ownership from criminal, illegal gun ownership. And while these efforts to differentiate may be successful for individuals, American culture more broadly tends not to be on board with these differences. Kohn stated that respondents perceived that gun owners had a “sense their own way of making
themselves and their families safer through gun ownership might buck current social or political convention” (390), but that they nevertheless believe their way is correct.

When viewed as a whole, the research about firearms reveals the results of focusing too closely on a limited area of what would be more appropriately studied as the expansive cultural phenomenon that it is. Indeed, the current state of firearms research is undoubtedly one factor that helps produce the conditions described in the previous section regarding the public’s level of understanding of firearms. When people are unacquainted with, are unable to understand, or actively disbelieve the conclusions of academic and government research, it leads to a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding. And this issue is magnified when researchers do not have access to sufficient funds, and relevant statistics, to conduct research that could illuminate the most important issues at hand.

**Organization**

This document is organized into six chapters, as well as Appendices A – D. In Chapter 2 ("methodology") I offer a detailed discussion of how the study was carried out, and why the accompanying choices were made. Chapter 3 ("Subculture") explores the values and experiences that respondents associate with being a gun owner, as well as how these values are passed along to new members of the subculture. This chapter also discusses how these aspects of the gun ownership subculture fit in with ongoing debates over gun ownership in America. Chapter 4 ("The Law / Legal Consciousness") explores how respondents view themselves in relationship to the law. Using Ewick and Silbey’s concept of “legal consciousness,” I explore how this uniquely positioned group reacts differently to the law in different circumstances, at times viewing themselves as legitimate participants in its processes and other times viewing themselves as
victims of those processes. Chapter 5 (“Stigma”) explores the extent to which New York’s upstate gun owners experience stigma in their daily lives because of their firearms ownership status. This chapter also offers commentary on several issues of theoretical relevance to the further study of stigma in firearms ownership, as well as the concept of stigma more broadly. Finally, Chapter 6 summarizes the main findings of the current work, discusses its limitations, and presents recommendations for future research.
Chapter 2 – Methodology

In this section I will first detail the theoretical reasons behind my choice of methodology, including an exploration of why taking a qualitative approach was most appropriate for this topic. I will also describe some of the more practical choices I made during my research, including the steps I took prior to beginning the project, the criteria used to select individuals and research sites, the methods I used to gather my data, and the process of analyzing the data once it was obtained. Additionally, I will outline some key practical and ethical issues that were important to address as I progressed through my research.

Choice of Qualitative Methodology

Most previous firearms research has used quantitative approaches, and while these efforts have produced some important scholarship, the dominance of the quantitative approach can be problematic. Specifically, when a research area is dominated by the use of one methodological approach, only certain types of knowledge will tend to be produced about that topic. In general, quantitative approaches are intended “to measure, count, [and] quantify a problem” (Hennink et al. 2001:16) and, through the use of a sufficiently large sample size, generalize broadly to a larger population. These types of data are valuable, and it is important to conduct research that will help describe the size and extent of a phenomenon. However, these are not the only questions that need to be answered by researchers, and no matter how extensive the information provided by quantitative approaches may be, they are not appropriate for addressing certain types of questions. For example, although a well-designed quantitative survey of pistol permit holders can give credible estimates of the demographic characteristics of people who have pistol permits,
it can give relatively little in-depth information about what causes people to seek a permit in the first place, what the process of obtaining a permit is like, and how people’s attitudes change – if at all – as a result of seeking the permit. These kinds of questions simply will not be answered unless a different methodology is used, and if the use of just one type of methodology is pervasive throughout an area of study, it can create a systematic blindness to certain issues.

One solution to this problem is for researchers to use a wider variety of methodologies. While this cannot ensure that every important issue will be addressed within a given area of study, it does at least ensure that there is less systematic bias in terms of what types of questions are asked and answered. This may be easier said than done, however, given the long-standing dominance of quantitative methodologies within many social science disciplines (Camic and Xie 1994; Hammersley 2010). Therefore, I hope this dissertation will be a step in the direction of balancing out the large amount of quantitative research done on firearms, and answer some questions that have been largely overlooked up until this point.

Theoretical Underpinnings of Methodology Choice

*Symbolic Interactionism*

The qualitative approach I use in this research is based on symbolic interactionism. This school of thought – pioneered by Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead, and then further expanded upon by Herbert Blumer – is based on three major premises. The first is that people “act towards things on the basis of the meanings they have for them” (Blumer 1969:2). The second is that “the meaning of such things is derived from . . . the social interaction that one has” (2) with other people. And the third is that “these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters” (2).
Essentially, symbolic interactionism takes as its most basic idea that there is no “essential meaning” inherent in objects or experiences, nor is meaning something which is “brought to the things by the person for whom the thing has meaning” (4), but rather it is a “social product” created through an “interpretive process” (5). This process takes place over time as the meanings of various aspects of social life are “created, affirmed, transformed, and cast aside” (12) through interactions among people. In fact, in a very basic way, it can be said that “the reality of everyday life is ongoingly reaffirmed in the individual’s interactions with others” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:149). This is true for basic concepts – such as associating particular colors and shapes of traffic signs with required actions – as well as for more complicated social realities, such as the ongoing national discussion related to the public display of the Confederate battle flag. This is a case of a symbol that was contested for years, both in terms of what its actual meaning was (e.g., pro-slavery, support for states’ rights, Southern pride, etc.) and the circumstances in which it was acceptable to display, and sometimes venerate, this particular symbol. Following the 2015 Charleston, SC shooting, this debate came to a head as various meanings for the flag were debated in the media and in state legislatures, resulting in a general consensus that the flag would no longer be displayed or sold in many areas. This example serves as a perfect entry point for anyone looking to understand how the values of symbols are not fixed, but are socially produced, and how this meaning can shift over time.

Symbolic interactionism is especially appropriate for the current project given the long-standing importance of firearms within American culture, and the multiplicity of meanings associated with them. Blumer notes that, even within areas of society which appear to be stable or involve settled patterns of interaction, there is a constant process of “social interactions” (Blumer 1969:19) that allows those meanings to remain stable, just as there is a process that
allows those social interactions to change. Furthermore, the actions that people take today – and the meanings they attribute to those actions – are the product of “a background of previous actions by the participants” and this means that “joint action [cannot] be sliced off from its historical linkage” (20) It is for this reason that I sought, “descriptive accounts from the actors of how they see the objects, how they have acted toward the objects in a variety of different situations, and how they refer to the objects in conversations with members of their own group” (51-52). Through using this approach, I hoped to be able to “see [respondents’] objects as they see them” (51) in order to explore in-depth the ways that current meanings have come to exist in their present form, as well as the ways in which previous interactions have helped form current meanings.

**Grounded Theory**

In this dissertation it is also my intention to generate solid grounded theory. As described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory avoids the dominant paradigm in which the researcher’s focus is on verifying existing theory and instead focuses on the “systematic discovery of … theory from the data of social research” (3). The researcher does this primarily by “starting with individual cases, incidents or experiences and developing progressively more abstract conceptual categories to synthesize, to explain and to understand [the] data and to identify patterned relationships within it” (Charmaz 1995:335). In general, the purpose of grounded theory is to discover the nature of a particular phenomenon, and develop “middle-range theories to explain behavior and processes” (Charmaz 1995:336). Or, as Glaser and Strauss originally conceived it, this method should allow researchers to finish their projects with a clear answer to the question, “What is happening here?” (337).
One of the most important differences between grounded theory generation and other approaches is that data collection, coding, and analysis all take place simultaneously and cyclically. Grounded theorists begin their research with a general concept that they are interested in exploring, but no specific hypothesis about what they expect to find, meaning that they must direct the research in ways which will allow them to identify, and elaborate upon, important concepts. This process is known broadly as “comparative analysis” and it begins with the first sessions of data-gathering where the information gathered from respondents will help the researcher identify “conceptual categories,” which are particular aspects of the topic at hand that seem relevant and important to study. Once a category is identified, the researcher will intentionally seek out cases (interviews, observation sites, etc.) with as much diversity in emergent categories, synthesized at as many levels of conceptual and hypothetical generalization as possible” (Glaser and Strauss 1967:37, emphasis in original), in order to ensure that his understanding of the category is as complete as possible. In fact, one major task during the data gathering and analysis phase of grounded theory generation is the active seeking of counter-examples, or “negative cases,” which help establish the boundaries of a particular theory. This is in direct contrast with other methods of theory generation that may seek to explain away, or avoid, examples that do not fit with the theory being developed.

After a category has been explored in-depth with many respondents, the researcher will typically find that subsequent cases are adding no new information, suggesting that the category has become saturated. At this point, the researcher then leaves the saturated topic and moves on to other categories, to which he applies the same process as before, until all major areas brought up by respondents have been identified, explored, and saturated. In the end, the goal of the researcher is to develop “conceptual categories and their conceptual properties” and “generalized
relations among the categories and their properties” (Glaser and Strauss 1967:35), all of which have arisen from the data.

Given the cyclical nature of data collection and analysis discussed above, it is clear that “the researcher’s emerging analysis shapes his or her data collection procedures” (Charmaz 1995:336), with the goal of using this reflexive approach to help develop theory. When data gathered from an interviewee begins to illuminate a theoretical category, the researcher will use those findings to inform future sampling choices, as well as what questions are asked of future interviewees, to ensure that future interviews are likely to produce data that can help further illuminate the categories, leading to theoretical saturation. Given that the goal is saturation, and that the researcher doesn’t have any pre-knowledge of where the research is headed, “there can be no definite, prescribed, preplanned set of groups that are compared for all or even most categories” (Glaser and Strauss 1967:49), but rather these groups are chosen based on “theoretical relevance” (51) and the extent to which the group will help extend, or deepen, the understanding of a particular category. Ideally, the sampling will begin with looking at groups that are relatively similar to one another, in order to get a baseline understanding for the attitudes and concerns of that group. However, as the project advances, the researcher will seek out additional data from cases very different from those he started with – including apparent negative cases – in order to fully map the boundaries of his emerging theory to see where and how it applies, as well as where and how it does not (56-57). The researcher intentionally “goes out of his way to look for groups that stretch diversity of data as far as possible, just to make sure that saturation is based on the widest possible range of data on the category” (61).

Another important cyclical process that is a hallmark of grounded theory is that of coding data and writing memos. As noted above, codes emerge from the data rather than being
determined ahead of time. In order to create these codes, then, the researcher reads interview transcripts line-by-line and attempts to describe what is taking place in the passages. Some specific things that the researcher might be attempting to understand through doing this kind of analysis include what processes are at work, what the respondents take for granted in their responses, what “structure[s] and context[s] serve to support, maintain, impede or change” (Charmaz 1995:342) the things they’re saying, as well as how they are developed in the first place, and what the consequences of those processes are (342-344). Once these codes have been developed, the researcher can then move on to focused coding where the most promising codes generated in the line-by-line analysis are applied more broadly to the data. The goal of this process is to identify the codes that have “overriding significance in explicating events or processes in your data” (345) and elevate them from codes to categories, where several codes may address common themes.

To make sense of these codes and categories – and be able to move from a collection of data to a coherent draft – grounded theorists use memo writing as an intermediate step. In this process, they examine each category in the analysis by “identify[ing] its properties or characteristics, look[ing] for its underlying assumptions, and show[ing] how and when the category develops and changes” (Charmaz 1995:347). Ideally researchers write these memos as soon as they begin forming categories, so that the reasons for which those categories were created are clear. Also, these memos will change as additional data is gathered and the concept of what each category is about changes as well. In the process of fleshing out these memos, and comparing them to each other, the key concepts of the research will become clear and well defined enough to create a first draft.
Carrying Out the Study

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval Process

From the beginning, I was aware that this project would require some extra steps to carry out in an ethical and efficient manner. Even though I have previously conducted research on topics related to stigma (Miner 2007), and am therefore aware of the need to protect subjects’ identities, I suspected that conducting an interview study with legal firearms owners would present unique difficulties. However, I was unprepared for the amount of difficulty I faced in getting approval from the IRB.

My initial perception – documented in an e-mail to one of my committee members – was that “…since this is largely an interview-based project, and on a relatively non-sensitive topic, that it will meet with quick approval” (personal correspondence 2010). Initially, things seemed to be heading in this direction; my first submission garnered only a request to make minor changes to the contact information of the IRB itself and a request (which was later dropped, after my dissertation chair and I objected) to change my informed consent document to inform respondents that university and government officials may inspect research records associated with the project. I was happy that this hurdle would be cleared relatively easily, and that I could move on to conducting my interviews as soon as possible.

However, in subsequent interactions with the IRB, the Board began to express heightened concerns surrounding a number of topics. The first of these was the potential for interviewees’ names and contact information to be accidentally disclosed. As with any research, I had intended to maintain a list of respondents, along with their contact information, so that I could conduct follow-ups with them if necessary, and also to inform them about the progress of my research. My original intention had been to maintain this list on a password-protected flash drive, to
maintain a slightly higher than normal degree of security for those whose personal information was contained on the drive. However, the IRB responded to this with a request – driven by an abundance of concern for respondents’ information – that I maintain no lists at all of respondents or their contact information. We were able to reach a compromise that allowed me to maintain respondents’ contact information until I was certain that I would no longer need to follow up with them, whereupon I would destroy/delete it. Additionally, I got approval from the IRB to set up a research web site, the address for which I would provide to each respondent, and which would provide updates about the project. In this way, even people with whom I was no longer in contact could feel connected to the research, and see the results of their participation.

The second – and more serious – issue brought up under subsequent review was one having to do with the disclosure of illegal activity. This is an issue that other researchers have faced, and addressed in different ways. Albers (2003) reports that “[u]nder Duke University’s guidelines for performing research using human subjects, I was not authorized to ask questions that could potentially incriminate respondents” (37, footnote 4), but provides no additional information about what he planned to do if a respondent volunteered such information. Kohn (2000), on the other hand, reports that the IRB “wanted me to clarify how I would handle incidents in which I learned about illegal behavior with guns” (121). She writes that she informed respondents that she was “not interested in hearing about illegal activities, per se,” (121) but that if a respondent did reveal a situation “in which someone would be harmed physically (i.e. an interviewee revealed to me that he or she planned to injure someone” (121) that she would end the interview and contact authorities. She also reports that, over the course of her research, her respondents told her about many “low-level illegalities” as well as “illegal
occurrences that they knew were frequent in the community” (121), but she never heard about anything that rose to a level where she felt it needed to be reported.

Having read these different accounts of how IRBs had handled this issue, I then consulted the American Sociological Association’s (1999) ethics guidelines. In the section on “Maintaining Confidentiality,” their Code of Ethics reads (in part) as follows:

Confidential information provided by research participants, students, employees, clients, or others is treated as such by sociologists even if there is no legal protection or privilege to do so. Sociologists have an obligation to protect confidential information, and not allow information gained in confidence from being used in ways that would unfairly compromise research participants, students, employees, clients, or others. (P. 11)

However, this statement is contrasted in the following section (“Limits of Confidentiality”) with the following information:

Sociologists may confront unanticipated circumstances where they become aware of information that is clearly health- or life-threatening to research participants, students, employees, clients, or others. In these cases, sociologists balance the importance of guarantees of confidentiality with other principles in this Code of Ethics, standards of conduct, and applicable law. (P. 12)

Taking into consideration my obligations to protect respondents’ confidentiality, but also maintaining standards in line with my professional association, I crafted a portion of my IRB protocol that, in essence, proposed the following standards for the project:

1) I will ask no questions which are intended to elicit responses about illegal behavior

2) If respondents share information about illegal behavior without being asked, generally speaking, I will keep it confidential

3) I will disclose illegal information to appropriate authorities only in an instance where a respondent’s reported illegal activity represents a clear threat to myself or others.
In crafting this section, I necessarily avoided giving specifics about what I would report and what I would not. I did this because there is obviously a wide range of illegal activity respondents could report, from the relatively minor (shooting without authorization at a range where they are not a member, or shooting a deer with a shotgun during muzzle-loader season), to the very serious (revealing the intent to commit homicide with a firearm, or intentionally providing firearms to convicted felons). Most reasonable people would likely agree that the minor instances would hardly be worth reporting to authorities, and doing so would certainly risk harm to the respondent without an offsetting benefit to the community. However, most people would also agree that it would be highly unethical to fail to report a serious incident, especially if failing to do so would likely result in severe bodily injury.

As an organization with legal mandates, however, the IRB clearly viewed this problem as requiring more definitive language. They insisted that I either state that I would not report any illegal activity, or that I warn potential respondents in my informed consent document that illegal activity will be reported to the proper authorities. (The latter option was coupled with the requirement that I submit my protocol to the full IRB for approval, since the Board deemed that participation in such a project would constitute more than minimal risk to respondents.) The inclusion of such a statement in my informed consent document seemed like it would have a negative effect on recruitment, especially given the problems that Albers (2003) faced in recruiting his respondents using just a regular informed consent document (37).

After consulting with my dissertation chair, we requested to meet with the chair of the IRB to discuss my options. In this meeting, it became clear that the IRB’s position was that a definitive statement needed to be made in order to provide legal protection for all involved, and that anything short of that would require a lengthy process of submitting to the full IRB. In the
end, to obtain permission to conduct my study, I opted to include the kind of statement they required, which reads: “All responses obtained from subjects will be completely confidential, with any personal identifying information removed or altered prior to publication or dissemination. I will protect respondent confidentiality in all situations, including in the case where respondents acknowledge previous or ongoing illegal activity.” After proposing this language to the IRB, my new submission was accepted, and my project was approved shortly thereafter.

The inclusion of this statement ended up being a good solution in the sense that it did not obligate me to report to authorities every single minor criminal offense that respondents mentioned. However, it also underscored a key issue that I planned to investigate in the project: the extent to which firearms owners are considered potentially violent lawbreakers. After consulting with my committee, and other graduate students who had recently sought IRB approval, I began to wonder if a greater than normal level of scrutiny was being applied to my project, and the amount of concern was unusually high over the potential disclosure of illegal activities. And while I understand, and agree with, the need to protect respondents from legal jeopardy resulting from statements made in confidential interviews, I believe that this project was given a higher level of scrutiny because of its subject matter, and because gun ownership is poorly understood in the academic world. After all, it is undoubtedly the case that in any research project – even one covering the most innocuous topic – respondents might bring up illegal behavior without being asked. However, the IRB believed that this was a likely enough scenario that they required me to commit to whether I would report such statements or not, whereas other graduate students in this scenario had not been required to make such commitments.
Given a charitable reading of these events, I would conclude that the IRB was looking to meet its mandate in the broadest sense possible. Although it is unfortunate that graduate students are not afforded more latitude in determining whether to report illegal behavior or not, this choice is perhaps not surprising since one of the IRB’s roles is to protect the University from litigation arising from improperly conducted research. Given that discretion tends to complicate legal matters, it makes sense from the IRB’s perspective to insist that I eliminate discretion and instead make a clear statement about what I would do in a given situation.

Methods Used

As described above, in this study I used a grounded theory approach, one goal of which is to obtain rich data that are sufficiently detailed to produce meaningful conclusions through later analysis. This is especially important for the current project because, as Taylor (2008) notes, previous literature on firearms has tended to focus narrowly on issues related to violence. Seeking rich data about firearms ownership will provide us with “[a]n understanding of the everyday, lived reality of gun owning behavior” and that this will “help us to comprehend how people conceptualize their use and ownership of guns” (183). Seeking rich data is not important merely for the level of detail, however; its purpose is to “afford views of human experience that etiquette, social conventions and inaccessibility hide in ordinary discourse” (Charmaz 1995:338). This is also especially important in the current research, since much of what is presented in everyday discourse about firearms is strongly partisan, and provides little information – or worse, highly stereotypical information – about what gun owners’ everyday lives are like.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) note that while “no one kind of data … nor technique for data collection is necessarily appropriate” (65), researchers should use “the collection technique that
best can obtain the information desired” (66). For this reason, and additionally following the recommendations of Blumer (1969:47-48), in order to achieve a high level of understanding of my participants’ world, I went out and observed them directly using ethnographic methods (sometimes also referred to as “participant-observation”) as well as carrying out in-depth interviews. Together these methods allowed me to gain insight into the world of my participants that would not be possible using other approaches.

Ethnographic research is ideal for this project because it is oriented towards seeking out “[f]irst-hand participation in some unfamiliar social world” with the intention of producing “written accounts of that world by drawing upon such participation” (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995:1). Such first-hand participation is key to being able to understand a subculture that may have “been kept systematically beyond the cognitive reach of the ethnographer’s audience because of the moral character of the social life under investigation” (Katz 1997:393) – a situation that many would argue is taking place in the highly polarized world of firearms ownership. Becoming a part of daily routines allowed me to “directly and forcibly experience for [myself] both the routines and conditions under which people conduct their lives, and the constraints and pressures to which such living is subject” with the purpose of being able to being able “to experience events and meanings in ways that approximate members’ experiences” (Emerson et al. 1995:2, emphasis in original). Getting this level of detail afforded me detailed insight into the potentially stigmatized nature of firearms ownership, which was a key point of investigation for this project.

Observation and participation are certainly important tools in qualitative research, but they may not be sufficient to get a nuanced understanding of key issues in this case. Even when one has seen and participated in the focal activities of a new social group, this observational and
experiential data may not be sufficient to fully understand the phenomenon in question. For this reason, I chose to supplement ethnographic data with in-depth interviews. This approach is consistent with Glaser and Strauss (1967) who stated that “theory generated from just one kind of data never fits, or works as well, as theory generated from diverse slices of data on the same category” (68). Luckily, interviews and participant-observation act as ideal supplementary methods to one another in this case. Participant-observation methods “provid[e] first-hand experience of the social world of the research subject, allowing the researcher … to create lines of inquiry that may be more meaningful to his respondents” (Albers 2003:15), while at the same time interviews afford the researcher the opportunity to ask questions to clarify any ambiguous occurrences encountered while in the field.

The primary purpose of conducting these interviews was to gain “the fullest, most detailed description possible” (Weiss 1994:9) of how respondents feel about their gun ownership, as well as to document “perceptions and reactions known only to those to whom they occurred” (10), particularly on the issues of stigma and legal consciousness. A secondary goal was to fill in the gaps of understanding which currently exist in regards to gun owners, and which complicate political and social relations surrounding firearms (Katz 1997:417). While firearms are certainly a common subject in the media, the discourse is dominated by representatives of key pro- and anti-gun organizations, rather than everyday gun-owning individuals. Carrying out interviews with this group of people will allow the “coherence, depth, and density” (Weiss 1994:3) inherent in respondents’ experiences in this area to be discovered and added to the ongoing discussions about firearms-related issues.
Research Location

This research took place exclusively in New York State. The rationale for establishing clear limits on this research is both practical and theoretical in nature. On the practical side, in a project being run by a single investigator, the logistical challenges associated with attempting to cover several states – much less an entire region of the country – would be great. Increasing the scope of possible people and events to sample from greatly increases the amount of time and money needed to traverse the entire area and obtain enough data to achieve saturation.

Perhaps even more important than the physical aspects, though, are the concerns about theory generation. The purpose of a qualitative project such as this one is to gather enough data to reach “saturation” of particular theoretical categories (Charmaz and Bryant 2011:292, cited in Silverman 2011:67). However, theoretical categories only emerge through “an iterative process that uses comparative methods” (292), and when the data that are gathered are actually comparable. This is an especially relevant challenge when studying firearms because firearms laws can vary greatly from state to state. It would be difficult to try to reconcile the experiences of firearms owners who operate under completely different legal restrictions (and who, as a result, may have developed significantly different sets of beliefs and values about those restrictions and the activities they regulate). Given these concerns, then, the choice was made to limit the research to a single state and, therefore, a single set of regulations.

For the same reasons discussed in the previous paragraph, I only sampled firearms owners who live outside of New York City. Despite being a part of New York State, New York City has significantly different firearms laws than the rest of the state. (Perhaps the clearest example of this difference is that pistol permits issued elsewhere in New York State are not legally valid in New York City.) In addition to this significant legal difference, data from
interviews confirm that firearms owners consider upstate and downstate New York to be different from one another in many significant areas related to firearms ownership (see Chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion of these beliefs). These key differences, then, justify the choice to exclude gun owners who reside and/or primarily pursue their gun ownership in New York City.

Study Population / Sampling Frame

Beyond the residency requirements noted in the previous section, there were additional requirements for participation in the research. Although the goal of the project was to study firearms owners, the mere legal possession of a firearm was not considered sufficient to qualify someone to participate. Consider, for example, individuals who have inherited firearms from relatives, but have no knowledge of how to use the firearms, nor any desire to do so. While these people are undoubtedly firearms owners, they do not represent the mainstream of, nor any influential faction within, the modern United States gun ownership culture. In much the same way that researchers would not consider someone who owns a single houseplant to be part of an indoor-gardening culture, mere ownership of a firearm does not mean the person has much, if anything, personally invested in the ownership and use of that firearm.

This issue is obviously one of concern to many researchers, and those who have previously conducted studies of firearms owners have addressed it in different ways. Kohn (2004), for example, chose to interview people who “(1) have an interest in owning and using guns of any type, (2) legally own at least one gun, (3) take pleasure in talking about guns and shooting with other gun aficionados, and (4) organize regular (weekly, or in some cases monthly) activities around their gun interests” (9). (Additionally, the title of Kohn’s book – Shooters – is meant to distinguish between those who merely possess an item (“owners”) and those who
actually participate in the use and organized enjoyment of that item.) Albers (2003) takes a somewhat similar approach, defining gun enthusiasts as those with “regular involvement in shooting sports and/or hunting, political activism and group membership, regular or significant investment of both time and money, and recruitment of new members into the subculture” (21). Taylor (2008), on the other hand, focused his research on gun collectors specifically, and recruited respondents by asking them if they were “gun collectors” or “gun enthusiasts” (206). He also specified in his recruitment script that he was interested in seeing “gun collections” and hearing people “tell stories about their guns and gun-related experiences” (206). Although he does not define what makes someone a collector – for example, by defining how many guns qualify as a “collection” – Taylor nevertheless was clearly seeking individuals who had a fairly strong connection to, and identification with, firearms ownership.

These approaches all contain important elements, but none was sufficient on its own for the purposes of this project, for several reasons. First, I did not want to exclude individuals from my sample based on their ownership of a particular number of firearms, or defining the guns they own as a collection. While it is unlikely that an individual who is strongly involved with firearms would not own at least one of them, I saw no reason to make this a category for exclusion, as there could be any number of extenuating circumstances which might cause a non-gun-owner, or someone who owns only a small number of guns, to be a good candidate to be interviewed for this project.

Second, I did not want to use political involvement as a pre-requisite for inclusion. Part of the reason for this is the difficulty of defining what it means to be political (e.g., attitudes versus actions), as well as the fact that requiring respondents to be politically involved could have skewed my sample significantly. It is clear that there are many people who care about firearms
who never choose to become involved in political discussions about the topic. In its public press releases, for example, the NRA acknowledges that of the 90 million gun owners in the United States, only about 4 million of them are NRA members, although they argue that 30 million of those people “identify themselves with the NRA” (National Rifle Association 2011a). Interestingly, some analyses have indicated that that the NRA’s actual membership number may actually be closer to 3 million (Harkinson 2013), but regardless of the actual number, if we use NRA membership/affiliation as a rough proxy for political involvement with firearms-related issues, it is possible that requiring respondents to claim an active membership in a pro-gun organization, or even merely expressing political affiliation with one, could have eliminated anywhere from 60-95% of potential interviewees – a frighteningly large figure for any researcher to contemplate!

Finally, the definition I selected needed to be relatively wide in order to take into account the fact that this area of research is somewhat preliminary. Very little research has been done into the lives of firearms owners, and no major research study has taken place in New York State. Furthermore, both of the major studies which have been done on this topic were conducted over a decade ago, prior to the expiration of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 (the most commonly known portion of which is referred to as the “Assault Weapons Ban”), as well as before two key Supreme Court decisions establishing firearms ownership as an individual right, and any number of other firearms controversies (the Gabrielle Giffords shooting in Tucson, the “Fast and Furious” scandal, the controversy over “stand your ground” laws following the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, the Sandy Hook school shootings, etc.). For these reasons, it was important to cast a wide net when sampling in order to obtain a broad understanding of what is currently happening in this area.
With these caveats in mind, I used the following definition of my sampling frame: “For this research I am seeking people who are interested in, and are regularly involved with, any major aspect of firearms ownership and use, such as shooting sports, hunting, self-defense, gun collecting, and gun politics. Additionally, these individuals should exhibit some significant connection to the firearms community, such as the donation of money or time, involvement with firearms-related organizations or causes, advocacy about firearms, and/or choosing to inform themselves about, and become involved with, important community issues.”

This definition includes only individuals who are both frequently involved with using firearms, and who also take additional steps to become informed about, and involved in, issues relevant to the firearms owning community. This definition intentionally excludes, for example, police or military personnel who are required to operate firearms for their job, but who have no interest in personally owning firearms or becoming involved with the politics surrounding firearms. However, the definition allows room for participants whose time or ability to be involved with firearms may be limited, but who nevertheless remain strongly committed to, and interested in, issues related to firearms. In short, the definition is wide enough to allow many different types of firearms enthusiasts to qualify, without opening the study up to criticism for including the opinions of those who are uninformed about, uninvolved with, or otherwise unconnected to mainstream legal firearms ownership.

Sample Size

As is common with taking a grounded theoretical approach, I did not specify ahead of time a minimum or maximum number of people whom I planned to interview for this project. Previous dissertations in this area had sample sizes ranging from 30-52, so I suspected my
sample size would be in a similar range, but I did not set any particular threshold beyond which I would consider my sampling completed, nor set an upper limit beyond which I would not continue. Instead, using the sampling methods associated with grounded theory, I continued obtaining interviews with individuals until I felt that I had reached theoretical saturation on key issues of interest in my research. In the final tally, I conducted 35 interviews with 37 individuals (two interviews were conducted with two interviewees each). A chart describing some characteristics of these individuals, as well as some additional discussion about how those characteristics compare with gun owners nationally, can be found in Appendix A.

**Sampling for Interviews**

As noted previously, the sampling frame for this research consists of legal gun owners with a significant commitment to the firearms ownership community. How best to locate these individuals, however, is not necessarily a straightforward question. Albers (2003) reports that he solicited most of his interviews “through casual conversations struck up during the course of target shooting, looking at merchandise at gun shows, or at the meetings of gun clubs and firearms organizations” (23), with only a few coming through indirect referrals or word-of-mouth. He also reports speaking in front of groups – such as the membership meetings of gun clubs – to solicit individual participation. Using a slightly different strategy, Kohn (2004) describes meeting respondents through the traditional anthropological method of “joining the designated group in question, making friends with its members, observing and participating in community events, and engaging in groups activities with the community” (3). Taylor (2008), on the other hand, reports a slightly more formal, method of recruiting people by meeting them “face-to-face at gun events, [and] using a standardized approach script” (47). While Taylor’s
approach relies less on making a personal connection prior to recruitment, all three approaches nevertheless rely on in-person contact.

Taking a cue from previous research, my sampling was carried out through a number of different methods. My first interviewees were people I knew personally who met the selection criteria for the research and agreed to participate. Some subsequent interviews were obtained through recommendations provided by some of these initial interviewees, as well as through other personal contacts I had made by joining a local gun club. Later on in the project, I obtained permission to set up a table at a gun-related event and promote my research there. I secured a small number of interviews through people I met at that event, and then subsequently – through connections made at that event – arranged to speak at the meeting of a gun-related group. At that meeting I made a number of connections with meeting attendees, and people to whom those attendees referred me. I did obtain some interviews through other methods – such as face-to-face encounters at gun-related businesses, or via recommendations from friends who were unconnected with the research, as well as one former student – but most of my sample was obtained through personal connections, speaking at public gun-related events, and through snowball sampling.

When snowball sampling was used, I had little control over how the project was first described to potential interviewees. However, upon being contacted (typically by e-mail) by someone who had been recruited by a previous respondent, I had a short scripted response for them that briefly described the project, to ensure that they knew enough about it to decide if they wanted to participate (and also to clear up anything which might have been unclear, or incorrect, based on the information provided by the referee).
When making a public recruitment presentation, I approached things a little differently. One task I focused on in these scenarios was establishing my credibility. Many of the attendees of these meetings did not know that I would be present, and therefore had no initial reason to assign any positive or negative values to my presence there. Guest speakers are not uncommon at these gun-related meetings, and so while my presence as a part of the meeting was not necessarily unusual, my message often was. In my experience, most guest speakers tended to either present information to those assembled (e.g., describe an upcoming event that might be of interest, or provide updates on local happenings) or solicit participation in, or donations for, various gun-related causes (e.g., wildlife habitat restoration, or efforts to support particular types of wild game). My presentation was more akin to the latter, though with a distinctly different content than attendees were used to.

Upon arriving at these meetings, my first step was typically to locate my contact person. Being seen talking with that person (typically the leader of the meeting) was an important first step in demonstrating my credibility to attendees. The firearms community places a great deal of emphasis on reputation, and so it was helpful for me to be seen with someone whose reputation was well known, since I did not yet have a reputation of my own. When speaking to the groups, I would emphasize my gun ownership and pistol permit status, my membership in the NRA, and my local residence. I did mention my affiliation with SUNY Albany, but emphasized more heavily my connection with SUNY Oswego (where I was working at this point in the research), because it was closer to where most respondents lived, and because more people would be likely to be familiar with it than with SUNY Albany. Additionally, I would emphasize my open-mindedness about firearms issues, often recounting a shortened version of the story that appears in my Methodological Appendix (Appendix B), which emphasizes my ability to change my
opinions based on evidence. Following this period of credentialing, I would describe the nature of the research, state my need for respondents, and then ask for questions. Following the answering of questions, I would then solicit people to participate in the project. (In the first meetings I attended, I would simply pass out business cards to everyone in attendance and ask them to get in touch with me if they were interested. However, a respondent later suggested to me that I would be better served by having everyone in attendance fill out a card with their contact information and then collecting those cards so that I could follow up with them myself. This strategy turned out to be much more successful in terms of the amount of interviewees it yielded.)

Using these methods, I found that, early on in my sampling process, I was interviewing a lot of people with law enforcement backgrounds, or who were currently employed in law enforcement. (This probably stems from the fact that some early interviewees had law enforcement backgrounds, and so the future interviewees they recommended also tended to have that same background.) While law enforcement officers are among the most visible groups of gun owners, I became concerned that the public nature of their gun ownership might skew my results in important ways. First of all, police are stereotypically assumed to be carrying guns at all times – both on-duty and off-duty – and so there is a different dynamic for this group of people when it comes to several key elements of stigma – knowledge, and disclosure, of the potentially stigmatized status. Also, it is likely that officers’ attitudes about the law are strongly affected by their professional experiences, meaning that their perspectives will be unique among gun owners, and potentially not representative of gun owners as a whole. Additionally, police officers are allowed to own, carry and use a wide variety of firearms that members of the general public are not. So it would not be surprising to discover that police officers might be more likely
to be concerned about different legal and social issues than the general public. So, as I moved forward with my sampling procedures, while I did not exclude anyone who had law enforcement experience, I tailored my sampling methods so that I would encounter more gun owners who did not have a professional background in law enforcement.

I feel my recruitment strategies generally worked well, and that I faced little pushback either from individuals or groups. While there were a few people who initially expressed interest in being interviewed and then later did not follow through, the reasons for these withdrawals seemed to have more to do with normal attrition and scheduling problems than any kind of systematic avoidance of researchers in general, or my project in particular.

The one time I was denied access to a research site that I was interested in was when I contacted a local gun club and asked to speak at an upcoming meeting. I received an initial reply by e-mail that indicated that the person thought that I was requesting to interview club members at the club meeting, and referred me to rules regarding not allowing members of the press inside the club. I responded with a clarifying e-mail indicating that I did not want to conduct interviews at the club, but rather to inform club members about the project and conduct interviews at members’ convenience. I received no reply for several days, and – upon sending a follow-up e-mail – I was given a final, brief denial of my request, which still seemed to indicate a belief that I wanted to conduct interviews on-site. Given this scenario, I feel like my denial probably had more to do with a lack of understanding about the nature of project, as well as a generalized preference to only allow members into the club, rather than a specific antipathy towards me personally or academics in general. This was the only time that I felt that my inability to sufficiently establish my credibility ahead of time might have affected my ability to gain access to important data. Had I known someone at this club, or spoken to someone in person rather than
e-mailing them cold, I might have had more success. However, while I would have preferred to speak to the members of this club, I believe that I was still able to achieve a fairly broad sample even without their being offered the chance to participate.

All in all, I was able to achieve a fairly broad sample of people from a variety of locations around Central New York. Since I did not focus my efforts around recruiting at a single location, but instead recruited widely in a number of different locations, I believe that I achieved sufficient variety to allow me to draw broader conclusions than if I had sampled narrowly from members of a single organization, or at only one type of gun-related event.

*Interview Guide*

Perhaps as important as selecting a population to interview is determining what to ask. However, given the nature of grounded theory generation, it is difficult – and potentially counterproductive – to try to determine ahead of time what a project will focus on. Trying to force particular conceptual categories, or codes, or other major ideas into one’s analysis could cause problems. For this reason, Glaser and Strauss (1967) recommend that “the initial decisions for theoretical collection of data [should be] based only on a general sociological perspective and on a general subject or problem area” (45) rather than on a pre-existing theory, or with particular hypotheses (or worse, conclusions) already in mind. Following this advice, I made a general survey of the academic literature, discussed the topic with my dissertation advisor, and contacted some key informants who are legal gun owners, in order to get a sense of what is already known about firearms owners, and what remains to be determined. In this way I identified three key areas that could benefit from further exploration: 1) the nature of the subculture of gun ownership in New York State; 2) how gun owners viewed their relationship with the law, in a
variety of different forms; and, 3) whether or not respondents experienced stigma as a result of their gun ownership. The goal behind selecting these sub-areas of investigation is to use them as guides for research – or “points of departure” (Charmaz 1995:337) – rather than as restrictive categories within which an answer must be found. In this way, the research can be guided in a particular direction without biasing the findings towards particular outcomes.

In this case, since research in the area of firearms ownership is still preliminary, several aspects of the current interview guide – especially those in the “Subculture” section – were adapted from those used in recent studies, such as Kohn (2004) and Albers (2003). Questions in the “Stigma” section were also derived from Kohn and Albers, as well as Goffman (1963) and Link and Phelan (2001). The questions in the “Law” section were largely derived from Ewick and Silbey (1998) and other works which address the idea of “legal consciousness.”

As is the case with many qualitative studies, the exact wording of these questions – as well as how they were asked in each interview – shifted somewhat over time based on the situation in which they were asked. In general, though, the questions asked for this project were intended to yield answers that could not be easily obtained through survey methods – information about individuals’ personal experiences with stigma, their interpretation of laws, and the source of their attitudes on various issues. These types of questions are important to ask in order to get an in-depth understanding not only of gun owners’ opinions and thoughts, but also additional information such as the source of those opinions, and a deeper look at the nature of them.

One important aspect of developing the interview guide was – in remaining true to the grounded theory approach – allowing for the emergence of themes that I had not initially thought of. One important way I achieved this goal was ensuring that – within the general topic areas I
had identified – the questions were not only open-ended, but also sufficiently generic to allow respondents to take them in a number of different directions. A good example of this can be seen in the question, “How well do you feel your viewpoints about firearms are represented in the various levels of government?” This question allows respondents to discuss any level of government they choose, and their experiences with, and opinions about, it. From this question – as well as some related follow-ups – emerged a key finding about respondents’ understanding of their location within the governmental power structure as it relates to being upstate versus downstate. (See Chapter 4 for the full analysis of this topic.) Without a sufficiently generic, open-ended approach to interview guide design, this finding might not have been uncovered, or might have remained under-explored in the analysis.

The previous question is just one example of how I designed my questions to allow for as broad a variety of responses as possible. However, this approach can be seen throughout the interview guide, the final version of which can be found in Appendix C.

Participant-Observation

Although the substantive conclusions in this dissertation are based primarily on the content of my interviews, I also conducted participant-observation sessions at multiple locations over the course of my research to get a better sense of the experience of being a gun owner. I began my formal participant-observation sessions in January 2011 and continued through May 2013. My most regular participant-observation site was at the monthly meetings of a local gun club where I was a member. Over the two and a half years I was conducting participant-observations, I attended fourteen of these meetings. However, much of my attendance was concentrated during the period prior to starting my dissertation interviews in earnest. My most
intense period of attendance occurred during 2011 when I attended 8 of the 12 monthly meetings. (While I would occasionally miss meetings due to scheduling conflicts, the only meeting I intentionally avoided was the December meeting, which was a buffet-style dinner and awards banquet. This meeting was more of a social gathering, and required additional payment above and beyond club dues, and so I chose not to attend because it seemed less likely than the regular monthly meetings to yield information relevant to my project.)

The regular meetings varied in length, but were never shorter than an hour in length, and typically lasted one-and-a-half to two hours. These meetings were run by the officers of the club using a form of parliamentary procedure, and covered a variety of issues relevant to club members, and also to hunters and sportsmen more generally. During these meetings those in attendance would be given at least two sheets of paper (a treasurers report and the minutes from the previous month’s meeting) and I used these sheets of paper to surreptitiously jot down observations or quotes which I would later use to help write my field notes.

Because I attended these meetings as if I were simply another member of the club, this allowed me to learn a great deal about what gun owners felt were the key issues affecting their community and how they spoke about such issues when they were among “the own” (Goffman 1963:19). My presence at these meetings, along with my relationships with key informants, also helped me establish myself as a member of the community, and aided me in developing the rapport needed when requesting interviews with club members.

In addition to attending meetings, I also attempted to conduct participant-observation by stopping by the gun club on weekends to shoot and converse with other members, a strategy that Albers (2003) utilized in his dissertation research. However, these sessions rarely produced any useful data for me because I would often show up to the range and nobody else would be there
during the time I had allotted for my participant-observation sessions. On the rare occasions that someone else was present, I found it difficult to engage these people in extended conversation, and so my field notes from these encounters are limited to only the behaviors I was able to witness while surreptitiously observing the other shooters present. Due to the lack of productive data I got from these sessions, I discontinued my efforts after a couple of tries, and focused instead on the regular club meetings where I would be guaranteed to see a variety of interactions among people within my sampling frame.

The one useful participant-observation session that occurred at the gun club occurred not on a random drop-in, but rather during a planned weekend shooting event. I stopped by the event to see if I could conduct an interview with a specific club member, who turned out not to be present that day. However, a previous interviewee invited me to participate in a round of sporting clays with him and two other members. Initially I said no, pointing out that I did not have a shotgun with me. They offered to lend me one, though, and so I went out and shot with them. This provided me the only opportunity I experienced during my research to shoot competitively with other legal gun owners. This was also one of the few times that I became a “complete participant” (Gold 1958) in a gun-related event, since I more typically tended to adopt more of an observer’s stance during these sessions.

In addition to sessions carried out at the gun club, I also conducted participant-observation sporadically at a variety of other events and locations. There were no specific criteria that I applied ahead of time to determine if a site was suitable for participant-observation; I simply looked for events, opportunities, or locations that were firearms-related and which seemed like they would reveal something about the daily experience of firearms ownership and use. Using this approach I conducted participant-observation at a number of different sites.
including two public forums about gun control held at Syracuse University, and at local gun shops where I stopped in to observe the everyday occurrences there. I carried out participant-observations at these events irregularly, when my schedule permitted, and when these events were happening, or an opportunity presented itself. (In one case, for example, I was traveling through an unfamiliar part of Central New York after having completed an errand and I happened to pass a gun shop that I had heard about at one of the gun club meetings I attended. Since I had never been in this particular before, I simply pulled over and went in to see what it was like and how people interacted there.) During these events, I would jot down notes if possible (at the public forums, for example, it was common for people to be taking notes, so I fit in as just another note-taker), but more often I would simply observe while I was in the setting, and then write up my notes as soon as possible upon leaving the field. Visiting a wide variety of locations, and participating in a number of different events, associated with gun ownership was helpful in improving my understanding of what gun owners’ daily lives are like, and the meanings they attach to their participation in the gun ownership culture.

Just like the gun club meetings, several of the places where I conducted participant-observation ended up providing me with opportunities to meet people associated with gun culture, and also gave me a chance to experience and participate in additional events that would prove helpful to establishing my credibility with local gun owners. In this vein, probably the most impactful event was attending a pro-gun rally in Albany, NY in February 2013. This rally was a statewide event meant to show gun owners’ displeasure at the passage of the SAFE Act. I mostly stuck with the members of my local gun club, observing what was taking place around us. (See Appendix D for a full description of the SAFE Act and the controversy surrounding it.) However, a couple of key incidents in the morning caused me to change my strategy.
The rally had two major components – one was a large public demonstration outside the capitol, and the other was an organized effort inside the capitol for gun owners to visit the offices of their Senators and Assemblymen and meet with them to discuss pro-gun issues. In the first such meeting our group had, the politician in question was not present initially and so we spoke instead with a member of the staff. She defended the politician’s stance to vote for the SAFE Act by citing Governor Cuomo’s strong push for the legislation’s passage. In making this point, she described Cuomo as the “boss” and implied that the politician in question was responding to the task his “boss” had set for him. This analogy did not sit well with the gun owners, who argued that her characterization did not sound like democracy, and that all Senators and Assemblymen should be free to vote whichever way they feel is best, not simply rubber-stamp the desires of a chief executive.

Later, as our group walked into the office of State Assemblyman Al Stirpe, another gun owner was walking out of the office and was upset. He spoke to our group saying that Stirpe had just cursed at their group and that he was leaving because he did not think that that language was appropriate for a politician to use with constituents. (The use of foul language was later confirmed by Stirpe himself (Figura 2013).)

Together, these incidents made me realize that – although I had not planned to do anything to make myself stand out from the crowd – it might be beneficial to record these interactions in order to get a better sense of the gun owners’ perspectives on politics. I had brought my tablet with me to take notes, and so I used both that and my cell phone to record our remaining meetings with politicians. Initially my intent was to simply hold on to these recordings and use them as part of my participant-observation work, but that changed later in the day.
In our final meeting of the day, we spoke with Samuel Roberts, an Assemblyman from the Syracuse area, who had voted for the SAFE Act. I recorded our meeting with him (as did a newspaper reporter who had joined our group by that point), and during our meeting he made a statement that many of those assembled found disagreeable. The group was questioning him about the short amount of time that had been available for politicians to read and understand the SAFE Act legislation, and also the use of the Message of Necessity (a designation which can be used to identify bills as needing emergency action, and therefore requiring a quick vote), a tactic which many gun owners feel was used improperly in the passage of the SAFE Act. The exchange (in part) was:

Roberts: … I didn’t like being put in that situation, and I still don’t like being put in that position, but that’s what happens to us sometimes and I have to stand up and take responsibility…
Gun Owner: Do you think that was a proper use of the Message of Necessity?
Roberts: No! No, I don’t. No, I don’t. I don’t think it was. I don’t think it was, I really don’t. But the thing is, it was, it put in there, it was in front of me, I had to vote – vote or walk.
Gun Owner: Did you vote against the Message of Necessity?
Roberts: Uh, no I didn’t.
Gun Owner: Even though you thought it was improper?
Roberts: No, I didn’t.
Gun Owner: … Thank you. Okay.
Roberts: Okay.

Many of the people present felt that this exchange revealed something important about the Assemblyman, and perhaps politicians in general; he said he was against the way the law was used, and yet he did not vote against its being used in that way. After the meeting was over, one of the local organizers asked me if I had recorded the meeting and I said yes. He then asked if he could have a copy of it, and I said yes, and later in the day I sent him a copy. He thanked me, and implied that he would use the video during the next election to show how Roberts did not have sportsmen’s interests at heart.
I worried that having made these recordings, and provided this file in particular, might have been an improper thing to do as someone who is attempting to maintain a neutral stance within the field. However, as a practical matter, the essential content of Roberts’ remarks (though not the entire exchange quoted above) were later reported in the Syracuse Post-Standard (Weaver 2013) and so the Assemblyman’s stance would certainly have been well-known even if I had chosen not to record his remarks as well. Furthermore, the conversation I recorded took place in a public hallway at the State Capitol building, and was already being openly recorded by a news reporter, so it would be very difficult to argue that these comments were intended as a private communication, or that they were taken out of context. Additionally, these remarks did not mark a departure from any public stance that Roberts had taken in the past, nor with his official voting record. The only reason these comments were notable was because of the reaction they caused for the gun owners, who clearly believed it revealed something about him as a politician. Therefore, I do not believe my recording of them, or my sending the file to one of the attendees, created any significant problems, ethical or otherwise. (Indeed, Roberts’s political fortune seems to have been unaffected, as he won re-election in 2014 with comparative ease (Knauss 2014).)

What this recording – and my participation in the trip in general – did accomplish, however, was helping to establish my reputation with local gun owners. More than once I found it helpful to mention my presence at the Albany event, and being aware of the events which took place there (especially the use of bad language by Al Stirpe, which came up more than once in conversation) came in handy when I was interviewing respondents who referenced these occurrences. Also, at one meeting in particular where I was recruiting for my interviews, an
individual personally vouched for me based on the fact that I had been to the capitol on that trip and had recorded the video in question.

In the end, while the trip to the capitol was undoubtedly the single most impactful instance of participant-observation I conducted for this project, there were plenty of other times where having been out in the field, and experiencing the same things which gun owners experience helped me build rapport with my respondents, and gain a better understanding of the topic I studied.

**Other Data Sources**

In addition to interviews and participant-observation, I also gathered data informally via a few other sources. One key source of information was the e-mails and various other communications I received from pro- and anti-gun groups. In order to receive a wide variety of perspectives on the topics I was researching, I signed up to receive e-mails from the NRA, the New York State Rifle and Pistol Association, New Yorkers Against Gun Violence (NYAGV) and the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence. I found that getting these e-mails helped me keep up-to-date both on topics that were already in the news, and which these organizations chose to comment upon (such as high-profile shootings, or upcoming legislation). However, it also informed me of issues that were less well known in the media, but which these organizations were promoting or discussing based on the relevance to their point of view. For example, the NRA often chose to focus on news stories that they believed demonstrated key problems with existing and proposed gun laws in the US. One such case was that of Shaneen Allen, a woman who was arrested in New Jersey for possessing a firearm for which had a legal permit in Pennsylvania, but which was illegal in New Jersey (Walsh 2014). Following these stories often
had a dual positive effect – primarily, it allowed me to learn about stories I might not have encountered otherwise. Additionally, though, because many of my respondents also read these same materials, it allowed me to be conversant in the types of instances (and sometimes the exact examples) that they were using to form their opinions about the world around them. That gave me a much better understanding of where they were coming from than if I had just been following mainstream news outlets.

In another attempt to gain a greater understanding, during the course of my research I maintained a membership with the NRA. (This was a strategy that Kohn (2000) also used.) I did this initially to establish it as a credibility-building attribute, but it quickly became clear that it was much more important as a tool to help me learn more about the lives of the people I was studying. Receiving the NRA’s printed mailings, for example, helped me understand the perspective that my respondents had on the content and volume of these communications (see Chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion of issues related to the NRA). Beyond this, though, it was helpful to be familiar with the benefits of establishing membership in the NRA, and also the messages which are given to NRA members via their website and various publications. Having this knowledge helped me understand better when respondents discussed some aspect of the NRA, or their approach to activism around various pro-gun topics.

In addition to these methods, I also gleaned information from various other sources including news stories, websites, television shows, and personal interactions too numerous to mention. Taken together, these methods ended up producing a broad understanding of the topic at hand, and I am grateful to all those who helped me gain a deeper appreciation of all aspects of firearms enthusiasm.


\textit{Self-Presentation}

Regardless of one’s data-gathering methodology, it is important to consider – both before and during one’s fieldwork – how one will self-present while in the field. In both my interviews and my participant-observation, I did my best to self-present in ways that would encourage sharing and openness. For this reason, I did my best to follow the advice of Lofland et al. (2006) in presenting a “nonthreatening demeanor” (68). I learned to be cognizant, for example, of the clothing I wore while conducting my research. (The importance of this choice was highlighted when, at a gun club meeting, one of the members felt it necessary to explain away his “fancy” clothes by saying he had come directly from work.) While I did not purchase special clothing in order to attempt to dress similarly to my respondents, I did make sure that I dressed casually for interviews and recruitment meetings, where I would normally have opted to dress more formally. The only major exception to this instance was during the trip to the pro-gun rally in Albany. For this event in particular, the organizers had circulated information stating that more formal attire was to be worn, indicating that these types of dress would be considered standard for such an event. (The wording from an e-mail associated with a later rally read, “Dress code is business casual, or better. NO blue jeans and camo, please” (personal correspondence 2014).) However, the preference for business casual clothing was clearly limited to members of just our local group, as there was plenty of camouflage clothing on display at the capitol during the rally.

Clothing aside, though, I made every effort to be “supportive, cordial, interested, nonargumentative, courteous, understanding, and even sympathetic” (68-69) during my interviews and participant-observations. As Lofland et al. note, it was occasionally difficult to maintain this stance, especially during times when respondents made statements that I either knew to be false, or with which I disagreed, or to which I was morally opposed (e.g., racist and
sexist statements). However, I think I did a good job of maintaining an even keel even during these times, and respondents generally seemed open to sharing their stories with me.

Part of my respondents’ willingness to share may have been due to the other component of my self-presentation while in the field: “selective competence” (70). I made it clear to my respondents that I did not grow up owning guns, and was certainly not an expert in their use or history, or the politics surrounding them. However, I tried to maintain a general knowledge of local, state, and national politics, with a particular emphasis on gun issues. I also developed a general understanding of the technical processes associated with the operation and use of various types of firearms. So, while I (wisely!) did not claim expert status, respondents were often pleasantly surprised when I would report knowledge of a gun-related topic, or was able to answer a query that they had about something we had been discussing. This was helpful because, despite my efforts to present myself accurately, some respondents seemed to forget altogether that I was a gun owner, or seemed to assume that I knew very little about firearms.

At times, though, I would find myself adopting a stance of “acceptable incompetence” (69). While I had a working knowledge of firearms and politics, my grasp of this realm was far from encyclopedic, and respondents would often bring up something that I either had not heard about, or did not recognize from their initial description. In these cases, I found it to be perfectly acceptable to simply ask them to explain what they were talking about. Since I was coming to these people to ask them questions about their lives, Lofland et al. appropriately identify this as “the quintessential student role” (69, emphasis in original) in which it is acceptable for me to not know everything. In fact, this can sometimes produce better results because it directs participants to take additional care and provide as much detail as possible when responding to their questions so that the “ignorant” student can be enlightened on the topic they are discussing. Adopting this
role can be successful when the “student” is seen as “otherwise cordial and easy to get along with” (69) – a stance I did my best adopt in all interactions.

Taken as a whole, I believe my self-presentation was acceptable, as respondents seemed perfectly willing to share information with me, and responded well to my inquiries. Although I felt I connected better with some individuals than others, there were no interviews where I felt that my self-presentation hindered my connection, or kept me from getting the necessary information from my respondents.

*Data Analysis – Software*

The analyses presented in this dissertation were completed using the Atlas.ti software for the Mac. I chose to use a software package in my analysis for several reasons. First, software-based approaches tend to mesh harmoniously with the nature of grounded theory because they allow the original data itself to remain unchanged throughout the coding and writing process while analysis and coding is overlaid onto the data. In this way, if codes need to be added, changed, merged, or deleted, the original data is unaffected and remains available for future analysis. (This contrasts with other methods of data analysis, such as using highlighters on paper transcripts, where once a change is made it is difficult to reverse.) Also, software makes it easy to create memos since all of the relevant codes and quotes can be easily assembled for examination with a few clicks, simplifying what would otherwise be an onerous and omission-prone process of manually collecting all references to a given topic or code.

There were some drawbacks to the use of software, though, the first of which was the need to figure out how to use it in the first place. However, as qualitative software has risen in popularity, it has become more user-friendly and more tasks can be accomplished via processes
that are familiar to most computer users. Also, all major qualitative software producers provide tutorials for their software, and I found that these were generally easy to follow, especially to complete the relatively straightforward tasks of coding and memo writing, which I used most often. Furthermore, had I decided to eschew the use of qualitative analysis software, I would have been faced with the difficult task of creating from scratch my own system of coding and memo-writing from within the word processing software I used to transcribe my interviews. That would surely have taken at least as long – and likely been less efficient – than simply learning the quirks of a piece of software tailor-made for those tasks.

Another potential drawback to using software is the fear of crashes and data loss. Luckily, prior to beginning my analysis, I began using an off-site secure cloud backup service that operates in the background of my computer. In this way, I do not even have to remember to do periodic backups – the computer automatically uploads my files to the cloud server. However, even with this software in place, there’s always the danger that a file becomes corrupted and then that corrupted file gets backed up, writing over the uncorrupted versions of the file, and making it impossible to recover a “clean” version. To address this (hopefully!) unlikely possibility, I took the step of e-mailing my Atlas.ti project file to my University e-mail account at the end of every week. In this way, if the newest version of the file were to become corrupted, I would at least have a somewhat recent version to consult, and from which I could reconstruct the work I had done in the previous week.

In the end, the benefits of using software in my analysis clearly outweighed the negatives and I ended up with a stronger paper as a result of using it.
Data Analysis – Process

When coding, I used the grounded theory approach of choosing no codes ahead of time and instead allowed my codes to emerge from my initial line-by-line exploration of the data. Given the nature of this process, it tends to produce a large number of codes, some of which may appear very seldom, and others of which may appear so often that they end up needing to be split into sub-categories. For example, I ended up with 648 codes throughout my interviews, but over half of them were coded 5 or fewer times. Sometimes these “small” codes referenced things that only a small number of respondents were interested in, such as the code “Airsoft” – which only appeared once – and which refers to a type of shooting sport where competitors shoot non-lethal plastic BBs at one another.

However, these individual codes were also sometimes simply one part of a larger theme or idea, and it is important for analysis to be able to view these connected ideas appropriately. This hierarchical organization of codes is called different things in different software packages; in NVivo software, for example, these hierarchies are referred to as child and parent nodes, whereas in Atlas.ti hierarchies are created through creating code groups, or code trees. Another simpler way of structuring code hierarchies is to simply add prefixes to the names of codes that are related to one another (Woolf 2007). This has the benefit of allowing the user to easily view similar codes together, as well as simplifying the process of merging codes. While this method of organization is less advanced than formally creating code families or networks, as a novice user I found prefixes to be very helpful in keeping myself organized and aware of what codes were related to one another.

An example of the use of prefixes to show how an individual code is part of a larger category is “Media – Believe What Says.” This code was used in cases where a respondent
referred to someone who uncritically accepted what the media presented to them. This specific code was utilized just five times during my analysis, but was part of the larger “Media” category, which contained fifteen total codes that were used 123 times during my interviews. While most of the “Media” sub-codes did not earn their way into my analysis, several of them did, including “Media - Incorrect/Deceiving,” “Media - Shows Gun Violence,” and the two related codes “Media - Gun Owner Portrayals (no/few/little)” and “Media - Only Shows Guns when Bad / Illegal.” (These codes are utilized and discussed further in the subsection “Power Structure - Media” in Chapter 5.) By grouping these codes together using prefixes, I was able to not only keep track of how often they were coming up, but also easily view the quotes associated with them to explore how they might be related.

Some of the most important coding categories in my analysis included “Family,” “Govt,” “Guns,” “Gun Owners,” “Law,” “NY,” and “Stigma,” all of which contain multiple codes within them that were utilized during my analysis. Within these important categories, some codes that proved to be of special importance included, “Family – Father,” “Govt - Politicians Do What is Necessary to Stay in Office / Maintain power / Get elected,” “Gun Owners - Different from Criminals,” “Guns - Fun/Enjoyment,” “Law – Inconsistencies,” “NY - Upstate - Better than Downstate / Divided from Downstate,” and “Stigma - Internal.” While there were fewer of these, there were also some important stand-alone codes that were not part of any larger coding category. These included concepts such as “Women,” “Responsibility,” and “Mental Illness / Mental Health.”

These codes all emerged from respondents’ interviews and I explored and refined them through the use of memos. My initial procedural memos simply described what types of content belonged in each code. However, as I collected more interviews and as my codes began to
increase, I switched over to writing analytic memos exploring the meanings of the codes, and connections among codes. Sometimes these connections either did not pan out, or simply did not have enough evidence to answer inquiries from my early memos, as in the case of this excerpt, proposing a connection between the codes “Self-Reliance” and “Self-Defense”:

The tags of self-reliance and self-defense are often linked, which wasn’t something I anticipated. Perhaps defense is a form of self-reliance? Obviously anything you do yourself involves relying on yourself, but it may be deeper than that. Many people framed their self-reliance in the form of not relying on police officers who may be far away. Could this be part of a larger distrust of government? Or merely a manifestation of a rural mindset where police are remote and less effective than simply doing something on your own?

In the end, I did not have enough relevant data to explore this possible connection any further in the current project. However, such memos could serve as springboards for future projects.

In other cases, though, the connections I found through memoing did bear fruit, and were incorporated into this dissertation. In the memo entitled, “Safety – Hunting,” I use content gathered from my codes to flesh out a concept that made it into my final analysis:

There is a concern among those who hunt about hunting alone versus with a partner … Those who do hunt with others trust them implicitly. Those who hunt alone seem to have chosen to do so because they haven’t found anyone who they can trust to the extent necessary to hunt with them. Everyone stresses safety, but for hunters it seems to be a bigger deal because it’s more present in their lives. Some of them know people who were shot to death by accident, and they know they’re engaging in a sport where there are other people in the woods with them who are trying to kill things that are moving around. … By contrast, nobody reports knowing anyone who was killed (or even injured) at a range. While safety concerns still exist there, it seems less serious. There are few reports of people being so unwilling to shoot with someone at a range that they’ll only shoot by themselves.
Portions of the final text of this section – located in Chapter 3 in the sub-section entitled “Adults and Hunting Safety” – follow directly from the conclusions reached in this memo, and demonstrate the value of this process within a grounded theory context.

Ethical Concerns

While conducting my research, I faced many of the typical ethical concerns associated with participant-observation and interview studies. In this section I will discuss those issues briefly, as well as some additional issues that are unique to this project.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

As noted earlier in this chapter, there was a strong focus throughout this project on protecting the names and identities of respondents. It is important, therefore, to briefly highlight the ways in which this was achieved, in a practical sense.

During the recruitment process, I attempted to maintain procedures that would allow individuals the maximum amount of privacy and discretion possible. For example, when I recruited people in group settings, such as gun club meetings, I made sure to pass out individual cards where people could include their contact information if they were interested in participating, rather than passing around a sheet containing everyone’s contact information. In this way, even those people who were in attendance did not know for sure who had provided their contact information to me, and of course they could not be certain if that person ended up deciding to participate in the research project or not. Also, even if an individual felt pressured into filling out a card for me, he could easily either fill out incorrect/incomplete contact information, or he could simply opt not to participate when I contacted him to follow up.
Aside from meetings, some of my recruitment occurred individually, face-to-face, and in these cases, I simply made an effort to be as discreet as possible about asking the person to participate in my project. The only instance I can think of in which this was compromised to any reasonable extent was when I attempted to recruit an individual whom I saw wearing a pro-gun T-shirt while I was out shopping for groceries. In that case, my partner – with whom I was shopping – clearly saw the individual to whom I was speaking, and knew that I was asking him to participate in the project. However, I made sure not to share the potential respondent’s name with my partner, and I did not discuss any further developments with her about whether that person chose to participate in the project or not.

In conducting my interviews, I also took steps to help protect people’s identities. The approach I took in this case was to allow respondents the maximum amount of flexibility to choose the date, location, and time of the interview. In that way, if they were concerned that someone might find out their gun ownership status, they could select a private location where our talk would be very unlikely to be overheard (such as their house, or a gun club during the day). An added benefit of this approach is that, even if they were unconcerned with the confidentiality of their response, they were still afforded the chance to choose the location, giving them the power to select a space where they were most comfortable. As a result of this policy, I conducted interviews in a wide range of locations including gun clubs, eating establishments, people’s homes and workplaces, and even in a respondent’s vehicle.

During the interviews themselves, I planned to follow the respondent’s lead when it came to the level of confidentiality they sought. If we met in public, I had anticipated a need to read respondents’ conversational cues to see whether they continued to speak at a normal volume when other people were present, whether they looked around furtively, etc. However, the
strategy of allowing the respondent to pick the location seemed to provide a sufficient level of confidentiality for all interviewees, as none of them exhibited any significant signs of worry or concern about our conversation being overheard. There were, however, two instances in which an interviewee expressed concern about saying a piece of information aloud while the recorder was on. In the cases where the person indicated that they had information of this kind which they wished to share with me, but did not want recorded, I simply turned off the recorder and listened to what they had to say, and then turned the recorder back on. In one case, a respondent reported information that would likely have been stricken from the transcript anyway (since it involved the names of individuals and specific enough information about their relationship to the respondent that that information could have been used to identify the respondent). In another case, the respondent reported some personal details that – although they might have been relevant to this research – I have excluded from my analysis in order to honor the promise of confidentiality I made by turning off the recorder.

Once the interviews were concluded, I either transcribed them myself, or sent them out to a transcription service. I used multiple transcription services over the course of this research, all of which have explicit non-disclosure agreements with clients, guaranteeing the confidentiality of any data submitted to the service. In choosing transcription services which offered these assurances, I believe I struck a balance between maintaining strict confidentiality for my respondents’ data and allowing me to complete the project in a reasonable amount of time, thereby honoring respondents’ participation in the project by allowing them to see the results of the research much sooner than if I had insisted on transcribing every single interview on my own.
When I transcribed an interview on my own, I integrated various confidentiality measures into the process. However, if the interview had been transcribed by a service, I would read the transcript while listening to the audio file of the interview, fixing any transcription errors, and at the same time making edits related to confidentiality. The main steps that I took were to remove information related to any names that might identify the respondent or those close to him/her, as well as to remove any information that might help localize the respondent in such a way that someone reading the transcript could reason their way into identifying the speaker. Common redactions included names of respondents and their family and friends, names of cities, names of counties, names of specific gun clubs, and location information associated with specific places.

This process relied somewhat on common sense when the question arose of whether to delete a name or location. Obviously, names of politicians were not removed, since the simple fact that a person lives within a given voting district provides little in the way of specific info that could be used to track down and identify a single person. Also, occasionally some names or locations were left in the text when it was important to identify exactly who/where the person was describing. However, in all instances, I attempted to play it safe when trying to determine if a particular detail should be included or not. If it seemed like there was any chance that the detail provided a significant danger that the respondent might be identified as a result, I removed it.

As an extra means of protection, once I had gone through my process of anonymizing my transcripts, I engaged in the process of “member checking” by sending the transcripts to my respondents for them to look over. When I presented this material to respondents, I included along with it a request for them to review the transcript if they liked, and to let me know if they saw any additional information they would like to have removed to help protect their identity. And while this process was carried out primarily to give them the opportunity to review the
material I had removed to protect their identity, it also provided the additional benefit of allowing respondents a chance to see in writing what they had said aloud, and give them the chance to add to what they said, ask for any material they said to be removed, or dispute what the transcript contained.

Only a few respondents got back to me after I sent them a transcript, with most responders saying some version of, “this looks fine.” I did, however, have a few people respond with questions or issues with the transcript (although none who were asking for more identity protection). Probably the most serious issue that was raised was by one respondent who asked if I had summarized the interview, or otherwise removed material that was said. I responded by telling him that the entire interview had been transcribed verbatim, and offered to provide the full audio recording of the interview for his review. He declined, however, and agreed that although he had believed the interview had been longer than what the transcript showed, the material contained in the transcript nevertheless reflected his beliefs accurately. So, while we might not have reached a definitive agreement about whether the interview transcript was truncated, I believe that this respondent ended up being satisfied overall with the way his information was being used. Other than this instance, one respondent disputed the way that a single sentence had been transcribed – a disagreement which was resolved through my providing him an audio clip of what was said, and reaching an agreement about the words that were used – and two respondents noted errors in proofreading, but either did not respond to a follow-up request to identify these errors, or subsequently stated that they were not serious enough to warrant changing them). Overall, these disagreements were minor, and were resolved quickly.

Furthermore, because nobody objected to the extent to which I had anonymized their transcripts
– or requested additional identity protection – I felt that the approach I took to protecting sensitive data had been effective.

In presenting respondent data in this dissertation – and in any future publications – I have chosen to identify respondents using a three-digit code number. In order to do this I simply obtained a list of three-digit random numbers and replaced each sequential interview number with a random number instead. (One notable departure from this method is that – to indicate their connection to one another – I intentionally assigned sequential numbers when I interviewed two people at the same time. This applies to interviewees 297 and 298, and interviewees 431 and 432.) Assigning respondents a random number provides more anonymity than referring to them by their sequential interview number because it provides less identifying information. Also, I think it is a better approach than assigning them a pseudonym because lists of pseudonyms can be culturally biased in the names they include, as well as the fact that respondents might dislike the pseudonym that gets assigned to them. Given these drawbacks, choosing a number system seemed to be the best choice, despite minor drawbacks associated with it (some people might feel as if being assigned a number instead of a name is too impersonal, for example).

Despite the steps that I have taken, as with any security measure, my attempts at anonymization are guaranteed to have flaws. For example, if a respondent told me about a particular incident, or told a particular story, that has also been recounted to – or was experienced by – other people, it is entirely possible that that the respondent might be able to be identified via the story. However, it would be very difficult for me to take the time necessary to verify with each individual that each piece of information they were sharing with me was sufficiently vague as to prevent anyone at all from recognizing them if I were to use that information in my work. (Also, in some cases, it would have been counterproductive to do so, since many respondents
explicitly told me that they would not mind if I accurately attributed everything they said to them, using their real names.) So, while this method might have flaws, and while some individuals might be identifiable to some other individuals through shared knowledge of stories or locations, I believe that the task of anonymizing respondents’ information has been effectively completed.

Field Membership Roles

As described earlier in this chapter, the requirements of my IRB protocol put me in a difficult position when it came to building rapport and maintaining contact with my respondents. The eventual protocol I agreed to allowed me to maintain people’s contact information throughout the process of interviewing them, and any necessary follow-ups. However, after that time, I was required to delete their contact information and cease further communications with them. This presented a few key problems, which it is important to discuss.

First, it put me in an awkward position when it came to developing and maintaining rapport with my respondents. This is naturally a process that takes a fair amount of time, and can be difficult to do, especially in areas where there may be distrust between respondents and academics. I feared that this distrust would be heightened by my actions of entering the community, interviewing respondents, and then cutting off all communication with my respondents. It was for this reason that I insisted upon several common-sense measures to help mitigate the appearance of having abandoned my respondents immediately upon completing my interviews with them.

First, I agreed with the IRB that if a respondent contacted me after I had erased their contact information and ceased communications with them, I would respond normally to them,
rather than refusing to speak with them for fear of violating my assurances of confidentiality. (This is true regardless of whether the individual contacted me in person or electronically.) It would have had a far greater harm to my relationship with the community to violate social norms by pretending I did not know the person than it would to potentially endanger a person who clearly did not have any concern for the fact that their contacting me might, in some way, endanger the confidentiality of their data.

Second, I insisted on the creation of a research website so that, during the course of the research project, respondents could check in with how the project was going without having to contact me directly. Even though it is very unlikely that anyone who contacted me via e-mail would have their personal information compromised by doing so, creating the additional one-step removal of establishing a website would allow anyone with any concerns about personal identification to remain essentially entirely anonymous if they chose to do so, but still receive updates on the project they were a part of.

Third, to avoid the impression of being someone who “cuts and runs” from the field once the final research publication is complete, I have made a commitment to offer to present my research to groups in New York State who are interested in hearing my results, but especially those groups whose members participated in my project. In this way, even people who prefer not to suffer through the blow-by-blow accounts of a website documenting the ups and downs of a long-term research project, or those who are interested only in the final results, can have the opportunity to attend in-person a presentation where the main results of the paper are discussed. In this way, hopefully the community will have an opportunity to not only ask any questions they may have about the research findings, as well as the process that was used to reach those findings, but they can also achieve some amount of closure that might have been denied to them.
by my seeming abrupt departure following my interviews. This commitment to “leave well” is especially important if I am to continue on in researching this topic in the future. As mentioned previously, a great deal in the firearms ownership community rests on one’s personal reputation, and the word of mouth that exists about you. My observations suggest that this reputation can persist for years, and it is difficult both to establish a reputation and to change it once it is established, so it is important to me that the last impression I leave with people is a positive one.

It is unclear the extent to which these steps made my respondents more or less comfortable with the process of participating in my research. At the end of every interview, when I reminded the respondent that their real names would never be used in my dissertation, and that their confidentiality would be protected, several of them made explicit statements saying that they would not mind if I did use their name, or that it did not matter if they were revealed to have been participants. Indeed, there was more than one instance in which past respondents publicly revealed their participation to individuals, or to groups, while in my presence. So, for these people anyway, it seems that their claims of not caring that their names were associated with the project were at least somewhat verified. However, there have been far more respondents who – after the interview – have never contacted me again. I cannot be certain if this lack of communication demonstrates their desire to take advantage of my guarantees of anonymity, or if it merely represents a shift of their attention to other issues in their lives. In the final evaluation, then, I think that it is important for me to have taken the steps that I did to ensure that participants who might wish to remain anonymous were – at the very least – given a chance to do so.

In the end, I hope that these steps – all of which are relevant to what occurred after the interview process was complete – have helped mitigate some of the difficulties associated with
my process of entering and exiting the community appropriately. Also, I did my best to ensure that the knowledge that I had to utilize these post-interview strategies did not affect my ability to establish meaningful connections with my respondents as I was conducting interviews with them.

*When to reveal that I am a researcher*

When conducting most types of research, it is generally agreed-upon that – absent some compelling reason not to – identifying oneself as a researcher is required at some point. When, and how, to do this, though, is generally left to individual discretion. After all, as disconcerting as it could be for individuals to realize that the person they’ve been talking to for hours is a researcher (and having to mentally make an accounting of what they’ve just said and whether they would be okay with sharing that information with a wide audience), it could be equally disconcerting if researchers were to go around introducing themselves as such to every person they met while out in the field, on the off-chance that that something that person says or does could end up appearing in some form in a research publication.

I was especially concerned about the tension surrounding the “outing” of myself as a researcher given that Albers (2003) reported conducting a fair amount of his recruitment “during the course of target shooting, looking at merchandise at gun shows, or at the meetings of gun clubs and firearms organizations” (23). (While he later clarifies that, in the latter case, he often encountered people only after making an appeal for interviews in front of these organizations – thereby clearly identifying himself as a researcher – it can be assumed that a certain amount of the time he faced the tension of when to identify himself as a researcher.) I was also concerned about it because research had indicated to me that the world of firearms ownership might well be
one of the “many social settings in which entrée, and the building of rapport with setting members, needs to proceed slowly and gingerly” (Lofland et al 2006:38), and that identifying myself as an academic, and a researcher, might be disruptive to the process of building rapport.

For these reasons, I adopted a kind of dual strategy. In settings where people’s actions were public (such as at a gun show, or a public pro-gun rally), I did not identify myself as a researcher, since it seemed unlikely that people would act any differently in these situations knowing that a researcher was nearby than they would knowing that anyone else was nearby. Also, people in these types of public locations have no reasonable expectation of privacy, which is the standard typically used in social science research (Guest, Namey and Mitchell 2012: 102). In settings other than this, I made a judgment call about when to present myself as a researcher. For example, once it became clear that a person was a candidate to be an interviewee, I would identify myself, briefly talk about my project, and then gauge their interest in participation. I never surreptitiously questioned anyone about topics related to my research before asking if they’d be interested in participating. But, by the same token, I did not identify myself as a researcher to everyone I met. For example, while I was traveling through an area of New York State I had not previously been through, I happened to see a gun shop that I had heard about and I decided to stop in to do some participant-observation. After walking around the shop for a few minutes, I struck up a conversation with one of the employees, and even asked him to get several guns out of the case so I could look at them. In this case, I did not identify myself as a researcher. Even though the location was only semi-public, it would undoubtedly have been disruptive to announce my researcher status upon entering the shop. Now, had I decided to ask anyone in the store to be a respondent, or ask the owner to post a flyer for my research, I would certainly have identified myself.
In contrast to this previous example, there was another time when I entered a specific gun shop looking to speak with the owner, who had been referred to me by another respondent. In that case, as soon as I met the owner, I identified myself, as well as the person who had referred me to him, and talked about my project to gauge his interest in participating. In this case, I chose to identify myself because I was specifically looking to recruit this individual, and because it could have been interpreted as deceptive to simply chat with him for a long period of time as if I were a regular customer of his store.

Luckily, in the course of my research I did not encounter any situations in which I was in any entirely private settings where my research status was unknown to those present. Every time I visited a person’s home pursuant to this research agenda it was only after I had made specific arrangements to do so, and so there was no concern that people would speak or act in ways that they would not have done if they knew I was a researcher. If that situation had arisen, I would probably have simply mentioned that I was a researcher as soon as the conversation turned to something that was relevant to my research.

In the end, I believe that the strategy I pursued is an ethical one, and one that will help avoid claims of bias. Given my policy of early identification with anyone who was potentially a respondent, I typically did not know much about how potential interviewees felt about topics relevant to my dissertation before I asked them to participate. In the end, I think this was a good choice because it minimized the chances for an unconscious bias toward or against certain types of gun owners, or people with certain types of views. Identifying myself early may have pushed away some people who might otherwise have participated, but I suspect that members of this group would have been unlikely to participate in any case. If their level of interest in my study was so low – or their fear of participation so high – that they immediately chose not to
participate, then it is unlikely that a short session of rapport-building, followed by the subsequent revelation of my researcher status, would have produced a significantly different outcome.

In the end – as described elsewhere in this chapter – the majority of my recruitment took place through existing contacts, presentations at meetings of gun groups, and snowball sampling, all of which raise few concerns that respondents did not know I was a researcher when they talked with me. However, when considering the ethics of one’s recruitment, it is important to review methods that were used at any time, not just those that were used most often.

*Insider/Outsider Status*

One key component which is intimately connected with the choice of when/whether to reveal oneself as a researcher is being aware of one’s status in the field, and whether one is likely to be considered an insider or outsider. As noted in their discussion of Fred Davis’s essay exploring the difference between the approach of a “Martian” (one who seeks distance from a social setting to describe it without references internal to the phenomenon) and a “Convert” (one who seeks almost complete subjectivity as a means of getting the most detailed information possible about the phenomenon), Lofland et al. (2006) note that both closeness and distance are required at different times in one’s research. They conclude:

>If you are already (or will become) a member in the setting, you almost “naturally” possess (or will possess) the convert stance … [c]onversely, if you are an outsider to the setting, a stranger to the social life under investigation, your access to questioning will be equally natural. You need, then, to seek mechanisms for reducing that distance. (22-23)

Using this dichotomous approach, I would best be described as an insider, since my goal was to join the group I was studying, participate in their activities, and understand their perspectives.
However, it is good that Lofland et al. emphasize the dual nature of insider/outsider (or Martian/Convert) because I have aspects of both groups, despite my methodological choice to join the group I studied. In fact, during this project I maintained what would probably most accurately be described as a hybrid insider/outsider status. As discussed in greater depth in the Methodological Appendix (Appendix B), I did not grow up owning firearms, and was generally opposed to their ownership and use until relatively recently. However, since that time I have achieved many statuses that are key to being seen as an insider within the group I researched – gun ownership, pistol-license holder, gun club member, and (to my surprise) being a somewhat decent shot. In addition to these achieved statuses, I also have the benefit of being male and White, attributes which place me generally in the mainstream of the firearms ownership community. (This is especially crucial since Kohn (2000) reported a conversation with a respondent in which it became clear that male respondents intentionally hid some aspects of their personalities, which might be deemed offensive, specifically because she was a woman. She also reports that her presence at gun shops, for example, was seen as non-normative and required explanation (124) – a situation that I did not face.)

However, I also have some potentially disconfirming statuses as well, most notably my position as an academic. There has been, and continues to be, a contentious relationship between academics and gun owners. Since at least the mid-1990s, academia has been recognized by firearms owners, and pro-gun organizations, as a source of research that is perceived as anti-gun. Of the many anti-gun studies that have received a lot of attention and gained traction in the media, one of the best-known is Arthur Kellermann’s 1993 article in the New England Journal of Medicine in which he and his co-authors found that “keeping a gun in the home was strongly and independently associated with an increased risk of homicide” and that “[v]irtually all of this risk
involved homicide by a family member or intimate acquaintance” (Kellermann et al. 1993:1084). This conclusion represents something very different from what many firearms owners would like to believe – that their firearms are likely to be deadly only to intruders and not to friends and family – and it has been a perennial target of criticism since its release (Montgomery 2011).

Seeing the influence that the Kellermann article had – and perhaps anticipating what further anti-gun studies might do – in 1996 the NRA spearheaded efforts to prevent the CDC from doing research on firearms in ways which they believed were biased against firearms ownership. This move was criticized by scholars, some of whom believe that it has led to a generally poor understanding of firearms-related issues due to a lack of basic research on the topic (Luo 2011).

The CDC hasn’t been the only target, however. In one recent case, the NRA took the step of sending out a press release to its members warning them against participating in research being carried out by Dr. Garen Wintemute of UC Davis. Dr. Wintemute’s research was singled out, according to the NRA, because his previous research “ha[s] tried to blame legal firearms dealers for the illegal use of guns, and proposed further restrictions on dealers' ability to conduct business” (National Rifle Association 2011b). The NRA went on to urge its members not to participate in the research, so as to deny it credibility, and possibly prevent future research of the same type. (I was further disheartened by accounts of Albers’ (2003) field research where he encountered disparaging references to “CLAMs,” a group which his informants identified as “Congressional Left, Academics, and Media” and who they perceived “to be enemies of the right to bear arms and the gun-owning public” (35)).

Given this existing tension, I was afraid that being an academic might make firearms owners unwilling to talk to me, or – at the very least – suspicious of my motives. I even feared the possibility that state- or national-level gun groups would denounce my research, and that
members of those groups would refuse participation. Luckily, though, neither large-scale suspicion, nor mass refusal to participate, came to pass, or at least did not occur on a large enough scale for me to notice it. There could be a number of reasons for this outcome, which may well overlap with, and reinforce, each other.

One possibility is that the qualifying attributes I possess – especially that of being a gun owner myself – might have outweighed any negative status associated with being an academic. I anticipated from the beginning that my academic status might be discrediting, and informally I did have respondents report to me that they were skeptical of the research at first, but were reassured when they found out that I was a firearms owner, and that this wasn’t intended to be “anti-gun research.” This could represent a normal, healthy skepticism about research being conducted on what is a potentially stigmatized status – Taylor (2008), for example, describes firearms owners as “naturally guarded” and notes that “trust can be difficult to establish” (48). However, it is also consistent with the situation described above about organizations (such as the NRA) directing their members to avoid participating in research that might be biased. Whatever the source of this reluctance, however, the remedy seems to be making personal connections, and the demonstration of a sufficient “insider” status, so as not to represent a threat.

This meshes well with the experiences reported by Kohn (2000) while researching firearms enthusiasts in Northern California. She reported that gun owners seemed to have greater trust in her ability to represent them fairly when they encountered her in a situation where it was clear that she owned and used guns. She says that:

Shooters allowed me into their community because my status as a shooter was prima facie evidence that I was not ideologically opposed to gun ownership, and I was presumed to either understand or be sympathetic (or at least fair-minded) toward gun ownership in general). (157)
Furthermore, as Albers (2003) noted in his study, it is possible that the novelty of being both an academic and a gun owner might have surprised and impressed his potential respondents (35). I might well have benefited from the same feelings, and – combined with my knowledge of ongoing issues within the firearms ownership community – it may well have provided me with a positive status that I might not have enjoyed if I had been a complete outsider, or someone without these seemingly disparate statuses.

A second possibility is that I took sufficient steps to frame and qualify my academic status. Albers reports attempting to delay people’s knowledge of his academic status for as long as possible, and instead attempting to engage people in conversation first (36-37). Because of the way that most of my sampling took place, however, that was not as viable a strategy for me as it was for him. Despite this, there were several instances in which I chose to present my academic status as a positive rather than a negative. First, I framed myself as a conduit through which respondents could have their message heard. In my research flyer, for example, I framed it this way:

Tired of reading research written by people who know nothing about guns? Would you like to help set the record straight? Now you can! Zachary Miner – a gun owner and Ph.D. candidate at SUNY Albany – is doing interviews with New York State gun enthusiasts for his dissertation research. The study is specifically designed to let gun owners’ voices and experiences be heard. Don’t pass up this opportunity to tell the world of academia what it’s really like to be a gun owner in New York!

(I also framed my status in a similar way on the posters and materials I used when I promoted my research at a gun-related event.) In doing so, I presented my research as an opportunity for communication to the academic world, while at the same time front-loading my gun ownership status as a means of establishing my credibility. In this way, I followed Lofland et al.’s (2006) advice to “say something about what’s in it for your informants” while also heeding
their warning to “avoid identifying yourself in terms of labels or roles that may be alien, suspect, or accentuate status differences” (44). The status of the “academic who gets it,” or the “gun owner who’s also an academic” may have proven to be a useful one.

A third approach I found useful to mitigate the effects of my academic status was to use the prestige of others to qualify me. I had the great fortune to become acquainted with several high-profile members of the gun ownership community in Central New York during the course of my research, and many of them were interested in my research and offered to help me in pursuing it. These meetings were especially fortuitous because of the power of reputation that I observed in the gun ownership community (as discussed elsewhere in this dissertation). The collective memory of the gun ownership community was remarkable, and so having the support of a person who has developed a strong reputation over the years allowed me to benefit from the goodwill afforded to that person. It is very likely that several of the people who participated in my project did so because they received word of it from one or more trusted figures in the firearms ownership community. In that way, any misgivings they might have had about me or my status as an academic might well have been laid aside due to their trust of the high-status person who relayed the message.

There are two other possibilities that are important to consider as well, both of which are somewhat idiosyncratic. It is possible, for example, that – contrary to what I had assumed from my research – gun owners do not actually dislike academics, or do not dislike them enough to affect the likelihood that they would participate in research. Kohn (2000), for example, reported that revealing her identity as a researcher “was usually greeted with a few raised brows, and sometime [sic] general questions, but at no point any outright distrust or hostility” (148). It could easily be true that the NRA’s high-level disapproval of academic and federal research does not
trickle down to individual members, and that gun owners are simply unaware of (or ambivalent about) the NRA’s position on academic research. Also in relation to the idiosyncrasies of local opinion, it could also be the case that my affiliation with SUNY schools might have affected people’s opinion of me in a different way than if I had been a student at a nationally-known university (as Albers was, as a student at Duke). (This is, of course, only an assumption, and one that it would be difficult to try to verify.)

Finally, it is possible that any anti-academic sentiment within the firearms ownership world is episodic in nature. Albers, for example, recounts how his research coincided with the scandal associated with Michael Bellesiles. (Bellesiles was a researcher whose work “contended that, contrary to popular conceptions of American history, private gun ownership in Colonial America was actually quite rare” (Albers 2003:10). His controversial work was later found to contain enough errors and instances of academic dishonesty that various awards he had received were stripped from him, and he resigned from his position at Emory University.) It could well be that much of the difficulty that Albers faced during his research was due to the prominence of this scandal at the time – a situation which, luckily, has not repeated itself during my own research.

In the end, I feel that I was able to successfully achieve a blended insider/outsider status within the firearms ownership community. This was an ideal outcome because, as Lofland et al. (2006) note, both statuses possess advantages and disadvantages (41-43). Therefore, blending the two hopefully allowed me to gain as many of the benefits as possible from each, while mitigating the drawbacks.
Safety/Danger in the Field

The level of danger a researcher faces while in the field varies a great deal based on the topic being researched, the methods being used, and the purposes for which the researcher visits various location(s). Obviously researchers need to take safety precautions when their methodology leads them to potentially dangerous locations, such as carefully choosing the time of day to visit neighborhoods with high crime rates (Fader 2013:10). However, in the current study, it is more difficult to assess the level of risk than it might initially seem. After all, firearms are designed to be dangerous, in the sense that their primary purpose is to launch projectiles at speeds which are capable of wounding or killing both animals and people, as well as damaging or destroying property. Voluntarily putting oneself in a situation where firearms are being used, then, necessarily raises one’s risk of being hurt or killed by gunfire higher than normal. However, the vast majority of my research took place not on active gun ranges, but rather in people’s homes, and at their businesses, where it was only slightly more likely that someone would be shooting a gun than would be the case in any random house or business in America.

Although my research was on a topic that conjures images of crime and violence in many people’s minds, even the most cursory examination of mortality statistics shows that I was in greater danger while driving to and from my research sites than I was while interviewing legal firearms owners (a conjecture borne out by CDC data (Centers for Disease Control 2012a; Centers for Disease Control 2012b)).

Given the considerations above, for the majority of the time I was conducting my research, I took no special precautions in terms of my physical safety. However, when I did visit active gun ranges, I made sure to remain alert to any potentially dangerous situations, including people failing to follow established gun safety rules and thereby creating an unsafe situation.
Luckily, during the course of my research these was not a single incident that I noticed which was severe enough for me to fear for my safety, or which rose to the level where I felt that I needed to say something, leave the area, or call authorities to keep myself or others safe.

Undoubtedly, part of my experience of safety had to do with the fact that I had some previous training and experience with firearms, and felt capable of judging when firearms were being used safely and when they were not. Furthermore, my feelings of safety were also partially formed by being male and White, both common attributes in the firearms ownership community. Since I shared these attributes with the majority of my respondents, they seemed likely to yield a neutral evaluation – or potentially even a positive one – of myself by my respondents. Had I been non-white or female, my respondents’ assessment of me might have been different, leading to a different understanding of safety while in the field. (Although Kohn (2000) does not discuss in-depth any specific problems she felt she faced as a female researcher, as noted earlier she does mention that some men refused to express certain types of “offensive” views around her. She also gives small examples throughout her research – such as acknowledging that one of the gun ranges she visited had “a slightly macho feel” (141-142), and that some shooters eroticize their firearms as female (Kohn 2004:12) – indicating at the very least that sex and gender are not neutral characteristics in the firearms world, and therefore suggesting that they might well have some effect on a researcher’s agenda, including the potential for danger).

Summary

This chapter discussed the most important aspects of my methodology, from the benefits of using a qualitative approach rather than a quantitative one, to specific choices made about how to present myself, and what to say while in the field. Overall, I believe that the choices I made
were appropriate to the unique challenges presented by the research area and setting. I faced few problems locating respondents for my interviews, and identifying locations for participant-observation, and I was able to manage these problems using a variety of strategies described in this chapter. Additionally, the ethical challenges I faced – while serious in nature – were also able to be addressed through the use of a variety of approaches drawn from existing literature and adapted to the needs of my situation.
Chapter 3 – Subculture

Introduction

As described in Chapter 1, legal gun ownership occupies a peculiar space in American culture. Few other statuses are as common, and yet remain as poorly understood by the general public as legal gun ownership. One major reason for this is because of the lack of authoritative information available, which leaves many people simply under-informed about what legal gun ownership is like. Also, with increasing geographic and cultural isolation between those who own guns and those who do not, non-owners fill in their understanding with material gleaned from media, politics, family, and peers. It is in this way that, despite the fact that there are millions of legal gun owners, the everyday realities associated with their firearms ownership have been “kept systematically beyond the … reach of” (Katz 1997:393) most non gun-owners. This creates a situation where large portions of the public have little or no credible information about mainstream gun ownership, leading to misunderstandings both large and small.

One of the most prominent of these misunderstandings was evident in President Obama’s widely reported quote about people living in economically-struggling small towns in Pennsylvania and the Midwest:

… they fell through the Clinton Administration, and the Bush Administration, and each successive administration has said that somehow these communities are gonna regenerate and they have not. And it's not surprising then they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations. (Fowler 2011)

This type of statement suggests that firearms ownership is merely a subset of conservative ideology, rather than its own phenomenon, and shows the extent to which understanding of
firearms ownership has been limited even among those who are most knowledgeable about the US and its people. This is just one example of how insiders and outsiders maintain very different understandings of the same issue, and conflict arises as a result of the gaps between their views.

With this in mind, one goal of this chapter is to help provide some of the information and context about legal gun owners that is currently missing from our national conversation. The qualitative methodology used in this study helps answer different types of questions than have been asked in existing quantitative surveys, and provides needed context for these important issues. This study also provides important updates – with the most recent comprehensive qualitative studies of gun owners having been published in 2000 (Kohn) and 2003 (Albers), this chapter offers an opportunity to explore how previously documented aspects of the subculture have changed, and if new elements have gained prominence. Since qualitative research with legal gun owners is rare, this study - in conjunction with others – helps to establish a base of knowledge about gun owners more generally.

In addition to the more general benefits of conducting this research, this chapter takes on added significance as the first qualitative investigation of New York State’s gun owners. Previous major qualitative studies have looked at gun owners in California (Kohn 2000) and North Carolina (Albers 2003), so interviewing New York’s gun owners offers access to a new set of data. New York is an ideal place to choose for expanding knowledge, because it has important attributes that set it apart from other states. The strong upstate/downstate divide and the recent passage of the SAFE Act, for example, make New York very interesting theoretically and allows us to expand our knowledge of which subcultural aspects are universal and which are regional or situational in nature.
In the end, it is clear that if the knowledge gap about gun owners is to be filled, it must be done through systematic efforts aimed at creating a better understanding of what is currently a poorly understood group, and this chapter represents one step towards that goal. Early on in my interviews, I asked questions designed to investigate the everyday lives of legal gun owners. My questions explored such topics as respondents’ history with firearms, their reasons for gun ownership, and the values they associate with that ownership. In responding to these questions, my interviewees often touched on additional topics that revealed more about the subculture of legal gun ownership, yielding some interesting conclusions about this group, especially as it relates to their perceptions of gun safety, what it means to be a responsible and skillful gun owner, and their understandings of how the Constitution applies to gun ownership. These conclusions are useful because they help fill in some of the central themes of what it means to be a gun owner. Such information shows the depth and variety within a group that some have assumed to be largely one-dimensional. This information also has policy relevance for those looking to work with firearms legislation, as it establishes the core values of gun owners and distinguishes those values from the positions of pro-gun politicians and firearms advocacy organizations (e.g., the NRA).

Origins of Gun Ownership

In starting the analysis of the world of firearms owners, it makes sense to begin at the beginning – how respondents became interested in firearms in the first place, and what sustained their interest in it over time. Although I interviewed both men and women (see Appendix A for a table describing the sample) the majority of references to how people began to become interested in firearms were associated with male figures. This section explores those themes, as well as
themes regarding familial involvement, and the following section explores the influence of women.

*Family and Fathers*

The social construction of gender is an important concept in sociology, and in this arena firearms have been repeatedly linked with the construction of masculinity. Firearms represent a number of masculine ideals including power, strength, and independence, and the narratives men create around these firearms demonstrate the strong association firearms have with these ideals. Men who carry firearms, for example, report doing so for highly gendered reasons, such as: “to protect their wives and children, to compensate for lost strength as they age, and to defend themselves against people and places they perceive as dangerous, especially those involving racial/ethnic minority men” (Stroud 2012:216). Further research agrees that some men – especially those in “the ‘safe’ white enclaves of suburbia” (Carlson 2012:1125) – carry guns in response to a greater perceived likelihood of victimization (especially by racial minorities); still others carry guns as a way to avoid the emasculation of having to rely on the state for protection. But while the links between gun carrying and masculinity take place on the individual level, researchers have also considered how masculinity is constructed in larger ways within the world of firearms ownership. Studies have shown how the associations between firearms and masculinity plays out across numerous locations within the firearms world, including in the contents of hunting magazines (Kalof, Fitzgerald, and Baralt 2004), in the pro-gun stories told in gun advocacy publications (O’Neill 2007), and in organized shooting sports (Anderson and Taylor 2010).
And while many gun owners use them for legal purposes, other research has suggested that the criminal use of firearms may be linked to masculinity as well. Klein (2006), for example, has suggested that many school shooters – who tend to be young and male – may enact their violence partially in a form of retaliation for being called gay by bullies. These shooters see the use of firearms as a way to “re-assert a more dominant, powerful, and victorious masculinity” (39).

But where does this pervasive association with masculinity arise, and how does it persist across generations? One clear reason is that most gun owners were initiated into their enjoyment of firearms by men, and so it maintains lifelong masculine associations. In his work with gun owners, Albers (2003) reports that, “without exception, and regardless of gender, each participant’s introduction to firearms was through men” (68). My findings are similar, though with fathers specifically emerging as key figures in the process of developing interest in firearms. Even in cases where multiple factors may have been at work, fathers were often indicated as the people with the most influence. For example, respondents typically described their interest in firearms as something that developed over time, rather than in response to a single incident. One respondent described being interested in firearms since he “was old enough to be cognizant of anything in the world” (R117), and others experienced it as a kind of permanent presence: “it was just something I grew up with all along” (R432). Theoretically, then, any number of individuals could have played a part in the process of animating the respondent’s interest in firearms. However, many respondents specifically suggested that their own interest in firearms was somehow inevitable because of, or arose naturally from, their fathers’ interest. Respondents described this process by saying, “you tend to do things that your parents do” (R488), or “[my father] was interested and I think that's why I got interested in
them” (R242), or stating simply, “My father was very interested in hunting. I hunted with him a lot when I was growing up” (R262). Another respondent described his interest in a similarly fatalistic way saying, “I come from a hunting family … My father- they were hunters, so I mean, we just shot like big time, from five years on up, man, we just shot” (R345). Even the respondent who described his father as “not what I would call a very good [hunter]” (R235) perceived his interest in firearms as stemming from early experiences with him. Many respondents reported strong positive memories of time spent with their fathers, with one going so far as to say, “Those were the times when I think back to all of our experiences when we really related, really communicated. That is something that without guns that would have never been part of my life” (R262).

An interesting finding, though – noted among a minority of respondents – suggested that a key component of fostering an interest in guns required the presence of a father, or father figure, of a certain age. When asked about whether his father owned guns and hunted, one respondent said, “[h]e was pretty old when I was born, so he's past all that good stuff” (R174). Another respondent had a similar situation, saying of his father, “[h]e was well over 50 when I was actually of hunting age. He had pretty much worked himself out of that, and I [felt] that as I was growing up” (R332). A third felt similarly as he noted of his burgeoning interest in hunting, “my father passed away … when I was like fifteen, so that kind of put a damper on things” (R345). This suggests that, at least as far as hunting is concerned, simply having a father with a certain attitude appears not to be sufficient to fully shape his child’s attitudes. Obviously all three of these individuals did end up becoming firearms enthusiasts, but it is instructive to note that both R332 and R174 reported that their interest in firearms increased a great deal later in life, rather than being constant from a young age, suggesting that the complete or partial absence of a
parent can have a significant effect on the arc of a person’s interest in firearms. R345, on the other hand, reports that his neighbors took up the slack, in terms of his firearms education, after his father passed away. Obviously little can be concluded from such a small sample, but there are at least indications that while parental attitudes can lay the groundwork for firearms enthusiasm, there also needs to be an active component (though not always from a parent) to push interest to the next level. By these respondents’ own descriptions – indicating that their interest was less than it would have been if their fathers had been younger or more involved with guns when they were kids – it suggests that parental interest plus the ability to go out and do things together has the greatest effect.

Additional indications of the strength of a father’s presence comes from the large number of respondents who reported a father who was present, with whom they interacted frequently, and who introduced them to firearms ownership. Especially common was the description of going out hunting with their fathers, and other male relatives, in some limited capacity while they were still children (sometimes as young as 5 years old). Respondents described how they “tagged along” (R448) with a hunting father, often not “actually shooting or carrying a gun, but I was out there in the woods with him” (R267). In addition to hunting, some respondents report doing related tasks – such as driving deer towards a hunting party, or carrying supplies – while others report simply being there. (As a side note: while many people reported going out into the woods with their fathers well before they were old enough to hunt alone, very few acknowledged holding a gun or shooting animals when they were too young to do so, and more reported that their families were adamant that they not shoot until it was legal to do so.)

In addition to being the ones who physically brought the respondents along with them while hunting, fathers were also often identified as promoting firearms safety. As described
elsewhere in this chapter, firearms safety was a major concern of respondents and fathers appear to play an important role in fostering this value in their children. One respondent reported that his father “did things, along the way, that helped me understand how important it was to constantly be aware of safety so that it becomes second nature” (R267). Even Respondent 488, whose parents were uninterested in firearms themselves, reported that they required that he “handl[e] them with care.” Another respondent discussed how his father took steps to remind him of the dangerous nature of firearms, and the need to use them safely:

I had a cousin … and I can remember this one summer we were on the side yard shooting a .22 rifle and we'd been plinking away for a while. My dad came out of the house with an Ithaca Featherlight 12-gauge Deerslayer and a 30/30, a Winchester 30/30, and we're thinking, "Oh okay, he's going to shoot with us." No. He said, "You know you guys are having a lot of fun shootin’ up this .22 ammo, but … I don't think you respect it anymore, so from now on, you're going to have to shoot these guns. One round through each of these guns before you can plink with the .22." So we proceeded to each of us shoot a 12-gauge shell and a 30/30 shell. Like I said, we were probably about 12, 11 or 12 and I can remember it knocked my cousin right out of the chair. So, it was just one of those things that you never forget. … I really think he was right … I really was not thinking it was that big a deal, how serious even a 22 could be. (R242)

Respondents clearly view parental responsibility as an important source of safety information. However, this can work both positively and negatively. Respondent 345, for example, noted that after his father passed away, things “were a little too loose … nobody was around, so we did what we wanted to do” in terms of the use of firearms. And even when parents are present, this does not always solve the problem. Respondent 320 identified parents’ attitudes and behaviors as powerful, but sometimes in the wrong ways: “[to interviewer] You’re my kid, okay? And Dad’s going to take you hunting. And you’ve just been through hunter ed class, and there are certain things that you were told that are totally unacceptable, okay? Are you going to tell your father that he’s doing something wrong?” The idea that parental influence is potentially
stronger than that of state-mandated hunter safety classes shows a clear understanding of the process of developing safety as lifelong, with experience and authority often winning out over simply receiving advice.

For the most part, though, the influence of fathers was seen positively. In fact – just as with Albers’s respondents (2003:69) – many respondents who were fathers themselves indicated that they were interested in passing along their love of firearms to their children, or that they had already done so. Respondent 362, for example, reported that his guns are “primarily used for sporting, recreation, to go out and have a good time shooting with the kids. My kids learned how to shoot when they were six, seven and eight like I did.” Respondent 332 reported similarly that his adult children enjoy the use of firearms as a means of “spending time with Dad,” and that such use “is a good family-type thing if it's done safely and done with respect.” Respondent 138 also reported that the times spent hunting and shooting with his college-aged children are “some of the best times that we got to share.”

While the influence of women on respondents’ lives is explored elsewhere in this chapter, when looking at the influence of fathers on respondents’ lives, it is important to consider the effect of fathers’ attitudes within the larger household. It is worth noting that no respondent reported growing up in a household where both parents were actively against firearms. Probably the most strenuous parental objection to firearms came from Respondent 441 who initially reported that her mother “was very against [firearms]” and as a result didn’t allow her father – who had a military background – to keep them in their home. This respondent did, however, report that her mother “wasn’t against shooting [firearms]” (emphasis in original) and, although she did not want them in her house, she allowed both her husband and daughter to continue to use firearms outside of the house. On a slightly similar note, Respondent 378 had a unique
situation where his parents were not interested in firearms, and reported that, “some of my uncles we were in World War II, you know, so they weren’t fond of guns, I don’t think.” Even this disapproval was fairly slight, though, as he later reported that nobody in his family was “avidly against” firearms. Finally, Respondent 220 reported being a “liberal kind of kid” growing up, and so his parents were surprised when he expressed an interest in firearms later in life. However, he reported that this resulted in both parents having positive reactions in the end, partially due to his father’s early experiences with shooting firearms. These respondents were the only ones who reported any significant amount of negative family reactions in regards to their firearms ownership. In the end, most parents who were not part of a gun ownership tradition were not described as anti-gun, but rather as neutral towards gun ownership. For the most part they reportedly had “no problem with it” (R220), with merely “no desire to have a gun” (R128) themselves, or said that owning firearms “just wasn’t their thing” (R227).

Other male relatives

When seen in context, the images of respondents’ fathers paint a picture of an individual whose influence on firearms ownership is perceived to be quite strong, but certainly not unique. Often, the father’s influence was supplemented with that of other male relatives. Several respondents report male relatives enjoying and using guns together: “I had a older brother that hunted quite a bit, and my father hunted quite a bit” (R140); “I was born and raised in a family that hunted. It was cousins, uncles, whomever, and so that's where I started” (R262); “They were part of my family … every guy on basically both sides of my family grew up hunting … they were a fixture” (R240). However, there were also some respondents who described family
situations where their father was no longer interested in hunting, or was unable to participate as fully as he would like. In these cases other male relatives typically stepped in to fill the void:

My uncles all hunted, my uncles were avid hunters. My dad used to do a little bit of hunting but not that I could ever remember. He used to hunt before he got married. … There was really never any guns in our house other than my grandfather, he had some guns … So I started shooting when I went to my grandparents’ place, I’d always shoot. (R362)

My father taught me how to shoot … We used to go out to my uncle’s farm and shoot all kinds of – either handguns or rifles. His father was a hunter, and my father went out – he was a hunter and fisherman – but my father never really got into the hunting. He went out for a while with ‘em, but he never really liked to do it much. But we’ve always been in the target shooting they have, and also, my whole family has been involved y’know? (R324)

This also seemed common in situations where the respondent’s father was never interested in hunting, and allowed others to step in and provide guidance. These typically involved close relatives, such as uncles, cousins, and grandfathers: “My father was never one to get into [hunting], but all my uncles hunted and all my cousins … For some reason, it was just something my dad never wanted to do. And, to each his own” (R251); “My grandfather was a huge hunter … My dad really never got into it. My grandfather, my uncles, they were all into it, so I learned a lot from them” (R154).

*Family involvement*

Respondents report engaging in a variety of firearms-related activities with their families that appear to have both helped create and sustain their firearms enthusiasm. The most prominent of these activities is hunting. Hunting holds a great deal of importance for many firearms owners in upstate New York, as shown by the large number of respondents who mentioned it as a key activity in the formation of their attitudes about firearms. (As Respondent 138 put it, “[Hunting]
a family time ... If you ask most people up in this area, I believe that most of them will have some type of experience with hunting.”) One reason for this is that hunting is a skill that must be learned through practice. More than one interviewee reported being certified to teach New York State’s required hunter education course, and they emphasized that the course they taught was oriented towards teaching students how to hunt safely rather than to impart techniques of how to hunt any particular animal. (And given the wide variety of animals that are hunted legally in New York, as well as the huge variations in terrain across the state, it would certainly be impossible to teach all possible types of hunting in a ten-hour course.) Therefore, the bulk of a hunter’s knowledge necessarily comes not from classroom work, or book study, but from time spent hunting with knowledgeable others. For this reason, hunting is typically viewed as a tradition that must be passed on from person to person. Respondents take this tradition seriously, but they also often describe it as an enjoyable way to spend time with family. Respondent 262 described his hunting time as “very therapeutic, and a piece of that is sharing that time if you're hunting with others, whether it be my new son-in-law or my sons or, at the time, my father.” (R262) Respondents typically reported enjoying the time they got to spend with family, and wishing they could spend more time doing so, whether it was on special days – such as opening day of hunting season (Rs 140, 267), or Thanksgiving Day (R138) – or just a normal day during the season. Some also reported taking hunting-related trips with their family, occasionally to faraway (and sometimes even international) locations, but also to more everyday locales such as in-state hunting camps. Some respondents even found just talking about hunting to be enjoyable: “I’ve got a brother that’s 73 years old, limited mobility and stuff, and he’s hunted all his life. When I go down to see him, what do we talk about? Hunting. It’s conversational” (R169).
Just like hunting, target shooting is a skill that has to be learned through repeated practice. (And, as several respondents pointed out, it is a skill that degrades quickly if one does not maintain it.) It is for this reason that respondents also commonly reported going to a target range, or casual shooting of a similar type, as an activity they frequently did with family as well. Some reported doing it while away from home – “We would go out camping a lot, so it was nice to have a firearm with you … We would go up to the old picnic grounds, and we would sit and target shoot for hours at a time … It was fun” (R324); “when I was 21 there were still places where you could go out and find a gravel pit or something where you could shoot … my brothers and I we had 22s, .22 rifles, and BB guns, and things like that” (R297) – while others reported trips to an organized gun range: “…going to the range together, having the experience and the fun, and just teaching them and having them learn was an exciting part of it. Hopefully, I’m passing that on through being a hunter ed instructor now to more generations” (R138); “My daughter had an exchange student … he got on the range and shot. We waded in snow up to our knees, up there, out there to check the targets, put up new targets, come back and get some more shells. … they had a good time” (R178). Along these lines, some respondents observed that there are few unregulated locations – gravel pits, unofficial backwoods ranges, etc. – where one can safely and legally shoot anymore, so the vast majority reported having a membership at a gun range where they currently use their firearms.

A few respondents reported other types of family interactions – such as bringing family members to firearms classes – but the majority of family interactions had to do with the preparation and use of firearms either in a hunting or target-shooting situation. However, families represent more than just a group of people from whom firearms knowledge is gleaned, or skills are practiced. Several respondents described receiving actual firearms from family
members, either as gifts, or through inheritance. Typically, these guns were described in positive terms, and were clearly valued possessions whether or not they had significant monetary value. The sentimental value of these firearms appeared to come from several sources. One was their association with memories of the people to whom the firearms had originally belonged: “A few of my guns really mean a lot to me … You know, like my father's guns. Some of the guns I've had for a long time. It means a lot to carry one, and to be in possession of it” (R345); “I own a gun that was my great grandfather’s. It’s what he bought as a kid. It’s a little single action .22 and that was given to me young” (R169); “My first actually owned firearm I got when I was 12 years old. I was making my confirmation and my godfather gave me a choice. He said, ‘Would you like a new suit or a gun?’ The choice was very simple. I have the gun to this day and you would swear it just came out of the box” (R320).

Interestingly, one of the primary ways in which respondents’ attitudes about family guns emerged was in objecting to changes in the law which might alter, or eliminate, the ability for certain types of firearms to be transferred through inheritance. One respondent described a particular gun in his collection and said, “even if I pass away … I can’t give it to one of my sons if they live in New York State. Basically at my death, that has to leave New York State, or be forfeited” (R138). Another posited, “Say, you have a family heirloom that's been handed down for years, but because of some of these new laws, you no longer can give them to your kids. They're telling you, you either have to follow our rules. We're not going to pay you for that $3,000 gun that you have. We're just going to take it away from you. That's not right” (R332).

 Speaking more generally, another respondent said:

… if you have a handgun permit, and you lose that handgun permit for any reason … you not only lose your handgun permit and your handguns, you lose all your long guns. You lose your long guns too, and you cannot transfer them or sell them; they're destroyed.
That’s within the SAFE Act. I can't transfer them to [my daughter] or my son, I can't send them out of state to be sold, they are destroyed. (R167)

The concerns addressed by these respondents touch on several overlapping issues. One aspect is clearly the cost of the property being forfeited, since firearms can be quite valuable. However, what bothers these respondents more than the financial loss is the loss of agency and self-determination – specifically, the ability to decide what happens to one’s own property. And this loss is exacerbated because it is occurring to a piece of property with sentimental, as well as monetary, value. Even if they themselves have not received a firearm from a relative, respondents are clearly aware that passing along a physical firearm is a common way – both symbolically and practically speaking – to pass along one’s firearms enthusiasm to others. (As Respondent 178 described, for example, “I enjoy having [guns] and use them properly, and I have passed a few down to grandkids. I’ve had all girls, so they hunt a little bit, but I got some grandsons now, so they’re involved. I gave them a few guns and will probably give them some more” (R178). He clearly indicates the transfer of firearms as a means to pass on his firearms enthusiasm to a new generation of relatives.) Therefore, legal changes in their ability to do so represents not only a potential financial loss, and an abridgement of their ability to determine the posthumous disposition of their property, but also a potential barrier to the normal means of passing along a valued tradition. (See Chapter 4 for a more in-depth discussion of respondents’ attitudes about the law.)

As a counterpoint, though, just because a firearm is inherited, it does not mean that respondents felt a need to use them, or even keep them for their entire lives. While many people did express those kinds of sentiments, others reported less sentimentality and attachment to the guns they had inherited. Often, this seemed to be due to the firearm not meeting their needs.
Respondent 154, for example, described being given a firearm when his uncle passed away, for the purpose of hunting with it. He reported that although he “loved” the gun, “[t]he next thing I know I’m sick of dragging this beautiful 1948 shotgun through the woods when I’m hunting.” He then went on to purchase a different kind of gun that was more in-line with his shooting interests at the time. Respondent 101 reported that he inherited a pistol from his father that was the same pistol the respondent had used to learn about the mechanics of guns when he was a child. He reported that the gun was in bad condition when he got it, so he restored it and used it, but then later sold it to purchase a different type of gun. So, while people can be sentimental about inherited firearms – and often do keep, maintain, and use such firearms for years – it is not a universal phenomenon.

*Non-Family Influence*

Taken together, all of the influence that families have on firearms ownership and use indicate that family support (especially parental support) is a key factor in developing firearms enthusiasm. However, it is important to note that immediate family were not the only ones who influenced respondents when it came to firearms. For those whose parents were uninterested in firearms – and even some who were – unrelated adults (mainly in-laws, neighbors, and family friends) as well as same-age peers sometimes played a role in the development of respondents’ firearms enthusiasm. While these people were far less likely to be identified as the ones who brought about the respondents’ initial interest in firearms, they nevertheless represent a strong influence in many people’s lives, especially in terms of sustaining or increasing an existing interest. For example, Respondent 420 reports that, “once I got married, my wife’s family was very much into hunting, which kind of dragged me further into it.” Respondent 178, who
reported his father hunting a little – but then giving it up – said that his interest was renewed when his family moved to the country “and I got involved at school with young guys that hunted.” Demonstrating the breadth of the involvement that can exist, he reported hunting with “Dad, and some local people in town up there, and some friends of my age.” People also report hunting with co-workers (Rs 128, 345) and neighbors (Rs 420, 345).

In a few cases, parents would specifically seek out other non-family adults to help guide their children to become safe, responsible gun owners. Respondent 181 talks about his father asking a friend for help teaching him about firearms. He reports that, “we had a healthy respect for the guns because this guy was a gun enthusiast but a good gun enthusiast. He was the ‘respect a gun, shoot them properly, treat them properly,’ and so I think that was more of the reason my dad got us to go out with him.” The same respondent also expressed the view that learning from someone other than a parent may be beneficial, because a child may listen more closely to the advice they receive from someone who is not a relative. Respondent 488 had a somewhat similar experience, with a neighbor who had “grown up hunting and shooting. His uncle was a taxidermist and he had hundreds of guns. He took us out, and all the neighborhood kids, he took us out and taught us how to shoot.” Perhaps for slightly different reasons, Respondent 138 – whose father had passed away early in his life – also reported his mother encouraging him to seek out neighbors for guidance in firearms-related pursuits.

Summary

Clearly the factors influencing any particular person’s interest in firearms are quite varied, and are affected by one’s personal biography. However, most people report an early interest – often earlier than they can remember – that is sustained through engaging in firearms-
related activities. Family members emerged as key figures, especially – though not exclusively – fathers, and other male relatives. Also, it should be noted that while most respondents came from families that were openly pro-gun, it is clear that children may also develop pro-gun attitudes in families that are functionally neutral towards firearms. The lack of respondents in this study with strongly anti-gun parents, though, suggests that a family situation that is strongly anti-gun would be less likely to produce a child with strongly pro-gun attitudes. Additionally, for some people, neighbors and friends also played a key role – though often one of sustaining an existing interest rather than creating it from scratch.

**Women and Gun Ownership**

*Women in General*

When talking about women in general, there is a pronounced belief from respondents that women, as a group, were not typically firearms owners. Some described this as simply a neutral stance:

> The fellows that I hunted with, no, their wives didn’t hunt. Maybe one or two, I can think of one girl that did, but only because of her boyfriend. … She could have probably took it or leave it, you know what I mean? No, I think it was basically a guy thing. That’s how that was. (R235)

Others described it as a simple lack of exposure: “With a lot of teachers here – a great percentage of teachers are female. … Many of those females that have had no exposure to guns, no exposure to hunting” (R262). Others, however, described women as having an actively anti-gun stance, of varying degrees of seriousness. Some women, for example, would accompany men to gun-related events, but disapproved of some aspects of gun ownership:
One guy, I knew him, quite well, he shot a lot. We were at a shoot in the Fall and a flock of geese were going over. I was sitting by his wife. He was shooting and I was sitting on the bench, waiting my turn to go up, and I looked up. “Man, I sure wish they would come down low here.” “You would shoot one of those?!” … She was very anti-hunting. (R476)

Other women were reported to do such things as give frightened looks when learning of an acquaintance’s gun ownership status (R262), or vehemently insist that children not wear clothing that depicted firearms in a humorous manner (R298).

Even within families where some female members are firearms owners, this does not necessarily translate to others having the same preferences the way it typically does for males: “My family has lived with me for years and years now … Some of them shoot and some of them don’t. I don’t think any of the girls shoot” (R441). Respondent 441 went on report that she does have two female cousins who live elsewhere shoot – “not necessarily as much as I do, but there’s guns in their houses and they have shot” (R441).

While males who were uninterested in guns, or hunting, were typically depicted as doing so through individual preference, for women there was a sense that there was something more basic at work – something about their status as women that was incompatible with, or out of line with, firearms ownership or enjoyment. In describing cowboy action shooting, for example, a respondent’s wife commented that the people of this sport were very different from other types of shooting because the people they are “very conscious of women, very polite” (R324), indicating that most other events are not this way. Another respondent stated, “I had one uncle who had a really nice gun collection, but once again, he wasn't married either so his income went to buying new guns instead of curtains, probably, for the house. [laughs] Little different mindset, priorities really different” (R362). Both of these respondents suggest that the activities pursued,
and values held, by women are generally different from those of men, and incompatible with
most firearms ownership. More directly, the daughter of one the respondents remarked that:

for the longest time I didn’t tell people that I was a hunter and that I own guns, and then I
started to tell people that, and they looked at me, they’re like … “you're a girl.” … they
didn't expect a girl … to go out into the woods and do stuff like that. (R167’s daughter)

However, despite the near-universality of this attitude, respondents also indicated that
this gap was not too large to be bridged, as there was a sense that women could become
interested in firearms. It was generally agreed, though, that in order for this to happen, there
needed to be some change that took place in their lives. One key change that respondents
mentioned is the feeling of being unsafe. Respondent 324 described a 70 year-old woman living
in a rural area who, following the death of her husband, began to become concerned for her
safety and purchased a gun for personal protection. He offered to teach her how to use the
firearm and, following the session, “she was beaming, just beaming. Then she took her target
with her. ‘Oh, I hit this target. Wow, this is so much fun.’ She just never realized.” Another
agreed:

…because of our society being what it is, a lot of women don't feel safe anymore, so they
started learning how to shoot. Well, they found out that they really enjoy shooting. It's a
lot of fun! Plink a piece of paper, a tin can at 50 yards out, and you can actually hit that.
That's a rewarding feeling. (R362)

This perception – that women are in danger, and firearms can be an equalizer to prevent that
danger – was a common theme throughout many interviews.

Something as drastic as perceiving a threat to one’s life is not the only source of an
attitude change, though. Sometimes all that is required is a comprehensive introduction to
firearms. Respondent 378 described a TV show where a woman who bought a new gun for
personal protection and was encouraged to attend training sessions to learn how to use them. She was described initially as being “very anti-gun” but that “after it was over she actually loved it and enjoyed it.” Respondent 167 described a similar scenario, but in real life where a friend reached out and said, “I’ve always been against guns, but I’m starting to feel like I really want to learn about them and shoot them.” He replied by offering to show her how to use firearms safely, “and she was very accepting of that: ‘Thank you, I look forward to it.’ She’s been anti-gun her whole life.”

Another way women were described as becoming interested in firearms is through events specifically tailored for their needs. Respondent 324 reported participating in an event at his gun club that was targeted at women, specifically because:

There’s a great need … that exists right now, for women to have information about firearms, about selection, operation, safety. Either they’re single or divorced, or widowed, and they have no family member to teach them that, or, as a woman, you don’t want to walk into a gun club and say, “Oh, I want to join a shooting club.” That’s a little overpowering. (R324)

Respondent 167 discussed sponsoring similar events, reaching over 200 people per year, and targeting women in particular through ensuring that female instructors are available at the events to answer questions. Also in Central New York, there is an active group called Women in Nature (WIN), the goal of which is to get women interested in outdoors activity, with hunting and shooting representing a large component of their outreach. Respondent 201 described the WIN events as essential for women because although “many of them have husbands that hunt and shoot … the men don’t take them out. Either they don’t have the patience or they want their own little thing about hunting.” She also described the WIN events as being free from judgment on
one’s skills (or lack thereof), whereas at a mixed-sex event, there would be feelings of “Oh, I'm going to look foolish” or “He’s going to make fun of me.”

It appears incongruous to hear gun owners express such distinctly opposite opinions – that women and firearms are generally incompatible, but that women can be introduced to firearms relatively easily. However, this speaks to the depth of my respondents’ beliefs about the value and appeal of firearms. The things they represent – values, certainly, but also physical benefits, such as protection from crime – are so powerful that even those people who are predisposed to disliking firearms can be brought around by these forces. And this trip is virtually always one-way – respondents did not recount stories of women who enjoyed firearms at one time, but then gave them up, or stopped valuing them.

And yet, despite these strong feelings for firearms, it is clear that they perceive women’s use of firearms to be distinct from men’s use in a number of ways. Perhaps the most obvious instance of this is physicality. Since women, on average, are smaller and lighter than men, there are practical concerns about finding firearms and accessories that fit the average woman’s frame. Respondent 441 described the gear manufactured for women as “substandard” and gave several examples of how women’s gear is not equivalent to men’s gear. She also described how she has to use youth shotguns because standard-sized firearms are sized for men. A related concern for women was the size of the rounds being fired, and whether they would be as able as men to handle the recoil of larger rounds. Respondent 362 described the AR-15 as a weapon that’s ideal for home defense for “someone who can't take recoil. I'm thinking of women. A woman doesn't want to shoot a 12 gauge shotgun but they can shoot an AR-15 very accurately without recoil and without fear” (R362). Another respondent described women as being even better at shooting than men, provided that you “don’t give them a big cannon to hold and shoot. Something that’s
going to spin them halfway around” (R235). Respondent 201 – a woman – expressed a similar viewpoint, saying, “I would hesitate probably to buy a new gun because, being a smaller frame, I don’t want a heavy recoil.”

Some of these concerns – including those expressed by women themselves, or on behalf of specific women – stem from physical differences alone. However, concerns of that kind mingle with others that seem related to different attributes associated with female shooters. Since women are perceived as being less interested in, and oriented towards, firearms ownership, there were occasional undertones of sexism towards, or disdain for, female shooters. One respondent described seeing women in a gun shop treating guns in what he considered to be an unsafe, or unskilled way: “… they’re looking at these guns and these women are throwing them in their purse, ‘oh, I can throw this in my purse.’ They have no concept, but there is nothing much you can do about that” (R488). Another described female shooters on TV shows, saying, “the women are now wearing makeup! [laughs] The women hunters all have their earrings in and so forth” (R420). And still a third advocated for stronger requirements for gun ownership, using women as an example:

What if you … get a gun owner who’s buying a gun because whatever reason – break-ins in the neighborhood and they want to protect themselves. If she’s more of a danger to herself, her family, and the other neighbors, you’ve got to kind of question, “Okay, let’s back you up before you get the gun, you have to show your ability to use it.” (R181).

An interesting sidebar to this disdain for female gun ownership is the situation in which a woman is identified as being a better shooter than a man. These situations are always described as anomalous – and usually requiring explanation: “his wife grew up on a farm, and she knows how to shoot, better than he does” (R324) – and sometimes as humorous, or embarrassing, for
the man who has been bested: “My daughter is an excellent shot. She shoots better than her husband, makes her husband mad that he can't shoot as good as she does!” (R362).

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to fully explore the attitudes of shooters – men or women – towards female gun owners. However, it is important to note that the attitudes of those in this study were fairly polarized. There were some people who spent a great deal of time talking about female shooters positively, and were actively seeking to bring more women into firearms ownership. But there were also others who were more open with negative views on women’s participation. Had the questionnaire specifically explored this issue, it is undoubtedly the case that more themes of this sort would have emerged, and greater clarification of the nature and direction of these effects could have been achieved. As female engagement in the shooting sports rises, this is an area ripe for further research.

Wives and Girlfriends

When discussing wives and girlfriends, respondents brought up different sets of issues than in regards to their mothers, or women more generally. Respondents still talked a fair amount about wives’ anti-gun sentiments, but these were typically more limited than the concerns of the mothers, and tended to revolve largely around safety. Respondent 227, for example, reported that his wife was worried when their son shot large-caliber rifles for the first time, but noted that this likely stemmed from experiences she had in her childhood with close relatives who used guns unsafely. In a similar way, Respondent 345 discussed how his wife does not believe that carrying guns is necessary (though she does not mind if he carries one), because she suspects that people who carry guns “could be on a death wish.” Also, in the realm of safety, Respondent 324, whose wife came from a family described as being very anti-gun, discussed his wife’s push to keep
their guns “out of sight” when “the kids were a little older” in order to prevent the unauthorized use of those guns.

What made female partners’ responses stand out from others, though, was the recurrent narrative of how these women’s opinions about guns changed over time. Sometimes this change was accomplished through the efforts of the respondent himself, as in the case of Respondent 324, who reports that he “introduced [wife’s name] into firearm ownership and what it entails and how to do it, and how safe it can be, if you take the proper steps. Now she’s come along, and here she is a champion shooter! [laughs].” Other times it was described as a slower process:

With my wife, I think, she's gotten more comfortable. She was pretty anti-gun, but I think she over the years has softened, and maybe it's because she is getting older and feels less able to defend herself … I wouldn't say she's into guns now, but I think she's more into them now, like she'll go with me and shoot. (R242)

Self-defense seems to have been a motivating factor in a number of people’s decisions to begin using firearms, as Respondent 267 describes:

I taught my wife to shoot a .22 rifle so that if I’m gone, I can load the rifle, and I can leave it without a round in the chamber so that it’s safe, and I can leave it where she can get it quickly from bed, and she knows all she has to do is pull the ejector down and she pops a live round in, and she knows how to shoot it. (R267)

Not all respondents had partners who were against firearms, though. Wives were described as enjoying going along on hunting trips – whether actively participating in hunting (R178) or not (R262) – and seeking out training in specific types of firearms (R267), or events where firearms sports more generally were being taught to women (R178). However, the overall tenor of respondents’ descriptions of their significant others’ opinions on firearms indicated a generalized belief that most women were less likely to be interested in firearms on their own, and
would need to be introduced to them by men. This was tempered, however, with a clear belief that women could be convinced to like firearms over time. In fact, only one respondent reported that his wife was strongly anti-gun and had remained that way throughout their marriage.

Safety

Background

The ownership and use of firearms is not without danger. In 2013 alone, the CDC reports that there were over 500 people killed accidentally by firearms in the United States (Centers for Disease Control 2015), in addition to all of those who were killed intentionally. And although this figure is the lowest that it has been since 1999, it nevertheless reminds us that firearms can unintentionally produce lethal outcomes.

There is a general understanding in the gun ownership world that most gun safety can be boiled down to a certain number of rules. These rules are well publicized on the websites of major gun manufacturers and pro-gun organizations, as well as posted in gun clubs. Most of the basic concepts of gun safety are generally agreed upon, as revealed by a review of firearms-related websites that offer safety advice. However, there is some disagreement about exactly how many “essential” rules there are – popular firearms websites describe anywhere from three to twelve, referring to them variously as “principles,” (Armed Defense Training Association n.d.) “rules,” (National Rifle Association n.d.) and “commandments” (Remington n.d.).

There are a few concepts that are present in all of these sites, while others appear in just a few and seem to enjoy only limited support. The areas of greatest agreement, and those that typically appear on the shorter rules lists (four or fewer items) include: controlling the direction of the gun (“Always point the gun in a safe direction”); the presence of ammunition (“Handle
every gun as if it were loaded,” “Keep the gun unloaded until ready to use”); attempting to limit accidental discharges of the firearm (“Keep your finger off the trigger until ready to shoot, “Do not rely on mechanical safeties to prevent discharge”); and awareness of what you are shooting at (“Be sure of your target and the areas beyond your target”).

Lists that go beyond four concepts tend to discuss additional information, such as: ensuring the gun is safe to use (keeping the gun’s mechanisms free from malfunctions, maintaining a barrel free from obstructions, properly cleaning the gun); protecting your sight and hearing from damage by wearing eye and ear protection; having proper knowledge of your firearm’s specifications (using only ammunition that is appropriate for your gun, being aware of how to safely operate your firearm); and preventing firearms from being used by unauthorized persons (children and untrained adults). Additional concepts that were mentioned in some lists, but not all, include: not using drugs or alcohol prior to using a firearm; and transporting guns safely, and in accordance with the law.

**Adults and General Gun Safety**

In one form or another, all of these safety rules came up during my interviews, or while conducting participant-observations in the field. Without question they are generally understood, and agreed-upon. If anything, respondents would like to see safety rules being more widely followed. However, despite this impression among respondents, not all cultural factors point to complete integration of these rules. For example, one individual who taught a state-required firearms training course lamented the fact that there were no set criteria that required instructors to cover these basic rules with new gun owners: “I was hoping there would be a guideline to say you will at least give ‘this is the four basic guidelines to safely handling a firearm’” (R332).
Additionally, there are some nuances in the application of these rules (e.g., how long a particular gun can go before it needs to be cleaned, or whether certain low-caliber rounds require hearing protection when shooting).

Even taking these small deviations into consideration, however, it is clear that there is essentially no organized opposition to any of the rules, and the normativity of these guidelines was reflected in respondents’ accounts. Respondents frequently described safety as “the number one thing when you handle a firearm” (R140), with several respondents expressing that “safety is always first” (R201) or that it is “the biggest thing” (R154) when shooting. This appeared to be true regardless of the type of firearms activity being undertaken. For example, safety was described as the “primary thing” (R169) used to determine whether to choose another gun owner as a hunting partner, but respondents also discussed how their “biggest concern” is “safety on the range” (R448). Respondent 432 went even further, stating that “safe gun handling, that’s what makes a good firearm owner.”

While this veneration of safety rules can seem a bit excessive to outsiders, it does not occur in a vacuum. In fact, respondents’ own experiences indicate that while they are entirely on board with the safety rules, that is not universally the case throughout the firearms ownership subculture. Several respondents reported personally seeing breaches in safety protocol of varying degrees of seriousness, ranging from mishandling firearms – “I don't want anybody picking up a gun when I'm downrange. And a lot of people will do that. They'll pick up a gun! They’ll either want to show it to someone else, who knows if it's loaded, and you got your back to 'em” (R448) – to passing the barrel of the gun across another person – “you see people that maybe when they’re unloading their gun, they’re not making sure it’s pointed in a safe direction or something like that. [pretends to wave a gun around recklessly] They do a lot of this, you know?” (R420).
Rarer, though far more serious, were life-threatening breaches of safety that respondents experienced:

I walked down to the 230 [yard range] a few years ago and I was changing a target and a guy shot at me … He said he didn't know I was down there. Then again there was a table with a gun on it, my car was parked there. He just couldn't see me walking on that small little narrow trail and then he popped one off. (R298)

While this respondent received only a serious scare, several respondents also reported instances where they had friends who had been killed through poor safety practices such as playing with guns (R140) or through hunters being unaware of the locations of the other members of their party (R448; R251).

However, as dangerous as strangers wielding guns can be, gun owners acknowledged that one reason for the focus on safety is because even experienced shooters will occasionally break these rules without intending to. Even those with extensive practice report causing breaches of safety from time to time, whether via a rare occurrence – “I've seen it from the training aspect of people who've done drawing [of guns from holsters] hundreds of times and that one time they draw and the gun goes flying down the range” (R227) – or forgetfulness – “Am I pointing the gun in a safe direction at the loading table? Somebody is there watching me in case I forget, and I do forget … Everybody forgets. But somebody is there to remind me” (R324) – or simply an accident – “I actually had my gun go off when I was out hunting, and it was unintentional because I didn’t realize my safety was off. My muzzle was pointed in a safe direction and no one was hurt, even though I was with other people” (R267).

Respondents find themselves in a potentially difficult spot in regards to how to respond to safety breaches, and which approach they take appears to differ based on both the situation in which the breach occurs and the nature of the breach. Some aim to proactively take control of a
potentially unsafe situation rather than dealing with breaches after they occur: “When someone comes to the shooting range when we're shooting pistols, I kind of take over” (R448). This kind of proactive approach takes place even on private ranges:

My grandfather … was extremely interested in safety, so … he instilled gun safety into us when we were … really young. Shooting out at our camp … he was … really strict about safety and maybe that's where I got it. Because when we're at their range, I become, like, “Safety Man” [laughs]. (R298).

This proactive response does not seem to be the norm, however. In some cases, respondents felt that the unsafe actions they saw (either in a particular incident, or as a pattern of behavior) needed to be corrected, but chose to rely on range personnel to deliver the message: “[Unsafe] behavior would not be tolerated [at local gun clubs] … You’ve got range officers at all of the clubs that enforce proper behavior. The rules of the club, things like that” (R441). However, this does not seem to be a universal solution either. While a few respondents reported that they felt that people’s behavior at gun clubs was generally better than other places, others disagreed, indicating that they were disturbed by the poor safety behaviors they had seen at gun clubs.

This yields two possible conclusions – either there are “bad-apple gun clubs” where safety rules are rarely enforced, or there are “bad-apple members” at clubs whose unsafe behavior disturbs those around them. Based on the evidence from my study, the latter scenario seems more likely. First, the widespread agreement about safety rules suggests that it is very unlikely that a club could be founded and maintained fully by people who disagree with such a widely held subcultural value. Second, even if such a club did exist in the area, it would undoubtedly have a bad reputation among other gun owners, and no such pattern emerged when people talked about their gun clubs, or clubs they had considered joining. Third, such a club
would be at a much higher risk of serious safety violations and would likely be investigated by authorities, or would be subject to lawsuits from individuals who got injured at the club. It seems far more likely that individuals with poor safety practices are to blame.

The “bad-apple members” conclusion is also supported by respondents’ accounts of how they deal with safety violations. Several respondents reported feeling confident in addressing safety issues with those they knew well, such as co-workers, friends, or hunting partners, as in the case of Respondent 235 who dealt with an unsafe situation immediately:

Years ago, I was a boss on a road job and I was boss of all the engineers, the field engineers out there, and I had a .22 pistol that we would take out there on our coffee break or lunch hour and throw an empty can in the creek and bang away at it until it sunk. We were probably littering in a way, but not that bad. But, one guy in particular, he said, “can I take a few shots?” I said “yeah, sure.” I loaded the gun up … He starts: pink, pink, pink, and I don't know why he got to laughing, he turns around like this – did a complete 360 with a loaded gun – and that gun at one time or another pointed at, probably there was a half dozen of us there. I said “[name], let me have that.” I says, “take a break.” (R235)

Outside of well-known individuals, though, there was less support for direct intervention. Although a few respondents report that they routinely confront such violators – “If they don't like it I'll just tell ‘em, ‘I don't care.' I'll tell ‘em to leave. If they tell me they're a member, ‘you broke the rules, get out’” (R448) – not everyone feels comfortable doing the same. Since not everyone feels comfortable doing this with rule violators, it is possible that there are “bad apples” who routinely break safety rules, but who do so around individuals who either just keep quiet, or simply leave the setting upon detecting the violation.

The choice to not deal personally with safety violators is common for several reasons. First, this tendency towards non-confrontation is common in other areas of social life, and so exists here too. There are many situations in which people feel they have been wronged, but
choose not to confront the person causing the problem. This tendency to avoid conflict is undoubtedly increased, however, when the confrontation in question would be with a potentially hostile armed stranger. Respondent 488 recounts a fictional scene of confronting someone using a firearm improperly, and the emotions it might cause:

You don’t know how to handle a gun … and I am telling you ‘point the gun in the air’ and you’re pointing it and you’re looking like this [waves imaginary gun around] and I take it away from you. Are you now going to be pissed? (R488)

He then went on to discuss a real incident at a gun club where a similar scene played out: “I’m sitting over at the bar having a cup of coffee and somebody’s pointing their gun at me, I go “hey!” Pisses a lot of people off, but fuck ‘em. I don’t want guns pointed at me” (R488). If even this kind of minor correction of a clearly dangerous action can potentially result in anger, it is easy to understand why gun owners might be hesitant to approach each other to offer such advice. (To help circumvent this tendency towards non-involvement, one local gun club posted a sign with rules, and included at the bottom the phone number for local law enforcement. At a subsequent club meeting, officers instructed club members that they could confront rule-breakers personally if they chose, but that calling law enforcement was also available as a means of intervention for offenses that endangered public safety, such as shooting after dark.)

Even if someone is potentially willing to intervene, however, concerns for their personal safety may lead them to do otherwise. Some types of safety breaches can produce serious harmful effects not only to the person breaking the rule, but also to those in the immediate area. Obviously the unintentional discharge of a gun can result in injury or death, but other common mistakes – such as the misuse of ammunition, or the firing of a gun with a plugged barrel – may cause a firearm to rupture, spraying those nearby with shrapnel. For these reasons, many people
reported that they simply leave the area – “I've been to some competition shoots where I've sat there and just shook my head and walked away before somebody does get injured because of the lax of some of the safety rules” (R227) – or would simply prefer to be elsewhere – “Someone that's not safe, I don't want to be around at all” (R345) – whenever they see safety rules being broken. Others will attempt to intervene, but leave if it does not have an immediate effect: “If I see somebody doing something I don't like, I tell them. If they don't stop doing it, that's it, I'm gone” (R251).

Adults and Hunting Safety

This need to make decisions about safety seemed to be especially present for hunters. One main reason for this is the increased potential for danger a hunter faces while in the woods. While shooting at a gun range, one at least has the luxury of being in a low-stress environment, knowing how many other shooters are nearby, having a clear line-of-sight to all of them, and working with the expectation that everyone is shooting in the same direction at clearly visible, stationary targets. With hunting, none of that can be taken for granted, and the consequences of this are potentially quite serious. Respondent 332 cited safety issues as “one of the reasons why I stopped hunting,” describing incidents where any flash of white – such as the bread in a sandwich, or a piece of clothing – could result in a fellow hunter shooting at what he believed to be a deer. Additionally, the examples cited earlier in this section reveal instances where hunters were killed by members of their own hunting parties, or simply other hunters in the woods, through negligence or the breaching of safety rules.

As a result of these threats, hunters had many of the same responses to these dangerous situations as other gun owners did. Some used a prior avoidance technique, attempting to avoid
encounters with unsafe hunters at all. Describing his father, Respondent 488 referred to him as “an incredibly, incredibly strict safety-minded individual” who, as a result, found that “there weren’t many people he would hunt with because they didn’t handle their guns properly” (R488). Respondent 262 describes a similar outlook: “I have been around people that are not as careful, not as safe as I would like to see, visiting other people's hunting camps and things like that. Not interested in being around those folks.” However, sometimes avoidance cannot be achieved. When coming across someone in the woods who is acting unsafely, Respondent 169 suggested a direct approach, saying, “I try to correct them,” although he acknowledged that he “wouldn’t hang around with” someone who uses a gun unsafely. Respondent 345, on the other hand, recommended against the correction and simply leaving: “you just want to get away from somebody like that, as quick as you can” (R345).

Because there is a clear understanding that other hunters may present a danger, it might seem like an ideal choice to hunt alone. However, hunting alone presents its own dangers – falling from a tree stand, sustaining an injury and being unable to walk out, getting lost – as well as other logistical issues such as retrieving heavy game on your own. (These issues were especially important to older hunters.) Additionally, many respondents cite the camaraderie of hunting with another person – or more than one person – as part of the enjoyment of hunting. Many people have hunted with the same partners for years, or even decades, and spending time with their partners is one important goal of going hunting in the first place. Those who decide to hunt with one or more partners, then, tend to develop strict criteria for selecting them. Since this is potentially a life-and-death decision, hunters almost universally attached a great deal of significance to choosing partners who were safe and could be trusted not to act inappropriately with guns. However, this process is complicated by several factors.
First, although they take recommendations for whom to consider asking to be a partner, no outside assessment of a potential hunting partner is sufficient. Instead, they must rely on their own judgment for whom to accept into the group. One means of doing this is to hunt with family members, whom one has known for a long time and whose safety record is known. As one respondent put it, “we’ve got them trained so they’re safe” (R178). Similarly, Respondent 320 reported that he took it as the highest compliment when his own hunting partner said, “if he had to choose a hunting partner, other than me, he’d take my grandson. Because he knows what he’s like.” But, even when hunting with family, safety maintenance is ongoing. Respondent 262 described how:

We may be hunting with a group of five or six people or more sometimes. If there's a young one who's starting to carry a gun, everyone felt free to point-blank make sure that everything was taken care of and they understood when they were doing things right and when they were slipping a little bit. (R262)

If one does not hunt with family, the process becomes a bit more complicated. It is not sufficient, for example, to simply select a neighbor, friend or colleague. “I may know you, but I won’t hunt with you until I really really find out how safe you are … there’s some friends I won't even hunt with. I’ll do other things with them but … I'm big on safety” (R448). Even those who have other positive attributes may not be a good choice for other reasons:

There’s a guy I bought my 30-06 from who, I would say, is a good gun owner, but was a bad hunter … when I was a teenager, we hunted with him a couple times. I told my dad, “If you’re going to hunt with this guy, don’t invite me.” (R267)

So, rather than simply going with friends, selecting a safe partner involves checking out:

Their past history, if they’re good guys or not, friends, and how safe they are, out in the field … You feel out a few guys he’s hunted with, people that know him, and find out
what he’s like and how he handles himself and then kind of watch, carefully, the first
hunt, to make sure they’re safe and not doing things they shouldn’t do. (R178)

This respondent went on to say that even this may not be entirely sufficient because “sometimes
you get a group of guys and there’s always one guy that just don’t fit in, for some reason,
personality or whatever” (R178). So, even when the safety aspect has been fulfilled, there may
still be other considerations.

Just like when hunting with family, hunting with friends means being aware that “safety”
is not a static goal one reaches, but rather it is an ongoing, negotiated process in which one must
constantly be aware of safety and danger:

There's three of us that hunt together, maybe four once in a while, and we know every
move that each one's going to make. And we talk to each other even after you get done
shooting. “Are your safeties on?” “Guns down.” You know, everything. (R448)

Even when hunting in a safe location, one respondent reported taking precautions:

Even hunting on our own property, when I'm walking around, I got a camouflage blaze
orange … I slip that over the top of my camouflage when I'm walking around … I always
wear that. Even if I know the only people there are other hunters in my camp who I know
are safe, or I wouldn't be in the camp with them. (R476)

*Children and Gun Safety*

The safety issues surrounding children and their use of guns deserve separate treatment
because it is clear that respondents perceive that a different set of issues are involved than with
adults’ safety. However, there is no single set of rules that emerges from respondents’ accounts
about how best to protect children from harm when it comes to firearms. One reason for this is
because, as noted elsewhere in this chapter, families tend to pass along their firearms enthusiasm
to children, often starting at a very young age. This is not a coincidence since a few respondents
noted that it is crucial to get kids interested in firearms before they get “involved in everything” such as “soccer, and sports, and music, and on and on and on” (R267). Even without organized activities taking up their time, though, children’s interest must be fostered early because, “[b]y the time a child is 12 years old, these days they've spent probably 10 of those years playing video games and have no interest in doing anything else” (R279). If kids are not “brought up on hunting” (R476) or other shooting sports, or if parents are too busy to teach them, respondents perceive that children may never become firearms enthusiasts. Given these constraints, gun owners have to strike a balance between exposing children to firearms early enough to catch their interest, but not before they are able to understand how to use those firearms.

One key problem identified by respondents in achieving this safe balance is the tension between having children sufficiently interested in firearms to want to become involved with them long-term, but not in such a way that will cause them to seek out guns and use them inappropriately. One major danger stems from the tendency children have to search their surroundings to find new and interesting things to play with, especially if these searches could lead to accessible firearms. Respondents acknowledge that it is a bad situation “if [children] know they can look under the couch cushion and find a gun” (R181), or if a parent “leaves his handgun on the counter when he gets home” (R154). One respondent suggests that gun owners “don't store the firearms and the ammunition in the same place. My suggestion is, nowadays, you store the firearms in a gun safe and the ammunition someplace else locked up … For safety reasons. You know, children are curious” (R113). These fears seem generally well-founded, as several respondents report having had unauthorized access to firearms when they were children – or knowing people who did – and while sometimes this unsupervised time only resulted in looking at the firearms (R378), other times they reported playing with them (R448), shooting
them (R227), and even taking them apart and putting them back together (R101). While this level of curiosity would undoubtedly give many parents pause for thought if they suspected their children were doing the same, a few respondents countered that “curiosity is the fact that only comes into play if you're never allowed to touch a gun” (R332), or that if children had “plenty of opportunities to shoot the guns with Dad” there would be “no curiosity there” (R362). Nevertheless, even these respondents did not advocate children being allowed unfettered access to firearms; instead, they tended to advocate for allowing children’s use, but only with close monitoring.

Respondents had an interesting turn of attitude when it came to households without children. Several people explicitly acknowledged that context is very important when determining what kinds of firearms safety is necessary for a given home – the answer to the question “Who lives in your house?” (R227) can affect the decisions you make about what firearms to keep there and how to store them. Some even explicitly stated, “based on the circumstances, if you don’t have children, that’s another story” (R488), implying that more lax security is acceptable in a household without children. However, others were quick to note that safety rules are important to follow “if you have children in the home, even if they just visit, if it’s grandchildren or nieces and nephews, I think you need to keep those safe and keep those people safe” (R420).

This highlights another difficulty of which respondents were keenly aware – one’s own children, and the rules in one’s own house, are not the only criteria to be considered when looking at children’s safety. Respondents cited the need to prepare children for visits to other houses where firearms might be present – “I taught them, I said, "If you ever go to anybody's house and they go in a closet and get one of their Dad's guns out, you come home immediately.
You never stay in a house where someone's got a gun out’” (R362) – as well as untrained children visiting them – “a kid comes over and goes, ‘hey [name], does your dad got any guns?’ ‘Yeah he’s got some,’ ‘Oh, let’s look at them.’ … Well you know what? They are locked up. He couldn’t get at them” (R488). In these kinds of situations, then, where children are away from authority figures, and possibly outside the home, it was almost universally agreed upon that the best defense was keeping guns locked away to avoid danger.

Perceptions could not have been more different, though, when it came to teaching young people about firearms. Respondents consistently reported that they enjoyed instructing children how to use firearms appropriately, sometimes doing so for free – “I instruct for nothin’. I instruct a lot of young girls, y’know, kids, grown-ups, they come to me to teach ‘em. And, uh, I do what I can to help ‘em because I love the sport” (R448) – or report enjoying it more than going out on their own:

I love to take young people hunting that haven't experienced it, or are new at it … I'm at a point where I've shot enough things that I really don't care if I shoot anything else. I'll go! Don't get me wrong, I like it. But if I have the opportunity to take somebody else and teach them the sport I'd rather do that. (R128)

Even in this area of enthusiasm, however, respondents acknowledge that it is important for the instructors to be knowledgeable because “you have some people that are supervising the kids that shouldn't have a gun themselves” (R476). This may be one reason why respondents are so keen to offer their services – because they perceive that they are the ones “that have the credentials to be able to do it” (R167).

With potential danger of children using firearms at the front of many people’s minds, it was interesting to consider an alternative viewpoint presented by a minority of respondents. They
identified this danger as being one of the things that makes firearms ownership and use so beneficial to children.

It teaches a lot about responsibility that they can’t get anywhere else at that early an age. You’re responsible for your own action, the actions of others. You have to obviously be very cognizant of the safety of the guns, which way they’re pointed, if they’re loaded or unloaded, things like that. It’s a greater responsibility than just playing little league or soccer or skiing on a weekend. It’s a pretty serious thing, so you’ve got to be responsible. I think it’s good to give people that opportunity to be responsible at a young if they can handle it, if they’re mature enough. (R432)

Respondent 488 agreed, saying, “When you hunt … all of a sudden, you can kill something you realize ‘wow, I have this incredible power, but I have to be very responsible and safe with it’” (R488). Respondent 169 expanded upon this, noting that hunting programs for children cause them to “assume[e] adult responsibility” because they realize “in the wrong hands this is what it can do” (R169).

The concept of child gun safety, then, is one that appears to be full of contradictions that respondents resolve in different ways. It is clear that respondents feel the tension of balancing the desire to pass their enthusiasm along to children with the belief that most children (especially those that are untrained) cannot make safe use of firearms on their own. While a few respondents reported that they would simply tell their children directly that firearms are off-limits – and believed that this was sufficient to avoid problems – the general consensus was that the most responsible thing to do was lock all firearms away except when a trained adult can provide supervision. What was less clear, and hopefully future research can illuminate, is when these barriers begin to break down. Some respondents were adamant about their stance as it relates to kids: “Should we teach our children that firearms are dangerous? Oh, definitely. Should they never be touched by children? Definitely … If you do have kids, they’re not out” (R138). But
others took a more measured approach, implying that the older a child gets, the less security is needed: “there were guns in the house, and I made sure that – and they were locked up when he was a kid – but I did make sure that he understood what to do if he encountered gun, and I showed him mine and let him handle them a bit” (R242). This leaves open the question of at what point children can be considered safe to use firearms without supervision. In New York State, children as young as 12 years old can obtain a license to hunt with adult supervision (Department of Environmental Conservation n.d.), but one hunter education instructor complained that, at times, even children at this level “don't seem to want to grasp the idea” of treating guns the way that their instructors ask them to. And 12 year-olds are not the youngest people involved in this equation – some respondents reported supervised children as young as six years old using firearms with their parents, and even participating in shooting events. Therefore, future work should explore not only the processes that adults use to teach their children safety, but also the criteria they use to evaluate when the child is able to apply that knowledge effectively.

**Alcohol and Drugs**

Firearms ownership is an area of social life rife with debate. Very little about it is uncontroversial, but one of the areas about which there is near-universal agreement is the use of alcohol and drugs in combination with guns. Although this was one of the less-discussed safety rules in the sources mentioned above, respondents expressed essentially unanimous disapproval for people who mix firearms use with intoxicating substances, the primary reason for which was the ways in which such substances cloud the user’s judgment and affect their ability to use firearms safely: “You don’t drink alcohol and fool around with guns … you don’t do anything
that’s going to alter your judgment when you have a gun in your hand, simple as that” (R488); “I mean I've seen people do things that they would never do sober, when they're drunk” (R117).

Respondents made it clear that, regardless of who a person is, they can be affected by intoxicants. One respondent even shared a story of a local volunteer firefighter who accidentally injured himself with a firearm while intoxicated:

Now clearly, sober he might have been a responsible citizen, or whatever. But you know what? You shouldn't have been doing anything with that the gun if, you know, you're about to have a beer. It's like you shouldn't have been going out to the range, or hanging out. (R298)

Not a single respondent offered a defense of using firearms while intoxicated, although many reported that it occurs.

While most people indicated that drinking before, or during, the use of firearms was a poor choice by an individual, there was a separate type of scorn for drinking that occurred at gun clubs. One respondent spoke generally of violations he had seen – “At some of the clubs, one or two clubs, you can drink all you want and hand out guns and I don't go for that” (R448). Another agreed, describing, “the redneck mentality, of ... Sunday morning, Sunday afternoon, grab a few beers and go down to the range and shoot. I've seen a lot of that. I have a real problem with that” (R140). A third respondent elaborated on his objections to this practice:

At our gun club, there's a hard-and-fast rule that says no on alcohol on premises, all right? … But the minute they have a big event, or they're doing these skeet or trap shoots, or sporting clays, I'll look in the parking lot, there's a bunch of guys that bring their own six-packs and drink in the parking lot. … And I'm thinking myself, “Well, why don't you tell those guys – hey!” Y'know, they don't do it. Well, you know, “they're good guys,” and … everybody looks the other way. … So, is it a rule or isn't it a rule? (R298)
The nature of the objection to drinking at gun clubs stems partially from the breach of normal safety protocols involved with intoxicated people operating firearms, but also from its public nature and potentially stigmatizing effects. When these actions occur not only in public, but at a location where their occurrence could lend the drinking some “official” endorsement, they have the potential to cast all gun owners in a negative light, especially when a club fails to curb the practice even if their rules prohibit it. So, while there is scorn for drinking that occurs in hunting cabins, for example, it appears to be seen somewhat less negatively because it is isolated and essentially uncontrollable (except to the extent that individual hunters can choose to avoid hunting partners who drink). However, drinking that is publicly associated with firearms ownership can cause all gun owners to be seen as “rednecks” or as “drinking hunter[s]” (R174) – negative stereotypes that gun owners find reflect poorly on them (see the “Stigma” chapter for additional discussion of this).

This difference in opinion about the circumstances under which drinking is allowed clearly signals at least some amount of disagreement within the firearms community. One element of that disagreement may be over whether substance users are dangerous only when they are actually intoxicated, or whether their substance use indicates something morally suspect about their character. Most responses were neutral towards this point, saying things like, “If you’re going to go out drinkin’ for the night, why do you need to carry a gun with you?” (R181) or “stay away from heavy drinkers because alcohol and gunpowder don’t mix” (R113). These types of responses indicate an understanding that drinking and gun use can exist separately within the same person without being a problem – one can either drink, or carry a gun, but not both – or that some amount of drinking is okay, and only once the drinking becomes “heavy” is it problematic. However, others took a more extreme stance, suggesting that drinking even a few
days before hunting is problematic (R320), or that drinking is a sign of a larger problem. When asked to describe attributes of a bad gun owner, Respondent 128 immediately replied: “People that are carrying guns that are either drinking or doing drugs or breaking the law in some other way” (R128), indicating a belief that these things are related. Some even went as far as to suggest that excessive drinking should be cause for the loss of certain firearms rights: “If somebody has gotten drunk and done stupid things and all that other kind of stuff, then I don’t know that I want this person owning a pistol” (R488).

So, while there may be squabbling over the specifics, the main message from firearms owners on alcohol/drugs remains the same: they should not be combined. It is interesting to consider, then, why such a combination appears to occur often enough that it is not just a stereotype; in fact, multiple respondents report having personally seen such use occur repeatedly.

Summary

In the end, safety is clearly a major concern for gun owners of all types. The inherent danger of their hobby, plus the inability to trust that even experienced shooters will always act safely (to say nothing of newer, more reckless shooters) forces gun owners to take precautions every time they use their firearms. And while the respondents in this study were all very focused on safety themselves, they also clearly indicated that not every gun owner is the same way, suggesting that one of the values they hold to be most important is either not interpreted the same way throughout the firearms ownership community (leading to different practices being considered safe), or may be held with less reverence, and enacted less completely, in some circles.
Safety is also a key concern when teaching children to use firearms. Respondents generally agreed that children should not have access to firearms on their own, but this opinion was balanced with a perceived need to get children interested in firearms early enough to foster it into a lifelong enjoyment of them.

**Skillful Operation**

As discussed in the previous section, firearms owners are very concerned with the safe operation of firearms. And while they repeatedly highlighted safety as a key concern within their interviews, it is important to see safety as a base-level concern on top of which other subcultural values rest. Only once basic safety concerns have been met can members begin to explore other subcultural values, such as pursuing expertise with firearms.

As noted in Albers (2003), each subculture has a focal activity. In gun ownership, obviously one of the major focal activities is operating guns skillfully. What “skillful operation” is, however, is multifaceted. Its most basic element, though, is accuracy – the ability to reliably hit that at which one is shooting. While it takes different forms in each firearms discipline – self-defense, target shooting, hunting – accuracy is required in all major elements of gun enthusiasm. Accuracy is a difficult value to achieve since – by necessity – it is always in jeopardy. Every shot is an opportunity to miss one’s target, thereby jeopardizing one’s ability to claim mastery of this key subcultural value.

In addition to accuracy, another key subcultural value is proficiency. While accuracy refers only to the outcome of a shot, “proficiency” refers to the knowledge behind the use of a firearm. Someone would be said to be proficient if they know the operation of a firearm, and are able to use it in efficient and error-free ways, while following appropriate cultural scripts.
Both proficiency and accuracy are constructed outcomes – achieved through practice, and putting forth effort over time. Firearms owners acknowledge this in their responses that depict sustained efforts towards mastery as what is valued: mastery is typically not a single goal, or a destination, but a process of constant improvement. “It’s a discipline you develop. Say you’re shooting at a 50 yard range with a .22 and you do a group within a six inch radius. Well, your goal is to get it within five, four, three. Put them in all in the bull’s eye” (R169). Even if the process is difficult, it is seen as valuable: “Shooting a handgun to me is very hard … but I think, I mean that's part of the lure … I'd love to get better at this, better, better, better, and I think that's kind of cool” (R298).

One purpose that respondents identify for achieving proficiency with firearms is to cause their physical manipulation to be carried out via “muscle memory,” or otherwise become second nature. In this way, the gun owner is able to concentrate on navigating their immediate situation – such as self-defense, or setting up a hunting shot – rather than having to first focus on operating their firearm: “I'd rather know and understand that piece of equipment inside and outside, versus not know it and go ‘Uhhh!’ in the moment” (R227). And to achieve this goal, just as with everything else in this area, “the only way is to just dedicate as much time as you can to familiarizing yourself with whatever gun or guns you have so that you know how to use them” (R242).

Respondent 431 told a story of doing exactly that. He had the opportunity to go on a moose hunt in Canada and was informed that likely shooting distances there would be 200-300 yards, with a chance of shooting game perhaps even 400 yards away. So he began going to the gun range to sight in his gun – normally zeroed at 100 yards – and becoming proficient at longer-range shooting instead. He says:
Every couple of weeks … I’d shoot a box of shells out to 200 yards, and it was amazing how over time your groupings got tighter. Then, as I got comfortable doing that … I said, ‘Okay, now this is real life, more hunting.’ I was more free-handing and shooting off sticks and things like that to the 200 … and I figured, ‘Well, if I’m hitting something like that [gestures the small size of his metal training target] at 200 yards, I can hit a kill zone like that [gestures a much larger size] at 200 yards.’ I felt I would be comfortable out to 400 yards with a good rest. That was a lot of fun for me, was just getting proficient with the firearm. (R431)

In doing this, Respondent 431 acted exactly as the subculture would have him do. He first carried out the necessary technical process of zeroing his firearm to a new distance, and then slowly achieved enough mastery to hit his target reliably. But, rather than be content, he continuously introduced additional challenges of shooting with various limitations in order to ensure that he was improving his skill to the point where he even more proficient than necessary to take game at the new distance.

Respondent 431’s story highlights one additional important element of firearms mastery that differs from other hobbies: the effect that failure to meet cultural scripts has on others. In some hobbies, failing to meet cultural standards yields only personal dissatisfaction, or the disapproval of others in the hobby. With firearms, however, failing to meet these standards can result in serious injury or death. In the case of a home invasion, for example, respondents cite the need for gun owners to be proficient: “I think you have a responsibility to be good at it. Instead of just, ‘Oh shit, someone’s coming in the house,’ and start spraying and praying, you want to hit what you’re shooting at, so you have an obligation to be good” (R181). In this case, failure to be proficient and accurate could lead to ineffective defense of one’s home and the victimization of oneself and others by criminals. Worse than that, though, Respondent 332 raises the specter of a lack of skill hurting others directly: “unless you know the proper way to function with that
firearm even in the house with other possible loved ones in there, leave it locked up because you're going to be more of a danger to them and yourself” (R332).

This type of concern exists outside of self-defense as well. One hunting instructor described how their organization offers hunter education courses several weeks/months prior to the beginning of hunting season, but will not offer courses close to the first day of legal hunting. He explains that:

If somebody goes out and get their license on Friday night, buys their gun on Saturday, has never shot it and goes out in the woods, and tries to hunt with it … they don't have the experience with the gun, they don't know the gun, they don't know how to handle it, they haven't gotten familiar with it in any way. (R251)

This kind of person is likely to be a danger to others in the woods because he has not gone through the necessary steps to achieve proficiency, and might injure others through negligence.

But, other hunters are not the only concern. Respondent 138 references a concept that many hunters discussed – making a “clean kill,” or following a “one-shot, one-kill” policy:

The only way to do that and to get better is to practice. It’s that time spent at the range doing that, and keep practicing and practicing. I relate it to sporting events. You don’t go out and just say, “Hey. I’m going to play pro football today.” There’s a lot of practice and a lot of things that go in to that. There’s ability, but there’s a lot of factors that goes in to it as well. (R138)

In this case, even though the purpose of hunting is to fatally wound an animal, the value of proficiency still applies because such a wound needs to be delivered in a humane way so that the animal suffers as little as possible. As Respondent 476 put it, “You owe it to the game you're hunting to be able to make a clean kill, I think, as clean as possible. The people that don't practice or don't put some effort into it, they're just out there blazing away” (R476). This
respondent clearly indicates contempt for those who – through lack of effort – fail to measure up to subcultural standards.

This contempt for those who fail to measure up is apparent throughout respondents’ accounts. However, it is not typically leveled at those who simply are not proficient – beginners, for example – as long as they are operating within their limits while they pursue greater mastery. Instead, it is reserved for those who fail to seek mastery at all – those who rely on minimal practice, or who do not attempt to improve their skills. In fact, this was one of the few areas where there seemed to be some (very limited) support for additional firearms regulation – to enforce the need for expertise:

I hate to see government regulations, but there's a lot of people need more training with guns, and more experience. Like the bow hunters will say, “we're better hunters than gun hunters are.” I've seen a lot of bow hunters that ain't any good either. They just don't practice. (R476)

Others had some conditional support for a law that would require new gun owners to get up to a certain expertise level. One respondent, while talking about what the purpose of the law should be, said:

I think the goal should be to make sure that the individual who is going to own a firearm has had the proper training and safety focus on what really is entailed in owning a firearm … it should all be driven around safety that, “how does this gun operate, how do I use it, what’s the type of ammunition that it uses, what’s the differences?” (R488)

Another respondent contrasted his view of the ideal world where gun owners all had expertise with a world where everyone, including complete novices, owned guns: “I don’t want to say ‘just let all the guns in’ because I think that would be the wrong way to go about it. You got to have training” (R220). This concern about a lack of training exists partially because there are no
formal training requirements for long gun ownership, and the requirements for handgun permits vary so much from county to county. As one instructor put it

If you're going to have a concealed permit ... I think you should be involved in some sort of training that will enforce you having that carry permit. To say [as a reason for needing to carry a weapon] I carry a certain amount of money on me, no – state that you participate in proper training to utilize that. (R332)

This respondent went on to elaborate about several skill-based and attitudinal attributes that he felt that all concealed-carry permit holders should have.

Even with this level of support for training, it is not necessarily clear that there is any consensus about how much, or what types, of training would be satisfactory. One major reason for this is that respondents acknowledged the existence of a wide variety of skill levels based on many different factors. One former police officer said that “most people … shoot once or twice a year” (R242), and he acknowledged that the level of skill he possessed – which was based on repeated practice, including performing extensive dry-firing drills and operating a firearm without looking at it – was out of reach of most people. People’s ability to reach given levels of expertise was also said to be affected by age – “I also feel that if we’re going to require somebody to get a license, to take a hunter safety class, I think when you look at the other end of the scale, maybe once you hit a certain age you should be required to take a refresher” (R320) – as well as the stage of their development as a firearms owner:

I get upset when I hear people that say they went bird hunting and stuff. “I shot 15 times today!” “How many did you get?” “Two.” That’s not proficiency … a lot of people go through that stage when they’re hunting. It’s called the “shooter stage” where they like to get a lot of shots in, and as long as they do it safely. But they may not be doing it, from my perspective, responsibly at times. (R169)

Others cited variability in performance that gets introduced by the quality of the equipment they
use (R362) and the purpose for which any particular gun is intended (R227), but the biggest variable involved is perceived to be time and effort: “Personally I can't be into it as much as some people, maybe, that's all they do in their life. There's some people that's all they do is shoot. That's their hobby. They're going to be better than you at it. They are” (R345).

Summary

In the end, then, while there is a great deal of agreement on what constitutes accuracy and proficiency, as well as generally how to go about improving them, the only definitive conclusion that can be arrived at is that good firearms owners should seek to constantly improve their skills, at least to a reasonable level. Once one’s skill deteriorates to the point where one can no longer use a firearm safely, or if it never got to that level in the first place, gun owners may report that such a person either needs additional training, or should cease using firearms altogether.

Perhaps Respondent 9 sums it up the best: “anybody can shoot a gun, but not everybody can shoot a gun well.”

Responsibility

During their interviews, respondents were asked to describe various aspects of the experience of being a firearms owner. These ranged from values and experiences they associated with gun ownership and use, to what they enjoyed most about being a gun owner, to what makes someone a “good” or “bad” gun owner. The purpose of asking questions at a higher level of abstraction was to get respondents to think through their entire experience as gun owners rather than about just one or two smaller aspects. However, the downside of asking respondents to
explore higher-level concepts in this way was that they often referenced ideas that, in the abstract, remained ambiguous.

One such concept that came up quite often was “responsibility.” This term was used in a wide variety of scenarios and it clearly had several different meanings. Using context, and follow-up questions, it became clear that “responsibility” was used in three primary ways. The overarching understanding of “responsibility,” however – that was common to all definitions – was seeing it as a kind of additional component, or an overlay, which tempered and shaped the actions one takes with firearms. It was not depicted as a burden or a limitation, exactly, but more as a mandatory additional set of considerations that factor into one’s choices. It is perhaps best represented as a constant presence affecting the decisions one makes and how one carries them out.

The first meaning that respondents gave to “responsibility” is essentially the equivalent of “acting safely,” but in specific ways. To act responsibly with firearms means to be aware of their destructive power, and the danger of misusing firearms As Respondent 488 put it, “as a young boy learning to hunt … all of a sudden, you can kill something. You realize ‘wow, I have this incredible power, but I have to be very responsible and safe with it.” Respondent 441 had a similar opinion, describing owning a gun as giving “you a very strong sense of responsibility that not only do you have something that powerful you can handle. But also something that you need to be responsible for so that it’s not doing damage to other people in any way shape or form.”

However, responsibility does not end with one’s own actions; many respondents highlighted how a key portion of responsibility involves preventing others from misusing firearms through negligence. This was especially salient when it came to the safe storage of firearms, and keeping unauthorized users from accessing them: “I'm doing the right things -
locking 'em up, taking 'em apart, doing all … the things you're supposed to be doing, that people say they do that they don't do” (R227). Often, children were identified as those who were most in danger from irresponsible firearms use:

A good gun owner is somebody who’s responsible. A good gun owner is somebody who’s safe. A good gun owner is not somebody who leaves a handgun loaded in their bedside drawer. A good gun owner is not somebody who, their idea of keeping the handgun away from their child is leaving it in between some shirts in their closet and saying “don’t go in my closet.” (R154)

but anyone who treats guns lightly can be seen as irresponsible:

Parts of the responsibility are keeping the guns in a safe place, where they can't be gotten by somebody else … A lot of people are irresponsible when it comes to handling guns or owning them. They leave them anyplace … They leave them that they can be seen in their vehicles. You’re just asking for trouble. (R251)

Respondents expressed the belief that failing to acknowledge and respect the danger posed by firearms can lead to serious negative outcomes, especially when others use firearms irresponsibly. Respondent 140, for example, described how a friend of his was “killed from poor gun handling … Obviously, ‘unloaded’ gun. Hit the floor, killed him … I take it seriously. It's a great deal of responsibility” (R140). Clearly this tragic incident lead the respondent to take more seriously the safety rules that are meant to prevent such deaths. However, exercising responsibility does not always mean limiting the presence or use of firearms. Respondent 242, a former police officer, describes how the actions of others have lead him to carry a personal firearm even though he is no longer required to by his job:

I don't always carry everywhere I go now, but I do a lot and that's probably just because every day you hear on the news about, somebody at a mall or at a fast food joint or somewhere, you just never know where you're going to encounter somebody. I also think I have a responsibility to carry because I've had the 25 years of training and shooting. I
know how to handle a firearm and so I think as long as I'm okay with it, I feel like I kind of- if anybody is going to be armed, it probably should be me. (R242)

To this respondent, the existence of criminal firearm use warrants a response – but only by those who are trained to do so in a responsible way. In his eyes, only someone with years of training will have the knowledge and skill to respond to a dangerous scenario with the appropriate response, and so the responsible thing to do is for him to carry a firearm.

The second major way in which respondents used “responsibility” was to describe actions or choices that are perceived to be reasonable and prudent. This included such things as taking a measured approach to life, remaining within established normal limits of behavior, and ensuring one’s actions do not unduly impact others’ lives or well-being.

One reason for this value being paramount is, as Respondent 154 noted, due to the circumstances under which firearms are used:

When you’re at the range on trap night with 50 other people, you’ve got to trust these people. It’s a mutual trust that one of them’s not just going to spin around and start shooting … when you’re shooting around a lot of people, there’s a huge factor of trust and mutual respect there and mutual responsibility there. (R154)

In this case, the respondent only wants to be around other people who have cool heads and can be trusted to act appropriately. However, of course not everyone is perfect - in describing a person who did not always act in a safe manner, but whom he did consider to be a good gun owner, Respondent 267 said:

I think he was a good gun owner because … he was responsible in the fact that he kept his guns stored properly, and he kept his ammunition stored properly, and he wasn’t running around the countryside with a loaded gun in his car for no stinkin’ reason, and stuff like that. (R267)
In this way, even a person who has some lapses in safety (thereby going against the first sense of the word) can still be considered responsible in the second sense if they conduct themselves in a safe, reserved manner where others might not.

One key attribute of responsible gun ownership has to do with remaining calm not only in everyday situations, but also stressful or frightening ones. In describing the attributes of a good gun owner, Respondent 441 said:

They are responsible. They pay attention to things around them. They’re not easily angered, they don’t fly off the handle for no reason … they are not looking for a fight of some kind and bragging about “I’ve got X number of guns, and if you come over here blah-blah-blah.” (R441)

One respondent even singled out George Zimmerman by name, arguing that his confronting Trayvon Martin was unwarranted: “The guy's a nut case! … He's not being responsible, not being rational. To confront that Black kid the way he did I think was totally wrong. Lack of maturity. Lack of responsibility” (R101). This respondent identifies the confrontational aspect of Trayvon Martin’s killing as being inappropriate because Zimmerman reacted unwisely and without proper reflection – in other words, failing to utilize the normative approach of being calm.

Not every situation is about life and death, though, and respondents used the same term to refer to very serious situations as they did those that simply require maintaining politeness. When discussing proper shooting technique, Respondent 138 mentioned that one aspect of being a good gun owner is being careful where and when you are shooting:

That’s taking responsibility, as well as not shooting around your neighbors. It’s, “Hey, yeah, on my property, I can do it,” but is it really nice for the neighbors? Is it giving you a positive or a negative image if you just say, “I’m 500 feet from your property. It’s on my property, and I can shoot anytime I want, basically”? Even though it’s disturbing
On a similar note, Respondent 431 highlighted that, in addition to grasping “the gravity of what it means to own a firearm and to use it safely,” being a good gun owner also means using firearms “responsibly in such a way that it’s not a danger to others, it’s not a bother to others, or you're not disturbing the neighborhood by utilizing them at improper times or days of the weeks or things like that. So responsibility is the number one thing.” (R431)

The final way that respondents used “responsibility” was in referring to the culpability attached to a decision or action. Typically this occurred when respondents were mentioning some potentially negative legal outcome a decision could have, such as when Respondent 227 was talking about safety when using guns:

I think the liability enters and everybody's brain on a lot of things in life. What's my responsibility in this? … But if you're doing it responsibly, the liability aspect, it's going to be down here [gestures low]. It's when you're not acting responsible that it's going to go up. (R227)

Or as Respondent 324 said, “If I’m in a situation where I have to defend myself and somebody else gets hurt, I’m responsible for that bullet.” However, respondents also used “responsibility” to refer to situations where there were moral implications in addition to legal ones, such as when Respondents 297 and 298 were discussing what happens when they cannot bring guns with them into certain buildings:

R298: … people will say, “why don't you leave it in your car?” I can't think of a worse place to keep it, you know? You know? 'Cause, they, that's the first thing they're going to find.

R297: Right, your car gets, broken into, and then how do you explain that? Then you're responsible for having an illegal gun out there on the streets. So I don't want that responsibility.
Respondent 138 spoke theoretically about the culpability regarding Adam Lanza’s ability to access firearms before committing the shooting in Newtown:

The shooting that happened at the school in Sandy Hook. The parents knew that he had mental problems, we find out afterwards, but he still had access to firearms. Whose responsibility is it to make sure those are safe? … it’s the parents. You’ve got an unstable person, but you still have let them have access. Now, don’t get me wrong. Could have taking him to the firing range been a great therapeutical session for him? Possibly. But should it have been where he could’ve gotten access to it? Definitely, not. By himself. (R138)

In this case, the respondent poses a moral quandary – in his view, allowing Lanza access to firearms on a limited basis could have had positive outcomes, but the failure to secure those firearms when not in use placed moral culpability for the shooting on his mother.

Regardless of the sense in which it is used, it is important to consider how responsibility fits in with firearms ownership. It indicates that, regardless of how enjoyable gun use is, or its status as a legal right, it always exists within a framework of obligation to self and others. That obligation takes the form of requirements – created through interactions with the legal system, with conventional moral values, and with other gun owners – that may not be dismissed or ignored and still allow one to retain status as a good gun owner. Rather, good gun owners act responsibly in order to maintain esteem in the eyes of others, as well as to avoid breaking the law.
Fun and Enjoyment of Shooting

General Enjoyment

Firearms ownership is not just about serious topics such as safety, legal culpability, and avoiding danger. My respondents reported that one of the major reasons that gun owners cite for their continued participation in the subculture is simply the enjoyment they get from it. However, the nature of their responses revealed some interesting things about the types of enjoyment they get.

For some, owning and using guns was a way to relax and step away from the stresses of daily life. This reaction was especially common among hunters, who reported that being out in the woods was “a good form of relaxation” (R251) because it “gives you an alone time where you can just relax and just enjoy what you’re seeing, or it gives you time to think if you have problems, trying to solve it” (R201). Another only semi-jokingly encapsulated the enjoyment he got from hunting this way: “any day I can go 8 or 10 hours without having to hear a phone ring is a good day” (R279). Stemming from this attitude, many hunters stated that their enjoyment of the day was not lessened if they did not take the animal they came out to hunt, suggesting that relaxation is a major part of hunting. This seeking of relaxation was not limited to hunters, though. Respondents described how with target shooting, “becom[ing] completely involved with that one activity … gives you a chance to get some relief from everyday life” (R431). Another described how his attempts to shoot very accurately require concentration, and an effort to “slow down [my] heartbeat. Three deep breaths, you know? It's relaxing. It really is” (R174). For some, then, it seems that the enjoyment of gun ownership involves being away from stressors, and being “completely involved with that one activity” (R431), whether it is hunting, target shooting, or any other related pursuit.
However, for others, the enjoyment is more active in nature. These people tend to describe gun ownership as being exciting, or engaging, or simply as a fun experience. “Most people who own guns, own guns because they enjoy the act of shooting it,” Respondent 362 said. Respondent 101 agreed, saying that during his time in the military it was “[f]un to go out on the range of Fort Drum, and blow away these pop up targets. I mean, I always used to enjoy going to the range. Always” (R101). Others concurred, indicating that shooting reactive targets – targets where a bullet impact is immediately evident – are more fun than just shooting a hole in a piece of paper:

A lot of people don’t see a reason for a firearm, and as soon as I get them in, and try it, they say, “Oh, this is fun!” There is an immediate reaction because … when you hit a metal target it goes, “Bing! Dang! Boing!” You get immediate feedback. “Oh, I hit it!” (R324).

Other summarized shooting as a way of seeking “stress release” (R128), and identified gun ranges as a place where they can “kick back, shoot off some rounds, relax, tell some good stories, have a good time” (R154).

Fun is such an expected part of gun ownership that more than one person identified the loss of fun as a sign that something is wrong. “It should be fun” (R220), one respondent said, and another agreed, saying:

You have to enjoy it. If you make it a head game where you get frustrated and you walk away and you’re mad when you come off the station, you better just go home … If you don't have fun and joke around and laugh, then it's no good to ya. (R448)

One group of gun owners that reported a somewhat different sentiment, however, is comprised of those who go competition shooting. Competition shooters do report that it is fun, but only to a certain point. They report that friendly competition is enjoyable, such as this case
where a respondent reports shooting with co-workers: “It’s neat to throw a couple targets up and see who’s the best, or whose gun- for a while, we were buying different bullets to see whose bullet could blow the watermelon up better. That healthy competition is enjoyable” (R181). The same is true when shooting informally with family members: “there’s always that unspoken competition when you’re shooting with your dad or your sons at the range, and who’s hitting the most bullseyes, and who’s got the best grouping, and who’s hitting the farthest shots” (R267).

Even in formal competitions, respondents identified that as you improve, there is enjoyment in “work[ing] your way up and, it gets you going, your blood going. Like, this guy beat you this week, well I’m going to try to get 'im next week. But in a good way!” (R448). They also reported a thrill in anticipating the results of a close match: “we want to see our name come up close to the top … when they're reading off a score … especially when it’s called out” (R332). However, many of the same people who reported enjoying competition acknowledged that there is a less enjoyable part to firearms competition as well.

One negative aspect of competition is that it takes a lot of time to be a strong competitor. One respondent reported that “competition interests me, but I just, I just don't have the time to devote to participate in it” (R279). Another reported that competition requires almost constant engagement: “I just don't have the time to- uh, especially with handguns, it's a sport where if you don't do it all the time, you'll lose your edge fast” (R297). A third agreed, citing how in order to be competitive in his chosen sport, he had to conduct experiments with different types of hand-loaded ammunition, as well as practice for weeks to determine how to handle his gun differently through different portions of his competitions (R362).

More so than the time aspect, however, respondents describe how being serious about competition transitioned from being fun to being more of a job, or something else that wasn’t
enjoyable. One respondent, who reported being a strong competitor who spent thousands of dollars per year on ammunition and competitions, said:

I got to the point where I couldn't shoot with the top shooters unless I really worked at it. And it was a game to me, so working at it wasn't fun. And if I didn't really work at it, I wasn't shooting up to my ability, and that made me mad. (R476)

He also contrasted his current attitude with that of when he was shooting competitively:

Now when I shoot a poor score, it upsets me. But I also get over it within fifteen, twenty minutes. When I was really at the top of my game, if I had bad score I'd be mad for three or four days. But I'd get over it in time to go the next week and try it again. (R476)

Other respondents agreed, recounting how they had been to certain types of competitions where “people get angry” if they do not shoot well, or that “people are so concentrated that they don’t want to talk to you. They don’t want to say anything. You go in, shoot, and leave” (R324). This kind of intensity can also lead to dishonesty – Respondent 332 reported being at a competition where a friend gained an unfair advantage and ended up placing higher than he should have as a result. Respondent 324 eventually summed it up concisely: “You can be highly competitive or just go to have fun” (R324).

Despite these negative attributes, many people still report competition shooting to be enjoyable. Those who felt this way tended to be the ones who were able to look beyond the score they had just shot, or the competition they were currently a part of, and instead see their performance as part of a process. As Respondent 476, the competition shooter, acknowledged “averages are made of lows and highs. I just don't like the lows” (R476). Some also managed to take a longer view of their participation by taking the viewpoint of, “you're competing against yourself … to see if you can make yourself better” (R332), rather than engaging in a competition
with those around you. Others found enjoyment in reflecting back on how their hard work had paid off with significant improvement, even if it did not result in a victory (R362).

And, in the end, some of the older shooters acknowledged that there was a point at which it was necessary to simply let go of competitions, whether completely, or via scaling back one’s involvement, or by taking up a shooting sport less oriented strictly around competition (R324).

*Camaraderie*

While outsiders may think of firearms ownership as a solitary pursuit, that is seldom the case. At the very least, firearms and ammunition must be purchased from gun shops, or other gun owners, requiring some level of human interaction there. But where the real interaction takes place is in the use of firearms. In the past, it was more common for gun owners to practice at unofficial, unlicensed spots such as gravel pits, or homemade shooting ranges. These areas were typically either on private property, or were in isolated areas, and so it was more possible to use firearms without encountering other people. However, while some of these places still exist, increased regulation has tended to push gun use towards official ranges and today almost all dedicated firearms owners are members of at least one gun range, with some maintaining multiple memberships. Different gun clubs offer different amenities – dedicated pistol ranges, indoor shooting locations, one or more ranges for shotgun sports (skeet, trap, and sporting clays) – and so some people will belong to multiple clubs to have access to as wide a variety of options as possible. Gun clubs may be the site of any number of activities – target practice, sighting in rifles and shotguns for hunting, classes, events, and competitions of all kinds (both friendly matches – such as those between individuals or clubs – and those officially registered with a league or organization).
Even outside of clubs, though, firearms ownership often has a social component to it. As noted above, firearms use is a skill that must be learned through practice. That practice almost always takes place initially under the instruction of another person. So, from the beginning, firearms ownership and use is something that practically requires social (or at least collective) engagement of some kind. Given this necessity for social interaction, then, and the wide variety of situations in which it occurs, it was not uncommon for respondents to frequently cite camaraderie, and the enjoyment of being with other people, as one of the things they liked most about firearms ownership. However, the content of this camaraderie tended to vary somewhat across individuals.

For some, the predominant characteristic was the presence of other people who enjoy the same pursuits, and who offer helpful tips for greater mastery and enjoyment of those pursuits. These respondents tend to cite enjoying the time spent with other people who “can teach me a lot” (R220) or who will “help you out” with “anything related to a firearm” or “a shooting technique” (R420). Respondents also reported positive experiences with shooting partners who were generous not just with time and advice, but also with guns and ammunition. It was a common occurrence to hear of respondents loaning firearms to other people – and receiving such loans as well – while at gun ranges, for the purposes of trying the firearms out. When asked what a good gun owner is like, one respondent described someone who, “will do anything to help somebody. They will loan you firearms, they will loan you – you can go to a shoot, and if somebody’s there, “Here, do you want to try this?” They’re loaning you ammunition. Even now, when ammunition is tight” (R324).

However, camaraderie is multifaceted, and some respondents – including some of the same people who describe it in egalitarian terms, and as a learning relationship – also describe
the nature of camaraderie as having a competitive component to it. Part of this may be due to the circumstances in which other people are encountered. Most shooting sports are contested in a manner that promotes competition, or at the very least measures successes and failures, and often the other people one encounters while pursuing these sports are fellow competitors:

It’s usually the same 50-100 people and you run into them so it's camaraderie and the competition and, it's similar to – [sighs] - I don't know, I would say maybe competitive cyclers. Guys compare the gear that they've got, and they talk shop, and things of that nature. (R140)

Others are more explicit, describing shooting as “a competition against yourself, and a competition against all the people you shoot against. You've got your best friends right next to you, but when you step up on the line, he's not my best friend anymore … you shoot to win” (R448). Even those who are not explicitly in a competition report that “there’s always that unspoken competition when you’re shooting with your Dad or your sons at the range, and who’s hitting the most bullseyes, and who’s got the best grouping, and who’s hitting the farthest shots. It’s just- It’s really enjoyable” (R267). As the location where competitions occur most often, gun clubs appear to be a key location where this kind of camaraderie occurs:

When you get into a gun club, there's another 100 guys there that think they're a better shot than you. It's always fun, because there's a little camaraderie there, people are busting each other's chops about who's the better shot or who you really send one off the target or something, it gives everybody an opportunity to poke fun at you. It can be humbling! [laughs]. (R362)

But camaraderie is not always about competing, or even necessarily about guns. Several respondents spoke of enjoying their time with other gun owners just because they got to spend time with friendly people. “[T]hat's one good thing about belonging to a club … there's good people there, you like to be around ‘em. They're great, man. Great people. There's no doubt”
(R345). This appears to be true whether the people are simply members of the same club or, as in the case of Respondent 320, a hunting partner who has been a friend for decades:

We go down to his camp, goose hunting. Depending on things we will probably hunt for basically an hour until after all the geese have flown off the pond. Then we’ll go up and sit in the clubhouse and wait to see if they’re going to come back. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don’t. But we might spend a whole day and just sit there and visit and talk and stuff like that. A lot of it is just the comradeship and that type of thing, and you can always find something to talk about. (R320).

Even Respondent 220, who became a gun owner later in life, summarized his experiences by saying, “I’m just learning the culture and I have this attitude towards it: from what I gather, the politics of it are terrible but the people are great- and I guess that’s the takeaway, is the people are great, right?” (R220).

Engineering/Mechanical Enjoyment

As described in Albers (2003:58-59), a significant minority of my respondents explicitly referenced enjoying the technical or mechanical aspects of firearms ownership. This aspect of firearms enthusiasm is similar in many ways to other components of how firearms owners describe other aspects of their enthusiasm, but it remains distinct. For example, some cited historical tradition and longevity as one aspect of their enjoyment. However, these kinds of statements are distinct from those highlighting, say, a family tradition, or an historical tradition more generally, because of their connection to particular historical figures: “it's absolutely amazing to me that most of the things that work best about firearms right now were invented by people over a hundred years ago. People like John Browning were absolute geniuses” (R279);

Also the mechanical side of things. I really enjoy taking guns apart, buying them, and all the engineering. I’m a mechanical engineer so I’ve always enjoyed guns and I marvel that
guys like John Browning, invented all these phenomenal designs back in 1800’s, early 1900’s, and nobody has improved on them. They still are based off of his designs within that. (R488)

These statements obviously place firearms within history and establish them as part of an ongoing tradition – a common theme within many accounts. However, they also elevate firearms at the same time by connecting modern firearms being used today to the original designs created by “geniuses.”

Another part of respondents’ descriptions of firearms that stood out was enjoyment arising purely from the technical aspects of the firearms themselves. This is related to, but distinct from, two other key topics – the general enjoyment of using firearms and achieving accuracy. In terms of enjoyment, most respondents who discussed firearms enjoyment highlighted the active enjoyment of being out with other people, operating a firearm, and hitting targets. The enjoyment of technical aspects, in contrast, tend to be more solitary in nature and represent a kind of internal fascination or thrill with the minutiae of firearms mechanisms, whether in general – “It’s a mechanism. You know what I’m saying? I’m mechanically inclined, that aspect of it. It interests me” (R174); “I enjoy the engineering of them, how they’re made. Different ones are better than others” (R178) – or in relation to specific mechanisms – “I enjoy the technical end of the guns as far as how each one functions and the difference between the autos and revolver, semiautomatic versus the pump action, just the functionality of each gun” (R362); “I’ve always been very interested from a mechanical and an engineering standpoint and taking them apart, seeing how they work, repairing them when they don’t work, and they’re all a little bit different. So it’s a field of study that’s very engaging as far as all the different types and the different mechanical actions” (R431) – or in terms of specific actions taken to improve or maintain the firearm – “one of my favorite parts is after going to the range, is I go home, and …
and take them all apart, and it's like some people have model trains, it's a mechanical pastime, so I kind of enjoy that. I mean it, I actually enjoy cleaning all my guns after we go to the range, it's part of the hobby” (R297).

Achieving accuracy obviously requires skill and patience, but a subset of gun owners also used their technical interest in firearms to help achieve this subculturally valued outcome. While some viewed these efforts more generally: “the technical aspect of distance shooting, getting a rifle to send a projectile so far and hit an object that's this big is just amazing ... I think the aspect of marksmanship and accuracy and ballistics is really kind of cool” (R298), others find that the technical aspects of firearms can provide both an entrée into shooting, and a reason to keep coming back to it. That was definitely the case for Respondent 220 who took up shooting later in life:

I like to kind of know the limits of what’s possible, with ballistics and optics. Like I said, my first reaction to firing a gun: I figured it was difficult but I had no idea what the forces involved, and what it actually felt like. Now I like plinking, I get good scopes and I like to be able to watch myself hit the targets over and over. (R220)

Even if one is not an engineer, or otherwise highly technically minded, that does not prevent seeking enjoyment based on the technical side of things. One respondent, for example, reported enjoying AR-15-style rifles because there is a lot of technical work on the gun, such as changing barrels and refining trigger pull, that “you can personally set yourself that doesn't take a gunsmith to set it for you” (R362). In this way, someone who has even a modicum of interest in the operations of a firearm can enjoy the technical side of some types of firearms.

Mechanical enjoyment appears to be a combination of many different aspects of firearms enthusiasm, but in the end it appears to come down to appreciating firearms’ operations, and specifically their ability to reliably achieve the desired goal of firing a projectile accurately. For
some, this process is both enjoyable in itself, as is the process of achieving it, and the historical legacy that preceded it.

Constitutional Rights

When asked to describe what it meant to be a gun owner, several respondents brought up the Constitution and the Second Amendment, as well as more generic concepts related to the exercise of one’s rights. While there is a more detailed discussion of respondents’ beliefs about the law in Chapter 4, there are a few important points to be made about how firearms owners connect with, and interpret, these historical documents.

Directly or indirectly, several respondents appealed to the historicity of America’s founding documents, and the tradition associated with those documents, when discussing what firearms meant to them. It was clear from their descriptions that the provenance of the right to bear arms, and the length of time for which it had existed, made them feel as if that right was very secure. People referred to firearms ownership as “part of American history” (R279) and one of the “finest traditions” (R378). One person pointed out that participating in the continuance of the Second Amendment gives you “the pride of continuing with the tradition” (R441), while another described the Second Amendment’s guarantees of gun ownership as “an important thread in the fabric of our society” (R431). One person summarized it this way: “when the Founders got together, they really created something really special … in outlining the rights of people” (R378).

Despite the strong reverence for the Constitution, respondents had different perspectives on how it should be interpreted today. While no one described anything approaching a “collective rights” perspective – interpreting the Second Amendment to mean that firearms
ownership was guaranteed only for those who were actively serving in a militia – some were more likely than others to lean towards a strict constructionist approach, and argue that the original meaning of the Constitution should be the most valid. Those who did so tended to refer to the historical events of the founding of the United States in order to support modern interpretations of the Second Amendment’s meaning: “[it] was written into the Constitution for a reason. It was obviously fresh on their minds because they were the ones that … fought off the British, and there were reasons they wrote that Second Amendment the way they did” (R420). Others take a more practical stance, asking:

[I]s the government going to stockpile all the guns somewhere, and then say, “Okay, militia people! Here’s the guns”? I mean, I think the idea behind the Second Amendment, for me, was that, yeah, that guns are necessary for militias to protect the country or interests of the country. But, those guns already need to be in the hands of those people. (R267)

Some had no specific interpretation at all, but argued that, in order to validate gun ownership, all one has to do is, “go back to the Bill of Rights and however you want to interpret it, it’s an accepted practice” (R169).

However, there was almost nobody who took a strict libertarian viewpoint on the meaning of the Second Amendment and argued that it meant there should be literally no restrictions at all on firearms ownership. Sometimes they would describe how they “feel strongly about the Bill of Rights in this nation” and how people “should retain the right to bear arms” (R378), but in the same breath immediately qualify that by adding that these rights should be available only to, “law-abiding [people].” Others, who seemed to take an extreme viewpoint by pointing out that the Founding Fathers “didn’t write any limitation in there. They didn’t say you can’t own, say, a weapon of mass destruction. They didn’t even say that,” would immediately
follow up with a contrasting statement: “I think most people would argue you don’t want just anybody having that [laughs]” (R420). Others were more concrete with their proposed limitations, saying that only a “respectful person that's got nothing wrong with [them]” (R345) should be allowed to own firearms, while others stressed that firearms owners “have to be responsible” (R113). So, clearly respondents saw the protections of the Second Amendment as being at least somewhat limited.

Some firearms owners tended to define their support for the Second Amendment in opposition to what they thought would happen without it. A number of people expressed the viewpoint that one positive outcome of the general population being allowed to keep and bear arms is that it acts as a check on government power. Sometimes this was explicitly related to the American Revolution – “if there were no firearms in this country before this country existed, when it was still … colonies of England and France and Germany and Spain and whoever else colonized this country, I think we would still be under the thumb of those rulers” (R279) Others tended to look forward in history, and look to foreign threats to the United States, or threats that other nations had faced. For example, one respondent pointed to World War II, saying “they asked one of the leading generals from Japan why he never attacked after Pearl Harbor, why he never attacked the West Coast. He said, ‘We’ll get shot. Too many people own guns. There’s no way we can do that’” (R324). Others pointed to other nations and how the lack of firearms protections there lead to significant problems:

Look back at history and you'll see the reason our forefathers put that Second Amendment in there … Look at Germany. Italy. Even Cuba. Castro … the first thing he did when he got into power: all privately owned firearms confiscated. Look at history. I think the reason that the forefathers put that in there was so democracy would continue. (R113)
People who took the latter approach tended to cite Hitler’s Germany and the Soviet Union most often as examples of locations where dictatorial rulers had subjugated the population partially through confiscation of privately owned firearms.

There were also some respondents who viewed the protections of the Second Amendment as intended to limit the power of our own government, and perhaps to allow for the possibility of a popular uprising if the government becomes tyrannical: “if you have a corrupt government, the people in the long run have the right to stand up for themselves. I really feel that's basically how it was written, that a well-armed militia is the fact that the public has the right to defend themselves from a corrupt government” (R332); “I think what the Founding Fathers had in their minds was that was also protection against your own government. If the government gets too carried away, you can overthrow a government” (R476). However, both of these people went on to immediately disclaim their statements saying, “whether they're going to fight that government or not using firearms is not my opinion, but they have the right to possess the means to protect their own life” (R332); and “Not that I would ever want to do that” (R476).

There is even some conflict within the opinions of someone like Respondent 267, who made a very definitive statement about government intervention with firearms:

If we, as a society, remove all of the guns … let’s face it, even the hardest core liberal, anti-gun person knows if they try to do that, somebody’s getting shot. [laughs] A lot of people are probably getting shot trying to remove those guns from people’s homes … There’s probably going to be a lot of gun battles in neighborhoods like this [laughs] if they really tried to do that … If the government has guns and I don’t, that’s a problem. (R267)

This same respondent, at other points in the interview, expressed support for background checks, and waiting periods, as well as definitively stating that he does not solve problems with violence.
These kinds of statements are perplexing, and perhaps even frightening, to outsiders especially when taken out of context. Reading only the pro-revolutionary statements made by respondents, it would be easy for someone who is unfamiliar with this world to come away thinking that firearms owners commonly hold dangerous anti-government viewpoints. (See Albers (2003:Chapter V) for a more in-depth discussion of the pro-militia gun owners he interviewed.)

I would argue that, for certain, we do not need to interpret the kinds of statements made by my respondents as actionable threats against the government, or any person or institution. However, it would also be improper to simply dismiss these viewpoints as bluster, or pure rhetoric. Where it seems that most respondents are coming from is a position of strong belief in the Constitution – and the Second Amendment in particular – and they also seem to believe that the values represented by these things are being constantly under attack: “in the Constitution, I think it was laid out to be that ‘You have the right to bear arms’ and all that but, it feels more like since then it's become a privilege because they've put so many restrictions on it” (R242). Part of that attitude seems to stem from a belief that the Second Amendment is more or less absolute, and that any proposed gun control law represents a threat to a fundamental right:

It’s a constitutional right to own firearms, and they’ve taken that right and turned it into a privilege … now you’re going to have to register those guns as you would a motor vehicle or a boat or anything else … get a license to exercise your own constitutional right. (R432)

Depending on the person’s viewpoint, such efforts may even be seen as a dark portent of things to come: “there were reasons they wrote that Second Amendment the way they did, and to constantly water that down I think that’s a dangerous path we’re on” (R420); “The states have been allowed, in my view, too much latitude and their restricting of the Second Amendment. I
don’t see at any time in the near future that being corrected” (R431).

However, time marches on, and most major firearms restrictions – such as background checks – that have been in place for a significant amount of time are no longer especially controversial. This is true even of those that limit access to entire classes of firearms, such as automatic weapons. It seems, then, that once a regulation is passed and it is shown to have little or no impact on the day-to-day lives of most firearms owners, it starts to become less controversial and eventually fades into the background. (As described in Chapter 4, this is likely one reason why the SAFE Act is considered controversial – not only is it new, but it also threw a great deal of uncertainty into firearms owners’ daily lives in terms of what kinds of firearms, accessories, and ammunition were legal to possess, and how they could be obtained legally.)

But even though most firearms owners are not dissatisfied with current laws – aside from the SAFE Act – there are always new mass shootings, and other high-profile gun crimes, that begin anew the process of political jockeying to propose new gun control laws. Therefore, pro-gun individuals always feel as if their rights are on the verge of being compromised – something that state- and national-level organizations both take advantage of, and at times manufacture, to increase their profile and raise funds. This combined with the occasional major upheavals – such as the passage of the Assault Weapons Ban, or the SAFE Act – yields a perception of a state of perpetual crisis surrounding firearms.

The reality of living in such a state, therefore, is that many people take a highly principled stand. They stated in their interviews that they highly value the Constitution (though they largely addressed just the Second Amendment) and truly do abhor the idea of the protections therein being taken away. So, they take the position that if they felt that their fundamental rights were being taken away, they might react violently against it. However, the
point at which most gun owners draw that line in the metaphorical sand is so remote as to be functionally irrelevant in terms of leading to any actual violence. That is not to say that some individuals might set a personal standard that is far short of that of the bulk of firearms owners—and might end up committing a violent act as a result—but my respondents reported that their breaking point would be something like when “you disarm your entire citizenry” (R420), or “something extremely drastic” (R476, emphasis in original) such as door-to-door confiscation of firearms. Since these kinds of propositions are politically impossible, the likelihood of the average gun owner—much less all gun owners—deciding to rise up against the government is vanishingly small. (This conclusion is further reinforced by the tendency for firearms owners to believe strongly in the importance of following the law (further explored in Chapter 4).) And yet, their commitment to the Second Amendment remains strong enough—and their level of concern about its violation high enough—that they continue to express the viewpoint that such an eventuality is possible.

Also, in contrast to the previous group, there are some gun owners who do not support the idea of firearms owners rising up at all. One respondent noted, “I think we couldn't raise a militia, I don't believe, to overtake our own government. I really don't think that would happen” (R242). Another respondent felt that there would never even be a need for firearms owners to rise up:

If all of a sudden there was a ban, through the government—we're going to every household in the nation and taking your guns. Who would do it? The military? Would it be like the local police department would have to come and do it? … I honestly believe that no police officer or no military man is going to be part of it. They're just not going to do it. They'd revolt. They would! There's no way that they're going to come to your house. I firmly believe that. If I was in the military, I'm not going to somebody's house and taking their guns. (R345)
And still others were happy to have the rights they do, but foresaw no problems if legal changes were to occur. After ridiculing gun owners who have what he perceived to be an uninformed, ideologically-driven pro-gun standpoint, Respondent 297 said, “I would be disappointed if there were laws that restricted my, my ability to have them. But I always say that, you know, I'll find some other hobby that sucks up all my money and makes a lot of noise [laughs]” (R297).

Overall there were approximately as many gun owners who gave a “militant” or “insurrectionist” interpretation of the rights guaranteed by the Second Amendment as there were people who made statements indicating that such a revolutionary stance was either futile or entirely unnecessary. So, in the end, it appears that while the vast majority of gun owners certainly support the Second Amendment – and see it as protecting an individual right to firearms ownership – there is really very little support for the kind of armed insurrectionist viewpoints that some assume are common among firearms owners (see Chapter 5 for more on this topic). This is not to say that there are no dangerous armed groups, or individuals, who advocate for the overthrow of the government. From my data, I can conclude only that within the mainstream of firearms ownership, there may be a greater likelihood of interpreting the Constitution as protecting the rights of the people to overthrow a government of which they disapprove – a position that many legal scholars believe is on legally shaky ground (Bogus 2010; Magarian 2012) – but the level of support for such actions is extremely limited. For the most part, such actions are condoned by only a few, and only in such limited circumstances that they are very unlikely to occur in the foreseeable future. Instead, this group tends to see the Second Amendment, and the Constitution as a whole, mainly as having a rich history, and protecting their rights to firearms ownership and use in an everyday sense.
Conclusion

This chapter explored some of the most significant themes that emerged from interviews about the legal gun ownership subculture. When considering all of this data together, one clear conclusion that emerges is its multifaceted nature. The evidence from this sample indicates that – for many – owning and using firearms is far more than simply a hobby or a pastime. Rather, firearms ownership informs their understanding of key aspects of their lives, including important aspects such as family and masculinity. For example, interviewees strongly associated the beginnings of their firearms enthusiasm with family, especially fathers and other male relatives, and saw themselves as connected to these people via their shared enjoyment. Given the highly masculine nature of these associations, and the socially constructed nature of masculinity, it is no surprise that respondents connect some highly masculine values – such as their multidimensional understanding of “responsibility” – with firearms ownership.

Making the connections between these key aspects of respondents’ lives was not the end of the issue, however. Within the enjoyment of firearms there was a strong emphasis on safety, for example, a concept that respondents took very seriously. This was also a problematic concept for respondents to negotiate, however, given the inherently dangerous nature of firearms, and the tension between subcultural pressures to introduce children to firearms, and the need do so in a safe, responsible manner. In addition to safety, as noted above, respondents also stressed responsibility – a term they use to represent a number of related concepts, all having to do with a kind of internal limitation that regulated one’s behavior when using firearms – and the ongoing process of seeking to achieve expertise with firearms.

Firearms ownership is not all serious, however – respondents report enjoying a number of different aspects of owning and using firearms, from time spent with others, to its competitive
aspects, to just the fun and relaxation that comes from their use. Finally, respondents also gave a number of different interpretations of the Constitution, and the rights they believe are derived from it. Together, this data more than satisfies the goal of providing additional detail beyond what the few national surveys have revealed. It begins to get at the heart of what gun ownership is, and what imperatives legal gun owners feel they are acting under when they engage in their pursuits.

More than this, though, having this information is important for future understanding of gun owners. When debating important political issues, such as increased regulation, it is imperative for advocates on all sides of the issue – as well as gun owners themselves – to be aware of the fundamental values of the groups that will be affected. Without an understanding of the things that this group believes, and how those beliefs are transmitted, the political process may be proceeding blindly. Absent this important information, political figures may unknowingly take hard stances on issues where constituents could be flexible, and compromise in areas that constituents feel are non-negotiable. The same goes for advocacy groups in terms of which issues they choose to take up, how they attract new members, and the type of messaging they present both internally and externally.

These findings will also be useful to future social scientists who can use them as a base in order to explore the phenomenon of gun ownership further. For example, these findings could be useful in the development of future quantitative surveys that have increased cultural resonance for respondents. Asking questions that better get at participants’ real-life experiences will increase the quality of the data as well as potentially improve gun owners’ perceptions of the social scientists who administer such research. Future qualitative researchers could also use the
findings of this study to explore the extent to which they generalize across other groups of gun owners – in international contexts, for example, or across race, sex, and gender lines.
Chapter 4 – The Law / Legal Consciousness

Introduction

In this section I will discuss respondents’ attitudes towards the law, both in general and as they relate specifically to firearms ownership and use. In doing so, I will be using as a general framework Ewick and Silbey’s (1998) idea of “legal consciousness.” It is important to use qualitative research to examine this phenomenon because “the ambivalent and shifting experiences and understandings of men and women as they move through legal institutions and other arrangements of power” (14) might be difficult to capture using a quantitative approach. Gun owners are a good group to examine using this approach because they pursue their enjoyment of guns within a complex and dynamic set of laws, and there are so many “legal institutions and other arrangements of power” with which they must interact in order to participate in their hobby. Organizations as widely varied as the FBI, the Department of Environmental Conservation, and state and local law enforcement all have jurisdiction over various aspects of owning and using firearms, to say nothing of the impact of legislative bodies at all levels. Examining the nature of the relationships that gun owners have with these organizations, and the ways in which gun owners experience those relationships, is very important if researchers want to understand gun owners’ attitudes about the law, and the legal and governmental institutions/processes that establish and maintain the law.

Furthermore, Ewick and Silbey identify this approach as being very appropriate when examining the “persistent contradiction between the ideal and the actual in the law” (xiii). This is especially applicable to gun ownership since, both historically and currently, gun owners’ objections to gun control has typically revolved around the inability of laws to deal with realities
on the ground, and/or the unintended consequences of many firearms laws. And it is even more relevant to explore these topics as they relate to New York gun owners because of the passage of the SAFE Act following the Sandy Hook shooting. With the changes instituted by this law, the actual legal situation on the ground has moved further from what many gun owners consider ideal than at any time in the past. Therefore, this is a crucial moment for investigating how gun owners relate to the law because social patterns may become clearest when significant change is imminent, or in progress.

Legal Consciousness Overview

Legal consciousness is defined by Ewick and Silbey (1998) as an attempt to “identify the various ways in which legality is understood and enacted in the daily lives of ordinary citizens” (xii), or “how Americans interpret and make sense of the law” (17). The authors later define “legality” as “the meanings, sources of authority, and cultural practices that are commonly recognized as legal” (22) and say that it is ultimately a “social structure actively and constantly produced in what people say and what they do” (223). This definition is somewhat vague and so, for the purposes of this dissertation, “legality” will be interpreted to include both situations where the law is formally invoked (e.g., the passage of laws via governmental processes set down in statutory law, the litigation of court cases, etc.) as well as important social processes surrounding the formal elements of law (e.g., how the existence of a law affects the lives of everyday people; how individuals and groups arrive at an understanding of what the law means, etc.).
In approaching this topic, the authors acknowledge that most people “don’t think about the law at all” (15), with the law and its origins remaining “remote and often irrelevant” (15) to most people on a daily basis. They even argue that most people are, in some ways, on autopilot in their everyday interactions with the world, leading to an appearance that the legal system we inhabit is “natural and inevitable” (15). However, instances arise from time to time when people must interact with the legal system in one way or another and the authors contend that “normal appearances are shattered when our motives, relationships, obligations, and privileges are explicitly redefined within “legal” constructs and categories” (16).

While it is tempting to perceive the law as a set of objective, rational standards that are applied using a more-or-less impartial approach, the authors instead document that this is far from reality. Instead, the “law” is made up of “numerous actors, involved in diverse projects, employing different legitimating discourses, material resources, and political power to achieve a wide range of goals” (19). They even go so far as to argue that, contrary to what some have posited in the past, it is not even necessarily clear how to distinguish that which is the law from that which is not the law, because the law is constantly being enacted through the interaction of individuals both within and outside of what is traditionally considered the criminal justice system (18-20). This points us in the direction of needing to speak to normal, everyday people if we want to understand the law, since “the commonplace operation of law in daily life makes us all legal agents insofar as we actively make law, even when no formal legal agent is recognized” (20).

This concept is especially appropriate to apply to firearms ownership for a number of reasons. First, because of the level of legal scrutiny applied to gun ownership, every legal gun owner has to interact with legal authorities at some point, and often more than one type of legal
authority, making them ideal persons with whom to discuss these issues. Secondly, because of
the seriousness of legal violations related to firearms ownership, interactions with the law have a
high degree of salience to firearms owners, meaning that their responses will likely reveal a great
deal about how they understand their orientation towards the law. Most of all, though, firearms
owners inhabit a key legal arena in which there is a tension between stability and change. Some
aspects of firearms regulation have been unchanged for decades, whereas others are undergoing
swift and dramatic change over a short period of time. Ewick and Silbey identified the times
“when the routine and the mundane see[m] to break down” (28) as the best chance to learn about
the intricacies of people’s perspective on the law, but they also clearly acknowledge that most of
people’s interactions with the law take place almost without realizing it. Therefore, firearms
ownership presents a great opportunity to study both aspects of common types of interactions
with the law.

As a result of their interviews, the authors developed a three-part typology of how
Americans experience the law, which they identify as “before the law,” “with the law,” and
“against the law.” These three general approaches – while not directly applicable to all of the
findings in the data discussed in a later section – are nevertheless a useful basis from which to
begin examining firearms owners’ attitudes. Given the situation of gun owners in New York, it
makes sense to take an approach that emphasizes people’s perceived relationship with the law,
and the extent of their ability to change or resist it, as it is a good general fit for gun owners’
experiences with the areas of the legal system they regularly encounter.
Before the Law

The basis of the attitude of “before the law” is that there is a “lack of connection between law and ordinary life” (77), and in fact the law is often seen as taking place in “a space outside of everyday life” (76). One way in which it is different is because the law is seen as “removed from the ordinary affairs by its objectivity” as well as its “formally ordered, rational, and hierarchical system of known rules and procedures” (47). Despite its “general, objective, and impartial power,” however, the law “is not seen as omnipotent” (76) because its power exists only within its own boundaries. In fact, it is the same rules that form the legal system that also define its sphere of its influence. Within the system, everyone is bound to follow the rules set out for that system, thus creating its “impartiality and objectivity” (76). One consequence of this perceived impartiality is that people tended to “apprehend the consequences produced by this organization without identifying the mechanisms that accomplish those effects. They describe a powerful, apparently autonomous place of ordered rationality whose capacity transcends particular human actions” (Ewick and Silbey 1998: 76). In other words, even though every aspect of the law was created by humans at some point in the past, and operates based on the actions of individual people, the historicity and contingent nature of the law often remain unseen. Instead, the law is seen as a kind of black box that produces just outcomes simply by its nature, rather than as part of a constantly evolving – and potentially fallible – process.

An important aspect of being before the law is the reification of the law. “Rather than perceiving law and legality as a constellation of related actors and actions, objectified in particular material forms … for these … persons legality has an ontological status apart from its concrete manifestations” (78). What this can lead to are situations where individuals might disapprove of the actions of individuals within a system, or specific outcomes of that system, but
nevertheless see the system as fundamentally “‘just,’ ‘effective,’ or ‘honest’” (79). In short, the legal system becomes a thing separate from the rest of society, which is “suprahuman, impartial, rational, [and] objective” (82). Given their opinion of the law, people who hold these views may be reluctant to pursue matters via the law if they perceive them to be easily solvable through other methods. They will often only resort to using the law if there is collective danger from a problem (86-88).

People holding these views, and who find themselves subject to legal authority, understand that “[w]hile … there are things that the law should do (i.e., operate impartially), [they] also realize that there are things the law cannot do” (88). Legal proceedings are constrained, for example, by rules, and by judging actions that can be documented, yielding a predictable quality to the law. As a result, not every matter that is unjust is seen as able to be addressed via the law, and people may still feel powerless and angry as a result of those outcomes. However, the system’s apparent impartiality and rule-based nature causes it to remain largely exempt from criticism.

In sum, the authors note that the concept of being before the law “embod[ies] the same characteristics that liberal law claims for itself” (106). In this way, the law is seen as neutral, fair, timeless, and exists in a separate sphere from everyday life.

With the Law

In contrast to the previous perspective, people who see themselves as “with the law,” see the law not as existing in a separate plane than other aspects of life, but instead see it as “relegated to the sphere of the profane” (163), as something “both different from and yet coexistent with everyday life” (159). Starting from this position, the authors describe law as a
game, but this is not meant to imply that the law is trivial; rather, it refers to the way in which the law operates. Like a game, the law represents “a highly circumscribed and rule-bound arena of contest in which the players’ relative skill strongly determine the outcome” (128). Perhaps the most game-like element of the legal system is the fact that it is “deliberately designed with degrees of freedom around which outcomes are produced but not predetermined” (136) – that is to say, the legal sphere is a place where participants begin from a nominally equal position and seek a victorious outcome for their side through skillfully negotiating within a set of rules. This is not the “dispassionate and transcendent world of legality” (139) of the “before the law” perspective, but rather an area where parties motivated by self-interest attempt to achieve desired ends by employing the tactics available to them. Sometimes these tactics may go outside of normative ideas of morality or decency, potentially even including “some level of misrepresentation and manipulation” (141), but as long as these exist within the rules of the game, it is acceptable. The only behaviors not permitted within this system are things like “corruption, immorality, and malfeasance” which are proscribed because they are “transgressions of the highly circumscribed ground rules of the law-game” and unfairly “predetermine[e] the outcome of legal processes such that only one set of interests can prevail” (144). The legitimacy of a legal system, much like a game, can only be maintained if the outcome of the process is not preordained and if the rules “apply to all who play” (146).

With all the focus on equality, however, it would be easy to overlook the fact that those with this perspective do not reify the law and see its rules as “suprahuman, impartial, rational, [and] objective” (82). Rather, they clearly see “rules, procedures, ordinances, and even constitutional amendments” as “historically and socially constructed” and therefore “open to challenge, vulnerable to change, and available for self-interested manipulation” (146). Those
who use this perspective, then, demand the primacy of the rules be respected, while at the same time remaining open to changing some rules, so long as this is achieved in a manner consistent with other rules.

Whatever rules are used, though, victory is achieved through using one’s “skills and resources” to “shape the outcome” of the contest at hand (151). Given the emphasis on skill, and the need to operate within (and sometimes attempt to skirt or alter) a complex set of rules, one of the best resources available to the “players” of this game is a lawyer. For some, lawyers are seen as a valuable asset to have on one’s side in a legal fight, and are “accepted as a self-evident part of the game” (155). For others, though, the necessity of hiring a lawyer – especially since the “quality and value” of their representation varies “in relation to scarcity and cost” (155) – is a sign that “the game is no longer open to ordinary people” (155). In extreme cases, this perception could cause the system to be seen, in whole or in part, to be unfair because it tilts the balance of power in favor of those with well-trained, highly paid lawyers. This situation could potentially constitute a violation of the rules of the game, since the point is for “the result of a legal game to be a product of the play itself” (148) rather than having the outcome be pre-determined by one side entering with an unfair advantage.

*Against the Law*

Finally, those who perceive themselves as “against the law,” feel that they have been “caught within the law” (48). They often try to resist the power of the law, for a variety of reasons, and using a number of different strategies. The authors note that people will choose to resist the law when they find themselves disadvantaged in a power relationship, where that disadvantage has created some unfair or unequal outcome, and when an opportunity arises in the
form of a situation where “one might intervene and turn to one’s advantage” (183). These are people for whom the law is not a game, but “a net in which they are trapped and within which they struggle for freedom” (184). Legality is not an arena where they are able to stand as equals with those who want different outcomes than they do – instead, they are disadvantaged, with “limited access to resources that might otherwise be converted into power within the situation” (185). These people do not see the law as an even playing field, and certainly not as a separate sphere of impartiality based on morality; rather, they see the law’s “power as producing the normative grounds upon which power is exercised” (189). It is this power that is often most frightening to people who see themselves as “against the law.” Rather than perceiving the law’s influence as something they can turn to their advantage in order to meet their own needs, people tend to see the “law as a giant, hobbled by its size and blinded by its formality” and that those who engage the giant are “as likely to be harmed by its clumsiness and myopia as by its rage” (196). The natural consequence of this outlook is that the law is “something to be avoided” whenever possible, and not even “conditionally appropriate or useful,” but rather “condemned” (192).

The types of reactions to this unequal power distribution, and negative outlook on the law, vary based on one’s outlook and situation. Sometimes the powerlessness to act within the law leads to “having to take the law into their own hands” (201), even sometimes rising to the level of committing crimes themselves or, “more often, the imagining and threatening of violence” (201). However, the extreme nature of these threats is often not a reflection of hardened violent or criminal intentions, but rather a reflection of “futility in the face of legality’s constraint” (203). However, people’s reactions are not always violent or criminal. In fact, they are not even always overt – they sometimes take the form of “silences, refusals, and absence” in
addition to “acts of defiance and disruption” (189). Through “[f]oot-dragging, omissions, ploys, small deceits, humor and making scenes” (48) people will seek to “retain a sense of dignity and honor,” but also “to exact revenge” (48), in the face of a disempowering situation. All of these types of resistance are essentially “a means of exercising some control in situations in which little opportunity for control exists” (216). The authors report that such people often approach these actions with “a strong sense of justice and right” (49) and that their initial desire to resist the law carries over into their re-telling of it, often containing “humor and passion” (49), showing how deeply they feel the desire to resist the law.

**Legal Consciousness Research**

There has been a good amount of research done on legal consciousness in the years since the publication of Ewick and Silbey’s book. However, much of it has focused on situations where laws are being broken, such as cockfighting (Young 2014), illegal sex work (Boittin 2013), sexual harassment (Uggen and Blackstone 2004; Blackstone, Uggen and McLaughlin 2009; Marshall 2005), and illegal immigration (Gleeson 2010; Abrego 2011; Provine, Rojas-Wiesner and Velsco 2014), or areas that are legally precarious such as the status of migrant workers (He, Wang and Su 2013; Schwenken 2013). These research locations are ideal for studying legal consciousness because they involve situations where individuals are constantly under threat of the power of the law. This threat causes the law to be foremost in people’s minds, and brings to the surface their understanding of what aspects of the law they understand to be legitimate and illegitimate. These scenarios make clear the boundaries and requirements of the legal system in which the respondents operate, and clarify their role within it. However, such studies are less applicable to the situation of my respondents – legal gun owners – because they
conspicuously operate within existing legal standards, and actively disapprove of those who operate outside of such a system. In fact, as noted later in this chapter, they often call for stricter laws, and more legal punishment for those who break the laws. Therefore, it is important to scour the existing literature for explorations of the legal consciousness of groups who largely operate within the law, and not under any specific legal threat, in order to determine whether groups who are not constantly fearful of the law perceive it differently than those in a more precarious legal position.

One key idea from the legal consciousness literature has to do with how legal consciousness emerges, and is sustained, in a group. Ewick and Silbey focus the majority of their empirical efforts on mapping the nature of people’s attitudes towards the law, and address more theoretically the idea of how these ideas emerge, spread, and are sustained. They describe, for example, that “legal consciousness” represents “participation in the process of constructing legality” (45) and that “legality is produced” (45) whenever people interact with the law, interpret it, or question it. They further describe how legal consciousness is “variable, locally shaped and situated, involving improvisation and invention as well as appropriation and replication” (46). These theoretical ideas of how legal ideas emerge are verified in Hoffman (2003), who explores this idea in a qualitative study of two taxicab companies, and the way in which company policies shape the legal consciousness of their workers. The author studied how grievances – such as disputes between drivers, or perceived unfair treatment by a manager – were handled. While both companies had formal grievance policies, only one company – Coop Cab – actually valued and used these formal procedures on a regular basis. This company, which was “cooperatively own[ed] and collectively managed” (709) emphasized collective solutions to problems at many levels within the company, and highlighted the formal grievance policies in
new employees’ training. As a result, employees – many of whom had no experience with such policies prior to being hired – would find themselves becoming part of a culture where “grievance procedures and rights consciousness were essential elements of their identity as members of a worker cooperative” (712). The other company in the study – Private Taxi – was privately owned, and handled grievances much more informally. Few employees were even aware that the formal resolution process existed, and most said that they did not plan to use it as a way to settle their work-related problems. Instead, they valued settling these issues informally, by interacting with the other employees directly, confronting them alone or in groups, and by informally seeking the help of a supervisor or the company’s owner. This last method was rare, however, since such management figures were perceived to be “fickle” and the outcome of this approach “depended on how personal a relationship one had with the manager or the owner” (705).

In these cases, the author points out that “[m]erely having certain structures in place, such as formal grievance procedures, does not guarantee a certain legal consciousness,” but rather it is “the environment of an institution” (715) that causes the attitudes there to develop. This is how “within the same industry and the same town, two groups of workers understood conflict quite differently and held very different attitudes about the appropriate ways to resolve them” (715). This is important to note because it shows how only through repeated contact with a system of legality does any particular legal consciousness emerge, and their understanding of that system is shaped not only by their personal experiences but also by the experiences of those around them. So, even if a legal structure exists, if groups have little or no interaction with those structures, then they may have little or no concept of legality as it relates to those structures. Conversely, if groups have frequent contact with particular legal structures and develop ideas of what is
culturally appropriate based on that contact, then the nature of those structures shape their present and future experiences with the law, especially if those around them validate those legal consciousness ideals.

Another valuable empirical examination of legal consciousness comes from Wilson (2011) who interviewed pro- and anti-abortion activists to explore their relationship with the law, and especially with the courts. The activists in this case were concerned with “secondary movement litigation” (456) wherein the legality of abortion itself was not at stake, but rather the ways in which activists could advocate about abortion. (In a generally similar way, my respondents were not contending with the fundamental legality or banning of firearms, but rather dealing with edge issues such as magazine capacity and firearm functionality.) And even though this article focuses on individuals’ accounts – rather than going to the organizational level recommended by Silbey (2005) – the authors make an argument that “individual litigants’ stories are another field in which legal meaning is contested and created” (Wilson 2011:457) and do not necessarily reflect the official viewpoints of the movements of which they are a part, and so therefore these individual stories “should not be overlooked in favor of solely examining a movement’s public frames” (457).

One important outcome of this article was to show how experiencing a negative legal outcome does not necessarily lead to a change in one’s legal consciousness. In this case, anti-abortion activists experienced frequent court case losses, and yet the accounts that they gave of their experiences “ultimately sustained and reproduced state law” rather than leading them “to be dissatisfied with, and possibly defy, the state” (478). This was true despite the fact that these religiously driven activists follow a moral law that could be perceived to supersede state law. Even those groups that resisted the court judgments against them did so in ways that were limited
and minor – portraying individual “adverse judicial rulings as aberrations – the products of ethically dubious abortion-rights activists and a few rogue judges” (479). This perspective ultimately reproduces the authority of the state and leaves it intact and legitimate despite criticism.

Perhaps a more important point, however, comes when Wilson highlights Nielsen’s (2000) observation about how previous legal experiences can affect one’s current views the law. Wilson notes that “legal consciousness is experientially rooted” and “new experiences can change one’s consciousness” (Wilson 2011:479-480), but notes that “[t]he degree to which it can change, and under what specific conditions, however, remains to be seen” (480). Nielsen expands on this by noting that “legal consciousness affects not only how people think about invoking the law or the general utility of the law, but also how people interpret events in their everyday lives” (2000:1087). Certainly the different events that affect different kinds of people could yield outcomes that vary greatly from person to person, as well as situation to situation. However, these day-to-day experiences are not the only factors at play. Individuals’ experiences are also nested within larger frameworks, such as the experiences of family and friends, important historical events affecting groups of which they are a part, and the ways in which such experiences are framed by media. These concepts are very relevant to my respondents’ data, especially as they discuss how their views of the law shift under varying circumstances.

A potential expansion of the idea of legal consciousness comes from Fritsvold (2009), who proposes a potential expansion of Ewick and Silbey’s original concept. He proposes to add the orientation of “under the law” to the original three categories of legal consciousness. This category – developed in interviews with radical environmentalists who engage in illegal activist behavior – stems from seeing the law as “a protector and defender of a social order that is
fundamentally illegitimate” (799). Fritsvold’s respondents fundamentally agree with Ewick and Silbey that the law is enacted, sustained and altered through people’s interactions with it, and that it has strong connections with the environment from which it emerges. However, they fundamentally disagree with the purpose of the law, which is to maintain the current social order—a social order that they believe is “intrinsically corrupt” (810). This is a very different concept of the law than Ewick and Silbey’s respondents discussed. Even members of the most critical of the original categories—those who orient themselves “against the law”—may perceive it as “clums[y] and myopi[c]” (Ewick and Silbey 1998:196), as futile and weak (199), or simply unable to meet the needs of regular people. People with this viewpoint typically view the law, at worst, as something to be avoided or condemned, and they may decide to take some matters into their own hands to avoid becoming enmeshed in the law themselves. But, for the most part, they do not see the law fundamentally as a tool for the reproduction of an oppressive social order the way that Fritsvold’s do.

Those taking the “under the law” perspective tended to highlight areas of perceived collusion between agents of formal social control (such as the police, courts, and the military) and other important aspects of American society (such as the government, and the capitalist economy). They perceive the law not as universally myopic but rather selectively so, targeting groups like theirs while at the same time turning a blind eye to extensive corporate and environmental evildoings. Their objections come not from a sense of “futility in the face of legality’s constraint” (203), but rather from seeing agents of social control as “actively protecting and defending a larger social system that is fundamentally illegitimate” (Fritsvold 2009:813) Fritsvold argues that because his respondents do not see the law as a “meaningful tool for social change,” (812) and because their ideals go well beyond Ewick and Silbey’s “against the law”
concept of viewing the law as “a product of power” (815), that their perspective “cannot be bound within Against the Law and demonstrates a need for theoretical expansion of Under the Law” (812). He further argues that significant active resistance is an important component of “under the law,” something that is largely inconsistent with an “against the law” perspective. Those who are “against the law” may engage in minor acts that attempt to delay, subvert, temporarily sidestep, or mock the establishment, but their actions do not intend (and are unable) to actually disrupt or damage the existing social structure the way that organized attacks by environmental activists are meant to do. Actions such as “arson, large-scale property destruction, identity theft, and monkeywrenching – actions that cause millions of dollars of damage” (819) are fundamentally different from the limited, minor acts pursued by most people who intend to defy legal authority. In the conclusion of his article, Fritsvold calls for the further investigation of “under the law” with “larger sample sizes … and samples that include different social movements, as well as everyday citizens” (820) to determine if it is relevant beyond the unique case of environmental activism. It will be instructive to compare Fritsvold’s concept of “under the law” with the opinions of legal gun owners to see whether their perspectives in any way heed the call to broaden Ewick and Silbey’s existing framework, or whether they remain comfortably within it.

Together, these explorations and expansions of the concept of legal consciousness are valuable in providing a framework through which to view my respondents’ discussions of the law. With attention on Ewick and Silbey’s original project in outlining the concept of legal consciousness – as well as subsequent theoretical elaborations – we now turn to respondents’ perspectives on a variety of legal issues.
Legal Gun Owners and the Law

Purpose of the Law / Respect for the Law

It is important to begin by examining what it is that respondents believe the purpose of the law to be. As outlined above, the “law” is often remote and can be perceived in a variety of different ways, so establishing respondents’ idea of the law’s ideal form will help illuminate some of the reasons for which firearms owners object to the non-ideal legal realities they encounter on a daily basis.

When asked directly what they believe the role of the law to be, the vast majority of respondents interpreted this to refer to the criminal law. And while criminal law is just one portion of the larger legal apparatus, it is telling that this is the first thing that sprang to mind for most people. Other forms of legality – such as the legislative process – had to be discussed separately in order to explore respondents’ attitudes about them. But what came up first was the very immediate idea of statutory criminal law and a specific idea of how it is enforced in the community: in these conversations, the primary themes that emerged about the purpose of the law were protection and safety. Specifically, respondents saw the role of the law to be the protection of law-abiding citizens from crime and violence, and the related goal of the provision of physical security more generally. This was expressed by respondents who described laws that provide protection for the people (R441), or help achieve “public safety” (R167), as well as describing elements of the law focusing specifically on reducing violence (R174), or preventing people from committing violent acts (R101). These are clearly related goals, but distinct in their focus – the former is broader and more conceptual in nature (respondents emphasize laws that are “designed to provide safety” (R128) or to “keep the peace” (R117) or “prevent disasters” (R345)), while the latter is more practical, and oriented specifically towards crime control
(emphasizing laws that would result in “no more crime; no more murders” (R174) or those that “prevent or cause people to think about doing a crime more” (R332)). On the flip side of these idealized goals, respondents report disapproving of “ineffective” laws that are “not going to solve any problems whatsoever” or will “do nothing to create any safe environment for the private citizens of New York or anywhere else” (R432). Along these lines, respondents identified bad laws as those that do not actually achieve the goal of enhancing safety by preventing crime, but merely create “a trail to figure out what happened after” (R174). These ineffective laws are described as “unenforceable” or “meaningless” (R441) and are disliked because they “won't really give anybody any benefit” and “don’t better anything” (R298). (A few examples of laws that respondents identified as fitting these attributes include laws that reduce magazine capacity below ten rounds, require background checks to purchase ammunition, and microstamping laws.)

Perhaps as a result of respondents’ view of the protective nature of the law, and its perceived effectiveness at doing so, one of the perspectives they shared most often when asked about the law was their respect for it, and the need to follow it. They displayed this in several ways, most notably by describing “law-abiding” as an important attribute of a good gun owner: “good gun ownership is having the respect for the law, ensuring that you have the ability to use [a gun], and that if you’re using it, understanding when you can use it properly” (R181). They cited “stay[ing] legal” (R178) as an important component of being a good gun owner and hunter, and that knowing the laws in a given area is an important prerequisite to acting within those laws. Respondents made specific references to scenarios in which a legal gun owner might make a mistake and accidentally break a law, but even in these cases they took the attitude that it was that person’s responsibility to be aware of the laws and so they deserved whatever punishment was appropriate for what they had done. People who did not follow the law were described
variously as “reckless” (R113), “irresponsible” (R235), and “undeserving” (R174) of the gun rights that are available to them.

The reasons given for following the law were a mix of ideological and practical concerns. Some used higher-level reasoning, saying “Ethics is doing the right thing when nobody's watching” (R167), and “What kind of society do you have if nobody respects the law?” (R174), suggesting that following the law should be done for its own sake. However, others took a more self-interested approach:

You could be camping in another state … you could get mugged, but yet you can't carry a gun with you because it's illegal. And a lot of people may still do it, but a lot of people won't. Like I won't, and at certain times I wish I had it. But I'm not going to take the risk of getting caught. (R345)

So, while some of the law-abiding behavior that gun owners show is principled, some of it is also about self-preservation.

These kinds of perspectives show a clear relationship with the idea of being “before the law.” Respondents consistently refer to the law as impartial and objective, and not subject to questioning, at times even to a fault when people who accidentally violate the law are understood to have violated the established rules. There is little talk of questioning why those rules are in place, or whether leniency should be offered – the focus is on how it is the responsibility of all to remain in compliance with the law rather than question its origins or application. This is true despite the fact that some firearms owners reported personally engaging in illegal acts including hunting underage, altering firearm parts to create a gun that was similar to an automatic weapon, owning unregistered firearms, and accidentally bringing a firearm onto school grounds. The important point to be aware of in this case, though, is that the vast majority of these incidents occurred either accidentally (or otherwise in circumstances where their intent was not to break
the law), or when the individual was underage and they have since regretted, and not repeated, the behavior. In only one incident – a respondent who reported carrying a firearm with a large-capacity magazine during our interview – did anyone report intentionally breaking the law and show no remorse for having done so. Even this respondent, however, reported following other laws, such as obtaining a pistol license, and not illegally possessing firearms that are disallowed in New York State. So even this incident does not reflect a larger trend among gun owners towards lawlessness (though it does demonstrate the need for developing rapport in order for respondents to feel comfortable enough to share potential illegal activity with researchers).

Rather, it demonstrates the general veneration of the law as a system that is rational, impartial, and representing more than a group of individuals. Instead, the law is a concept that must be obeyed and not questioned.

As described in Chapter 3, a few respondents hinted at their willingness to break the law in order to keep possession of firearms that had become illegal. However, not only were these instances rare, they were also consistent with the perspective that the Constitution (specifically the Second Amendment) is the ultimate law, and that any lesser laws that contradict that higher law can – and should – be disobeyed. Others took a different approach, however, stating:

At some point if they say, “All firearms are going to be banned.” Will I be happy about it? Not the least bit. Would I surrender them to not be a convict, a felon or whatever? Yes, I would. Again, I hope it never comes to that. (R138)

So, in some cases, the desire to remain within the law can override even the most extremely unconstitutional situation. However, these perspectives do not necessarily have to be incompatible. As one respondent put it: “Even the laws you don't agree with you've still got to obey them. You work towards overturning the ones that you disagree with, but you still have to
follow the laws” (R128). While this perspective superficially edges towards something more akin to the “with the law” perspective (highlighting the law’s malleability, given proper effort), it nevertheless remains firmly planted in the perspective that the law must be obeyed regardless of one’s personal beliefs on the matter. (Without encountering the situation in real life, of course, it would be impossible to test whether those who say they would rebel against gun confiscation would actually do so, or if those who say they would not would refrain from doing so, but the point of illustrating this apparent inconsistency is to argue that they may actually be just two different enactments of gun owners’ respect for the law.)

*Problem – Legal Restrictions / SAFE Act*

Having laid out respondents’ opinions about the ideal form of the law, it is important to examine some areas where respondents felt that these ideals were being violated. Seeking such cases is often a productive way of identifying the points at which true disagreement emerges, rather than just the absence of an ideal circumstance. To that end, this sub-section deals with times when respondents highlighted the restrictive nature of the law, specifically those areas where they reported feeling like the law prevents them from being able to do what they want with firearms. For clarity’s sake, though, it should be noted that when directly asked if the laws in New York State restrict them from being able to hunt, shoot, and defend themselves in the ways that they want to, most respondents reported feeling very little restriction. The majority of responses on this topic were along the lines of these respondents’: “Right now there's nothin’ that the laws have stopped me from doin’ … You know, sporting wise, or huntin’, or whatever” (R448); “as far as what I can do with my pistol, I can do about anything I want” (R345); “I don't feel restricted. I participate in the firearm activities I want” (R297).
Those that did respond affirmatively to this question, however, tended to cite parts of the SAFE Act as what caused them to feel restricted. Assault weapons restrictions were frequently identified as something that held them back from having the kinds of firearms they wanted:

I hadn't bought any guns in quite a while and I wanted a semi-automatic rifle and so I kind of picked one out and I went to a gun dealer that I know and he was like, “No you can't have that one. That's not- in New York State you can't have that, but you can have this version of that, which you know has the smaller capacity and no flash hider.” I had to settle for something that was less than what I really wanted. (R242)

Others reported dissatisfaction with the prospect of having to undergo background checks to buy ammunition, as well as the new restrictions on being able to own and transfer firearms that they already have.

These beliefs may seem to contradict those from Chapter 3 regarding the sense of the Second Amendment being under attack. How can a group of people be experiencing very little regulation that affects them personally and yet still maintain a sense that regulations are too strict? However, when viewed in context, it can be seen that they are actually complementary findings. Gun owners find themselves enmeshed in a culture where new restrictive anti-gun regulations always seem imminent. Every year there are hundreds of gun control bills proposed across the country, each of which represents a new chance for the abridgement of their rights (Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence 2016). And while these laws often do not pass, their mere existence – which is often highlighted by pro-gun organizations for fundraising purposes – creates an atmosphere of looming regulation (especially in New York State, as will be discussed below).

Also, on a more micro level, firearms owners do not form their opinions about the law based solely on their own experiences. As noted above, the experiences of others – as well as the
stated positions of groups to which they belong – may influence how they feel about the law. Even though individual gun owners may feel no restriction, they might well know someone whose activities are restricted, or they might belong to an organization that strongly advocates a view of the law as improperly intrusive. This combined with the high opinion that many firearms owners have of the Second Amendment can lead to ideological reactions even to laws that do not have a personal effect:

Personally, the laws—over the course of my lifetime, the laws would be restrictive as to the type of firearms I’ve owned and have liked to own. Right now, they don’t affect my current ownership. But I’m strictly against the all these assault rifle laws, and the laws restricting the capacity in magazines, whether it’s pistol or rifle or shotgun. (R378)

An additional factor that complicates gun owners’ relationship with the law in New York is the nature of the SAFE Act. As noted previously, firearms owners are often more comfortable with laws that they have had some time to get to know, and laws that have relatively few effects on their day-to-day lives. However, the SAFE Act does not fit well with either of these attributes, causing gun owners to feel like their rights are being infringed upon by the legislation. One reason for this is that, in many ways, the passage of the SAFE Act represents a violation of some of the key components of the “with the law” perspective that otherwise dominates gun owners’ outlook on firearms law.

For example, a primary element of the SAFE Act’s passage that upset gun owners was the fact that it was passed very quickly, and with little debate. This was achieved through the use of a parliamentary procedure known as a “message of necessity” which allows the governor to waive the normal three-day period before a vote can be taken on a piece of legislation. (See Appendix D for a full description of the SAFE Act and the controversy surrounding it.) This technique, nominally meant to be used in emergencies where an immediate need exists for
government action, was widely seen as improper by respondents. They often referred to the SAFE Act as being “jammed through in the dark of night” (R128) or as having occurred “in the middle of the night” (R420; R167) and “behind closed doors” (R101). These phrases also reference the perception of many respondents that the bill took shape so quickly that legislators did not know the contents of the bill they were voting on, and gun owners did not have time to mobilize resistance against it.

In a legal consciousness sense firearms owners had previously been able to rely on the nature of the legal system to allow them to shape legal outcomes on a nominally equal footing with their ideological opponents in that everyone was at least aware of the laws that were coming before the legislature, and the contents of those laws. They believed that existing legal standards prevented them from being surprised by the passage of a law, and that the power of their lobbying machinery would allow them to oppose or alter any legislation of which they disapproved. However, in this case, the Cuomo administration used an unexpected technique, and also introduced elements into the law that were much harsher than previous laws of this kind. (For example – in most cases where firearms have been banned by law, a grandfather clause was written into the law excluding firearms owned prior to its passage. However, in this case the grandfather clause was far more limited than in the past, and included a number of novel restrictions.) In essence, firearms owners felt like the SAFE Act proponents had tilted the outcome of the legal process by limiting debate, and dealt unfairly with the public by eschewing traditional legal procedures. Since the most basic requirement of the “with the law” perspective is that all parties compete on an equal footing, respondents clearly felt like they had been deprived of due process in this case.

In addition to the way in which the SAFE Act was passed, gun owners also reacted badly
because of the law’s incomplete and changing nature. From the perspective of those who are “before the law,” ideally the law requires clear standards that are applied equally and impartially to all citizens. From the beginning, the SAFE Act did not meet these criteria, as it required immediate alteration to exempt police officers from its effects, thereby allowing police agencies to continue to legally possess assault weapons and large-capacity magazines (Haberman 2013). More than this, though, the effects of the law, both short- and long-term, have been constantly in flux due to both legal and social factors.

SAFE Act opponents launched legal challenges very soon after the passage of the law, and they eventually succeeded in getting the seven-round limit struck down. Although this was a minor victory (since it did not alter many of what plaintiffs considered the most onerous portions of the law) it nevertheless revealed the law to be alterable, causing some to hold out hope that more elements of the law may eventually be thrown out by higher courts. This belief has not been proven to be well founded, as a circuit court recently held that the vast majority of the SAFE Act is constitutional, with only the seven-round limit being singled out as failing to pass legal muster (Spector 2015b).

Another aspect of the SAFE Act that has limited its validity in the eyes of opponents is that the implementation of one of its key elements – the requirement of background checks to purchase ammunition – has been repeatedly postponed due to the difficulties associated with developing an appropriate database to carry out these checks (Weaver 2015a). The combination of these elements causes the law to be seen by many as incomplete, or temporary, and lacking authority as a result.

In some cases, firearms owners’ reactions to the SAFE Act can even be said to fall into the realm of “against the law.” While opinion polling indicates that New Yorkers as a whole
appear to be in favor of the Act, there is much greater support among downstate voters than those upstate (Siena Research Institute 2015). Given that there is a great deal of discontent across the upstate counties, opponents of the SAFE Act have mobilized a number of tactics that one could consider the kinds of “acts of defiance” (Ewick and Silbey 1998:189) and “foot-dragging … and making scenes” (48) that are predicted to occur when people feel like they are victims of the law and have been caught within its power. Primary among these are the efforts that have been undertaken to pass non-legally-binding legislation in city- and county-level legislative bodies opposing the SAFE Act. As of April 2015, opponents have managed to pass such resolutions in 52 of New York’s 62 counties (NY SAFE Resolutions n.d.). Such actions undoubtedly have the ring of people who desire to resist the law, and who are attempting to regain “some control in situations in which little opportunity for control exists” (Ewick and Silbey 1998:216).

In addition to citizen actions, some law enforcement agencies (mostly county sheriff’s offices) have issued anti-SAFE Act statements, leaving the door open as to whether the law will be fully enforced in all areas of the state. This concern will continue to be an issue because the date has passed by which New Yorkers were required to register their existing assault weapons. The state has not published statistics regarding how many firearms were registered, leading some to speculate – though without evidence – that compliance with the law may be lower than anticipated (Spector 2015a). However, at the same time that these official anti-SAFE Act statements were being drafted and passed, there were also cases of individuals being arrested for violating portions of the Act. One that was especially present in some respondents’ minds was the case of Paul A. Wojdan who was pulled over for speeding, and admitted to the officer that he had a legally owned firearm in the car along with his pistol permit. When the officer asked Wojdan to make the firearm safe, Wojdan removed the magazine and the officer was able to see
that the magazine contained more than seven rounds. Wojdan was then arrested for violating the SAFE Act. Although the case was later dismissed (Prohaska 2014), the arrest of someone who was not intending to commit a violent crime – combined with official pronouncements from counties and law enforcement officials coming out against the law – created inconsistent messages about the nature of enforcement surrounding the SAFE Act, and created confusion among gun owners.

While respondents’ perspectives are important to catalogue, it is perhaps more important to go beyond merely describing how gun owners feel about the SAFE Act. To meet Silbey’s (2005) challenge, it is imperative to also pursue the “gap between laws on the books and law in action” (360). Theoretically speaking, what is it about the experience of being a gun owner that leads to dissatisfaction with the laws that have been passed in regards to firearms?

Perhaps one of the biggest reasons for gun owners’ disapproval of the SAFE Act is the obtrusiveness of its impact. One key component of the idea of legal consciousness is that “we rarely sense the presence or the operation of the law” (Ewick and Silbey 1998:15). This is certainly true for gun owners for whom, on a day-to-day basis, do not have much contact with the law. As described in Chapter 3, there are many aspects of what it means to be a firearms owner, and while some of them have legal components – especially safety and responsibility, two key terms highlighted by respondents – even these aspects are largely self-regulated, and gun owners have only intermittent contact with the legal establishment. With the passage of the SAFE Act, however, the presence of the law becomes a bit more obtrusive and gun owners found themselves targeted by an unwelcome influx of legal contact.

Due to the SAFE Act’s more limited grandfather clause, firearms owners were suddenly faced with a requirement to sell or register their non-compliant firearms within a year. And even
if they did register a non-compliant firearm with the state, they would no longer be able to
bequeath that firearm to anyone in New York State, including family members. A similar
requirement emerged in regards to large-capacity magazines, though no registration component
was available for these and they simply had to be sold or otherwise disposed of. In addition to
these situations, firearms owners also face the prospect of even more interaction with legal
authorities: pistol licensees will be required to renew their licenses every five years, whereas
previously the licenses had no expiration date. And, although it has not yet come to pass, the law
also states that all in-state ammunition purchases will be subject to a background check.

The reason these types of impacts are important is because they concern legal gun owners
on a day-to-day basis. Other restrictions – such as passing a federal background check for
purchasing a gun – are rare, relatively unobtrusive, and easily fade into the background of one’s
experience as a gun owner. Furthermore, such processes can be justified by their clear
connection to crime control. That argument is perceived to be less applicable to SAFE Act
provisions, many of which – as will be described further in subsequent sections – are seen by
respondents as lacking a connection to crime control or public safety. (A belief that is further
validated for some when law enforcement agencies and legislative bodies come out against such
legislation.)

In many ways, the passage of the SAFE Act created almost a perfect set of circumstances
that would upset legal gun owners through increasing the visibility of the legal structures that
constrain their actions and adding additional legal structures on to those that already exist. These
actions not only forced gun owners to increase their level of interaction with legal authorities, but
it also did so in a way that violated gun owners’ assumptions about how the legal process
worked, thereby shifting many people’s perceptions of the law away from being “before the law”
and “with the law” towards being more aligned with those who are “against the law.” The combination of the law’s swift passage, key differences from previous gun legislation, its perceived irrelevance to crime, and its impacts on the daily activities of some gun owners made it especially objectionable. And these flames were then fanned by subsequent legal action invalidating portions of the law, uncertainty about its enforcement, and general discontent among gun owners creating a feedback loop of resentment over its perceived flaws.

This knowledge of gun owners’ positioning in relationship to the law could be immediately applicable in a variety of different legal situations. The most obvious of these would be in future efforts to pass gun control legislation. Those promoting any kind of change in gun control will undoubtedly encounter resistance from gun owners, but such resistance is likely to be far more pronounced and widespread when the normal processes of legislation are not followed, and when such legislation will increase the intrusion of legality into gun owners’ lives more frequently. Therefore, in order for these efforts to be successful, it will be important for proponents of any future legislation to, for example, highlight how the changes will act to strengthen aspects of the law that gun owners view as important. The following sub-sections address some of the more general concerns that gun owners expressed regarding the current legal system and how they affect them. Each of these points emerged from the interviews as being of great importance to gun owners, and should therefore be taken seriously by researchers, politicians, and those who advocate surrounding gun policy. The more that conflicts with these aspects of gun owners’ legal consciousness can be avoided, the less likely it is that gun owners as a whole will put forth collective resistance to the proposed plan. By the same token, though, when the content of legislation – and the manner in which such legislation is proposed, promoted, and passed – ignores, challenges, or directly violates gun owners’ legal consciousness
(such as in the case of the SAFE Act) the more likely it is that resistance will be widespread and strenuous.

**Problem – Leniency**

As noted above, respondents’ idealized goals of the law indicate a veneration of the law as it applies to curbing criminal actions. Closely coupled with this is a marked disapproval of on-the-ground realities that depart strongly from such goals. With the SAFE Act, respondents felt that the changes to criminal law would simply be ignored by criminals and would therefore only be obeyed by the law-abiding citizen. However, their complaint is larger than this one law; the biggest objection they had to the current legal system was specifically with the type and amount of punishment criminals receive for all crimes.

The overriding sentiment that respondents put forth was that the penalties criminals receive for committing crimes with firearms are too lenient. This took a number of different forms, but Respondent 420 summarized them when he said, “If somebody commits a crime, punish them to the fullest extent of the law … make those penalties strict” (R420). Respondents argued that, without strict penalties, criminals were not being held “accountable for their actions” (R128) and were being let out “with a bare minimum” (R324) of punishment. Some indicated that the perceived tendency to allow criminals to serve very little time for gun crime contributed to a cycle of violence where the same violent offenders were able to get back on the street quickly even after being caught with an illegal firearm. A few respondents argued that leniency has its place for first-time offenders, or those who did not have illegal intent with their firearms, but repeat offenders were viewed with little sympathy, and were identified as the main source of many problems.
A key point of contention, identified by multiple respondents, was plea-bargaining. Respondents reported a belief that plea bargaining often allows criminals to escape severe penalties by avoiding mandatory minimum sentences that are supposed to be associated with gun crimes:

In New York State it's a mandatory year in jail if you're caught with an unregistered handgun, but they plead it down. They plead it down, the people don't spend any time in jail. Why did they make the law if they're not going to allow it to be enforced? (R167)

Some respondents also reported a belief that gun criminals should be subjected to federal trials, and put into federal prisons if convicted – the process used in Project Exile, and similar programs. (Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services 2003) However, much like with plea bargains, respondents perceived that prosecutors were not using these harsher options. In most cases, respondents felt that plea-bargaining was being used to push cases through the justice system as quickly as possible when more time, and less leniency, would be a preferred outcome.

While most respondents had a simple, incarceration-based solution for firearm criminals – “you don’t need them around. Throw ‘em in jail” (R178) – a minority of respondents felt that the pure amount of time being spent in prison was not the whole problem. Some identified prison overcrowding as one of the reasons that criminals were let out early, while others felt that prisons were not tough enough and so going to jail was no longer a deterrent. While a few people offered solutions for these problems – “Build another jail, we need jobs” (R441) – most simply reported that harsher sentences were the answer.

Taken together, these statements represent a general defense of the “before the law” position when it comes to the criminal law. Those who break established laws are viewed with
contempt because of their disrespect for the reified idea of legality that enjoys great acceptance among respondents. Furthermore, the insistence on fulfilling statutory punishment guidelines is a straightforward appeal to an ideal of the law being rational and objective – in their view, the system loses legitimacy if a crime does not result in the type and amount of punishment described in the law. Such things are seen as non-negotiable, and those who allow such things to occur – judges, lawyers, etc. – are viewed as complicit in the social problems that are perceived to result from such actions.

**Problem – Legal Inconsistencies**

As discussed in more general terms above, it is true that respondents desire straightforward laws, passed with the purpose of preventing crime and protecting the law-abiding public, and they want clear, consistent penalties for people who break those laws. They saw the SAFE Act as an example of where this was not the case, with criminals able to simply avoid the requirements of the law, but with the law-abiding citizens forced to follow the new regulations to avoid legal penalties. As discussed above, the criminal law provides the clearest example of how respondents feel on this issue. However, in other areas as well – such as those having to do with firearms regulations – respondents cited perceived legal inconsistencies, as well as loopholes that allow for subjective application of the law. This was also an area where respondents’ perceptions of the law began to shift within Ewick and Silbey’s categories. When discussing these issues, respondents tended to adopt a much more critical approach, and one that clearly saw the law not as “dispassionate and transcendent” (Ewick and Silbey 1998:139) but rather a place where groups with competing interests strive with each other to get their perspective enshrined in the law. The outcome of conflicts over gun control rarely resembles completely the desires and
preferences of one side or the other, but rather a mix of the two. Because these rules change before their eyes – or certainly within recent memory – and because the outcomes are so clearly associated with the efforts of particular interest groups, respondents see them as constructed rather than representing some kind of reified version of the law. In short, when it comes to firearms laws, respondents are far more likely to take a “with the law” perspective. This does not necessarily mean that respondents’ attitudes on the law were inconsistent, however. In fact, the type of legal inconsistencies respondents cited most often were when regulations were perceived to be arbitrary in nature, especially those having no connection to promoting safety or protecting a public good. This is consistent with the views outlined in previous sections, and represents only a shift in attitude about the nature of the laws in question.

One commonly cited example of legal inconsistency had to do with the way that the SAFE Act altered laws regarding ammunition magazine capacity. Prior to its passage in 2013, private citizens were generally limited to possessing ten-round magazines, which could legally be fully loaded up to the ten-round capacity. (Citizens were also allowed to possess, and fully load, magazines with capacities larger than 10 rounds, provided that those magazines were manufactured prior to the passage of the 1994 legislation that set the 10-round limit.) However, the SAFE Act initially made it illegal (except at gun ranges) for gun owners to load a ten-round magazine with more than seven rounds of ammunition, and also gave firearms owners one year to sell, or dispose of, grandfathered magazines with capacities larger than ten rounds. Although this portion of the Act was later partially struck down by a district court, respondents still saw it as arbitrary: “you can put 10 rounds in a gun if you're shooting on a range but if you're defending yourself you can only have seven. [laughs] Does that kind of stuff make any sense? No” (R128).
Others highlighted how they believed the legislation would not even achieve its goal of making the public safer by reducing the number of rounds a shooter can fire:

If you're an experienced person, you can go through and load seven-round magazines just as fast as anybody else, but there's no limit on how many magazines you can have. You can have a gym bag of magazines, as long as they only have seven rounds in them. (R332)

Respondents had a variety of additional concerns about the inconsistencies they saw in the law, as it related to ammunition capacity. Respondent 476 critiqued the seven-round limitation by suggesting that in some circumstances it could actually make firearms more dangerous:

What I do, is load an extra one into the magazine, close it, rack it in. Until I pull that slide, that's illegal. I've got eight bullets in the magazine rather than seven, but I've never seen a gun without a bullet in the chamber shoot anybody. So how is that- it doesn't make sense. It's a lot safer without that bullet in that chamber than it is with one in the chamber and seven in the magazine. One in the chamber and no magazine at all is a lot more dangerous than eight in a magazine and none in the chamber. It wasn't well thought out. (R476)

Others jokingly wondered whether lawmakers believe that the eighth, ninth and tenth rounds were more dangerous than the first seven (R140; R362), or questioned whether, in practice, the law would have any effect at all: “are you going to stop me and count them? Are you going to come into my house and check to make sure every gun I have in the house, if it’s loaded, only has seven bullets in it? Really?” (R441). All of these types of concerns have the same root, though – that the passage of this type of law does little to enhance public safety, and may create drawbacks ranging from inconvenience (such as having to reload more often while at the firing range), to legal challenges (via police searches uncovering firearms that violate the new laws), to a reduction in one’s personal safety (having fewer bullets in one’s own firearm
than criminals have in theirs). In this sense, gun owners find that the actual outcomes of laws are inconsistent with their understanding of what laws should do.

Capacity was not the only area where respondents objected to inconsistencies in this way. Some respondents pointed out that the law treats different calibers, and types, of bullets in ways that do not always make sense to them. Some reported, for example, that they occasionally had difficulty purchasing ammunition that is typically used in handguns, but can also be used in certain types of rifles. (In New York State, owning a pistol requires having a pistol permit, and many stores require individuals who purchase rounds typically used in pistols to show their permit before being allowed to purchase the ammunition). Respondent 140 argued that, “there needs to be more consistency in, if you go into a store, you're either going to have to show a handgun permit to buy ammo or not. Because .45ACP ammo can be used in a handgun, or can be used in a carbine. Same with .22, .308, .243.” (R140) Respondent 154, who was not yet 21 and therefore unable to own a pistol yet, had a related concern: “I really want to own a handgun. It’s kind of frustrating that I gotta wait until I’m 21 to do it … why can I own a 10 round 9mm rifle and I can’t own a 10 round 9 mm handgun?” (R154). Yet another respondent pointed out that the lethality of a given round may have nothing to do with how it is regulated: “Most deadly round in the United States is what? .22. … It's the most deadliest, and we haven't done anything with the 22s” (R227). Still another pointed out that certain muzzleloaders are not technically considered firearms at all, meaning that “my grandson can start shooting with me at 10 because, by law he can’t handle a gun until he’s 12. But with a muzzleloader doesn’t fall into that category. [laughs] I didn’t write the laws” (R320). As noted in Chapter 3, respondents have a strong belief that all firearms are potentially dangerous, and that outlook helps explain why treating firearms in this way may seem arbitrary and ineffective at achieving public safety. When
any round is seen as potentially deadly, it does not make much sense to restrict access to other rounds that are just as deadly. To do so introduces concerns not only of the consistent application of the law, but of whether that law is even appropriate.

However, not all laws are viewed this way. While the SAFE Act has elements that were critiqued for their inconsistency, some laws that are seen as having a viable, important role in preventing certain types of crime may still be considered problematic by respondents because of their inconsistent application. The situation in which this that came up most frequently was the extent to which laws (especially laws relating to pistol permits) are different from county to county. One respondent summed up the pistol permit process this way: “it all depends who the judge is for that county. They can make it really tough” (R345). No respondent had a story of applying for a permit and being rejected, but some objected to the length of time that the permits took to be processed, and the hassle surrounding the application. Some even reported that they wanted a pistol permit but had not sought one yet because of the extent of the process involved with getting one. Of those who did have permits, several had personal stories of their pistol permit applications taking months to be processed, and many perceived that the process would have been much easier in another county: “in Monroe County where Rochester is, the last I heard, the pistol license they’d give ‘em away. You know, you can have carry permits there, no problem. But in Onondaga County, which houses Syracuse, you can’t” (R378); “Oswego County is great. No hassle whatsoever … so why do they make it so tough on Onondaga County?” (R345).

Although the length of time to obtain a permit was irksome to many, it was less controversial than the limitations that were sometimes placed on permits. In New York State, judges have the ability to “opt to put certain restrictions” (R117) on the permits they issue. In
these cases, judges may issue a permit, but limit the permit holder to possessing the handgun on
the premises of their business, or limit them to hunting and target shooting with the firearm (i.e.,
preventing them from carrying it concealed). These restrictions were unpopular among
respondents, and some reported that they felt that they are improper:

Do I feel that that’s infringing part of our constitutional right? I believe it is. I believe that
the judges are supposed to enforce laws, not create their own in regards to their own
feelings … I think the state should say, “Across the board, this is how the whole process
is operated.” (R138)

These restrictions were even unpopular among those who approve of the overall goal of the law:
“I don't mind the background checks. I don't mind the fingerprints. I'm a decent, honest dude.
Never run afoul of the law. But it's just the restrictions today” (R101). Another referred to the
fact that each county issues and administrates its own pistol permit as “one of the biggest
drawbacks in New York State,” because “even though there’s a general law, it’s up to the judge’s
interpretation of what that law actually means” (R138). Using similar logic to the previous
discussion about ammunition calibers, one respondent said:

You’re restricting people in that way where I necessarily don’t think there’s a need to. If
you’re giving them a sheet of paper that lets them go buy a gun, a handgun, now they
have it in their house. Is it that big a difference for them to take it somewhere else … if
they want to? (R181)

These objections appear to come from some of the same sources, one of which is an
understanding of the law as ideally being objective, impartial, and remote rather than subjective,
partisan, and hands-on. Any situations where this perspective on the law is challenged – pushing
them from a “before the law” position to a “with the law” perspective – cause gun owners to
become uneasy, and critical of the discretion allowed by such laws. One major reason for this
feeling may be the fact that respondents see the protection of the public as the primary goal of the law. Respondents see no marginal public safety benefit to lengthening a pistol permit process beyond the length of time needed to verify that the applicant is not dangerous. And as for the ability of a judge to place limitations on permits, this comes across as an arbitrary check on a non-dangerous person. Respondents see this as having no value in protecting the public largely because individuals with permits have already demonstrated their suitability to own firearms. With that base criteria met, most respondents see no additional safety benefit to a legal restriction on the locations where permitted persons can carry their firearms, and so when such a restriction is levied it is perceived as an unnecessary (and potentially even unconstitutional) exercise of judicial power. These restrictions may even be seen as extra-judicial, again endangering the perspective of the law as a reified, distant ideal.

**Problem – Effectiveness of the Law**

One problem that respondents have with laws like the SAFE Act is the lack of focus on criminals in a way that they perceive will affect the actual levels of criminal behavior. However, this perspective is actually broader than just one statute and extends to the law more generally, and its overall efficacy. Many respondents report the belief that one should follow the law, certainly, but they also report skepticism about the ability of at least some aspects of the law to actually stop criminals from carrying out harmful, illegal acts. When discussing these areas, they tend to claim a form of the “against the law” perspective emphasizing the ineffectiveness of the law to control crime in any meaningful way through its being “unable to enforce its own judgments” (Ewick and Silbey 1998:199).

An example of this perspective comes in the form of criticism of specific laws – “having
the assault weapon ban, particularly in New York State when other states don't have it ... I don't see where it's done any good” (R140) – as well as the overall concept of state-by-state gun control:

I think [passing specific laws] doesn't do any good because it just, to cross the border in the states from coming from PA or from Ohio or anyplace else, it just doesn't matter. So, what are you going to do? You're just going to create more legislation and more laws to be enforced that won't really give anybody any benefit. Spend our money doing something better. (R298)

More specifically, though, respondents expressed the belief that much of the gun control legislation that gets proposed is ineffective primarily because criminals will not comply:

“Criminals are not going to go, ‘Ugh, they outlawed guns. Now, I have to stop using them in the commission of my crime because that would be illegal’ [laughs]” (R267); “the new regulations have … not hurt the unlawful gun owners, because they're already not following the law, so they're certainly not going to follow the SAFE Act and register their firearms” (R167).

Respondents had special contempt for the seven-round limitation that was initially part of the SAFE Act:

The magazine restrictions are ridiculous … obviously the criminal element doesn’t care a whit what the law says. They don’t care that their magazine holds more than 10 rounds. They’re not going to stop loading at seven. They’re going to load their magazine to full capacity, and they don’t care. (R431)

“I mean, how ridiculous, because anybody who’s going to shoot anything up first of all isn’t going to say ‘well, geez I’m going to go wipe out McDonald’s, I better only put seven rounds in my clip’” (R488).

These accounts lay out the weakness of the law in these situations, and the inequality that it creates. No longer are respondents in a position where they are on a level playing field with
those who hold opposing views on gun laws. Instead, their preferred solutions – such as more jail time, or federal prosecution – have been cast aside in favor of legal mechanisms that respondents feel are largely futile. Worse than that, though, respondents believe that these kinds of laws actually put citizens in a dangerous position because of the threats from criminals whose behavior is largely unchecked by effective lawmaking. Since legal solutions cannot be achieved (at least not in the short term) via the game-like process of legislation, respondents instead find themselves turning to self-help: arming themselves in a form of taking the law into their own hands. There was a strong belief among respondents in the protective power of firearms held by law-abiding citizens. In fact, within the pro-gun community at large there is a general belief that firearms – whether kept in the home, or carried on one’s person – are likely to provide protection from criminal victimization. For some, this belief takes the form of a deterrence argument:

I don’t think we need to be carrying guns all over the place, but I do honestly believe that if there was more gun ownership and more people that were interested in firearms, I really think we’d have less crime because criminals would be afraid of getting shot. (R267)

Some supported their belief in the protective power of firearms by using counter-examples, citing statistics that they felt indicated that reductions in gun ownership have lead to more crime:

And I just looked at her like, “Are you kidding me? Have you looked at the crime statistics? Have you looked at the New York City crime statistics since they started confiscating and moving firearms out of the city? Rapes have gone up over 50%.” Since 2010, I think it was, gone up more than 50% because people aren't being able to protect them anymore. (R167)

Others argued that the phenomenon of deterrence was real, even though it is difficult to document. Speaking about gun-related tragedies, Respondent 169 said:
For the restricted rights of the legal gun owners to own guns, those incidents won’t go down, they’ll increase. How do you document the prevention of the crime or an incident? You can document what happens, but what doesn’t happen because somebody fears there might be another gun owner out there, or something along that line. (R169)

Even those who did not report belief in a direct relationship between guns and crime cited a belief that, at minimum, loose gun laws did not necessarily lead to high crime rates:

The states with the loosest gun laws, Vermont, you can buy a suppressor, machine gun, sawed-off rifle, or whenever you want, you can go in and buy a handgun right off the shelf. You don't see the same types of crimes, and certainly not at the same rate per, per capita. (R240)

Others saw firearms not as having a deterrent effect for society as a whole, but – at minimum – a more focused deterrent effect that would protect those who own guns, and leave non-owners vulnerable. Making an analogy about having armed security guards in schools, Respondent 128 said: “if you've got a big dog at the front door the burglar’s going to pick the other house” (R128). As an offshoot to this argument, though, there was some disagreement about whether identifying oneself as a gun owner would have a net positive or a net negative effect on one’s likelihood of being criminally victimized. While several respondents stated specifically that they try not to publicize their gun ownership status in order to reduce their likelihood of being targeted by thieves, others felt the opposite:

There was a lot of concern about this list of handgun owners being released to the public. I said, “In my opinion, I think everybody on the street should paint a little sign that says, ‘I am a gun owner,’ and the next guy says, ‘Firearms are not allowed on my property.’ Now, at the end of a year, let’s see what happens. Let’s compare notes, and we’ll see how many people break into my house versus breaking into my neighbor’s house.” (R324)

Regardless of the source or nature of these attitudes, however, what it represents is a distrust of current legal systems, and an attitude that the drawbacks of those systems need to be
offset through self-help. Much like Ewick and Silbey’s (1998) respondents, my respondents expressed a range of views about what types of actions might be appropriate in order to respond to the law’s unwillingness to act on their behalf. Some appeared to “believe that they are authorized to do violence by the law’s apparent refusal to act” (201) on their behalf, but – also in keeping with Ewick and Silbey’s approach – most of these objections took the form of “imagining or threatening violence” (201) rather than reports of actually taking the law into one’s own hands. As described in Chapter 3, respondents tended to propose far-fetched scenarios in which the government’s behavior would represent such a threat that they would be forced to respond with violence, such as the few respondents who talked about how the time to act violently would be when the government was coming to “rip [guns] out of my hands” (R267), or when things became “extremely drastic” (R476). These types of responses are the closest that my respondents ever came to espousing a belief similar to that of Fritsvold’s (2009) “under the law,” where they could be interpreted as viewing the law as “a protector and defender of a social order that is fundamentally illegitimate” (799). So while this outlook on the law might be common among militia members, or others with extreme political views, it is clear that they are very uncommon among mainstream gun owners.

Only slightly more common was the reaction that gun owners would simply fail to comply with laws that require them to register their firearms: “You think everybody’s going to turn in their assault rifles and identify? You think they’re going to get rid of their large capacity clips? [scoffs] No way” (R488). Just two respondents reported intentionally breaking the law in the past because they felt that the current legal system did not sufficiently allow for self-protection: one reported carrying a firearm with a large-capacity magazine, and one reported carrying a handgun in a potentially dangerous location where it was not legal to do so. In a more
conceptual realm, another respondent described a hypothetical scenario in which he would feel justified in responding with lethal force to protect his family regardless of whether it was legal for him to do so, and one respondent said he would not comply with laws requiring him to keep firearms unloaded because it would prevent him from protecting himself. Even these reactions were quite limited, though, and expressed by a small minority of respondents. Furthermore, they represent the kind of behavior that is consistent with Ewick and Silbey’s “against the law” typology – perceiving the laws as “a net in which they are trapped and within which they struggle for freedom” (184), but not as a fundamentally unjust force, or one that protects a system that is internally corrupt (a la Fritsvold’s environmental activists).

While all of these instances of self-help – actual or theoretical – represent a minority of respondents, it is important to consider broadly the idea of what being “against the law” is about. Carrying a firearm for protection would be unnecessary if laws had sufficient power and reach that they either prevented criminal behavior before it occurred or allowed police to respond to criminal actions in ways that made civilian intervention unnecessary. Since that is not the case, however, respondents are left with the impression that lapses in the ability of the law to protect them means that they need to carry firearms in order to ensure their own safety. This is not to say that all, or even most, respondents carried guns on a regular basis. However, enough respondents did carry – and enough of them cited protection as a reason for their purchase and ownership of firearms – that it is important not to minimize the importance of this type of reasoning when exploring attitudes about the law. Being “against the law” does not necessarily mean committing illegal actions the same way that it does not always require performing acts of “[f]oot-dragging, omissions, ploys, small deceits, humor and making scenes” (48) that can be common to those who take this perspective. Instead, reactions of this type share the common thread that they
represent “a means of exercising some control in situations in which little opportunity for control exists” (216). This is especially important when exploring gun owners’ attitudes towards legislation that is perceived to result in firearms being taken away from lawful owners. These instances represent respondents’ fears that such legislation represents a potential threat to well-being. Their reactions to these types of laws in particular recall Ewick and Silbey’s (1998) imagery of the myopic giant stumbling about, harming those below more “by its clumsiness and myopia [than] by its rage” (196). By going too far in the effort to restrict and remove firearms from law-abiding citizens, respondents see the law as harming their ability to protect themselves, their families, and their homes, and leaving them with little control over their safety and well-being. (How realistic or likely the scenarios of government confiscation, or successful self-protection, are is another matter. For the current situation, it matters only that respondents see these scenarios as likely enough that it informs their attitudes, and guides their actions.)

Because firearms owners do not appear to trust existing laws to protect them – and because they see little progress on their major preferred anti-crime initiative (increased incarceration) – they seek alternatives for self-protection. In this way, firearms ownership represents not merely a connection to previous generations, or important abstract values, but a means of protecting oneself, and one’s family and property, in the here-and-now. The perception that firearms offer a direct means of protection is a powerful motivator, and certainly one that is likely to promote firearms ownership.

**Government**

When it comes to thinking about the law, firearms owners spend a great deal of their time focusing on legal regulations that constrain their everyday activities. However, as the source of
those regulations, politicians – and government agencies more generally – are also a key concern of firearms owners. This section will explore some aspects of firearms owners’ attitudes and experiences with these groups, and how those experiences inform our understanding of the legal consciousness that has developed.

**Attitudes towards Politicians and the Political System**

With a few notable exceptions, respondents tended to describe their perceptions of the government using the perspective of “with the law.” As noted earlier in this chapter, this perspective tends to see the law not as distant, impartial, and transcendent but rather as something more real and accessible than that. Those who are “with the law” tend to see legality as a rule-based system – like a game – where individuals can affect the outcome through certain types of efforts. Since most respondents operate with this perspective, it is not surprising that they describe the political system in positive terms when it works in accord with these guidelines, and disapprove when it strays from them.

Firearms owners, for example, tend to describe the ideal form of government as one in which politicians follow the desires of their constituency:

If you’re in a public office, you’re running for a public office, you do what the people that elected you want you to do. If 10,000 of your constituents say, “vote against Bill A because we don’t like it,” and 5,000 say “well, it’s really a good bill,” which way are you going? You’re going to go with whoever’s going to put bread on your table. (R320)

Another respondent felt similarly: “If you live out in Montana or something, hunting is their big industry, and where people make all their money, you better not be against hunting or firearm ownership. You're not going to be in office very long. [laughs]” (R345). These attitudes depict
politics as a very simple kind of game, in which the side that has the most voters supporting it wins.

However, even when the system deviates from this game-like structure, respondents still tended to see it as legitimate, provided these deviations do not unfairly affect the outcome of the system. For example, most respondents were aware that pure numbers are not always the deciding factor in political sphere; one respondent praised a local politician for:

[R]ealiz[ing] that the anti-hunters have a better communication network than the hunters do. If there's an anti-hunting bill comes up, even though she gets more letters from anti-hunters than she does from hunters, she still knows that the majority of her constituents are hunters. They just don't bother to make themselves heard. (R476)

Level of response from constituents is just one part of a more complex political reality that may factor into how a politician votes, though, and often other concerns come into play as well:

If it's an election year and I need some of those swing votes from Democrats who are Democrats but aren't necessarily anti-gun, I gotta treat that a little differently. The same way there are some Republicans, you know, have to carefully choose … what stuff they support and not support, so whether or not it passes, it really depends on the political climate. (R240)

This type of behavior is typically not seen as undesirable, per se, but rather as part of the game of politics.

What is seen as undesirable, however, is when votes are cast in a way that is not responding to constituents’ concerns. Such behavior goes against the purpose of the game of politics, where participants can affect the outcome through skilled play. One form of this objection arose among respondents who reported that the goal of government should be to serve the interests of the people, but that the current form of government often was not oriented in this
way. Specifically, respondents objected to scenarios in which politicians use their office to consolidate power rather than serve the needs of the people:

   When you put meaningless laws in place just to make yourself look important: wrong reason. It’s not for the common good, it’s not for the welfare of others, you’re just trying to promote yourself. That’s never a good reason in political office to be doing that, though it does tend to be the norm. (R441)

Another argued that, “when you make decisions based on political interests rather than on common sense, and the will and the good of the people, you make rules that don’t make sense” (R488). These objections tend to center around a kind of violation of the rules of the game. Rather than representing an ideal form of government (where the side with the most power will win, and the outcome is unbiased by external factors) these respondents feel that politicians are acting in service of goals other than meeting the needs of their constituents – goals that constituents may have no power to alter or change. (This sentiment seems at odds with the support of the powerful, and well funded, lobbying efforts of the NRA. Later in this chapter, I will explore how respondents perceive the NRA to generally be in line with their goals, and see the NRA’s monetary and lobbying influence as a legitimate part of the political game.)

   The most significant objection of this type came from those who perceived politicians as seeking to use their influence simply to remain in power, or to cultivate greater personal influence, without any benefit to their constituents. However, it is important to note that the accumulation of power by itself is not inherently negative – the influence of a powerful politician, after all, is one resource that exists within the political game, and which skilled practitioners can use to their advantage. Where the problem with power arises, though, is when politicians are perceived as peddling influence in order to further their political careers, or
otherwise completely giving up control over some or all of their voting powers to groups other than their constituents.

One respondent described hearing from a politician how the political system works:

You want me to vote for your thing? You got to vote for my thing. You don’t vote for my thing? I’m not voting for your thing, and it ain’t going nowhere … You could write the greatest piece of legislation in the history of the United States. It would benefit everybody in the country, and it’s not going anywhere unless you scratch somebody else’s back because that’s how it works. (R267)

Others agreed that, generally speaking, politicians could be influenced by powerful others within the political process: “I don't think the senators or assemblymen voice the opinions of their constituents when it comes to gun ownership. I think they look at studies and they get influenced by other senators, other politicians, and they vote that way” (R140). Some even see this in an ominous light, suggesting that even those who appear to have risen to power on their own might have some unseen backers who could step in and begin expressing demands:

How does a guy get to be governor without owing favors? It doesn’t happen. You’ve got to owe favors. You owe favors to somebody. Now that guy comes back and says, “I got you into office. Are you going to get this done?” “I can’t. That’s not right.” … Can you see him saying that? No. That ain’t going to happen. (R324)

Still others see political power as an all-or-nothing game, where a more powerful politician can simply dominate less powerful ones, in certain circumstances. When asked about how the SAFE Act passed, one respondent described it this way:

The Governor sat down with his cronies and said, “We're going to do this.” From what I understand it was you either vote for this, or you don't leave until you do … I know there’s some of our erstwhile politicians out there who disagree with their boss, the Governor, about the whole thing, but they've obviously not got enough power or enough support to challenge him on it. (R101)
These quotes illustrate an important conflict within the understanding of how my respondents perceive the game of politics. Respondents are aware that they will not always get what they want from politicians – others who play the game more effectively, or who have more resources, may succeed in winning a politician’s support, or getting their legislative agenda passed. However, there are several attributes that affect whether such influence is likely to be seen as legitimate; specifically, influence is more likely to be seen as legitimate when it is predictable, transparent, and subject to accountability. If a particular type of influence is seen as violating one or more of these principles, it will be seen as less legitimate. In the quotes above, for example, respondents report disliking commitments to shadowy power brokers because the goals of such individuals are unknown, the extent of their influence is unclear, and there is no way to curb or moderate their influence on individual politicians, or the political process more broadly. Even in the case of perceived influence by the governor – whose power is ultimately subject to voters’ accountability – his ability to step in and force politicians to vote his way on the SAFE Act is both unpredictable (in that he does not exercise it every time for every piece of proposed legislation), and non-transparent (in that it is not clear exactly what he threatened, or promised, to sway politicians’ votes).

The interplay among these attributes can be seen in other areas of respondents’ experience with government, such as their opinions about the influence of money in politics. In some ways, money is a perfect example of a resource that can be used equally by both sides in the political game – post-Citizens United, people and groups are allowed to give essentially as much financial support as they want to support or oppose candidates or issues. In this way, money is a kind of proxy that helps powerful groups to turn their superior resources into political
victories, and groups that enjoy the most support will tend to be the ones that prevail in the political arena.

In keeping with this general template, respondents tended to indicate that – when used properly – money is one part of the equation that can lead to influence in politics. As an example, they tended to equate the power of the NRA at least partially to its monetary resources, and indicated that this was acceptable provided that the money was used in service of achieving the political ends of those who had given it:

Overall I think [the NRA is] the strongest lobby for a reason. I think what better way to- I mean we’re playing the game too in so far as- we have dollars. It’s $20 here, $20 there, but if you got 4 million members or whatever, that’s a vote. You’re voting with your checkbook, right? … They wouldn’t be as powerful as they are if people didn’t really think that was needed. (R220)

Respondents also acknowledged that the use of money was a legitimate tactic that their political opponents could use as well – one respondent attributed the push for anti-gun legislation from downstate legislators as partially due to the fact that “Bloomberg got a lot of money and he spends it and he's been pushing an anti-gun agenda for years” (R113).

However, although they acknowledged its use as a legitimate political technique, respondents were not entirely comfortable with the power that money holds in our system. For example, in almost the same breath, one respondent acknowledged the influence that money had as part of the political system, and then immediately lamented that influence: “I know the NRA is a big supporter. I mean, they contribute a lot of money to the political elections. Then again, so does PETA [laughs] so what are you gonna do? Who has the most money wins, I guess, unfortunately” (R201). Another respondent agreed, suggesting that money to buy lobbyists was
simply part of being an influential group. When asked about why government agencies sometimes make the wrong decisions about firearms issues, Respondent 169 said:

R169: It’s who they listen to, who they hear- from a perspective of a hunter and a sportsman, we don’t have the money or we don’t have the citizens that perceive a problem where they’re involved enough to speak up for a sport or a group opposed to it. Maybe a little bit better organized or maybe getting more money into it where they go out and they have hired advocates who speak for them. [describes conservation group where he’s an officer]. We don’t have a paid lobbyist. We work from the volunteer aspect. But you take some other organizations, the [larger conservation group], which has a purpose but I think just seems to go beyond it – a paid staff, a large- it’s an NGO and it has the resources to move in the direction they want to go, but I just think they’re misguided.

ZM: But it takes that kind of money, it takes that kind of dedicated people to have influence within these government agencies?
R169: Unfortunately yes.

One reason for this reticence is money’s affront to the values of predictability, transparency, and accountability. Some respondents saw money as a mildly distasteful, but perhaps necessary, component of modern political negotiations: “certainly you can look at it in budget deals and everything else. It’s the same way. Everybody gets their little piece in there, but the general good is done and all this other pork barrel stuff goes in too” (R420). In this case, the addition of pork-barrel projects to please other politicians is somewhat problematic, but expected and straightforward, and therefore the respondent’s disapproval is limited. Where disapproval increases, however, is when more of these foundational values are violated. For example, the same respondent who previously praised the ability to vote with your checkbook also asserted that the ideal form of government is one made up of people who “got in to serve” and “so the more local you get, the less the money kind of tends to corrupt type thing” (R220). He contrasted the local level of politics with the national level where “It’s a special interest, the lobbying, and, ‘How can I do another term?’ and- Yeah, I really don’t have much faith in our congress, I guess” (R220). Another respondent agreed with this sentiment, highlighting money’s influence as
negative because of the way it alters the rules of the political game: “I think we’ve gotten away from the people who founded this country having a real value interest in the country versus value interest in their own pockets” (R324). Still others agreed, arguing that direct payments clearly alter whose interests will be represented when money is allowed to have influence over political votes:

R320: Well, you know, I’m not a real political person so I can’t tell you how lobbyists works but I’m sure that there’s an awful lot that goes on there that you and I or anyone else will never know about. How do you convince somebody that’s dead set against something to suddenly change their- do a 180? I’m just asking a question. [laughs] And that happens a lot.
ZM: You think they’re paying people?
R320: Of course, of course, yeah.

And even those who do not believe that direct payments are being made to candidates express viewpoints that money equates to political influence:

[Politicians] have a job basically and they have to be beholdling to somebody. They're beholdling to the party bosses because they control the money, and who controls the money controls the program. They have no choice. I've often felt that the politicians are nothing but like figureheads. They don't control the country, it's the money that does, the big money (R235)

In all of these cases, objections to the power of money arise when its effects alter the game-like nature of the political process (e.g., the money comes from shady sources, or causes politicians to stop being influenced by their constituents’ opinions and instead by the funding source). When this happens, respondents’ objections are based on the fact that their “with the law”-type expectations of a moderately level playing field are not being realized. When this realization is made, some respondents begin drifting further towards a position of “against the law.” They are especially likely to support this perspective if they– as voters, who believe they
are supposed to have the power to influence legislation – instead perceive they have decidedly “limited access to resources that might otherwise be converted into power within the situation” (185).

Another area where respondents expressed misgivings – and found themselves on the border of being “against the law” – was when they discussed how politicians went about gaining the support of respondents, and whether they did so in an honest, straightforward way or not. This topic was important to respondents because they use politicians’ statements as a way of judging their stance on policies, and determining whether to support them for office or not. However, this process is tricky because, in some circumstances, respondents indicate that they feel they cannot trust that what politicians say and do represents their real opinion, or a sincere belief of any kind. Instead, respondents fear that politicians will represent themselves differently to different individuals or groups in order to gain influence illegitimately (i.e. – not because of their actual politics, but because of a misrepresentation of their politics) as well as manipulating their stance through the use of “spin,” bending the truth, or outright lying. Such behavior is regarded as dishonest largely because it violates the rules of the game in which constituents make decisions about supporting politicians based upon the information that is available to them. If some of that information – in this case, politicians’ statements – is manufactured or tainted in some way, the integrity of the process is similarly affected. (This attitude can also be seen as one part of respondents’ larger objection to a system in which politicians may be influenced by factors other than constituents’ opinions.)

There were three related, but distinct, forms of deception that respondents found objectionable in their dealings with politicians. The first type was akin to something like “spin” or political maneuvering to alter the perception of a known fact in some way. Respondents
disliked, for example, when politicians who were perceived to be anti-gun would make public appearances by going hunting, or fishing, or otherwise trying to manipulate their image in the public eye. Such actions are perceived as disingenuous, but more futile (and, at times, humorous) than they are effectively duplicitous. However, the most negative reaction to an action of this type came from someone who believed that this kind of approach was likely to succeed. This objection came from a respondent who received what he perceived to be a canned response letter from Chuck Schumer saying that the Senator was pro-Second Amendment:

> And he wrote that. He wrote it … this guy has never voted on a pro-Second Amendment in his life, but he’s got the audacity to say that … and he’s got the gumption to think that I’m going to believe him. He’s going to write this and think– who does he think I am? At least, if he said, “Listen, you stupid son of a bitch, I’m not– you shouldn’t have guns.” Okay, that’s where the guy stands. No, he’s playing this numbers game. ‘Maybe they will believe me if I lie to them. Maybe they won’t see that I have got my face plastered over, on every bill that has anti-gun on it, has got my name under it. Maybe he won’t see it. Maybe they never read the paper.’ There’s probably a lot of people who don’t. (R324)

This respondent reacts negatively to the incident partially because he perceives that he’s being lied to, but more so because he fears that this tactic – playing a “numbers game” – may pay off and gain some votes. To this well-informed voter, then, the politician’s actions are not harmful because the attempt to deceive is obvious and will not have any effect on his ability to decide whether to support that politician or not. Where that behavior becomes dangerous, however, is in the case of a theoretical uninformed voter who is not savvy enough to see the truth of the actions. For that voter, the transparency of the actions is very low, and there is no way for such politicians to be held accountable for their actions until after the duplicitous actions have had their desired effect (e.g., garnered a vote). For that reason, this type of behavior is seen as a violation of the rules of the game.

The second type of lying is strategic situational lying, in which a politician is perceived to
be saying different things to different individuals, or groups, with the end goal of securing those people’s support through not telling the truth. Respondents disliked this practice because it typically involved a complete misrepresentation of the politician’s position, and therefore affected the ability of the public to know their real position on an issue and how they would vote on it. Respondents described this type of lying by saying:

I think people in government are going to say whatever is most convenient for them to say at the moment. If they’re talking to me and they know that’s how I feel about it, yes they will say that. If they’re talking to gun control advocates, they might have a different slant on it at that point in time. Because politicians say what politicians say … Politicians are not people you can put any faith in what they say. (R441)

In a more specific case another respondent, who had some critical views on the NRA and firearms ownership, was put off when a politician responded to him as if he were merely a stereotypical gun owner:

“Oh, I'm a big supporter of the NRA, yadda yadda yadda.” You know what? I guess, maybe we're kinda good at reading people but I could just see he was just playing us up … all he's giving you is answers back because he knows that he wants to make sure that he doesn't disagree with you … I looked at that going, “y'know what? You're just, you're just looking for a vote.” That's not a good thing. (R298)

Generally speaking, respondents identified this type of lying as being a case of politicians simply saying what their audience wants to hear (R235; R167). This type of lying was perceived more negatively than the first because its use is more pervasive and potentially more effective. In most cases, politicians were not necessarily working from a known fact and attempting to change the public perception of that fact, but were instead trying to sell audiences a wholesale bill of goods by completely concealing their real position. This type of lying was seen as worse for the same reasons as the previous kind, but with the addition of a lack of predictability: even if a politician
says something that a voter agrees with, that voter has no idea whether those statements are accurate or whether they are merely lies intended to secure a vote.

The final type of lying – agenda-based lying – is something of a combination of the first two, but with a different motivation. Specifically, respondents reported distrust of politicians whose actions are deemed to be in the service of achieving some larger goal separate from their stated goal. This type of criticism was leveled most often at New York governor Andrew Cuomo whose actions were perceived by some to be political jockeying in order to set up a run for president. This type of lying certainly involved “spinning” certain scenarios, as well as misrepresenting oneself to various groups of people, but in many ways it involved a deeper kind of misdirection than either one separately. Rather than simply saying something different to two groups of people, Cuomo was perceived by respondents as co-opting an entire movement to establish himself as a strong political figure:

Cuomo, all he’s looking for is he wants to know exactly what do I think is going to help my political career? “Look at this New York State, I’m a leader. We passed more stringent gun laws than the nation did. I can do this.” He’ll run on that if he tries to run for president, if Hillary’s not in there. And he’s going to say, “look what I did in New York State, I can do that for the nation.” (R488)

When discussing why Cuomo supported the SAFE Act when there was such opposition against it from upstate counties, Respondent 220 said:

What does that tell you? If you got [Cuomo] going to do this thing, it looks like an agenda. I mean why would he do that? It’s like a political ploy for his own presidency run, or he just wants to kowtow to people in New York City and say, “You’re safe. We’re going to keep you safe. Leave it up to us” (R220)

This type of lying is potentially more serious than the others because, in addition to lacking transparency, it is also especially unpredictable and lacking in accountability. Unpredictability is
high because the politicians may be attempting to appeal to completely different groups than usual, and so their previous actions may have little or no predictive power as to how they will act in the future. And accountability is low because the politician with larger ambitions may no longer be attempting to please local voters, but may be appealing to a completely different audience. In the case of Cuomo, who is perceived as having national political ambitions, as he seeks to be evaluated by a larger audience than just New Yorkers, his actions correspond less with local needs, and so his place in the political game becomes harder to understand and predict. (Additionally, his actions may become harder to predict because he becomes less available for questioning. One respondent described Cuomo in contrast to local politicians who are available to interact with voters: “They’re willing to talk and to listen. Cuomo, he’s got his front men out there and he’s only going to answer the questions that he wants to answer” (R488).)

In general, then, gun owners tend to take a “with the law” perspective, and see politics as a game-like process where those with the most influence get favorable outcomes. And for the most part, they approve of politics taking that form. Where they become disillusioned with politics, however, is when the game is altered in ways they have no control over. They disapprove of a system where the rules are no longer clear, and the traditional means of affecting the outcome of the game either change significantly, or are made obsolete by the actions of others. Examples of this include when the rules of the game are altered by outside influences (e.g., external funders), or when politicians do not play the role that is expected of them (i.e. – being a neutral representative of their constituents, entering the field with an interest in serving the public good, etc.) and instead seek to benefit financially from their position, or bow to improper influences. When these types of situations occur they alter the predictability, transparency, and accountability of the system, leading gun owners to lean more towards the
“against the law” perspective.

Representation / Upstate vs. Downstate

As Silbey (2005) noted in an article clarifying the ideal reach and scope of the theory of legal consciousness, in order for an analysis of the theory to be complete, research must not stop at merely identifying at the micro-level what types of reactions people have to various legal situations. Instead, it needs to move beyond that and “search for the forms of participation and interpretation through which actors construct, sustain, reproduce, or amend the circulating (contested or hegemonic) structures of meanings concerning law” (334). This section takes a step in that direction, exploring how the larger legal and cultural situation in which upstate gun owners find themselves helps create and maintain certain attitudes that were commonly reported by respondents. As Hoffman (2003) noted, “the environment of an institution” (715) helps determine what kind of legal consciousness its members will have. That can also be true of individuals enmeshed within a given political structure – the qualities of the interactions they have with political actors (including politicians, as well as other voters, and politically active parties) will affect how they view their position within that structure. Closely examining these factors will hopefully help meet Silbey’s (2005) call to explore the “gap between laws on the books and law in action” (360).

In the case of my respondents, some of the most important political and cultural distinctions they identified in their interviews were the differences between upstate and downstate New York. (It should be noted that the specifics of what was defined as “downstate” varied from person to person. Some defined it as narrowly as just New York City, but most respondents also included Long Island as well, and some included additional counties close to
New York City such as Orange and Westchester. Some defined “downstate” even more broadly, arguing that it encompasses all of the area east of Binghamton and south of Albany. For the purposes of this section, a generally acceptable definition would probably include at least New York City and Long Island.)

One major topic that respondents raised repeatedly is that the downstate area was a worse place to be a gun owner than upstate New York. They cited a number of different reasons for this with more restrictive laws being a primary concern. Respondents noted that New York City honors only city-issued firearms permits and does not recognize permits issued elsewhere in the state (R128), as well as expressing the viewpoint that traveling to and through the region with firearms may be more difficult (R320). Respondent 167 described downstate as, “the areas that have the more restricted firearms laws. And they're currently confiscating firearms” (R167).

Perhaps even more problematic for respondents, however, was that the legal restrictions common in this geographical area cause firearms to be viewed differently than in upstate. One common theme respondents brought up was that people who are raised in these areas do not have opportunities to be exposed to firearms and so they have little interest in them. This was especially true of hunting, as one respondent noted:

There’s no place to go hunt downstate really. You might be able to get a permit to, say, some of the parks down there or something like that. But if you can’t there isn’t really any place, unless you can go to a preserve of some kind, which I’m not sure there’s really any of those downstate anymore either. There’s just limited opportunities. (R441)

Another respondent agreed, describing how a lack of a hunting culture could have evolved:

I think in this area, people grow up with it. It’s part of their life. Either somebody in their family, or somebody in their immediate family, or uncle, or aunts, or whoever hunt, and they’re around it. I think if you get down to New Jersey, Long Island area, down there, you ask them, they’re: “None of us do it.” I think it’s the area that you’re in. (R138)
Others talked about how downstaters simply “don’t get it” (R262) when hunting is brought up, partially because the hunting options there are “very, very limited” (R320).

In addition to the limited hunting opportunities, respondents also viewed gun culture in general as less influential in downstate areas. Respondent 431 described the source of the difference as being “less access. If you grow up where you can’t shoot guns and you don’t own one, you probably do have a completely different perception of where things are going. A lot of that is your fear of the unknown too. You haven’t been educated on safety or what happens” (R431). Respondent 262 described the quality of being a gun owner as being different downstate than upstate: “Are you a gun owner? What does that mean? Yes. I have guns, but it's not the same as being on Long Island and being a gun owner. It's a different thing” (R262). Many respondents were at least somewhat sympathetic to these differences, acknowledging that the conditions in which people are raised strongly shape their attitudes about firearms:

Unless it’s your parents or something like that, you’re just not going to develop that interest. It’s not as readily available. Whereas up here, almost everybody I know owns a gun and the few people I know that don’t own a gun certainly know people that do own guns. (R431)

Even one person who was critical of downstate attitudes acknowledged that location and personal experiences drove most of the attitudes there: “Most of the people that have lived there all their lives, with a few exceptions, probably buy into it. ‘Cause they haven't known anything different.” He later concluded, “They really haven't known anything different. It's always been like that down there” (R113). One respondent described people with anti-gun attitudes as simply “misinformed,” noting that the “limited opportunities” to shoot had left the gun culture in the region “atrophied” (R441). One especially neutral respondent summed up the residents of the
two areas by saying, “they don’t have the same interests because they were brought up differently. Not that one is right or wrong, it’s just you were brought up in a total different way” (R488).

In acknowledging the differences between rural and urban areas some respondents cited the level of crime and availability of police as something that would affect attitudes about firearms: “in New York City, a cop is two minutes away, and here it could be two hours before help arrives. I think it’s a big urban versus rural attitude disparity” (R431). Another respondent agreed, noting that gun control may be popular among “people down in the City who are getting mugged by people with guns” (R362) or in an area where “[e]verybody's door has got 8 or 10 locks” (R235).

These attitudes about upstate and downstate were sometimes extended to politicians as well. Respondents tended to question whether the politicians who failed to support gun rights might be doing so out of a simple lack of knowledge of the issues at hand. As one respondent put it: “They understand it if you got people who grew up in New York City, what the hell do they know? They probably never even shot a gun. All they know is what they see on TV or in the movies” (R488). Others cited specific instances where politicians were unaware of key aspects of the firearms they were seeking to regulate, such as the fact that ammunition magazines are reusable (R420), that Civil War-era guns could still be dangerous (R128), or that waterfowl cannot efficiently be hunted with rifles (R167). Often these lapses in understanding were used to highlight the fact that the people who were casting votes about certain regulations might not fully understand what they were voting on. And while some attributed these lapses in knowledge to simply being brought up in a different type of environment – “most politicians today, they're lawyers. [laughs] Most of them have spent no time in the woods, no times on the firing range.
They really have no interest in guns, don't see much value in guns, don't see the history of guns, not too concerned about how it played a part in America” (R362) – understanding the source of these different viewpoints does little to offset respondents’ generally negative perceptions about the effect that such views have on the laws of New York State. Respondents perceived that “New York City and Long Island are dictating how we live our lives up here” (R431). The source of this disparity, as described earlier in the chapter, is perceived to be the large population of anti-gun voters in the New York City area. Some people describe this influence as purely numerical: “They go by the numbers, and if they get a big influx, out of the New York City, Long Island area against things, it kind of hampers us up here” (R251). Others described downstate as simply “having a louder voice” (R240) than upstate. Respondents with these views tend to utilize more of a traditional game-like view of politics where the group with the most influence wins.

However, when discussing this issue, respondents seem to object not simply because their views are not numerically more influential, but also because the rules of the political game are unfair since the political system that is meant to serve everyone is instead perceived to be serving the needs of just one group. For example, one respondent describes how when restrictive gun laws have been passed it is because “a lot of laws are coming out of and for … New York City … They didn't take into account for the state of New York, they took account of the state of New York City” (R332). Another agrees, saying, “All this goofy anti-gun legislation … is basically coming out of New York City and the surrounding ‘burbs. It's not coming from any of the upstate legislators … it's all being sponsored by downstate” (R113). And while some argue that the current legislation may be in keeping with downstate voters’ needs, others dispute even that:

As you get closer to New York City there's a whole different set of things and guidelines. I understand that it's still part of New York State. But I don't know that they're any better off by having some of the gun laws that they have in the city. (R128)
For some respondents, the solution to this situation is to return the political game to a more basic condition. The generic model of politics-as-game implies that the players in a given political sphere share key attributes (geographic location, types of needs, etc.), and argue over the same issues, creating a system where the groups that can gather the most support for their causes achieve victory. However, in the case of upstate and downstate, some respondents argue that there are such different needs when it comes to firearms that it is almost as if they are no longer playing the game on a level playing field. Instead, one side’s sphere of influence is so much larger than the other’s that – but for the times when checks and balances come into play – the victory of the more powerful side is a foregone conclusion. This runs directly counter to Ewick and Silbey’s (1998) conception of a “with the law” orientation because the most important attribute of a game is that it is “designed with degrees of freedom around which outcomes are produced but not predetermined” (136). Some respondents feel so strongly that the game they are playing is rigged that they argue “New York City ought to be its own state because they have got their own way of doing things, and their own ideas” (R324). Another concurs, suggesting that “[i]f we didn't have New York City to contend with, it would probably be a pretty darn good state” (R235). In this scenario, politicians would not need to “kowtow to people in New York City” (R220) and people living elsewhere would not be “impacted by what happens to the south” (R262), but could set its own agenda in line with the needs of their geographical area. While none of these proposals to separate the two halves of the state were intended as serious proposals, the message behind the criticisms is nevertheless quite revealing.

The feeling of being outnumbered is, of course, more than purely numerical; the way in which this advantage manifests itself in New York State politics is through the interactions of the
Assembly and the Senate. The New York State Assembly is a 150-seat proportionally representative body where the Democratic Party holds 102 seats, and has held a majority since 1975 (Gianaris 2006). The New York State Senate, on the other hand, has just 63 seats (New York State Senate n.d.) and is apportioned in such a way that the upstate counties have much greater representation than they do in the Assembly. As a result, the makeup of this body is much more contested than the Assembly, with each election – as well as changes in political power, such as resignations (Weaver 2015b), indictments (Greenblatt 2015), or changing political alignments (Peters and Hakim 2009) – potentially shifting which party will be in power.

As of June 2016, Republicans hold just 31 seats, but still maintain a hold on the majority because one democrat – Simcha Felder from Brooklyn – caucuses with the Republicans (McKinley 2016). For the Republicans, most of their caucus comes from upstate counties, though a significant minority comes from Long Island. The bulk of the Democrats, on the other hand, are from New York City. This indicates that, at least in broad brushstrokes, respondents’ perceptions of the nature of their elected representatives are accurate: most of the support for the pro-gun position comes from upstate representatives, and most of the anti-gun sentiment comes from downstate representatives. (Though it should be noted that respondents described how some upstate Democrats have supported pro-gun bills in the past.)

As a result of this situation, respondents find their understanding of the legislative process being shaped by the political realities they see around them. Respondent 279 describes how the political process has worked in recent years:

The New York State Senate is pro-gun enough that the Senate is usually able to negate most of the stuff that the anti-gun Assembly comes up with. And again, the reason that the Assembly seems to be more anti-gun than the Senate is because the state Senate is divided into representatives per area of the state as opposed to the state Assembly which is based on representatives per, per numbers of the population. So, because of that, with
New York City metropolitan area having 9 million people, and the rest of the state only having 3 or 4 million people, the state Assembly has a lot of anti-gun people in it. But we keep working on that! [Laughs]. (R279)

This respondent describes a situation where it is unlikely for those with pro-gun attitudes to be able to succeed by proactively pushing their own agenda on the state level. Instead, the best they can do is try to defeat legislation with which they disagree. This tactic works moderately well most of the time, but with such a slim margin in the Senate, it is still possible for high-profile legislation – such as the SAFE Act – to be enacted into law, as these respondents recount:

R432: … like you said, as the demographics swing to the cities, it’ll become increasingly so that we’re not represented.
R431: Every upstate- not every, but as far as like the Senate, every upstate senator voted against the SAFE Act, but we’re outnumbered.
R432: It went through anyhow.

If state-level politics are a game for gun owners, it is one in which they perceive their contest rarely takes place on a level playing field. New York politics in this case are unlikely to be thought of as representing an Ewick-and-Silbey style contest among equals, where both sides marshal their resources to gain a potential victory. Instead, it may be more akin to a game that can end either in victory for the away team, or a draw, but never a victory for the home team. Or, in political terms, gun owners perceive that they can never achieve their own agenda, they can only fail to prevent the passage of their opponents’ agenda. With this perspective, it becomes even clearer why gun owners reacted negatively when they felt that the rules of the game were shifted even further by the passage of the SAFE Act using the message of necessity. In that instance, a system that was already perceived to be unfair was further altered by employing a temporary rule change that prevented gun owners from being able to utilize one of their major strategies for preventing the passage of gun laws: getting out the word to their constituents in
order to influence the votes of upstate senators. (Respondents also objected to the SAFE Act’s composition of a few law changes that had universal appeal – such as increased penalties for those who murder first responders – along with the more controversial measures. They felt that this composition provided political cover for politicians to claim that they were voting only for the good portions of the act, and not the portions that voters disliked. However, this objection can in some ways be seen as a subset of the objection to the swift passage of the bill because if additional debate had been allowed there might have been room for negotiations to occur that would have separated the measures, or at least allowed constituents to more fully express their opinions about the existing form of the Act.)

Although this feeling can be seen most clearly in the case of the SAFE Act, it is not the only indicator of the types of legal consciousness that exist within the gun ownership community. As Ewick and Silbey (1998) note, legal consciousness is “variable, locally shaped and situated” (46), and Wilson (2000) agrees, describing how previous legal experiences can affect one’s current views the law because it “is experientially rooted” and “new experiences can change one’s consciousness” (479-480). This is absolutely true for my respondents, who have developed a clear understanding about their general powerlessness within the system they inhabit. When asked key questions relevant to legal consciousness – such as if they chose to contact government officials and, if so, what effect they felt that those interactions had – their responses indicated how they had been shaped by their political experiences.

First of all, despite gun ownership’s clear relationship to law and legal processes, only a small number of respondents said that they ever even contacted their representatives to discuss firearms issues, and even fewer did so regularly. When asked to explore the reasons for this, they tended to respond by saying that they were “busy” (R140), or do not get involved with politics
(R448; R262), or that there were no issues they cared enough about – or were relevant enough to their lives – to get involved with (R117; R227; R242; R181). Some responded that they used to get involved, but do not anymore, or that they got involved once with a single issue but have not gotten involved since then (R297; R362). Even the few respondents who did report having contacted government officials mostly referred to contacting lower-level politicians rather than those at the national level. This makes sense, though, in a system where higher-level figures – the governor and national Representatives/Senators – are perceived as being selected by a process over which people in your group have little influence.

For those who do not simply drop out of the political system, there is a very interesting reaction that emerges. Instead of disengaging from politics altogether, some respondents appeared to engage largely in arenas – and through the use of methods – that approximate the type of political system they would prefer to be a part of. One example of this that appeared quite frequently was a greater satisfaction with local politicians and those with whom more immediate, traditional communication methods (such as face-to-face meetings) could be used. In these types of interactions, respondents tended to feel that this personal contact lead to a number of benefits, most having to do with creating a more effective connection between themselves and the politician. For example, Respondent 201 noted that – after the completion of her interview – she was going to volunteer at a local politician’s office:

I’m going to do a couple of hours on the phone bank. Why? Because I like her stance on conservation laws and gun laws, and so I’m willing to put some time in to help for reelection. I also know that if there’s something that comes up, I’ll be able to write to her and … she might look at it a little bit more closely. (R201)

By acting locally, and making a personal connection with this politician, the respondent anticipates that her concerns will be given greater weight than if she was just another voter
writing to ask for something. In a similar vein, Respondent 488 highlights the commonalities one has with local politicians:

George Maziarz, Senator Maziarz … he lives out in Wilson. People hunt there. I know the man! I know his brothers. They all grew up here they all hunted and everything. They understand it. If you got people who grew up in New York City what the, hell do they know? They probably never even shot a gun. (R488)

Respondents saw a number of other positive aspects of face-to-face meetings: this type of communication allowed them to maintain existing relationships with valued political allies (R113), cultivate knowledge of their positions among politicians with whom they had no previous contact (R320), challenge those who were perceived to have wronged them in the past (R441), and attempt to keep their political agenda in the front of politicians’ minds (R169).

Face-to-face meetings are not only for when things go well, though. One respondent talked about expressing his displeasure to Senator Valesky (an upstate Democratic senator who is perceived by many gun owners as having a good record of voting pro-gun until he voted for the SAFE Act):

ZM: Hmm. So, in upstate, do you think politicians end up on your side and understand..
R167: Most of them. [Al] Stirpe’s not. He's- Valesky's always been, but he threw us under the bus on this one.
ZM: Yeah I've that from a couple of people, why do you think- what changed, do you think?
R167: I don't know. But he got an earful from me.
ZM: So you've contacted people about these kind of issues?
R167: [nods] And I talked to him personally.

The respondent’s clarification that he “talked to him personally” indicates that this is the more serious, more direct way of doing things, and it is the method that is required when a message needs to be conveyed strongly.
Some respondents were so committed to this approach that they carried over their preference for “with the law”-style tactics even beyond the areas where it seemed like they would be most effective. For example, one respondent expressed a belief that meeting a politician face-to-face – even one who seems unsympathetic to your views – would improve things:

Senator Charles Schumer. He seems like one of the senators that always get on the bandwagon for anti-gun. Any time the slightest little issue comes up he seems to chime in. I'd like to have the opportunity to sit down and question some of them sometime and see why, and where they're actually coming from, where their information is coming from. (R140)

Other respondents, though, were less optimistic about the effectiveness of face-to-face communication. One respondent affirmed the power of face-to-face communication at the local level, while simultaneously acknowledging its limitations in higher-level politics:

I know if I sat down with our governor, I probably wouldn't get far with him, no matter what I said and how many facts I showed him about legal gun owners not committing crimes, and that the majority of the crimes are committed by criminals against criminals, that probably has no concern to him about our gun laws. I'm sure that would go in one ear and out the other. But my local representatives who count on my vote, and they know who I am and I know who they are, and they see me at a regular basis at these different functions and things. I might have more persuasion with something like that. You got to do that at the local level. (R362)

And one obvious drawback of face-to-face communication is that it can only be effective with people who will agree to such a meeting:

ZM: So maybe if they could hear it directly from you it would be more effective, but ...
R420: I don’t know how you do that unless you actually go down to Albany. I don’t care who you are. Other than maybe- you’d have to be at a high enough level. I’m not even sure that someone like, maybe the president of the New York State Conservation Council, I’m not sure even they would get in to see Cuomo.
By way of contrast, it is instructive to examine respondents’ views on other methods of communication, and how their perceptions of those methods fit with a “with the law” approach. In general, respondents reported feeling disconnected from, and sometimes distrustful of, other types of political communications. Respondent 324 reported feeling unsure if contacting Senator Chuck Schumer by mail has any effect at all:

I’m sure an aide’s aide answers the letters, and somebody in there probably answers the telephone … maybe they write a compilation at the end of the month and say, “We got 300 for and 300 against” or whatever. Who knows? Maybe they don’t even keep track because he says, ‘I don’t want to hear anything from these guys. Only let me know the other side.’ I don’t know what goes on, I really don’t. Like I say, I don’t trust a politician. There isn’t one of them I trust. (R324)

Respondent 138 describes a similar uncertainty after making a phone call to a politician, saying that the only way to tell if your call had any effect was when: “you find out how they voted after they vote, but you have no idea … what kind of response they got from it. And whether I guess that phone call made any difference in their opinion on how they voted” (R138). Still another respondent described how an aide hung up on him when he called the office expressing an opinion counter to that of the senator:

He is my senator and I want him to know that … I am not in favor of this. They wouldn't even listen. … Just click. “What are you calling about?” I tell them. “Nope.” Click. That was it. Hung up. Tried to dial back for half an hour and got nothing but a busy signal. (R251)

Based on these comments, it is clear that one aspect of what bothers the respondents about non-face-to-face communication is that it occupies an uncertain place within the rules of the political system. As noted above, respondents believe in a political system where various types of influence – monetary contributions, political power, voters expressing their viewpoints –
can affect how a politician votes. Respondents become uncomfortable, then, when the connections among those things are unclear. One manifestation of this is that they dislike engaging in types of communication where it is not clear if what they say has any impact at all on the political outcome they are concerned about.

Also, it is clear that this aspect of my respondents’ legal consciousness developed based on the environment in which the interactions occurred, because respondents report having different standards for different types of politicians. Respondent 378, for example, reported that a low level of interaction is expected from national level politicians (along with a concurrent low level of impact from expressing one’s viewpoint), but that more is expected of local politicians:

R378: If you go federal, you don’t -- they usually send you a letter or email or something and say, “Oh thank you.” Do what they want to do anyway.
Z: So at the national level it’s just kind of, do whatever. At the state level, it’s a little bit more responsive.
R378: Well yeah I mean, you know, when you’re a politician, you have to kind of do what the people want you to do, and when you get to higher levels, you have so many more people involved. So I mean, they say, “thank you” and they vote the way they’re going to vote, whatever it was they feel will keep them in office.

This position is given additional credence by Respondent 174’s frustration following an impersonal interaction he had with a local politician, from whom he expected more:

ZM: Have you ever contacted your representative about your opinions on firearms rights and stuff?
R174: Yes.
ZM: What kind of response did you ...
R174: Form letters.
ZM: Yeah?
R174: Both sides, form letters … The pro and the gun- Like, DeFrancisco, who voted against it. Both sides, you get form letters.
ZM: Is that a sufficient kind of response?
R174: No. Would it be for you? You type your local legislator and ask him, "I see you voted against this. What's our next step to fight it?" And you get a form letter that has nothing to do with it. How personal is that?
From the respondent’s perspective, the act of contacting a local person should take place within the frame of reference he has developed for local politicians – where they are more available, more persuadable, and have more satisfying types of communications with constituents. So, when this politician’s means of response was more similar to that of a different kind of politician, the respondent reacted negatively as a result.

**Summary**

Taking all of these governmental issues into consideration, the overall picture that emerges is complex, but one that fits well with our understanding of legal consciousness, as well as allowing us to expand it slightly. Gun owners – who tend to take the perspective of being “with the law” – find themselves in what they consider to be a permanently disadvantaged position in New York State. They feel they need to remain constantly vigilant against threats to their rights, and use what influence they can muster within the Senate to deflect undesirable legislation. However, this does not always work. Sometimes there are not enough pro-gun votes in the Senate to defeat such bills, or sometimes social circumstances (such as the political climate after the Sandy Hook shootings), or political maneuvering (such as the use of the message of necessity), cause nominally pro-gun politicians to switch their votes and allow anti-gun bills to pass. So, instead of being able to compete on an equal footing – where both sides mobilize their resources in an effort to get favorable legislation passed, and with the better-organized, or more powerful, side prevailing – a situation emerges where pro-gun politicians are relegated to passing largely symbolic votes calling for the repeal of the SAFE Act, and engaging in minor acts of push-back towards their ideological opponents, such as voting last-minute to move a planned anti-gun demonstration from a public area of the capitol to an out-of-the-way hearing room.
(King 2015). These situations clearly indicate a group for whom circumstances have pushed them away from being “with the law” and into the territory of being “against the law.”

More importantly, though, an exploration of gun owners’ interviews shows how this type of legal consciousness shapes local political behavior. Just as the actions of Hoffman’s (2003) taxi drivers were shaped by the types of conflict resolution that were offered by their company and utilized by co-workers, so too are the actions and attitudes of gun owners shaped by the types of interactions they have with politicians and the outcomes they see occurring as a result of those actions. Upstate pro-gun voters find themselves in a situation where they perceive that local legislators are the only ones who are on their side, and that higher-level politicians not only do not agree with their position but also might not even take their views into consideration when voting for or against bills. This leads gun owners to preferentially interact with their local politicians, and even when they do contact other politicians they prefer modes of interaction akin to those used with local politicians: they prefer face-to-face communication, and object to methods of contact that do not have a clear positive impact for their cause. These preferences contribute to a feedback loop wherein gun owners have positive interactions with local politicians – with whom they share values, to whom they have access, and who generally vote the way they want them to on gun issues – leading to a preference for this type of interaction with all politicians. However, non-local politicians tend to be both busier and more physically remote – as well as potentially more ideologically remote – leading to less personal accessibility and a perception that communication with these politicians is ineffective in that it does not lead to preferred voting outcomes. This loop creates a situation where many gun owners perceive that their actions cannot affect policy because the only politicians to whom they have access tend to already vote as they would like them to.
In an attempt to break out of this pattern, local gun groups support periodic pro-gun rallies in Albany where pro-gun activists assemble to show their solidarity and attempt to meet face-to-face with all different types of politicians. However, outside of the group cohesion that these rallies promote (and the occasional instance of encountering a legislator who was unaware of, or undecided on, a particular firearms-related issue) they are largely symbolic given that they cannot fundamentally change the process by which political power is apportioned within New York State. (“Y’know, you can go to Albany, they have the marches on Albany. Does it do good? Yeah, sometimes it does good. But, other times, you're just fightin’ a losing battle” (R448)) This situation is certainly one reason why many gun owners are placing their hopes for a repeal of the SAFE Act on the judicial branch rather than the legislative – they perceive that no change is possible via a system they see as stacked against them.

Conclusion

This chapter explores gun owners’ attitudes about, and experiences with, the law, using the concept of legal consciousness as a framework. When asked about the law generally, gun owners’ thoughts run immediately to the criminal law – an institution for which they have great respect, and to which they relate largely within a framework that approximates Ewick and Silbey’s (1998) category of “before the law.” They see the criminal law primarily as an institution meant to achieve public safety and security. In that role they see it as being impartial, and above questioning or criticism, and express a strong belief that the law should be followed at all times, especially by gun owners.

Once outside the realm of criminal law, however, gun owners’ attitudes begin to more closely approximate being “with the law.” In the realm of politics in general, for example, they
view its structure as being game-like and perceive that the parties with the greatest resources and influence typically achieve their preferred ends. In this aspect of the law, outcomes are distinctly more mutable and subject to political influence. Respondents saw as ideal the situations where politicians voted the way their constituents wanted, and the will of the majority was realized. By the same token, they reported distaste for when politicians work only to maintain their own personal power, or vote certain ways in order to “get along” in a corrupt political system. Data from the interviews suggested that respondents tend to prefer aspects of the political system that are predictable, transparent, and subject to accountability, as these attributes help maintain the appearance of a game-like atmosphere that meshes with the type of political engagement they prefer.

Respondents’ attitudes about the legal process shift when these attributes are not fulfilled, though, and the most obvious recent example of this occurred with the passage of the SAFE Act. They perceived the introduction and passage of the bill – and especially the use of the message of necessity – as violating all three of the key values cited above, and caused a shift in their perception in the direction of being “against the law.” These attitudes were most evident when discussing the SAFE Act, but were replicated more broadly when discussing state-level politics more generally; here, gun owners perceived themselves as being in a situation where their own political goals can never be realized proactively and they can only hope to defend against the passage of their rivals’ agenda. This lead to a perception of an upstate/downstate divide, which strongly shapes the kinds of interactions that pro-gun individuals have with the political establishment. Specifically, it leads them to preferring local politics – and strategies common to local political engagement – and de-emphasizing engagement with higher-level politics.

Taken together, these political realities provide some important information and context
about the experiences of gun owners. For New York’s gun owners specifically, it helps explain why gun owners perceive themselves as politically disadvantaged, and their values as constantly being under attack, despite living in a region where their views are normative (an idea further explored in the following chapter) and in a culture where they have the weight of an extremely powerful pro-gun lobby behind them. This method of thinking – where a group of people who one never actually encounters nevertheless has a strong influence over one’s life – seems almost conspiratorial in the abstract, but becomes much more explicable when the reality on the ground is examined.

These findings will be useful in a number of ways, not the least of which is for those looking to enact future firearms legislation. Knowing the elements of the law about which firearms owners care the most, and the aspects of the legislative process that they view as most important, will be valuable to anyone looking to craft successful legislation. Without taking these elements into consideration, lawmakers risk a fight similar to that over the SAFE Act, where gun owners’ cultural understanding of the law was not taken into consideration, touching off a lengthy legal and cultural battle.

Beyond legal considerations, though, these results will also be useful to those looking to study firearms owners in other locations. Further research – both in locations similar to and different from New York – will reveal whether my respondents’ understanding of the law is widely held among gun owners, or whether it is idiosyncratic to a state with the legal structure that New York has. Such research will help broaden our understanding not only of how gun owners feel about the law, but whether different subcultural conditions can bring about different types of legal consciousness.

Finally, given the findings of a strong upstate/downstate divide over this issue, this
research may also be useful to those who study other political or social movements where support is strongly patterned along rural/urban lines, or other important demographic or social attributes. Researchers in areas such as crime, education, and farming, for example, might find that New York gun owners’ perspectives on the law provide an interesting contrasting case that could inform future work in those fields.
Chapter 5 – Stigma

Introduction

Given the long history of firearms in the United States, it is only comparatively recently that evidence has emerged of a widespread cultural concern about them. Since the 1950s, war, high-profile shootings, and the routine criminal use of guns have all contributed to increasingly negative associations with firearms in American culture. However, these views have routinely been challenged by powerful pro-gun individuals and organizations who have waged a long and public battle advocating for a more positive assessment of firearms; these groups argue that firearms represent traditional American values, and act as a source of security and protection from violence. As documented in this dissertation and elsewhere, this fight continues to rage in a number of venues including academia, various media outlets, and in lawmaking bodies across the US.

Located in the middle of this chaotic decades-long debate are legal gun owners, who are among the most visible groups connected with firearms. As such, they stand to experience potentially negative outcomes from their membership in an increasingly stigmatized group. And, indeed, previous research has indicated that many gun owners do experience stigma – primarily due to the association of guns with violence – and that this affects them in a number of ways. This fact alone might be sufficient to warrant additional work in the area, but gun owners are also important to study as a potentially stigmatized group because of their unique social location. Unlike many other stigmatized groups, they wield a great deal of political and economic clout, and enjoy significant cultural support from many quarters. Studying this group will provide
valuable insight into how a stigma could emerge in this population, and whether the effects of such a stigma are different in such a high-status group.

To that end, this chapter explores the experiences my respondents have with stigma, and the effects on their day-to-day lives. New York is an ideal place to study this because it is a state with both strict overall gun laws and a strong culture of legal gun use, leading to the potential for conflict over values. Observing the outcomes in New York may also help us understand how gun owners more generally are reacting to this large cultural shift, and how it affects their experience of firearms ownership. For this reason, the reports of my respondents will be contrasted with previously published accounts of other firearms owners to determine what general conclusions can be reached about how modern gun owners experience stigma.

In addition to exploring the experiences of gun owners specifically, this chapter will also place my findings in a larger context relative to several ongoing academic debates. Specifically, I will discuss how my conclusions bear on the ongoing exploration of the nature of stigma, including the issue of internally generated stigma, which has not traditionally been a major concern of stigma researchers. Additionally, I will explore the relevance of Neutralization Theory – which has been frequently utilized in previous research on firearms – to our ongoing understanding of gun ownership.

The Historical (Re-)Emergence of Firearms Stigma

Before exploring how stigma has been viewed in academia, it is important to first establish the history of how negative views of firearms came developed in the US. While many important stigmas – those related to physical deformities, religion, national origin, etc. – have been common for centuries, Keaton (2006) paints a very different picture of firearms ownership.
In modern times, the association of firearms ownership with violence is a key component of its social stigma. However, in the 1940s and 1950s, after the image of firearms had been rehabilitated through the Allies’ victory in World War II, “the public rarely equated gun ownership and use with violence,” partially because “Americans encountered firearms in everyday life in multiple ways unrelated to violence” (6). In fact, children's use of firearms in appropriate ways was seen as “wholesome” and “innocuous” (6), and was in some ways even seen as desirable. For example, she describes a 1952 article in a parenting magazine in which an American doctor asserted that “toy guns made appropriate and safe playthings while teaching children to vent their frustrations properly” (41), a statement which closely reflected the “expert” opinion of the day.

It was not until the early 1960s that critiques of allowing children to play with guns began to gain influence. Keaton points to the decline of the influence of “experts” in general, and of psychologists and psychiatrists in particular, as part of a larger critique of power and government during the escalation of the Vietnam War. As the war dragged on, the pro-gun narratives of the postwar era began to lose their influence (2006:44-47). Then, when John F. Kennedy was assassinated – a horrific event, followed by a series of other incidents that cast firearms in a negative light – the debate began to move beyond children's toys. It was in this era that “many Americans came to reconsider [guns] as instruments of crime, brutality, imperialism, and death, rather than patriotic entertainments” (14). It was this shift, Keaton argues, which caused pro-firearms groups to “alter their defense of firearms from one based on heritage and tradition to one rooted in the concept of legal rights” (14). This shift has not been complete, though, as many firearms owners still emphasize tradition – especially American historical tradition – in their defense of firearms, but most high-profile modern clashes over firearms take place over legal,
rather than cultural, issues (although cultural issues may be intertwined with legal ones – see District of Columbia et al. v. Heller, and McDonald v. Chicago, for example).

Despite the lack of a widespread cultural understanding of firearms as dangerous, the documents that Keaton quotes from indicates that even during the years when firearms were largely unquestioned, there was still at least some degree of concern about their danger – perhaps the opening through which later cultural critiques would emerge. Quoting an article about recreational gun use, for example, the author described how, “[p]roperly guided, this fascination [with firearms] can be made a social and national asset, rather than a menace to society” (2006:50). Also, in a different magazine, in an attempt to interest boys in shooting sports, an advertisement exhorts the benefits of riflery, cautioning, “don't let anyone tell you 'guns are dangerous.' So are banana peels, bath tubs and baseball bats” (52). These statements reveal an underlying uncertainty about firearms, which is not surprising since there is obviously widespread understanding that firearms are capable of causing destruction. Even absent any organized cultural antipathy towards these weapons, it is a rare parent who would not even be concerned about his/her family members picking up a hobby that involved the use of a potentially lethal weapon.

If safety had been the main concern that most people had about firearms, however, anti-gun criticism would probably have been limited to the use of firearms by untrained individuals. Instead, Keaton also discusses the growing stigmatization that hunters began to face as well during the 1960s. Although she does not identify any additional forces that may have been at work in the stigmatization of hunting, nevertheless hunters’ actions began to receive more suspicion in the early 1960s at around the same time that children's toy firearms were losing popularity. (Some hunters, however, backdate the time when they believe their actions were
becoming stigmatized to 1942 with the release of the film *Bambi* (Keaton 2006:114-115.).

During this time period, we see the rise of a particular type of stigma resistance – that of legal gun owners who attempt to distance themselves from other gun owners who engage in criminal behavior. In an article in *Field and Stream* magazine, Richard Starnes wrote, “I am sick and tired of being slyly equated with suicidal maniacs, psychotics, Neo-fascists, and the wantonly irresponsible. I am worn out with defending myself against innuendo and distortions that would do credit to some of Dr. Goebbels' hand-honed lies” (114, footnote 221). This is an especially illuminating quote, since it appeared in 1964 – before high-profile assassinations really brought firearms to the national attention – but the sentiment could just as easily be featured in an editorial page today. Clearly, there is a long history of gun owners’ perceiving the existence of an anti-gun stigma.

The stigmatization of firearms also took an unfortunate turn during the 1965 urban riots in Watts. Keaton describes how subsequent media portrayals of the events there “correlat[ed] the advent of gun violence with African Americans” (2006:130), who were frequently portrayed as the instigators of the violence there. However, in an unexpected twist, around the same time firearm use also became associated with white bigots who intended to use guns to suppress the burgeoning civil rights movement. In this way, firearms ownership was further stigmatized as being associated with violence, as well as bigotry and racial unrest – a trio of attributes with which few groups would relish being connected. Firearms were discredited even further when the rise of the gun-hoarding militia movement became known to the public. These groups’ claims to be promoting American values, and protecting the homeland from Communism, were largely rejected by a public made skeptical of nationalism during the Vietnam War (14; 44-45).
Also during this period, the NRA began its shift – completed in 1977 by a leadership coup (Feldman 2007:45) – away from marksmanship advocacy and towards protecting the right to bear arms. As public sentiment turned away from firearms, the NRA began to focus its efforts on ensuring that gun ownership remained legal, using a new rhetorical tactic that argued that any kind of firearms regulation was a step towards the wholesale banning of firearms nationwide. Although Keaton does not specifically discuss it, this position placed the NRA in opposition to the public on some key issues, especially those who felt they had been dragged into a world where firearms were responsible for seemingly endless wars and the deaths of popular public figures. This uneasy relationship has continued into recent times with the NRA still utilizing stigma to this day as a major tactic in its efforts to motivate firearms owners. (See later in this chapter for more on the current efforts of the NRA).

Goffman

Having established how historical factors lead to the emergence of negative cultural attitudes about firearms, we can now move on to the academic treatment of stigma. The classic academic treatment of stigma is Erving Goffman’s, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963). Much of this work is focused on exploring statuses that are deeply problematic among almost all societal groups including serious medical problems, substance dependency, deviant sexuality, and criminal background. These include both those “discredited” (41) statuses that are relatively easily perceived visually – such as a facial disfigurement, missing limb, or movement disorder – and those “discreditable” (41-42) statuses that might be successfully hidden, and become problematic only once their presence is known – a criminal past, a serious underlying medical condition, a predilection for deviant sexual behavior, etc. Throughout his
work, Goffman makes it clear that he defines stigma as a social reality that creates strong social barriers. Many stigmas keep people from having normal human relations with one another, to the point where “normals” may feel uncomfortable simply being in the same room with a stigmatized individual, much less interacting closely with him/her. Some stigmas can cause abnormal self-perception as well – Goffman illustrates this by describing the “self-hate and self-derogation” (7) experienced by a newly disfigured accident victim who can barely even believe that the figure he sees in the mirror is himself.

While he focused largely on serious, negative attributes, Goffman also did a great service to the academic study of stigma by highlighting its constantly shifting nature, and acknowledging that stigma itself is not a fixed quantity. Rather, it is merely one part of the larger system of perceptual processes that we rely on to tell us what we think people will be like when we encounter them. However, these leaps to judgment can also cause stereotyping, and can even lead to people becoming upset when the new person they encounter does not fit their preconceived notion of what s/he should be like. “We lean on these anticipations that we have,” Goffman says, “transforming them into normative expectations, into righteously presented demands” (1963:2). When these demands are not met, or the assumptions they are based on are challenged, social interaction becomes complicated, and potentially quite negative, for the person doing the challenging.

This way of doing things has several shortcomings, one of the most important of which is that any given individual's normative expectations may not be widely shared. What is expected of a certain type of person in one setting, by one group of people, may be completely different from the expectations in another setting by another group. Stereotypes about race, sexual orientation, physical deformity, mental illness, and any other kind of stigma are so variable that it
does not make sense to think of stigma as being fixed in any way. Goffman describes this by saying that, “a stigma, then, is really a special type of relationship between an attribute and stereotype (1963:4),” rather than an unchanging quantity of some sort.

Problematically, however, Goffman almost immediately discounts his characterization of stigma as being this ephemeral, “because there are important attributes that almost everywhere in our society are discrediting” (1963:4). At first, this seems to be a major limitation of his work, since there are a variety of statuses – perhaps including firearms ownership – which may be subject to a great deal of stigma in certain parts of our culture, but may be neutrally, or even positively, perceived elsewhere. However, in other parts of his book he explicitly addresses that even powerful stigmas may be perceived differently in different situations. He notes, for example, that while most stigmas are “attributes[s] that [are] deeply discrediting” (3), it is simultaneously the case that “an attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another, and therefore is neither creditable nor discreditable as a thing in itself” (3).

However one approaches stigma, though – as an ephemeral social construction, or as an enduring social reality – it is obvious that, in pursuit of the potentially stigmatized nature of firearms ownership, one must examine it as a discreditable, rather than discredited, status. Goffman boils down a variety of issues of self-presentation into the central concern of, “[t]o display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, and where” (1963:42). As opposed to an obviously stigmatized status – like a facial deformity, or movement disorder – gun ownership could easily go undetected by the vast majority of people unless the potentially stigmatized party intentionally reveals it. (And furthermore, except perhaps in cases of inheritance, “gun owner” is a completely voluntary status, and people's concerns about gun ownership do not stem from the fear of accidentally
becoming a member of the stigmatized group (37).) For this reason, Goffman's focus on passing as a normal, unblemished person seems especially relevant, given that there are few external markers – almost all of them voluntary – that distinguish a gun-owner from a non-owner. This lack of “evidentness” (48) of one’s firearms-ownership status creates a set of complications not common to stigmatized populations to which Goffman often referred, such as working prostitutes and those with impaired sight or amputated limbs.

Exploring the issue of visibility is important not just because it is relevant theoretically, but also because there is an ongoing conversation on these very issues, both in academic circles and among members of the public. One instance where this has been discussed in the academic literature is when Albers’s (2003) respondents spoke to him of feeling the need to conceal their firearms ownership status in order to avoid the negative consequences they perceived would come along with such a disclosure (127-128). The fact that these individuals felt the need to avoid associating themselves with a stigmatized identity establishes the stakes of claiming that identity. If disclosing one’s status comes at the expense of the esteem of one’s peers, increased tensions among family, and potentially even job loss – as Albers describes – then it is important to establish both whether this is a general phenomenon among gun owners, and what the primary source of this stigma is. Determining these things will provide a better understanding of gun ownership as a phenomenon, but it also provides context for the ongoing attempts of pro-gun organizations to use stigma as a motivational tool with their members. And, finally, learning about the choice to disclose may help us better understand political choices in New York State, such as the anti-SAFE Act campaigns revolving around highly visible lawn signs criticizing the law.
However, the issue of how to present oneself is not merely an issue of openness versus concealment in front of outsiders; self-presentation is a concern even for those presenting themselves merely to other members of “the own” (Goffman 1963:19). Though it may be assumed that gun owners share more with each other than they do with non-owners, to do so would be to overlook serious differences within firearms owners – a point which was not lost on Goffman. He noted that any given “stigmatized individual exhibits a tendency to stratify his 'own' according to the degree to which their stigma is apparent and obtrusive” (Goffman 1963:107), pointing out that this individual “may exhibit identity ambivalence when he obtains a close sight of his own kind behaving in a stereotyped way, flamboyantly or pitifully acting out the negative attributes imputed to them” (107-108). Though it should be noted that in this quote, again, Goffman persists in viewing stigmatized statuses negatively. In fact, throughout Stigma, his writing is shot through with implications that the stigmas of which he speaks are indeed shameful and that those who carry them are burdened because of it, and would like to relieve themselves of the stigmatized status if they could (see generally 1963:97, 108, 130). There is little – although not nothing (10; 38; 106-112) – in Goffman's work about resisting the application of a stigmatized label, or even reveling in a status which may be considered by some to be discrediting.

While Goffman remains an influential early influence in the field of stigma research, it is also clear that his position cannot be the beginning and end of the discussion. Much has changed since Goffman's time, not the least of which is an increase in the number and strength of movements aimed at contesting various forms of stigma, something Goffman spent little time exploring. This is a significant limitation when attempting to understand the social position of firearms owners in particular, as it would be impossible to do so without acknowledging the
powerful pro-gun machinery that exists today. The power of these organizations to shift public opinion about guns and gun owners is not insignificant. (Gun ownership is, of course, not the only stigmatized status where this is relevant; significant efforts are underway to alter public perceptions about HIV/AIDS (AVERT 2016) and epilepsy (Baruchin 2007), for example.) Therefore, in order to truly understand the landscape that today’s gun owner inhabits, it is important to look for more recent theoretical work that will be more relevant to the current situation.

**Link and Phelan**

Large-scale changes in the social experience of stigma, as well as changes in other related areas, did not go unnoticed by scholars. There is a growing body of literature that has updated the definition of stigma, its origins, and its effects, and these works are important to consider as they relate to the current research. A key component of the modern perspective on stigma can be found in Link and Phelan’s (2001) article, “Conceptualizing Stigma.” Their commentary on stigma is influential and emphasizes, or clarifies, several key points.

First, they address the problem of the expansion of the definition of stigma. Since stigma is a concept that comes up in multiple disciplines, it has been described and studied by researchers in a variety of fields, and using a variety of data from widely varying settings. As a result of this, a number of different definitions of stigma have emerged with varying degrees of strictness about what qualifies an attribute or activity as stigmatized. Some definitions are so permissive as to label something as stigmatized if it represents merely “a characteristic of persons that is contrary to a norm of a social unit” (Stafford and Scott 1986, cited in Link and Phelan 2001:364). And while the authors acknowledge that there will be some slippage in
definitions that are used across multiple disciplines, they nevertheless set out to standardize the definition of “stigma” using some of the more common aspects across definitions. (Also, in doing so they state that they hope to address the criticism that stigma researchers often fail to address the lived experiences of their subjects, and that stigma research is often too focused on the individual level.)

After taking all of these criticisms into account, they define stigma as, “the convergence of interrelated components ... stigma exists when elements of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination occur together in a power situation that allows them” (377). The early part of the process – labeling and stereotyping – stem from Goffman’s concept of stigma. In this way Link and Phelan (2001) highlight the fact that only certain differences are selected to be treated as salient, and how some of these categories become linked with stereotyped attributes. This hearkens back directly to Goffman’s linkages between labels and stereotypes, and the authors encourage stigma researchers to explore these linkages to discover how they “arise and how they are sustained” (368), as well the processes linked with “the use of categories and their linking to stereotypes” (369). Once these differences have been established, the next step is to ensure that labeled and unlabeled groups are clearly separated. This step is often reciprocally linked with the previous two because the “linking of labels to undesirable attributes – become[s] the rationale for believing that negatively labeled persons are fundamentally different from those who don’t share the label” (370). However, the very fact that these groups are seen so negatively facilitates further stereotyping “because there is little harm in attributing all manner of negative characteristics to ‘them’” (370).

Once these steps have been achieved, Link and Phelan’s definition moves on to the consequences of such processes, the first of which is status loss, which refers to “downward
placement of a person in a status hierarchy” (371). This outcome is very important, although it is often difficult to quantify. The authors note that status loss can create “substantial differences in outcome even when it is difficult for participants to specify a single event that produced the unequal outcome” (371). The invisibility of this aspect of the operation of stigma is undoubtedly one of the things that makes stigma so persistent — it is both difficult to perceive, and difficult to address, even for those who experience it.

The final aspect of the stigmatization process is discrimination, which can occur on both the individual and structural level, but can also occur within an individual via social psychological processes. Individual level discrimination is most likely to take place when the previous steps in the process lead people to engage in discriminatory behavior against a stigmatized individual as a result of the stereotypes associated with their personal attributes. The authors acknowledge that, like status loss, this can be difficult to perceive and study. However, they argue that it nevertheless occurs quite often (Link and Phelan 2001:372). Discrimination that occurs on the structural level, however, may actually have greater effects than individual discrimination. The authors describe how some of the disadvantage faced by stigmatized groups may have nothing at all to do with any attributes they have, but rather with the restrictions and expectations they face as a result of the attributes associated with their stigma. In this way, even those individuals who avoid being treated negatively on an individual level may find themselves discriminated against simply because “[s]tigma has affected the structure around the person, leading the person to be exposed to a host of untoward circumstances” (373). The authors also describe how social psychological processes operate on both an individual and structural level to create a kind of feedback loop wherein stigma can affect individuals’ views of themselves, and others like them. Stigmatized individuals who are aware of the existence of that stigma may
begin to find that their expectations of being mistreated lead to further negative consequences than if they had been unaware of the stigma. Or, if the associations are powerful and deep enough, stigmatized individuals may begin to believe that the stereotyped attributes are accurate, thus seemingly verifying the reality of those attributes, when in fact their existence was constructed.

Perhaps the most important part of this definition, which is emphasized throughout the text, is the way in which power is involved in the process of stigmatization. The authors' analysis plainly states that it is inappropriate to conduct research on stigma with a built-in perspective that portrays stigmatized individuals as powerless, passive recipients who can do nothing about how they are seen by others. Instead, they urge researchers to view “issues of constraint and resistance in the context of a power struggle” (378) where groups compete against one another using available resources. The authors note that this conceptualization of stigma necessarily leads to seeing it as “a matter of degree” (377) based on how much the group in question experiences the five aspects listed in the definition, the extent to which they are able to marshal their resources against their disadvantage, and – given these things – how serious the outcomes are for the group. From this they conclude that “some groups are more stigmatized than others and that some components … can be used analytically to think about why differences in the extent of stigma experienced vary from group to group” (377). It is easy to see how a group that wields a great deal of power can be more successful in resisting stigmatizing labels and avoiding the negative outcomes that may arise from those labels. To this end, Link and Phelan propose a series of questions to determine whether a group of people might be considered stigmatized or not. I quote this list at length, due to its special relevance to the issues at hand:
Do the people who might stigmatize have the power to ensure that the human difference they recognize and label is broadly identified in the culture? Do the people who might confer stigma have the power to ensure that the culture recognizes and deeply accepts the stereotypes they connect to the labeled differences? Do the people who might stigmatize have the power to separate 'us' from 'them' and to have the designation stick? And do those who might confer stigma control access to major life domains like educational institutions, jobs, housing, and health care in order to put really consequential teeth into the distinctions that they draw? To the extent that we can answer yes to these questions, we can expect stigma to result. To the extent that we can answer no, some of the cognitive components of stigma might be in place, but what we generally mean by stigma would not exist. (2001:376)

This list represents a clear statement against the tendency towards stigma relativism, rejecting the label for any attribute that simply has a negative component to it, but that does not lead to significant negative effects. The authors later clarify their distinction further, noting that if a group is able to successfully resist serious, persistent labeling – and the consequences that come with that labeling – then they cannot be said to be stigmatized. However, they note that in cases where there is an imbalance of power, often “resistance cannot fully overcome constraint. The amount of stigma that people experience will be profoundly shaped by the relative power of the stigmatized and the stigmatizer” (Link and Phelan 2001:378). These distinctions add depth to Goffman's earlier understanding of stigma and make it easier to test a claim that any given group is stigmatized.

Overall, Link and Phelan's detailed, power-centered approach is more flexible – and more relevant to a modern context – than that of Goffman. For that reason, I will be preferentially utilizing Link and Phelan's general approach in my analysis of stigma.

**Internally Generated Stigma**

Most stigma research focuses on how it is generated and maintained by powerful groups against less powerful groups, but comparatively little emphasis has been given to the ways in
which a group might intentionally generate/maintain stigma against itself. Goffman’s main focus was on how groups manage the appearance of their stigma – with a special emphasis on their ability to minimize it – and therefore he wrote very little about how and why a group might perpetuate a set of negative, and potentially damaging, beliefs about them. On the other hand, Link and Phelan, as well as others, have noted that one important means of being able to contest stigma is to have a powerful group that can marshal resources to help improve the public's perceptions of stigmatized individuals.

Combining these two concepts, it is important to examine how firearms owners may benefit from, but also be further stigmatized by, the actions of the National Rifle Association. The organization itself is undoubtedly powerful, giving it a strong voice with which to advance issues of relevance to its members. However, as mentioned earlier, the NRA often “appears to thwart public opinion that is strongly and consistently – at least according to public opinion surveys – in favor of more stringent gun control policy than is currently on the books” (Patrick 1999:11), and therefore tends to suffer from stigma which emerges from two sources: being associated with firearms, and because of its own strong, sometimes unpopular, stances promoting them. Interestingly, though, the organization has been quite successful and – in many ways – actually benefits from the stigma rather than being harmed by it, “appear[ing] to survive and prosper in an atmosphere of negative coverage and public opinion” (12). In fact, the organization saw its membership increase once it made the shift from an organization which merely promoted firearms safety and training and instead became a political organization (Melzer 2004:ix), partially through its reframing of issues in a way which energized its base of support.

Taking a slightly different approach, Melzer's (2004) dissertation discusses the ways in which the NRA's influence has shifted over the years, becoming what he refers to as a “social
movement organization” (7). In interviews with NRA members, Melzer discovered the nature of the stigma that they perceive from outsiders. They believed that the group of “anti-gunners” was made up of “the media, revisionist historians, and, depending on how conservative the member is, Democrats, Communists, Socialists, Terrorists and Fascists” (143). Traditional American values are perceived to be under attack by these political groups – as well as feminists, homosexuals, and non-Christians – all of whom are viewed as threatening to the NRA's goals, and the cultural and gender-related power of its members. In a different dissertation, Patrick (1999) demonstrates the extent to which the NRA is able to use the distrust that its members have for these groups – and especially the negative coverage that the NRA receives in the media – to mobilize their base in response to negative coverage. So, in many ways the stigmatization of the NRA, and the firearms for which it advocates, is beneficial to its continued existence as an organization. These assertions are backed up by the observations of a former NRA lobbyist, who identified the use of alarmist tactics, largely for the purposes of fundraising (Feldman 2007).

So while it is clear that the most powerful pro-gun group uses stigmatization to its own advantage, what remains unclear is the extent to which the stigmatization of (and by) the NRA simply motivates its members to donate money and become politically active, or whether it extends further and actually causes them to perceive a strong stigma where little, or none, exists. A further question involves whether the efforts of the NRA affect mostly just its own members, or whether they have a significant impact on non-members as well. While it has been shown that the opinions of NRA members differ significantly from the official positions of the NRA itself (Weil and Hemenway 1993), and it is clear that most gun owners are not members of the NRA (Silver 2010), no research has specifically examined the extent to which NRA members’ opinions differ from those of gun owners who are non-members. While the current research is
not oriented towards carrying out this specific comparison, it will be able to shed some light on related topics, such as perceptions of the NRA, and perceptions of stigma associated with firearms ownership, while exploring connections between the two.

**Modern Theoretical Stigma Research**

As noted above, stigma has been a topic of research for decades, and it is important to trace some of the major developments within the field that have shaped academic ideas about it. Specifically, research has helped contextualize and detail the concept of stigma, and when it can be properly said to be in effect, and in what ways.

Perhaps the most important concept that has been expanded upon in recent research has to do with the nature of stigma. Link and Phelan extended and clarified Goffman’s understanding of stigma, particularly the way in which it operates on multiple levels. The perfect illustration of this tendency can be seen in an exploration of a traditionally stigmatized status – mental illness. In Wright et al. (2007) the authors describe a group of people who are routinely viewed with suspicion and typically meet all of the criteria set out by Link and Phelan for a stigmatized group: schizophrenics. In the article, the authors explore how having a severe mental illness of this type can restrict the ability of patients to form long-lasting partnerships, and sexual relationships, with others. This is especially meaningful because having a partner is not only strongly normative, but it has also been shown to improve patients’ ability to cope with the negative aspects of mental illness (Baucom et al. 1998). Not being able to have a partner, therefore, can be a significant drawback. In the article, respondents describe how their societal rejection not only takes the form of individual rejection – because people with severe mental illnesses are viewed as “dangerous, unpredictable, and socially undesirable (Phelan et al. 2000;
Wasow 1980; Wilczynski 1991)” (cited in Wright et al. 2007) – there are also structural difficulties created by having a mental illness. Those who are in organized treatment, for example, often find themselves subjected to restrictive rules about sexuality and relationships, as well as being forced to undergo treatments that may reduce sexual desire (Wright et al. 2007: 81). Even more than this, though, respondents reported that those with severe mental illnesses often internalized the stigmatized views of their own group and tended to view others with similar conditions as unacceptable partners (92). This clearly demonstrates how a serious stigma can have effects not only on members of the wider society, but also on the stigmatized group itself, leading the authors to conclude: “this study lends empirical support to Link and Phelan’s (2001) theoretical articulation of the three central stigma processes—individual discrimination, structural discrimination, and the internal social-psychological responses of the stigmatized—as critical forces in the status loss that accompanies being labeled mentally ill” (Wright et al. 2007:93).

But what exactly leads a particular status – like mental illness – to be identified as something that is worthy of such close scrutiny? A number of studies have addressed this, and researchers have posited several theories that guide us in this area. Jones et al. (1984) made a classic set of observations regarding how the perception of a given stigma is achieved, describing six criteria that affect people’s assessment of a given stigmatized condition: concealability (the extent to which a given condition is immediately obvious, or whether it can be successfully hidden), course (the progression of the condition, how it changes, and its likely final outcome), disruptiveness (the extent to which the condition affects the relationships of the stigmatized individuals), aesthetics (whether the condition produces disgust or disdain among others), origin (the source of the condition, and specifically whether the stigmatized person is viewed as
personally responsible for it or not), and peril (to what extent the condition places others in danger) (Fiske et al. 2010). Although the work of Jones et al. was presented as a general treatise of stigma, it has often been applied to the specific case of stigmatized medical conditions. These types of applications, while obviously representing only a portion of stigmatized conditions, nevertheless provide an interesting basis from which to expand their insights to other types of stigmatized conditions. For example, Schroeder and Mowen (2014) note that health conditions are most likely to be stigmatized when “(1) the disease is incurable; (2) the disease is not well understood among the public; and (3) the symptoms cannot be concealed (Gilbert and Walker, 2010; Yang et al. 2007)” (458). While 1 and 3 correspond quite well with Jones et al.’s descriptions of “course” and “concealability,” respectively, the addition of the public’s level of knowledge is important because it is a key factor in determining some of the other attributes, such as course, peril, and origin. However, it is important to be aware of the flexibility of this attribute. Phelan and Link (2004), for example, showed that much of the stigma of mental illness comes from fears about the “symptomatic behavior” (68) of people with these illnesses. However, people who have greater contact and experience with people with mental illnesses actually have less negative perceptions of the mentally ill than those with less contact and experience. In many cases, then, it is important to be aware not only of the amount of information that the public has about a particular stigmatizing condition, but also the source, quality, and accuracy of that information. The public may indeed have a great deal of information about a topic, but if that information is biased, or relies on stereotypes, it may lead to far different outcomes than having a far smaller amount of accurate, unbiased information would.
Another key area to be aware of when describing the stigmatizing potential of an attribute is its legal status. While there are certainly plenty of legal actions and statuses that are stigmatized, it is important to be aware that many illegal actions have a strong potential to produce a great deal of stigma for the individuals and groups who are associated with them. And while some crimes are looked down upon more than others (both by outsiders and by those who have been convicted of the crimes), it is important to note that “[t]he legal system is an inherently stigmatizing entity, as stigma is evident in the way that laws and the justice system are structured” (Corrigan and Watson 2002, cited in Furst and Evans 2015:134). Thus, on some level, we might consider people who are sanctioned by the legal system to be automatically stigmatized in the sense that they have had a negative label applied to them in a way that they are unable to resist. The consequences of these labels will certainly vary based on how serious their crime is (e.g., a violation versus a misdemeanor versus a felony), the nature of the crime (e.g. - white-collar vs. violent), and other important attributes of the case (e.g., whether there is significant doubt about their guilt, the types of arguments made in their defense, etc.), but given the strong connection between firearms and crime, it is important to be aware of the link between legality and stigma.

Finally, one of the key issues raised by Link and Phelan’s treatment of stigma is that of power, and how the ability of the stigmatized group to resist its deviant labeling relates to the power of the stigmatizers to apply it. It is important to note that different groups of people – males and females, for example – may have differential abilities to resist stigmatizing labels. This is true even of people with serious stigmas, such as a criminal background. Echoing Becker, Geiger and Fischer (2005) argue that, “it is only to the extent that the deviant labels applied by others onto offenders cannot be neutralized, resisted, and cast off as alien to the self that they
will stick and become an essential trait of the offenders’ identity” (195). However, in order for such resistance to be successful, it must be effective on a number of different levels. One important, but often overlooked, aspect of this power struggle has to do with how various behaviors are perceived both publicly and privately. The power to influence perception may extend to just one, or both, of these areas, and the impact of that power struggle may be more or less consequential depending on in which area(s) it retains power. This is shown clearly in the case of old-age stigma, where Rapolienė (2015) demonstrates that while there is publicly stated reverence for older people in Lithuania, these public declarations conceal “intolerance, disregard and discrimination on the behavioral level” (63). The article also demonstrates that the level of these attitudes differs significantly from country to country, indicating that different social, political, and power structures clearly produce different outcomes for individuals who are part of stigmatized groups. This is especially important to remember when looking at stigmas with long histories. Using race as an example, Howarth (2006) reminds us that:

Race is something that produces and sustains material inequalities and is anchored in histories of prejudice, exclusion and poverty. Race generates its significance and its power from its particular histories of domination, colonization and global economics. It is not ‘simply there’ as a system of cognitive categorization (Aboud, 1988), something pre-or non-discursive. Race is constituted in and through structural relations of power and oppression, and can only be made sense of with reference to these very material histories. (443)

This reminds us that, in order to be understood, the most serious stigmas must be viewed in the correct scale; they must be properly placed in a larger context to understand the systems behind them that bring weight to the topics to which they are related.
The Changing Stigma of Firearms – Modern Research

Having taken stock of the ways in which the stigma surrounding firearms first emerged in an organized way in the 1960s, we must then take a look at how that stigma has changed over time. The first modern study to examine this is the research of Benjamin Albers in his dissertation “On Being a Gun Owner: Firearms and the Cultivation of Identity” (2003). Albers turned up several interesting insights about the stigma that gun owners feel and how they react to it. At the outset he acknowledges the tension surrounding firearms, noting that “the symbolic and cultural meanings ascribed to firearms by opposing viewpoints in contemporary society do not cohere” (121). This is a good general observation, given the extent to which powerful groups strive against one another to have their perceptions of firearms be understood and accepted as the dominant view. A close reading of discourse about firearms – such as that of Albers – reveals that one way in which this disagreement arises is when groups use competing historical frames of reference to situate their arguments. Several of Albers's respondents, for example, laud the use of firearms based on their historical importance – being part of America's struggle for independence (127), their prominent presence in the Bill of Rights (130), and even contributing to the protection of former slaves in the dangerous post-Civil War period (138). This perspective is often not shared by individuals who hold a stigmatized view of firearms owners, however. For the most part, these individuals and groups view firearms as dangerous, and those who own them as unintelligent, and perhaps even mentally deranged (126), for not being willing to recognize the danger. Because of this, they often view firearms owners with suspicion, fearing that they might become violent and use their weapons recklessly. Albers notes that this fear of violence seems to be the main stigma that gun owners perceive being directed at them, and it manifests itself in many of the quotes that he includes from his respondents.
Firearms owners perceive stigma coming from a variety of sources – both individuals and the media – and manifesting itself in several different ways. Several respondents report, for example, that they choose not to be open about their firearms ownership status at work, for reasons having to do with avoiding conflict with both co-workers and customers. Some went so far as “to avoid discussing the issue even with family members and other intimates in order to avoid conflict within their relationships” (Albers 2003:129) and several respondents reported that they found themselves surrounded by people “to whom they felt uncomfortable disclosing information about gun ownership” (130). Taken together, these observations suggest the existence of a stigma that, while perhaps not as serious or as noxious as some, nevertheless affects the daily lives of those whom it touches at least to the extent that it alters the way they interact with those around them, and causes them to hide a part of themselves which they feel would be judged harshly were it to be revealed.

Given the nature of this stigma, it is not surprising that individuals use a variety of strategies to manage it. As noted above, primary among these is simply not disclosing their firearms ownership status. However, additional strategies were also used by Albers's respondents, including a fair number who simply avoided contact with individuals who do not have similar views on firearms. Perhaps the most interesting response to stigma, however, was the choice that some respondents made to disclose their firearms-ownership status preemptively (2003:131). Albers discusses a number of reasons for which one might use this strategy, including seeking to determine as soon as possible whether or not a person is likely to be accepting of them, as well as due to Goffman's concept of minstrelization – attempting through humor to reduce the impact of their stigmatized status by “act[ing] out before normals the full dance of bad qualities imputed to his kind” (Goffman 1963:110). However, Albers believed that
respondents also used preemptive disclosure as a way to contest their stigma, both by implicitly rejecting the negative labels others might put on them, and also by opening up opportunities to engage in “proactive questioning” (Albers 2003:132) with those who held negative views about firearms ownership.

Having described this, Albers comes to the most important point, and the one that is most relevant to future research in this area: that the literature on stigma has largely focused on the idea that the actions taken by stigmatized groups represent “behaviors employed by social outcasts in order to appear whole or to attempt to conform to societal expectations ... a means of escaping some unwholesome existence – to reconcile their real (and somehow deficient) and their idealized self-concepts” and suggests “that striving for conformity and homogeneity is a universally held goal.” (2003:145). However, Albers makes the key point that stigma is, by necessity, imposed from the outside by others. This leaves out a key possibility – addressed briefly, but somewhat incompletely, in existing literature: that individuals might genuinely find nothing wrong with their self-identity and would not strive in any way to make it come more in line with conventional expectations. Along these lines, an interesting area of future research would be to examine the extent to which gun owners internalize “mainstream” criticism and attempt to conform to its expectations, versus the extent to which they are content to simply ignore this criticism altogether, or at least do not allow it to affect their self-concept in any meaningful way.

Albers also notes another key drawback to the way in which the current literature addresses stigma: it leaves out the possibility that one's membership within a stigmatized group can be contested. After all, stigma is not a one-way street, originating from outside of a group and being imposed on it by mainstream society. It can also originate from inside a group, and
may be applied to those who are not sufficiently in line with subcultural norms, with the intent of marginalizing them within the group, or even completely excluding them. Albers gives the example of those who come to firearms ownership later in life and do not have a family background that caused them to be steeped in firearms culture. He also suggests that women may be viewed more critically by the firearms community, as well as those who have less shooting ability, simply because they lack the attributes assumed to be common to “real” members of the subculture. This exploration of the subtleties of “internal censure” (2003:146) as opposed to the more general focus of most stigma literature on external censure, is an important area of future research.

In another dissertation – Taylor's “Gun Shows, Gun Collectors and the Story of the Gun: An Ethnographic Approach to U.S. Gun Culture” (2008) – the author offers a different perspective on many of the issues that Albers addressed. In the chapter on the management of suspect identities, for example, the author clearly makes a case for the existence of a firearms-related stigma, stating that “it was far more common than not for the subjects [of interviews] to acknowledge or reference some aspect of the stigma associated with gun ownership” (147), further reinforcing the notion that such an issue is of relevance to the firearms community. Taylor even goes so far as to sum up his respondents' experiences by saying “to be a gun collector or enthusiast is, at least frequently, to be cast in a suspect light ... a maladjusted, 'creepy' man gruesomely fascinated with the morbid tools of death” (148-149). Yet despite its prevalence, Taylor notes – though not entirely accurately – that “[n]one of the extant social science literature on these groups has examined the issue of stigmatization and stigma management” (149).
In the remainder of the chapter, Taylor focuses on the various stigma management strategies that he observed, or learned of his respondents using, in the course of interacting with others. He also notes the use of “passing,” or moving unnoticed by intentionally concealing (or, at least, not actively revealing) their stigmatized status. Respondents gave many reasons for this, including the intent to avoid the negative perceptions of those around them, as well as to avoid the kind of disclosure that might lead a thief to become aware of their ownership and attempt to steal firearms from them.

Beyond passing, Taylor also addresses the concern that these individuals had with protecting the image of firearms owners from besmirchment by outsiders – whether in the media or among the general public – thereby contesting the stigma which they experienced. As in Albers's work, Taylor found that the nature of the stigma attached to firearms ownership most often stemmed from a belief that firearms owners were “reckless and dangerous, and either likely to get hurt or likely to hurt others” (2008:163). Also in keeping with Albers, Taylor found that one stigma associated with firearms ownership is that of gun owners being perceived “as extremist or nut cases” (152), in the sense that they might attempt to use their guns to harm others in the furtherance of a right-wing political agenda. Given the violent nature of the stereotypes of gun owners, perhaps it is not surprising that many of the stigma management techniques that Taylor observed were in the service of directly countering these ideas. These took the form of public information campaigns – such as the presence of NRA's child gun safety mascot, Eddie Eagle, at gun shows – as well as public pronouncements of safety rules at gun-related events, emphasizing safe conduct with firearms. These actions are intended to show “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” (164).
Another type of stigma management Taylor observed was more indirect in nature – not addressing the specific concerns of the general public about the danger and violence they associate with firearms, but more generally engaging in pro-social conduct of a type likely to cast their group in a positive light. This process, known as “idiosyncrasy credit” (2008:165), involves associating oneself with causes widely believed to be laudable, in order to be perceived favorably by others. While this kind of strategy is accessible largely to groups with the resources to put on public events of their own, or with a high enough profile to successfully present themselves as being involved with events put on by others, it can be an especially effective strategy because it affects people's perceptions of the group as a whole, rather than on a single narrow issue.

Taylor also addresses the issue that Albers raised of how groups deal with stigma internally – that is, how they deal among themselves with the ways in which outsiders negatively perceive them. In dealing with the issue of gun safety, for example, many gun groups internally spread the message that the best solution is to ensure that anyone who might come into contact with firearms has had proper instruction on how to handle firearms safely. This strategy seems to be a kind of extension of the externally-oriented approach which emphasizes self-preparation in order to be able to show suspicious outsiders that “we” are even more safety-conscious than “they” are, or at least than “they” suspect us to be.

Taylor also describes another stigma management technique, however, which he believes to be distinct from those often used by individuals with other types of stigmas. He describes how individuals may actually “trade” in the negative attributes assigned to them by members of the wider society – namely, that they are bloodthirsty and value weapons based on their ability to kill. He gives examples from respondents who describe the perceived value of a military pistol
increasing based on whether it has been used in war, or whether a deer rifle has been accurate and deadly enough to kill a large amount of game (2008:170-173). He goes so far as to describe the stories that gun owners tell about their firearms as “warrior narratives ... running scripts lived out by individual social actors that unfold during the course of performing some aspect of masculinity (Jordan and Cowan 2007)” (173). These stories are told as part of an effort to make an account of one's personal masculinity, often through recounting the gun's exploits at killing game, or the capability it possesses to kill those who threaten the owner and/or his family. From his descriptions, though, while this process may indeed be tied up in the ways that firearms owners enact masculinity in their experiences with firearms, I am not convinced that it can rightly be called a stigma management strategy. Rather, it sounds much more like simply one more aspect of a firearms owner's experience with firearms that may become stigmatized. After all, it is certainly the goal of most hunters to kill prey, and it would surprise few people that they would recount stories of doing so – telling their exploits in ritualistic ways before, during, or after hunting – much as Taylor describes. However, for gun owners to discuss their ability to cause death and injury, whether to animals while hunting or to people in self-defense, does not necessarily mean that they are using that opportunity to manage their stigma. They are certainly engaging in talk and actions that might be considered repugnant by the non-gun-owning public, but there are potentially several aspects of firearms ownership that fall into this category. Everything from a casual discussion in a gun shop about the “stopping power” of various types of ammunition, up to and including individuals attending courses where they learn how to effectively use a gun to defend themselves from attack, might be subject to stigmatization by others. However, simply because these experiences are stigmatized does not necessarily mean
that they are part of a larger project of resisting (or embracing) that stigma; it simply means it is one part of the experience.

One final work which produced results which bear on the issue of firearms ownership and stigma is Abigail Kohn's *Shooters: Myths and Realities of America's Gun Culture* (2004). She reports many of the same types of results as those found in the previous two studies. Concurring with the existence of stigma, she describes Northern California as “maintain[ing] an 'adversary culture' toward the gun-owning community” and that when people discuss issues related to firearms, gun owners “are frequently in a position to defend their interests, often to hostile audiences” (6). She also describes how “gun ownership has become so stigmatized, the racism, sexism, and even violence-prone behavior of some gun owners has come to unilaterally define the public perception of gun culture itself” (38).

Gun owners are not passive recipients of this stigma, however. Much like in the previous cases, she describes the use of similar stigma management strategies including “dissociat[ing] themselves from popular culture's negative stereotypes of gun owners,” wishing to avoid being associated with the “criminals, neo-Nazis, militia members, white supremacists, and other undesirables who are more usually associated with the gun culture” (2004:15). In this vein, they offered “dignifying accounts” (15) of their gun ownership – “narratives designed to illustrate the inherent decency and dignity of their gun enthusiasm” (15). (These will be discussed further below.)

In short, Kohn's respondents report perceiving stigma much the same as Albers's and Taylor's did, and, although stigma was not one of Kohn's main research interests, the accounts they provide sound very similar to the tactics and techniques used by respondents in the other studies.
When exploring whether gun ownership is a stigmatized status or not, the first thing to do is set out criteria against which the situation will be judged. In this case, as discussed above, Link and Phelan’s definition will be utilized to determine if “elements of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination occur together in a power situation that allows them” (377). Each of these issues will be touched upon in turn to follow the progression that Link and Phelan lay out in their article, to see which areas suggest a strong argument for stigma versus a weak one.

Labeling

In the area of labeling, it seems evident that gun ownership is widely understood as being separate from non-gun ownership. While it does not carry the weight of other labels – race, sex, disability status, etc. – it is nevertheless true that our culture understands one’s gun ownership status as a relevant criterion that can be used to distinguish people from one another. One example of this is how gun ownership status is a common question on surveys of the public, including the General Social Survey, and there have been several major survey efforts to describe gun owners as a group. And support for this proposition does not only come from outsiders; respondents themselves explicitly accepted gun ownership as an important status and repeatedly used it to identify themselves as a group – “there’s legislation written all the time to limit the rights of gun owners” (R169) – as well as to separate themselves from groups that do not own firearms: “usually, what I find is, the ones that are vocal are the non-gun owners” (R324). Typically, the only objection that arose to using “gun owner” as a term was when
respondents felt they were being included with undesirable others: “I think mainly it’s that they’re lumping all gun owners together with the people that you read about, with drive-by shootings, things like that” (R201); “… responsible gun owners don’t do that. Are there people that do that? Yeah, but they’re the minority, not the majority. Most people that handle firearms know what they do” (R441). But even in these cases, respondents did not object to the use of the term itself, they just expressed a belief that responsible gun owners (see Chapter 3 for a discussion of the meanings of this term) were different from ones who are not responsible.

_Stereotyping_

As shown in the findings of the dissertations described above, gun ownership has a long history of stereotypes. Keaton (2006) describes how there are plenty of negative historical events associated with firearms that contribute to the stigma, and Albers (2003) explores the strong association of firearms with various crimes – both large and small – that continues to mar the status of firearms ownership. These trends were given further support in my respondents’ responses: when asked to describe stereotypes associated with gun ownership, almost every respondent was able to describe some. Furthermore, although few respondents believed these stereotypes personally, there was nevertheless an understanding that at least some people – especially non-gun owners – did believe them.

Consistent with existing literature, the primary stereotype that respondents identified as being associated with firearms ownership is violence. Typically, respondents referred to actual criminal violence, which they acknowledged does take place: “the major problem is the young kids using guns, shootin’ each other, injuring each other or killing each other, and the public is the biggest risk out of all that” (R227);
Back when I was growing up, there was nothing against hunting. It started in the 60s when all these shootings started, then the more shootings you had, the more people would go against the guns, because they firmly believe that if you get rid of the guns, the crime rate is going to go down. (R251)

In addition to actual violence, respondents also referred to the more abstract idea that having guns somehow indicated a penchant for violence or criminal behavior. One respondent, for example, described interactions with his wife’s family: “her family was totally anti-gun. You mentioned guns, and it’s like you’re a criminal” (R324). Another respondent described being reticent to carry a firearm because of the negative, fearful reactions that people might have to seeing a non-policeman with a gun: “I'm sure [if] people saw me carrying a gun they would freak out. And then there would be a real problem! … Because there is this gun fear, you know” (R117).

Occasionally the stigma was more extreme than this. A few respondents felt that the stigma of firearms owners – especially as it relates to violence – is one that goes so far as to be equated with mental illness:

You’ve got the Columbines you’ve got the Denvers where that nut thought he was Batman or whoever the hell he thought he was. These other people going in Sandy Hook and shooting all these defenseless people, I think it jades people to think people who own guns are lunatics. (R488)

Another spoke more personally about the issue, saying, “I take offense to these politicians calling me a lunatic because I have a gun. I’m not a lunatic, don’t intend to be, never will be” (R235). This situation appeared especially galling to firearms owners partially because they reported a strong desire to ensure that mentally ill people were not able to access firearms, typically through increased background checks:
Somebody that's a little loose, mentally unstable. I mean we've seen this how many times? Columbine. Newtown. There's nothing that's ever going to stop that. These people go through the background check. They pass, even though they shouldn't have. There's just nothing you can do about it- my opinion. (R101)

Another respondent addressed the same issue as it relates to the shooting of Gabrielle Giffords:

Part of the reason why Arizona happened was because the laws that were in place were not- there were weaknesses. That the guy, because of mental health issues, and all that, should never have been able to obtain the firearms, or any of that kind of stuff because he had quite a history. And some- there was a hole in the system somewhere that didn’t just didn’t do, it, was a weakness. That something wasn’t enforced according to the law. (R117)

What is somewhat ironic, though, is that in responding to accusations of stigma, firearms owners tended to stigmatize people with mental illnesses, partially in an effort to distinguish them from mainstream gun owners:

Think of what we went through in the last couple of years with these fellows that killed a lot of people. Those weren’t hunters; those were to my mind, lunatics that should have been in a rubber room long before they ever were allowed to do that stuff. (R235)

Others took it to an even greater extreme, characterizing mental illnesses as dangerous using stigmatizing descriptions for the mentally ill:

I mean people talk about like … the healthcare stuff. I mean, yeah. The check that we have now, where- We don’t want to let convicted felons get guns, right? … Those are good. We don’t want people that have obvious mental problems, but how to enforce that becomes kind of an issue and like who determines that is problematic, right? We don’t want to just open the door to any doctor to have his diagnosis available to anyone, who has an anti- or pro-gun agenda, right. Because I think privacy’s a hard thing. Yeah, if you got people who are committed or they have a history of mental illness, we don’t want those people having guns. That’s a health issue. It’s not a gun issue. We close a lot of the asylums that we used to have and we’ll put all these people out there, they’re all on drugs, right? So many of these mass shooters, they’ve confessed, or I guess it’s been proven that they’re on these drugs and there’s problem with them, but yet they’re out
there. I think if we would spend less money on the gun enforcement stuff and more money on the healthcare, psychotic aspects of that, it would be far better off. (R220)

This attitude is certainly not unique to firearms owners, of course, as mental illness is a highly stigmatized condition. (See the section on Neutralization Theory for further discussion of this issue.)

In terms of stereotyping, and gun owners’ responses to it, probably the most common theme that emerges is the sentiment that legal and illegal gun owners are separate groups, and that legal gun owners are not to blame for the majority of crime committed with firearms. One straightforward form of this argument is given by Respondent 138: “I think most law-abiding citizens that purchase firearms, and purchase them the right way, aren’t the ones you got to worry about anyways, in regards to the law” (R138). Respondent 267 goes a step further and identifies gun possession as the only thing that links criminals and non-criminals together: “I don’t consider criminals gun owners … they’re gun possessors” He then recounts a portion of a story told by a friend who is a police officer, and follows it up by distinguishing criminal use from non-criminal use: “[A guy’s got a gun and you take off chasing him, he’s ditching it.’ Well, that’s not a gun owner. I’m not ditching my gun anywhere. They cost me money, and they mean something to me. So, the criminal, to me, is not a gun owner” (R267). On a more theoretical level, Respondent 324 gives an account of how legal gun owners take firearms ownership seriously, from a legal perspective, whereas criminals do not:

I have to be aware of all these things. If I’m in a situation where I have to defend myself and somebody else gets hurt, I’m responsible for that bullet. It doesn’t happen to the criminal. It doesn’t really matter. They don’t have to obey the laws. They don’t have to follow the rules. It doesn’t really matter. They just go and do whatever they want (R324)
Given respondents’ desire to differentiate themselves from criminals, it is not surprising that some of the things that stood out most in their accounts were situations where people who were deemed non-criminal came under suspicion of being criminal, or where previously legal activities were criminalized. Respondent 174, for example, disapproved of the new SAFE Act requirements that would allow law enforcement officials to track his ammunition purchases, because his atypical use could cause him to be perceived as a criminal:

I shoot a lot. It's not uncommon for me to shoot two, three hundred rounds in a weekend. Now, if I go out and buy this, they're going to know exactly know how many rounds I bought. They're going to be knocking on my door, "Why are you buying so much ammo?" Now I've got to justify to them? That's not what the Second Amendment's about. It's not about me justifying to the people how much I shoot and why and where, and prove it to 'em … It's making me feel like the criminal now, you know what I'm saying? Everything I do, it makes me feel like I'm the criminal now. (R174)

This is seen as an indignity: for firearms owners, who spend a great deal of effort complying with the law, and who support the application of the law to criminals, to suddenly find themselves suspected of violating it. But, mere suspicion of law breaking pales in comparison to actually finding oneself on the wrong side of the law. Respondent 431, for example, disagreed with the swift passage of the SAFE Act’s criminalization of common firearms and accessories because, “[i]t basically creates a whole new class of criminals out of millions of people who before January 14, 2013 were completely law abiding people and now they’re all criminals” (R431). Respondent 420 agrees, saying:

The problem that they’re creating now is they’re making people who are really legitimate gun owners, they’re putting them on that fringe. And I certainly would hate to see anybody that’s really a legitimate, otherwise law-abiding gun owner being punished severely for having 10 rounds in there, because that doesn’t make sense to me to begin with. (R420)
These respondents both disagree with criminalizing the actions of people who, up until the passage of the SAFE Act, were in compliance with the law. To do so lumps these people in with criminals who intentionally break the law, thereby tainting legal owners with the association.

Moving beyond crime and violence, an additional theme that emerges from gun owners’ accounts of stereotypes is the belief that they only exist because people are unfamiliar with what firearms are really like. This is borne out in their repeated assertions that people who are against firearms must simply have never had a chance to learn about them. This comes in several forms, such as the belief that people did not grow up in an area where firearms are well understood:

As far as … the anti-gun guys, I think is lack of education. I think it's the lack of familiarity, being in the big cities where you're restricted of what you can have or not, but that's your choice, in a way, of where you live. Some people don't have that choice, but your life is what your life is. (R332)

Another respondent expanded on this, saying: “I think the people in New York City, or the big cities that’ve never been out of the city, don’t have a clue what you can do and how fun it can be, and the right to do it. They hear the negative” (R178).

Another form of this argument is the assertion that people are not getting the full story about firearms, or that they are getting bad information:

They just buy what they're being told. They don't dig into the meat of the matter and look at things … They don't enter it with an open mind, let's say, and get in there and look for the research for themselves … If they took and dug into it they might get a better understanding and then they might understand where the gun owners are coming from when they say that it's just a bunch of hogwash. (R113)

Another respondent saw the problem as the result of a larger strategy: “I think they're not knowledgeable. They see the gun and they just think ‘Oh, that's bad.’ That's being indoctrinated in schools. It's not education. Kids aren't being taught how to think they're being taught what to
think” (R128). This sentiment is distinct from that of people who believe that they have the correct information about firearms, but who are actually misinformed, and are unlikely to change their opinion. These people are sometimes seen as lost causes because they simply cannot, or will not, be convinced to see that their viewpoint is faulty:

They're talking about doing away with everything over 50 caliber. A 20-gauge shotgun would be outlawed. I brought up a point to a Manhattan legislator. I looked at her and said, “How would we hunt waterfowl?” She says, “Well, use a rifle.” I looked at her and I said, “You really don't understand this.” “Oh yeah we just don't want anything over 50 caliber.” I said, “OK.” I just- I gave up. It's an education problem. The whole thing is an education problem, and they don't want to be educated, the people that are dead set against it. (R167)

This perspective also comes into play when someone simply has the facts wrong:

They had a meeting … One elderly gentleman got up, and he was in his 80s … maybe 90, because he was a World War II veteran, and he talked about being in the war, and I think he actually had to shoot people and everything and how bad that was. Then he stood up and said, ‘There’s no need for anyone to have an automatic weapon.’ So he was talking about an automatic weapon. The crowd was actually very good. A couple of people were going to get on him and they kind of let the man speak, but when he said he was a World War II veteran he got a standing ovation, so people were very appreciative of what he did, but also didn’t like the fact that he didn’t know his facts. Unfortunately, that’s a problem that’s out there, people don’t know the difference between automatic, semi-automatic, single fire, so when they show that gun, the people automatically think when they see a military-style weapon with, say, a barrel shroud or a pistol grip, that it’s an automatic weapon. They don’t understand that those are off the table and have been for years. [laughs] There’s a problem there. (R420)

These types of viewpoints appear especially frustrating to gun owners because of the underlying assumption that if the person had all of their information straight, they would come to the right conclusion.

This positive attitude towards changing people’s minds about guns is potentially more than just wishful thinking, or personal bias. Numerous respondents had personal stories of
introducing new people to shooting, typically with positive results. Respondent 279 said he has found that, “very few people that, if you convince them to come out and try shooting, very few of them didn't like it” (R279). Some respondents felt that this transformative power was important, but relatively limited. Respondent 267, for example, discussed how there is something about gun ownership that can only be learned by experience, and which – once felt – will create at least understanding though perhaps not actual conversion:

I think, by and large, people are kind of fascinated by guns. If you could get people out to a range, and let them shoot, and let them actually see what it is that’s the draw. They might not say, “Ah, I got to go buy a gun,” but they might go, “Ah, that’s really … Now, I get it.” (R267)

On the other hand, one respondent told a story (which was later confirmed (Romans 2013)) that Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia introduced Justice Elena Kagan to firearms ownership. The respondent asserted that Justice Kagan, “came into the court with a very poor, very low opinion of firearms and firearms freedom” but that Scalia “has been taking her out, I think, skeet shooting … and she loves it. She’s taken to it and enjoys it. He’s started to change her mind. So there’s a perfect example of if you’ve never been exposed to it in a positive light, then it’s like anything; don’t knock it until you try it” (R431). And while not everyone believes that shooting a firearm has the ability to completely change absolutely anyone’s attitude, there is nevertheless a general belief that it can be effective in some circumstances. For example, even while arguing that there is very little that can be done to change someone’s mind about sensitive subjects, Respondent 378 argued that – through experience – some people can come to enjoy using firearms:

it’s “de gustibus non est disputandum,” in Latin it means, ‘concerning taste, there is no basis for dispute.’ You can’t argue religion. You can’t argue politics. And you can’t
argue gun ownership. If someone likes them or they don’t… all I’m saying is there’s a group of people who aren’t fond of them but are ignorant and might become fond of them if they have exposure. And there’s another group of people who just are anti-gun and that’s it, and that’s the religion in that scenario. (R378)

This respondent also acknowledges a key point that appeared throughout my interviews, which is that – regardless of the transformative power of using firearms – there is a core group of people who are dead-set against firearms ownership and who will remain unmoved. Respondents do not directly identify who it is that is most likely to be unmoved, though, and they spend much more time describing the types of people who they have successfully influenced through bringing them to the range, including women (R201; R235; R169), teachers (R362), children of people who are anti-gun (R298; R167), friends’ children (R420), politicians (R178), and foreigners (R178), among others.

An interesting illustration of the line between who can be convinced and who cannot be is found in the case of fear. Several gun owners suggested that the reason that people might be against firearms is due to fear of guns. In most cases, this was treated similarly to a simple lack of understanding – if people knew more about guns, they would not feel afraid:

> There are a lot of people that are afraid of [guns]. I still believe that. I still believe that there’s people that are- and I think there are people that are curious about them that are afraid of them, and then once they use a gun and find out it’s really pretty safe if you use your head. They enjoy it. (R420)

> I think a lot of people … lack the knowledge about firearms, what you can do with them, what you can't do with them, what the requirements are for ownership. So, in a lot of situations what they don't know they tend to fear. And that, that a lot of people do that about a lot of different things not just guns. (R140)

Some people even go so far as to suggest that people who seem to be anti-gun may actually just be afraid:
It’s not like they’re anti-gun. I mean, it’s just that they never dealt with them, they might be afraid of them. You know, those are the only people you might be able to win over if they had the opportunity to shoot. They may hate it. They may still be against it, but there’s going to be a percentage of them, maybe a large percentage that would actually enjoy the experience if it were done in a proper way. (R378)

However, the premise of this point of view is that these people either have no information about firearms, or they have gotten non-experiential information about them, and that taking these people out to shoot guns will help overcome this lack of first-hand information. The one major exception to this perspective is that gun owners tended to believe that people who have personally had negative experiences with firearms – such as having been a victim of a crime, or coming from a neighborhood where there is a lot of violence – may never come around to enjoying firearms. Presumably the acceptance of this position comes from the fact that people who have had such a thing happen to them do have first-hand information, but it is negative first-hand information. Most gun owners who discussed this topic were at least sympathetic to the attitudes of people in this situation: “Some of the families, maybe they’ve had bad accidents where someone's been shot or killed, and I can see that” (R448);

[The reason for a negative perspective on guns] would either be one of two things as I could see it. Their opinions were before about their upbringing, what they knew growing up, and/or a negative experience. Maybe they’re a victim of a crime, or unfortunately maybe they knew a gun owner who was a jerk. I think they’re few and far between. [laughs] While I say that, I don’t say that flippantly. (R431)

One of the areas where respondents were most understanding of these attitudes was in the case of those with military experience whose PTSD had caused them to be anti-gun, or to at least avoid using guns themselves. Respondents 128 and 324 both told vivid stories about how older relatives and friends had fought in the military and had returned home with no desire to own
firearms, or the inability to trust themselves with a firearm. Others (Rs 378 and 235) speculated that their relatives who were anti-gun may have been so because they were in World War II, or knew people who were. These reasons were seen as tragic and, in at least one case, holding people back from their former enjoyment of firearms-related activities.

Outside of the limited case of PTSD, however, the perspective of someone who has had a negative experience with firearms was generally treated with respect. Respondent 128, for example, seemed to believe that people who had been to war might have a genuine reason to avoid guns. However, as with others in this situation, he tended to minimize this perspective by limiting it to just that person’s experience, and implying that it was not a perspective that could be understood or rationalized: “Somebody that maybe has been a victim of violence or has somebody that has been a victim of a gunshot wound is going to obviously have an experience and bring something to the discussion that you can't possibly understand from their perspective” (R128). In a related way, some respondents tended to minimize or devalue these kinds of attitudes by highlighting their emotional content. In one case, a respondent described the anti-gun sentiments of those who have been victimized as potentially as strong as their own pro-gun feelings, but minimized them both because of the emotionality involved:

A lot of times, you end up with people on either side that are, they're super emotional about owning, wanting, needing to own a gun and you're dealing with somebody on the other side, who's had a child or a relative killed with a gun. So they're equally as emotional in the opposite direction because of that (R242)

Another respondent lumped together those who have gotten their information from biased sources with those who have experienced firearms violence: “People who disapprove of firearms ownership have either, they've either spent way too much time listening to emotional rhetoric instead of facts or, again, emotionally, they have, they or someone close to them has suffered
some sort of tragedy” (R279). Along these same lines, Respondent 441 described traumatic experiences as non-rational, and implied that they would be less affecting over time:

People that you see that may have that problem, and not all of them do, but may- are people that either they or a family member have been a victim of gun violence. And I think they’re not looking at it necessarily from a rational point of view. Because the further away they get from the incident and time, the less likely they are to feel that way. They’re more likely to talk to you, but if it’s happened recently they are less likely. Or more severity, they’re less likely. (R441)

One respondent even went so far as to blame victims of crime for putting themselves in the situation where they got hurt:

A lot of them blame it on when they've had a tragedy in the family with them, or they know somebody, but, again, I think most of it boils down to not the proper training or education to have safely handled them. If it was something … that had to do with breaking and entering or whatever, or it was a violent crime on the street, some of them look at, “Well, okay. If that person wasn't allowed to have that gun-” but what's out there that stopped them from doing it? Yet, the person that it affected apparently didn't have the right or didn't utilize the right to protect themselves and put them in a vulnerable situation. If a lot of people, you can tell just by looking at them, whether or not they're going to be a victim or not. As soon as somebody sees somebody and you walk with authority type of walk, they're not going to confront you. If you walk, and you look like you're a victim where you're in fear of everything around you, you're already a victim. (R332)

It is important to note that this view was unique to this respondent, as nobody else explicitly blamed crime victims for their own victimization, but it was an important part of a larger trend which was to discount, minimize, and compartmentalize the one line of reasoning that gun owners felt had some legitimacy in terms of holding a negative attitude about firearms.

Overall, when looking at stereotyping, it is clear that gun owners were aware of it, but they were also active in disputing it. Their major strategies included partial acceptance, followed by deflecting the stereotypes onto others, as well as challenging the validity of the stereotypes
because they are held by people who do not have full, accurate information. But, it is important

to note, these strategies are enabled by the belief that firearms ownership is largely
unproblematic, and therefore that criticisms of it are unfounded. This interplay between the
views of the gun owners, and those who stigmatize them, will be explored further below.

Separation

Link and Phelan (2001) describe separation as occurring when “social labels connote a
separation of ‘us’ from ‘them,’” and when “labeled persons are believed to be distinctly
different” (370) from non-labeled people. As noted in the previous section, most gun owners do
not believe that there is anything wrong with gun ownership, and they believe that many people
who currently hold views counter to their own could be convinced to change their opinion with
relatively little effort. So, from the gun owners’ perspective, there does not seem to be any
perception of ongoing negative effects from separation.

To explore this issue further, one of the interview questions asked respondents directly
how they felt that everyday New Yorkers perceived gun ownership. By far the most common
response to this question was that most people are neutral on the issue, do not think about it, do
not care one way or the other, or otherwise have views that straddle the line between pro and
con. Respondent 267 gave a typical response:

I really think that most people in New York- For instance, if you look at my
neighborhood, a pretty good representative sample of middle New York State, Upstate
New York. The people are just average people here, and I haven’t run across anybody
that has any problems with the fact that I own firearms. I haven’t run across anybody that
has a problem with the fact that I hunt. (R267)
Many people argued that this neutrality came from familiarity, because firearms are common in upstate New York: “just doesn't come up as an issue and people aren't uncomfortable or more comfortable because you do or don't. It's just, once again, everybody has a T.V. set, everybody has a car, and most everybody in upstate New York has a gun” (R362). Others, however, attributed this neutrality to how little most people’s everyday lives are affected by firearms:

The people that own guns obviously tend to be very pro-gun. There’s a lot of people in the middle that are indifferent. I shouldn’t say “indifferent.” There’s people that maybe believe there is that right, but they don’t get in the middle of the controversy because they feel like, “Well, it doesn’t affect me.” (R420)

In a broadly similar vein, some respondents acknowledged the existence of strong pro- and anti-gun groups, but argued that these groups were both small and that most people were somewhere in between: “I think most of the society is not really pro or against until something waves them to one side or the other. I think you have the two sides that are dramatically apart, and you have a whole larger portion of the society that’s in the middle” (R138);

You got the pro gun here [gestures with right hand]. Anti here [gestures with left hand]. You might have 40, 50% in the middle sitting on the fence [motions to space in between previous marks]. That's why I say you got to be smart and not do anything to push them the other way. (R113)

In the end, just one respondent expressed the view that anti-gun forces outnumber those who are pro-gun. However, in this apparent avalanche of neutrality, there is a significant undercurrent that needs to be explored. Even among those who clearly indicated that attitudes were mixed – with some pro- and some anti-gun – their sentiments reflected a strong regionality. Respondent 441, for example, clearly set upstate New York apart from other locations:
It’s a different lifestyle. They’re living in a different world than I live in. New York City, New Jersey. That isn’t here, that’s totally different. You get totally different attitudes, and what’s socially acceptable - up here people aren’t going to say much about you owning a gun because, well, everybody owns a gun or knows people that own guns, or family members own guns. You just don’t get the negative reactions that you would down there where nobody owns guns and nobody goes hunting. It’s not a way of life. Up here it’s a way of life. (R441)

Respondent 378 said something similar, but located the dividing line even closer to home:

I honestly think there’s a majority of population out there that does not even think about it. Because it doesn’t affect them. Drive up and down any house in … the suburbs where they’re not affected by crime like you are in the city of Syracuse, or Rochester, New York City. They don’t worry about walking down the street at night, you know, they don’t hunt, they don’t target shoot – no interest in it. So I think a majority of the population could care less what happens with gun laws. (R378)

Even in this straightforward endorsement of the majority sentiment that most people are neutral on firearms issues, the respondent clearly identifies urban areas (and anywhere that safety is an issue) as an exception. Respondent 178 revealed the same opinion, though only upon further questioning:

R178: Well, the ones I’m associated with are for the hunters and stuff. I don’t have – I can’t think of anybody offhand, family or close friends or anything, that has ever questioned me about hunting or owning guns or opposed to having guns. I’ve had some that said, “I don’t own a gun, but I don’t have anything against anybody. They’ve got the right to have it. I don’t have any reason for them not to have it as long as they behave with it.”
ZM: You think that is a pretty common attitude around here?
R178: I think so, yeah. I don’t know about down in the big city. That’s a whole different story

This evidence further fleshes out the pattern identified in the previous chapter. Just as in politics, gun owners find themselves on an island of like-minded people. However, unlike in politics, outsiders cannot outnumber gun owners when it comes to their day-to-day experiences, and how
locals view gun ownership. In this case, the local truly stays local. If, as most people report, their gun ownership status is unproblematic, then it is very likely that they will not perceive separation between themselves and those living around them. This hypothesis is supported by a theme that emerged during interviews, which I coded as “separate spheres.” In exploring this idea, it is important to contrast my findings with those of Albers (2003).

Albers’s (2003) respondents experienced gun ownership as a strongly problematic identity, largely because their “day-to-day routines kept them surrounded by people to whom they did not feel comfortable disclosing information about their gun ownership” (130). This extended to work, where they frequently chose not to discuss gun ownership for fear of repercussions, as well as their social relationships, where Albers reports that it was “not uncommon for some respondents to avoid discussing the issue even with family members and other intimates in order to avoid conflict within their relationships” (129). Perhaps the most striking thing, though, was the extent to which this occurred, despite the fact that “a significant number of [Albers’s] respondents revealed that they don’t generally associate with non-owners, or that they know no one who doesn’t own guns” (131). Albers notes that this does not appear to be intentional on the part of gun owners, but rather a result of people forming friendships with those who enjoy the same things that they do.

These findings represent perhaps the biggest contrast between Albers’s work and my own, because almost none of what he found was consistent with the experiences reported by my respondents. Although several gun owners did report that they spend most of their time with gun owners, even when outside of these groups, they reported few restrictions in how, or to whom, they spoke about gun ownership:
I hang out with a lot of guys. Almost everybody I hang out with owns a gun … I should say have never dealt with, somebody who has been disinterested in it because if they don’t like guns and don’t deal with guns you know I don’t get into arguments, discussions with them over guns. The guys I work with most of us have never had – shit, I can say all of us – have never had a problem. You know, we’ve bought’n the guns we want, we shot when we want, so I don’t think there has ever been a problem that way. (R181)

Some respondents found the lack of anti-gun sentiment surprising, but nevertheless found no evidence for it in their everyday lives:

I guess, if you look at the national media and looked at the perceived attitude towards guns, you’d almost think that most people are anti-gun, but I don’t think they are. Not the people I know. Even people that don’t own guns aren’t anti-gun … People don’t come in my house and go- They know I own guns. They’re not all nervous and jerky. They know that my guns are stored safely and they’re not loaded, and I’m not flinging them around the house going, “Hey…” sticking it in their nose and being a yahoo. (R267)

The people I meet. Everybody hunts. Everybody's got their special thing they like to do outdoors, a lot of it’s firearm related. Yeah. It does, it just absolutely amazes me that they say there's so many people against guns in New York, but I can't friggin’ find one. (R174)

Others, however, note that their experience may be unique to this area:

Things may be changing that I'm not aware of, you know, too. Like, maybe there's more people that are against guns now than I really realize, you know? Like, say, when you're around people that's all you've dealt with is hunting and fishing, you're around people that really like guns and everything, but is that the consensus of all the United States? (R345)

Especially if you're from upstate New York, you run into a lot less people because you'll probably find the majority of the households actually have firearms of some sort, more so than- of some sort. And they don't have the opinion of somebody if you're closer to New York City. (R332).

Whatever the reason, there seems to be simply no evidence to suggest that, on a day-to-day basis, respondents feel like their stigma leads to separation from those who live around them.
There may be evidence to suggest that they feel disconnected from wider society, but in the interactions that are most proximate, there is no indication that they view themselves as different, or that efforts are being made to keep them separate from others who do not share their stigma.

**Status Loss**

Link and Phelan (2001) note that the most important difference between their definition of stigma and others’ is the requirement that it leads to status loss and discrimination. They argue that the three preceding steps are merely meant to create “a rationale … for devaluing, rejecting, and excluding them” (371). Consistent with this viewpoint, they argue that a status can only be considered stigmatized if it affects “life chances” in areas such as “income education, psychological well-being, housing status, medical treatment, and health” (371).

Status loss, per Link and Phelan, is defined as any reduction in a status hierarchy. And, of course, for the effects of a status to occur, the status itself must first be known. Therefore, our first step should be to analyze how gun owners approach their status. If they believed that gun ownership is a negative status – or if they had experienced negative repercussions in the past from revealing it – it would be logical to see respondents keeping their status hidden as much as possible. And since gun ownership is a perfect example of a concealable (discreditable) status, it would be very easy for people who are concerned about the revelation of their status to simply keep it quiet. However, counter to the actions of Albers’s respondents, my respondents showed little concern about keeping their firearms ownership status quiet, almost regardless of the situation. For example, respondents almost universally reported having no qualms about talking about their firearms ownership at work:

R140: … my main career was 32 years at a [manufacturing job]. So [firearms] came up a
lot. More in the context of, you know, I bought this, or I use this, or I'm going to use that for turkey season or deer season or whatever. …
Z: Yeah. And even when you are working at [manufacturing job], it was something people would talk about commonly and, you know, there was never a problem of other people saying, “you shouldn't talk about that,” or getting upset if you did?
R140: No.

Others report similarly having no qualms about discussing gun ownership and activities at work:

I know who at work hunts and who doesn't and we talk about it and we kid each other about what we got, what we didn’t get. I've gone hunting with co-workers, stuff like that over the years. Those kind of things and share those kind of things. I'm not embarrassed that I like to hunt. (R128)

Some reported that they were open enough to put up gun-related photographs of themselves at work (R138), while one respondent reported that being a hunter was actually a helpful attribute in her workplace:

My boss was a hunter and she made no bones about it. She was perfectly happy to have another hunter in the group. There were three of us in a group of 12 that hunted. Nobody else had a problem with it. Her boss didn’t have a problem with it, he was amazed that there were two women in the department that small that went hunting. He was also amazed that on Fridays when we had our announcements during hunting season, everybody’s kills got announced. (R441)

Just one respondent reported being reticent to discuss his gun ownership at work. This respondent worked at a university and stated that he did not talk about it “because it’s an incredibly liberal, liberal place” (R488). He felt that his boss, in particular, would be likely to “negatively look upon” his being a gun owner, and so he would lie about his weekend activities when asked. When asked what the consequences might be if he were to reveal he was a gun owner, he said, “I think it changes the way somebody feels about you as far as your decision making process, your intellect. ‘Oh, you’re one of them,’ or something” (R488). So, while it is
clear that gun owners are aware that – in the wrong circumstances – gun ownership could be
seen in a negative light, the majority of respondents gave no indication that this was the case for
them.

More generally, though, respondents reported being open with their gun ownership
outside of work as well. Several respondents said that there was no reason to conceal their
firearms ownership status, since it was already well known: “I think most people that know me
know that I hunt. If I hunt I must have something to use you know? I post pictures of me with my
guns and my ducks on Facebook. That's fine. I could care less if people know” (R128); “Most
everybody that I know, knows that I hunt. Grew up with them” (R251); “Being a hunter ed
instructor, I’m talking about it a lot like I am to you. People know I have firearms” (R138); “On
the other hand, with a pistol, you could opt out of having your name come up on a FOIL. I didn’t
opt out. I don't care. People know I got a gun, maybe they'll stay away from me. Where I live,
everybody around knows I got guns anyway” (R476).

When respondents were asked if there was any situation in which they think they would
be better off if their gun ownership status was not known, the majority responded negatively.
However, it is interesting to note that many respondents also noted that this topic rarely comes
up, but that they would have been fine to talk about it if it did:

I work at [store] over in [city] part-time. It’s never come up there. … I would never avoid
talking about it. Like I said before, I’m proud of it and if it ever came to the point where I
have to defend myself, not like from an intruder but defend why I own guns, defend my
purposes for owning them, I would defend for hours. (R154)

In the business world, I don’t think it’s really come up … if we discuss something, and
we talked about it and somebody sees a picture and asks. … or- if I find out somebody’s
not a hunter, or you’re social engaging and talking like most people do, and find out
they’re not hunters, it’s not like I’m going to bring it up and just keep throwing it at them.
(R138)
One respondent described a work trip where, even though there were hunters present, the topic never came up, but he would not have shied away if it had:

R262: In New Jersey, there weren't many hunters at the table. There were a couple guys that were hunters, and the other six, seven guys were not. They were big into fishing, and so it wasn't so much political as in we really didn't have much in common to get into a discussion about guns and hunting and that type of thing. It didn't happen.
ZM: It's more that it doesn't come up. It's not that you avoid talking about it?
R262: I don't know that I've ever avoided talking about it.

The one major exception to this overall openness about firearms ownership has to do with security. In addition to any sentimental value, guns can be worth hundreds or thousands of dollars, and burglars are known to target houses with guns in them (Wright and Decker 1996). As a result, many firearms owners specified that the only reason they would avoid talking about their gun ownership would be if they felt it might cause them to be targeted by a criminal. When asked if he was concerned that people might find out he was a gun owner, Respondent 140 said:

R140: No, that wouldn't concern me at all.
ZM: Yeah?
R140: I'd be more concerned if somebody knew that I had a number of guns if they tried to break into my house.
ZM: Oh, okay, I see. But it doesn't bother you at all if people know?
R140: No.

Another respondent reported a conversation he had where he urged a co-worker to think defensively:

A co-worker had a Sig Sauer sticker in the back of his truck. I said, “what are you thinkin’?” He goes, “what?” He says, “you're just breaking my chops, 'cause you're a Glock guy.” I said, “no, I'm not. You know Sig Sauer means?” He goes, “what?” “Broken window.” “What do you mean?” I said, “you're advertising. What are people going to think? Got guns in that truck.” They're going to smash your windows out and
they're going to go through your truck. Wasn't even two days later he took the sticker off of there. Why advertise? (R227)

Respondents who were concerned about the potential for theft sometimes proposed scenarios in which it was not the person who they told who was the problem, but how the information spread:

If I say something to you, you say something to the girlfriend, then she says, “Oh yeah my boyfriend he was telling me this dude lives in [town], I think he lives around here and wow he was so impressed with his gun collection.” You know, and now that person talks to three others, you know? “Oh yeah I heard this guy in [town] has a gun collection.” You know? Could people put the dots together? Maybe. Probably not, but you know it’s just something I don’t think needs to be flaunted. (R378)

One respondent described how he intentionally played down his outward support for pro-gun organizations because he did not want to invite crime:

As big a supporter of the NRA as I am, you won’t find any NRA bumper stickers on my vehicle or anything like that because I want to be anonymous in that way. Not that I don’t believe in the cause, but it’s just to protect myself and my family from- any approaches that are unwanted. (R431)

(There was some disagreement on this point, as some people felt it would be safer to publicly acknowledge owning guns in order to scare off potential criminals. However, only a few people reported these views and those who favored keeping quiet on the matter were far more numerous.)

The final point regarding stigma has to do with willingness to not only talk about one’s status – which is generally done selectively, and on an individual basis – but also the willingness to publicly associate oneself with a potentially stigmatized cause. Goffman uses the term “stigma markers” to refer to things like outwardly signal one’s membership in a stigmatized group – the red and white cane of a person who is blind, for example, or a prisoner’s orange jumpsuit. For
gun owners, these might be things like camouflage hunting clothing, pro-gun bumper stickers, or NRA T-shirts. When asked about these kinds of markers, most respondents expressed a willingness to display such markers as pro-gun T-shirts and bumper stickers, but only a few of them actually reported doing so on a regular basis. There were a number of reasons for this. Part of it, as described above, was the debate over whether such public displays (especially on cars) might make one more vulnerable to crime. Also, a surprising number, though certainly a minority, of respondents reported that they refused to put stickers of any kind on their vehicles, so the choice not to display pro-gun stickers was merely a result of that. Those respondents who said that they do actively avoid obvious pro-gun materials tended to cite the same reasons as those who avoided talking about being a gun owner – security, along with the occasional concern about getting negative reactions from people who see it.

Discrimination

The final component of Link and Phelan’s understanding of stigma is discrimination – whether one faces serious consequences due to membership in a stigmatized group. As noted above, this can take place on the individual level or the structural level, in a number of different forms. As a result of this, it can be difficult to completely document all instances of potential discrimination, but it is important to at least attempt to catalogue the range of experiences that a stigmatized individual may face.

To attempt to touch on individual-level discrimination, respondents were asked if they had ever felt that anyone looked down on them, or treated them badly, by someone who found out that they were a gun owner. Given my reading of the literature – especially Albers (2003) – I suspected that I would hear a great many positive responses to this question, so I was surprised
when most people failed to report any negative experiences. To ensure that I was not missing something, I re-worded it, and added a probe question, to attempt to capture any incident – even very slight ones – where respondents might have encountered negative consequences due to their ownership status. In general, the pattern of respondents’ answers was in keeping with what I had found initially – relatively few people reported major negative incidents, but – upon probing – a few were able to recall smaller, less significant instances of negative interactions with others as a result of their firearms ownership status. It is important to note, though, that most instances were one-time events, and were relatively minor, including incidents such as: a brief disagreement with a stranger about guns (R140), arguing with a family member on Facebook about the SAFE Act (R128), arguing in person with a friend-of-a-friend (R140; R235; R167), having a lengthy argument with a PETA member (R169), occasionally encountering people socially who disagree with gun ownership (R441; R488), and having an argument over a gift to a teenager of a T-shirt with a gun image on it (R298).

Many of the mid-range incidents had to do with people who disliked hunting, or who were protesting shooting sports. For example, one respondent reported that his neighbor complained that a trophy deer he had shot was a “city deer,” that was used to human contact from being close to civilization, and that he had shot it in his backyard. He argued with the woman, saying that he had shot the deer properly in a location away from the city, and that the deer was still wild despite having been seen near the city. The woman ended up calling the game wardens, who investigated the claim, and found that the respondent’s actions were legal and appropriate. In this case, though, the respondent perceived the woman’s anger to be directed at him as a hunter rather than as a gun owner, noting, “she never said anything about guns though. They never really bring up the gun issue of, you shot it with a gun, you shot it with a bow”
This same respondent also reported encountering protestors in Pennsylvania who picketed a shooting tournament because of the negative environmental consequences of shotgun sports (R448).

Additional interactions of this type – which could have turned out to be serious, but did not – include: 1) a respondent who reported encountering (without incident) a person who tried to scare ducks away from hunting grounds (R169); 2) a respondent who reported encountering a group of anti-hunting protestors who would bang pots and pans in the woods to scare away animals (R138) – a situation that was eventually resolved via the passage of a law against such behavior; 3) a respondent who mentioned hearing about, though not personally encountering, a woman who reportedly protested hunting by wearing a brown coat and walking in the woods during hunting season, with the intention of getting shot by a hunter (R476). Luckily, though, these incidents did not produce lasting consequences, and respondents typically reported them as having happened years earlier, suggesting that such events are not common.

One incident did emerge from the interviews that was difficult to judge because of the lack of specificity, but which could rise to the level of discrimination. In this case, the respondent runs a business with a waiting room where, among other things, he puts out photographs of the deer that he has taken while hunting. He described it this way:

I got my deer down there. I didn't put the gun one [a photograph of his hunting rifle] in there because I figured the deer would be enough to kick them off. If I put the deer with the gun that I got the deer with, I'd probably have people get up and walk out. But I'm not here to offend my customer, but I am here to engage them if they want to engage. (R362)

The respondent then went on to say that his waiting room contains a number of other items that customers sometimes react to – Bibles, and photographs of conservative political figures – and he described a specific incident where his apparent support for a conservative political rally
caused him to lose at least one customer. However, the loss of customers seemed to be unrelated to the hunting photographs:

ZM: So you think the furthest it’s ever gone is maybe someone sees the picture of the deer, and is like, 'eww' and that's the furthest you think it ever goes for the most part? R362: Yeah, for the most part. A lot of people go up there and take a closer look at it and they ask me questions about it. And I see some people look at it and they get kind of a distained look on their face and they go back and sit down and they don't say nothing. But the reason why they're here is they know we're honest and we do good work.

Given the respondent’s assessment of the situation, it is difficult to assess how serious the presence of the hunting photographs is. Since no one has said anything to him directly about it, it seems unlikely that the respondent’s support for firearms has specifically caused a customer to cease doing business with him (or, at least, the hunting images have not been reported to him as the reason). However, it is clear that the presence of the hunting images is at least problematic for some people, and so it is possible that customers’ assessment of that particular stigmatized attribute could have affected their choice to continue to do business with him, or to recommend his business to others. (Though, as noted, the respondent believes that his reputation for honesty is enough to outweigh any stigma that might arise from the items in his waiting room.)

In the end, only one event rose to the level of serious consequences related to firearms ownership. In this case, Respondent 324 and his wife reported that they went to a doctor’s appointment, where they encountered an employee of the doctor’s office with whom they had gone shooting in the past. Together they began talking and reminiscing about their mutual enjoyment of firearms. However, as a result of this conversation, someone complained, and Respondent 324 reported that the employee was fired from her job. The respondent was unable to provide too many additional details since the woman who got fired was not a close friend and the event happened many years ago, but he was clear about the nature of their conversation:
We weren’t displaying firearms. We weren’t ranting. We were just reminiscing and having fun, and she was asking questions. We were just enthusiastic … we weren’t adding a lot of profanity. We weren’t saying, ‘Oh, you have got to shoot the bastards.’ We were just talking about firearms in general, exchanging information, what kind of gun would I use if I was going to do this kind of shooting again. (R324)

As noted, the details of this exchange were somewhat hazy, but the respondent was clear that the woman was fired because of this specific interaction, although his wife noted that the woman was, “ready to move on” from the job and that “[s]he was all right” after the firing because “[s]he was the kind of individual who could handle it” (R324’s wife).

Considering all of these incidents together, it seems clear that – while firearms ownership is certainly not a neutral status – neither does it rise to a level where firearms owners are routinely encountering problems as a result of it. Many respondents had to think long and hard, and be prompted, to even come up with the minor incidents they reported. And even the more serious incidents that were reported appeared to be quite uncommon in that few respondents reported them, and they were typically isolated incidents that did not reoccur and did not have particularly serious consequences.

As additional evidence, it is important to consider the responses to one other interview question. After the question about negative interactions, I also asked respondents if they had ever had a positive interaction after someone found out for the first time that they were a gun owner. Many respondents were able to come up with an instance where they had had a positive interaction as a result of someone finding out they were a firearms owner. These responses tended to revolve around taking people shooting for the first time or teaching them to shoot, as well as using firearms ownership as a way of making connections to new people they meet (both friends of friends and complete strangers). Occasionally a more meaningful interaction occurred,
such as a friendship that resulted from discussions about firearms (R267; R201), or going shooting or hunting with a new person (R448; R227; R251). One person even reported using firearms ownership as a way of connecting with potential business clients (R174). When asked, respondents generally believed that these positive outcomes happened far more often than negative ones: “In my life, yeah, I would say that happens more often than the other. You usually find out that the other person does too. You know? [laughs]” (R431). Respondent 235 reports the same thing, from people who visit his home, which prominently features a variety of animal trophies:

R235: Well, somebody might ask me, “do you hunt?” I say yeah. “Oh, what do you like to hunt?” If they come to the house here, I says right there. [points to hunting trophies] [laughs] They say “oh wow, impressive.” I don't think there's ever been anybody here that saw them and thought, “oh, dirty bastard he's an animal killer.” I don't think that's ever happened. I just don't.
ZM: It's more likely they have a good reaction?
R235: I think so.

There is certainly an argument to be made that positive interactions may be more common – even with strangers – simply because the people one encounters on a daily basis are not a random sampling of the population. However, regardless of the reasons for the ratio of positive to negative interactions, for the purposes of evaluating stigma it is clearly important that respondents overall believe that they have more positive interactions than negative ones.

Overall, then, there is no clear evidence that the stigma against firearms owners is strong or persistent. This is true to the extent that the major concern that firearms owners seem to have as it relates to revealing their ownership status is not stigma-related, per se, but rather a concern that they will be targeted by thieves looking to obtain guns. Otherwise, respondents report being generally open about their ownership status, with several reporting that it is well known in their
local community. Furthermore, there is no evidence from this sample to suggest that firearms owners, as a group, routinely face consequences that strongly affect their ability to work, go to school, obtain health care, have interpersonal relationships, and access other components necessary to life. Firearms owners do face some discrimination, but the vast majority of it seems to be limited to minor interpersonal conflicts that lead to, at worst, hurt feelings or raised tempers. Occasionally there is a serious consequence resulting from firearms ownership stigma, but these incidents seem to be few and far between, and appear to be largely outweighed by the positive consequences of the status.

*Power Structure - NRA*

The power structure within which firearms ownership stigma occurs is unique, and requires close study. Survey research has indicated that at least 20% of individuals in the United States personally own a firearm (DeSilver 2013), and approximately 40% of households contain a firearm (Gallup 2016). These figures are relatively high compared with other stigmatized statuses: those with serious mental illnesses make up about 4.1% of the US population (National Institute of Mental Health 2015), and those that are HIV-positive make up about 0.4% (AIDS.gov 2014). Firearms owners are certainly not the largest stigmatized group, however – for example, over one-third of US adults are considered obese, along with about 16% of children (National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases 2012). And, of course, numbers are far from the only factor when it comes to power. In Link and Phelan’s model, power is important insofar as it refers to a group that “possess[es] the social, cultural, economic, and political power” to bring about “serious discriminatory consequences” (376) for groups that they choose to stigmatize. They highlight this aspect of stigma because, without it, the concept would become overbroad.
From most perspectives, firearms owners are quite influential in their own right, and therefore have a strong ability to resist stigmatization. Economically speaking, the National Shooting Sports Foundation estimates that the total economic impact of the firearms industry is approximately $43 billion per year (National Shooting Sports Foundation 2014). And while that is less than 1% of the US GDP, it is equivalent to “about what Americans spend on the arts in a year” (Velasco 2013) indicating that it is still quite a large number.

Politically speaking, pro-gun groups are also quite influential. The NRA has been designated as a “Heavy Hitter” (defined as one of the “140 biggest overall donors to federal elections since the 1990 election cycle”) by the Center for Responsive Politics, and consistently ranks very highly in terms of the amount of money given in direct candidate contributions, lobbying, and outside spending (OpenSecrets n.d.). This far exceeds the spending by anti-gun organizations, although there is increasing spending by these groups, especially those associated with Michael Bloomberg. Prior to the 2014 election, Bloomberg reported that he would be spending $50 million “building a nationwide grass-roots network to motivate voters who feel strongly about curbing gun violence” (Peters 2015). In making this pledge, he stated that the goal of this new organization would be to emulate NRA tactics and “punish those politicians who fail to support their agenda.” Together, these factors suggest that the NRA is indeed a powerful organization both in terms of the amount of money they control and the amount of influence they have over political outcomes.

One important element of the NRA’s influence is their public perception. Polling data suggests that while a majority of Americans have a positive view of the NRA (Newport 2012), just 35% report that the NRA reflects their views “most of the time” or “always.” Even among gun owners, this figure rises to just 50%, indicating that support for the organization may not
come from people feeling that the organization always represents their interests. Additionally, other polling data suggests that there is a great deal of concern about the influence of the NRA – 39% of Americans report a belief that the NRA has too much influence over gun control laws, 35% said they have the right amount of influence, and 18% said they had too little influence (Drake 2014). And even when looking at gun owners, those who believe the NRA has too much influence still outnumber those who think they do not have enough (28% to 20%), with most others (47%) saying that they have the right amount of influence. These figures suggest that there is discontent even among gun owners about how powerful the NRA is, though less so than among the general population. However, political opinions are difficult to encapsulate in survey questions, as people’s viewpoints tend to be complex, especially on sensitive topics. Therefore, it makes more sense to explore such viewpoints using qualitative data, to give respondents a chance to explain their views and why they feel the way they do.

In my interviews, I asked respondents how well they felt the NRA represented their views, and asked them to explore the reasons why they felt that way. Those who expressed generally positive views of the NRA tended to cite a few main reasons why. The most often-cited reason was that the NRA speaks for gun owners, and represents them on political matters. For example, Respondent 431 said he liked the NRA because of the way they “defen[d] us in legislatures, both federal and states” (R431). Respondent 128 felt much the same way, saying that the NRA “stay[s] on top of legislative issues both nationally and local” (R128), and that they go beyond appearances and political statements and actually “hold the legislators accountable. They'll score them based on their performance. It's one thing to talk it but how did you vote? [laughs] You know? I'm not there to follow that every day. So that gives you kind of a
scorecard” (R128). Respondent 113 also praised the NRA’s attention to legislative and voting
issues:

They do come out at election with a list of candidates and how they stand, which gives
you some kind of an education on which ways you might want to vote. I can't speak for
every voter but I do look at that … They let you know the way the candidates think. It's
that old adage: you support people that support you. (R113)

Respondent 235 concurs with the previous viewpoints, adding that the NRA acts as a kind of
proxy for gun owners in government: “being a gun owner you need somebody like that.
Somebody's got to talk for me, I can't do it, you know what I mean? You and I can sit here and
talk, but where are we going? No, somebody's got to do it for you” (R235).

Even among those respondents who held positive views of the NRA, several indicated
that the NRA often took extreme positions that did not represent what they themselves would
want to see enacted as policy. However, there was a general sense among respondents with these
views that these extreme positions were necessary in order to achieve a positive result in the end.
Respondent 362 summarized it this way:

In politics, everybody goes for the extremes. … The same thing with our NRA. These
guys, they're doing the best they can, they're trying to keep things in the forefront to try to
counteract what's actually going on politically, where it's gone to the extreme left. You
have people out there that they want to do it take all guns away. Then you got the NRA
that’s trying to go to the extreme right so somehow we'll end up somewhere in the
middle, which I don't think that serves anybody [laughs] very well. … It's just the way
business is done. So if we didn't have the NRA, we probably wouldn't have our guns right
now. The fact that people think the NRA is way over to the right: well, someone has to be
because we got so many people who are way over on the left. … It doesn't make a whole
lot of sense but there's a place for the NRA, they're doing a good job. (R362)

Respondent 332 agrees in principle with what the NRA does, even if their actual positions do not
exactly reflect his own, because he perceives that gun opponents using similar tactics: “Do I
agree with every little thing that we shouldn't be somewhat flexible about? But if our government's not going to be flexible, I kind of support them doing the same thing” (R332).

Respondent 488 gives an example of how this kind of extreme negotiation takes place on a real issue:

That’s why I think they also then on the surface look like lunatics because you got Wayne LaPierre out there saying “hey, we don’t believe in background checks.” Everybody’s going, “well why wouldn’t you want a background check? It sounds so common sense. Why wouldn’t you want to make sure that some nut doesn’t have a gun?” What the media doesn’t pick up is the NRA saying it isn’t about background checks, it’s about tracking them so they can confiscate. That gets lost in the shuffle. (R488)

This respondent went on to compare the perceived creep of gun laws to income tax laws: “After World War II they started income tax. ‘Well, we just need it to help funding the war effort and how to pay for it.’ Whereas now you got a complex system … You can’t give them an inch because they’ll extend it they’ll extend it, the government” (R488). This respondent also classified the opposition to background checks as “somewhat unfortunate” but still reported that he felt opposing them was necessary to avoid government intrusion.

Reflecting the slippery slope argument about the power of the NRA, a few respondents spoke about what they felt might happen if the NRA did not take the positions that it does:

If you go up to Quebec and Ontario, hunting, you get the people up there tell you, the hunters, “Don’t ever let that NRA get away from you. The best thing that ever happened to you folks is having that NRA to fight for you.” They don’t have it up there. It’s a little tougher deal for the sportsman up there. (R178)

One respondent related this position to the passage of the SAFE Act in New York:

Well, it's like that gentleman I hunt with. I was after him for years to join the NRA. “Oh no, no, no.” He didn't want to spend the money … Sometimes he's cheap. The morning that that SAFE Act come out, he calls me up and he's crying. I says, “what have I been
telling you for the last 8 years?” He says, “I joined the NRA this morning.” I said, “I've been telling you that for 8 years!” He says, “I can't believe they did that to us!” I said, “I've been telling you they been thinking about that and trying for years! You just wouldn't listen to me. You're not laughing at me now, are you?” (R113)

Some respondents took issue with various aspects of the NRA’s current approach. A few questioned the NRA’s tone and the methods that they were perceived to use when carrying out their work, particularly their disinterest in compromise. While Respondent 154 categorized himself as pro-NRA, and had even attended national NRA meetings, he still felt that their approach was sometimes too strong:

I feel like the NRA is a little- If they scaled it back they would get a little bit more credibility. … Like, I’m reasonable. I don’t think you need to own a rocket launcher. I feel like they would get a lot more credibility, they would get listened to a lot more, if they were just- If they knew how to be more diplomatic with stuff. … 90% of the time they’re in it gung-ho for no restrictions at all. I think that if they were in there like “okay, we understand that you want to feel safer, so why don’t we find some sort of middle ground?” I feel like if they did that they would be a lot more successful. People would be a lot more open to them. (R154)

Respondent 441 also spoke about tone, and the tension between using a reasonable tone to present the organization well, and using a more aggressive tone to get attention:

I don’t think they are necessarily their best when they have got [NRA Vice-President] Wayne [LaPierre] out talking to people. I think Wayne can be very brusque and offensive at times. I think there are other people within the organization that do a better overall job. But sometimes you need to have that person that grates on you just a little bit, say it for the group because the other people aren’t listening, and you need to get their attention. And I think that’s mostly how they use Wayne, and I think that’s what he does best. Because when you meet him one-on-one he’s really not that kind of an abrasive person. He’s a much nicer person to speak to one-on-one than you would necessarily think after seeing some of his speeches. On the other hand … most of his speeches I agree with 100%. I just don’t always agree with how he presents them. (R441)
Also on the issue of tone, Respondent 138 argued that staking out a more extreme position sometimes leaves the NRA open to criticism from opponents:

> I think some of their media thing comes out a little crass, but I think it’s meant to do that too. I think sometimes they just want to shock people … I think that actually pushes some people to the other side, but it actually gives the other side a stance which NRA plays off of too, a stance say, “Look! Look how crazy they are! They want an armed guard at every school!” (R138)

Some people reported feeling conflicted about the NRA because they supported at least some of the NRA’s positions – or the things they believed the NRA stands for – but disagreed with other positions. In the end, many of these people who were on the fence came to the final conclusion that the NRA offered more benefits than drawbacks, although there were a variety of levels of this decision. Respondent 113, for example, when asked about the NRA initially said that there were some issues that the NRA got involved with where he ended up “thinking that's not a fight we want to get into,” but said that “most of the stuff they're doing right now I agree with. You got to fight it now or you're going to end up with problems down the road” (R113). In the end, he summarized his disagreements with the organization by saying, “I don't agree with everything the NRA says … but you're not going to agree with everybody all the time. You're bound to have differences,” and he summarized these differences as “minor stuff. It's not anything real major. It's not worth not joining over” (R113).

Some other respondents came to the conclusion that the NRA was the best option that was out there, especially when looking long-term:

> Whether they're right or wrong in some of the laws is fine but, they're actually lookin’ out for your, your interests. Okay? Do I get that much involved in it? No, not at this age anymore. Y'know, you get so many years to live, you live it the way you wanna- no, I think they're going to be- it's going better for the kids comin’ up now that they'll protect them. (R448)
After noting his disagreement with the NRA over some issues, Respondent 324 spoke of them as representing a counter-balance to what he perceived as a slow tightening of firearms laws:

I remember my father saying, “Now it’s your turn,” and he had to put up with New York State laws and all of this political fundraising stuff for – like the NRA has always got these things happening, but they are happening, and you are trying to fight them, so all that takes time and money. (R324)

A few, though, seemed to support the NRA in spite of themselves, and ended up supporting the NRA because there was no other option. One respondent was angry that the NRA had not done enough to prevent the passage of the SAFE Act:

As much as I don't agree with them and what they do, it's still all there is. I think they were really weak in New York when the SAFE Act was passed. Standing back and letting [New York State Rifle and Pistol Association President Tom] King take care of it, I don't think was appropriate. I think they should have drawn national attention to it. They should have focused at the state level, realizing it’s a foot in the door at the national level. Instead, they were more worried about everything else coming along at the national level. (R174)

Others were more fatalistic about this outcome, however: Respondent 420 said the NRA is at its strongest when influencing legislation, and concurred that the NRA had not done enough to fight the SAFE Act, but chalked it up to timing:

They tend to fight the national fight and, while they do fight the states, unfortunately, like with New York State, that happened so quick that they had no involvement. We do have the New York State Rifle and Pistol Association, which is really the New York State chapter of the NRA, if you will. They fight the state fights while the NRA fights the national fights. … It’s difficult because now you’ve got the New York State Rifle and Pistol Association, who has very limited funds, now having to fight this. (R420)
Those who reported actively disliking the NRA typically had a specific reason for doing so, but which was representative of a larger issue they had with the organization. Respondent 140, for example, reported feeling that the organization had “lost a lot of credibility” and gave their association with Ted Nugent as an example of this: “They, they do a lot of good things for gun ownership and I'm sure that they represent us, but on the same hand I think they've lost a lot of face when they have people like Ted Nugent. And that's why I would never join ‘em again” (R140). Another respondent objected to the organization’s lack of transparency:

And the other thing that bothers me with the NRA is they will say they want to be transparent but if you push somebody to, ‘well how much does Wayne LaPierre make?’ you won’t find out. You’ll go to your grave asking the question. And all the other people that are under him. Does he sit there and make a buck a day? No. I’m sure he’s up in that 2, 3, 4 million dollar bracket. ‘He came all the way to Albany to talk.’ Well, good. How much do you think it cost him to do that? Out of his own pocket? Nothing. His plane got paid for, his trip got paid for, his taxicab, his food, his hotel room, and everything else, and that was just part of what he did that day. Was he effective? I don’t think so. But that’s strictly my opinion. They try to educate people but I really think they- I don’t feel their approach is the best. (R320)

Probably the most common type of objection voiced about the NRA, however, was when a respondent strongly disagreed with a stance the organization had taken on a specific issue, and that soured them on the entire organization. Some issues of this kind included support for assault weapons (R251), opposition to background checks (R345), support for frangible (“cop-killer”) ammunition (R345; R476), and promoting the carrying of guns everywhere at all times (R117; R101).

Also, a summary of respondents’ disagreements with the NRA would be incomplete without noting that a significant minority of respondents independently reported disliking the amount of mailed communications they received from the NRA. Most reported a desire to
support the organization financially, but disliked what they interpreted as wasteful use of the organization’s resources:

The way I look at it they are constantly looking for money. If your concern is money, then why do you print a 4-color paper and mail it out to all your members six times in a month? How much did that mailing cost? 3 million dollars? 4 million dollars? The post office didn’t deliver it for free did they? (R320)

A few even reported that the excessive mailings were one reason they no longer supported the NRA:

If I could just give them money every year, and say, “Here.” and say that I was a member but do not send me anything [laughs] I probably would do it. I was a member of the NRA when I was a kid … Back when I was like, I don't know, sixteen or seventeen maybe. So the hounding of the money, saying they need it, need it, need it, need it. I don't like that with anything anymore. I'm older you know- some people, it probably don't bother. I don't like it, and I don't want to deal with it, and I don't have to deal with it. (R345)

The other thing with the NRA is, if I pay my $30 or $35 a year, they spend more money mailing me something every week than what they take in, and they are constantly begging for more money. … When I was a member years ago, at least every two weeks, I got something from ‘em, and the amount of paper and the postage slowly ate up my membership. (R251)

To summarize gun owners’ views of the NRA – overall, they appear to be in favor of having such a powerful organization on their side, especially when it comes to political issues. Many gun owners were very pro-NRA, several of them unconditionally so. However, there was an undercurrent of dissatisfaction with the organization, largely over issues where the organization’s standpoint differs from that of gun owners themselves. For a few people, these disagreements were significant enough that they refused to support the NRA. However, for many respondents who had disagreements with the NRA, there was nevertheless a sense that the goal of protecting gun rights was too important to withhold support from the cause. The NRA tended
to be seen as the only organization that protects gun owners’ rights, and so they tended to perceive that the good outweighs the bad. This is generally consistent with the relatively limited survey data on the subject (Weil and Hemenway 1993), which tends to show that “the leadership positions of the NRA do not represent the views of either the typical NRA member or nonmember gun owners” (363), but that support for the organization may still be high when “measured in very general terms” (363). This data is also consistent with the general pattern suggesting that NRA members are somewhat more supportive of pro-gun positions than gun owners who are not members. (Or, as indicated in my research, disagreements over policy issues where the NRA promotes very hardline views may lead gun owners with more moderate views to discontinue their membership, or to never obtain membership in the first place.) Overall this indicates that – as an element of the power structure of gun ownership – the NRA is quite powerful itself, and does enjoy a great deal of support from gun owners, but some elements of that support are conditional.

Power Structure - Media

Another key element of the power structure in which gun ownership operates has to do with the media. As described in the section on stereotypes, gun owners felt relatively little stigma in their day-to-day experiences in upstate New York. However, they are aware that stigmatizing forces exist outside of their local area, and the media was perceived to be one of those forces. Respondents tended to identify television as the biggest source of problems, but they also mentioned additional sources – such as newspapers and the Internet – that they saw as creating difficulties as well.
One major problem respondents had with most media portrayals was that they saw those portrayals as inaccurate or deceiving. Of those who felt that this deception was intentional, they argued that the press in general had an anti-gun agenda and would intentionally spin stories to conform to that bias, or would fail to report key information that would give necessary context to ongoing situations revolving around firearms. This ranges from broad conceptual points – “I think most of the quote-unquote mainstream media would like the world to believe that most of the public isn't in favor of firearms ownership. But, I mean … people that take the time to do honest research have shown otherwise” (R279) – to how gun-related tragedies are covered – “I think they just see something like … the emotional aspects of kids getting killed with machine guns and stuff, the stuff that gets overblown by the media and usually portrayed incorrectly” (R220) – to supposed intentional cover-ups of accurate information – “for how many years has it been proven that the states that pass concealed carry, the crime rate dropped? How many years has that been proven? Last 10-15 years? How many people know it, or going to admit to it? … they just hear the top of the headlines, the mainstream media bull. That’s their education. That's the extent of it” (R174). The reasons for this perceived anti-gun slant are not entirely clear. One respondent indicated that the problem may be systemic: “the media kind of leans a little bit to the left, and their antigun agenda is somewhat imbedded” (R378). Respondent 441 explicitly exempted individual reporters from responsibility for the problem, stating that they often submit well-balanced stories, but that people further up the organizational hierarchy subsequently alter the stories to be more in line with the view of their media outlet. When asked why this happens, she replied:

That organization has decided that’s their stance on that. Anytime I have seen a news organization of any kind take a stance on something, be it who they’re backing for political office, or whatever it is. A law that they’re backing or going against. That’s the
company stand, everybody is going to have the same stand, that’s company policy. (R441)

Overall, though, relatively few people identified a reason for the perceived bias, but many people did believe that it existed.

Intentional misrepresentation was not the extent of the problem, however. Many respondents also found fault with the media for not knowing key information about firearms, and either making inaccurate statements, or creating stigmatizing portrayals, as a result: “They all call a shotgun a rifle or a rifle a shotgun. They don’t go into detail. They don’t say that it was an illegal gun that was used in this robbery. I don't think the reporting is accurate and thorough enough” (R201). Some respondents objected specifically to the common TV news practice of using graphics, or file footage, featuring firearms that may or may not be associated with the story in which they are being used:

I think there are some media outlets that do better than others, but I think in general. I mean, they all- when they were talking about the SAFE Act, you saw the AK-47 with the 30-round clip. They … themselves don’t take the time to understand. I don’t think they even understood that what they were shown on the screen was not even what we were talking about … It’s easy to put that out there because it looks like a military gun and just put fear into people, and I think the media sometimes promotes that. (R420)

These types of errors sometime straddle the line between intentional and unintentional. Referring to the Maryland Navy Yard shooting, and how claims that the shooter was armed with an AR-15 rifle (rather than a shotgun and pistols, as turned out to be the case (Brumfield 2013)) turned out to be false, one respondent said: “they were calling it an assault weapon. I did hear it called an AR-15 at one time, but all that had to be retracted. It just tells me that the media would do anything they can to make those kind of guns look bad” (R235). This was seen as an ongoing
problem by some because it was perceived that people who were unfamiliar with guns were taking in this bad information and drawing conclusions based on it (R441).

While inaccurate or deceiving portrayals were the biggest concerns that respondents voiced, another problem they saw with the media was the related concern that realistic portrayals of gun owners were perceived to be either few and far between or totally absent. Complaining about this lack of accurate portrayals, Respondent 138 said:

I mean, where’s the rest of the things about firearms go? It goes in the sports section, and it goes in the calendar. Every once in a while, they have a little picture on there of a guy with the trophy of the week, or whatever it is, or the fish of the week, and that’s what you see. How many people—unless you’re actually looking for that, you don’t even open that section up. (R138)

Respondent 320 contrasted the reaction to what he perceived to be the portrayal of “real” gun owners versus the most common types of portrayals:

You’re not going to see a write-up in the paper about Joe who took his grandson out and they spent hours out in the field watching and planning and doing all this other stuff. Now if Joe took a gun and went and robbed a 7-11, he’s front page. (R320)

Respondent 362 agreed, suggesting that the only time the media comes close to talking about real gun owners is when they talk about hunting injuries and deaths.

How many hunters got shot. [laughs] That makes the news. It doesn't make the news if some guy got a trophy buck in upstate New York and it was the largest one taken in the United States or something like that. That would never make the news, but it would make the news if some guy got winged out in a field. That'd be playing for three days. (R362)

This concern is very closely linked with another problem that respondents identified: that the only time guns appear in the media is when they have been used illegally. This took a couple of different forms, one of which had to do with questioning why local gun violence stories
became national media stories. One questioned this in terms of a particular local story: “That shooting out in Webster, two guys got killed, and they were shot with a Remington version of the AR-15. That's two out of how many million people are there in this country. Why should that be nationwide news?” (R476). Others interpreted this more broadly, suggesting that there are actually relatively few incidents of gun violence and the media simply play up the ones that happen:

Every little incident that's happening is being reported so when you get all those incidents added up, it sounds like a huge number of people taking part in gun violence. I think, statistically, it's probably not as bad as it sounds but when you got the news media banging on it every single day. (R362)

The final problem that respondents reported with the media is that they viewed it as part of the problem – that the media is implicated in depicting gun violence in a way that feeds back and creates more violence:

Their exposure is the television. Their exposure, the politics. That's what they see. That's what they hear about. They hear about crime every night. There's a shooting on South Salina Street in Syracuse, there was this, there was that. It's coming at you all the time, and that's what they hear. (R262)

Some respondents also perceived that things were better when they were younger:

We grew up watching things like The Lone Ranger, who shot the gun out of a guy’s hand. … Shot him in the leg so he wouldn’t run away. You didn’t blow him into 50 million pieces. There wasn’t blood. You didn’t decapitate him. There wasn’t all this blood and gore involved. It was- you did what you had to do. Okay. Then you stopped evil from progressing. Now it’s there is no fine lines, and you’re looking at this stuff. How do these kids decide? (R324)

Together these key forces – the NRA and the media – sketch the boundaries of the power structure within which the stigmatization of gun ownership takes place. Further research should
seek to explore this issue more, exploring all of the organizations that gun owners believe are involved in this process, and the processes they believe are most influential. For the current research, though, the most that can be done is to outline the influence of these two powerful entities and explore how gun owners experience them in their daily lives.

**Internally Generated Stigma**

*Introduction*

Whether using Goffman’s approach, or Link and Phelan’s, stigma tends to be viewed similarly as a back and forth between groups – the stigmatized and the stigmatizers. Link and Phelan’s approach allows for more resistance on the part of the stigmatized group, and puts more emphasis on the power structure that surrounds the interactions, but they still view stigma largely as a back-and-forth proposition. What tends not to be addressed as much in stigma research, however, is the stigma that a group generates against its own members. However, before approaching this topic it is important to distinguish internally generated stigma from “internal stigma. “Internal stigma” (sometimes called “self stigma”) typically refers to a situation where someone with a stigmatized attribute internalizes this stigma and begins to feel guilt, shame, or embarrassment because they feel that the attribute is their fault or that they deserve its effects. This internalization can lead to the stigmatized failing to seek help for medical conditions such as HIV/AIDS (Sultana 2014), failure to take medications for mental health problems (Murphy and Busuttil 2014), and “withdrawal from social support” (Bogart et al. 2013: 845) that is key to addressing such problems. Such feelings have been found to be quite common among some stigmatized populations (Langston et al. 2010:15) and their effects can be quite profound.
Internally-Generated Stigma – Stigma within a Stigmatized Group

Internally-generated stigma has two key elements, both of which are essential to understanding firearms ownership cultures. The first level of internally-generated stigma is essentially just a fractalized version of firearms stigma as a whole, where rather than anti-gun people stigmatizing pro-gun people, it is pro-gun people stigmatizing other types of pro-gun people. This type of stigmatization tends to break along well-known social divides, such as social class. For example, as Richard Feldman (2007) notes in his description of the national-level NRA meetings, there is a great deal of contrast among the people attending these events versus those who typically attend local gun shows. One of the observations he makes is that the people attending the national meetings were much less likely to be wearing “provocative T-shirts emblazoned with defiant slogans” nor did he observe “many of the often shifty-eyed 'camo people' who represented the paranoid world of the militia movement” (8). These statements represent a clear attempt to stigmatize gun owners who are perceived to be militant, either literally (in the sense of having joined a militia) or figuratively (in terms of being overly pro-gun). A similar concern was echoed recently at the local level, but emphasizing a different fault line. In February 2013, pro-gun groups organized a rally at the capitol building in Albany, NY and more than one local group advocated that attendees were to avoid wearing camouflage, hunter’s orange, and other such clothing, instead recommending that attendees wear more formal garb, such as suits and ties. The stated purpose of these guidelines was to avoid the group being easily dismissed as “rednecks.” (However, this opinion was either not widely held, or was routinely flouted, as large portions of the attendees at the rally sported garments which were inconsistent with these rules.) These debates echo Goffman's discussion of “stigma symbols ... signs which are especially effective in drawing attention to a debasing identity discrepancy ...
with a consequent reduction in our valuation of the individual” (Goffman 1963:43-44). Those advocating certain styles of dress are clearly aware of the stigma that may come with camouflage clothing and choose not to wear it, perhaps to avoid the “flamboyan[cy]” and “stereotype[s]” which Goffman suggests might come with such a choice.

Such cases are interesting to explore partially because they reveal the complexity of stigma as a concept and how it is not an either/or situation – those who are stigmatized in one situation can become the stigmatizers in another. However, these instances are also important to explore because they reveal a great deal about the group whose members are stigmatizing each other. In the case of the march on Albany, for example, it reveals concerns about social class, and how utilizing, or eschewing, the trappings of members of a higher social class can affect the legitimacy of political messages.

During my interviews, several key areas emerged where internal stigmatization took place. Typically these references occurred in cases where respondents perceived some group of other firearms owners to have stepped outside of the normative expectations associated with gun owners (some of which were described in chapter 3). For example, some of the most prominent instances of this took place when respondents spoke negatively of gun owners who were in favor of unrestricted access to firearms. Although they differed on exactly which restrictions they liked or disliked, respondents tended to believe that firearms ownership should be restricted in some ways. Therefore, they tended to speak ill of people who were perceived to have a desire for few or no restrictions, which they perceived as extremists: “I’m not a fanatic … because I’m moderate. I think there should be certain laws in place, you know, what have you. But you know, some people are fanatical about that. No laws, we should be able to have a tank and whatever” (R378); “I’m not into it like that- he's gung-ho NRA just every breath he takes is basically NRA,
you know like gun rights, just gun rights, gun rights” (R345). Along similar lines, respondents stigmatized those whose views were outside the mainstream, especially if they were perceived to be extremists: “I’m not one of these that stockpiles 400 boxes of ammunition in case we get invaded by Martians or something of that sort, I’m not that type of an individual” (R320); “These are things that people don't understand about gun owners. It's not about overthrowing governments. It's not about going down in an inner-city and seeing how many people you can shoot” (R362). In addition to these views, gun owners also stigmatized gun owners who were perceived as unskilled or failing to utilize proper training in their actions. Respondent 242, for example, described the routines he went through to become skilled at using firearms and then described other gun owners saying, “most people probably aren't like that. They shoot once or twice a year” (R242). Respondent 488 also stigmatized the untrained, arguing that “[t]he majority of the accidents, and children shooting children or some guy shooting them, is because the person was never trained properly and/or they’re a moron” (R488).

Norm maintenance takes place on multiple issues. For example, a few respondents reported receiving negative assessments from other gun owners when they expressed viewpoints that were interpreted as being anti-gun. Respondent 476 discussed the conversations he has with other gun owners about his dislike of certain firearms: “you get arguing some guys. I say, ‘well, your AR-15 is not really a legitimate hunting weapon’ … [speaks as opposing gun owner] ‘Are you anti-gun?’” (R476). Another respondent reported receiving an anonymous phone call when he wrote a letter to the editor supporting trigger locks for guns:

My letter was published, and somebody telephoned me, and started giving me a ration of crap, and I demanded to know to whom I was speaking. He refused to identify himself, and I hung up on him. … It was basically, “why have you got a trigger lock?” … I get the opinion this yutz thought that I should be carrying the thing around in my belt 24/7, ready to plug the first idiot that knocked on my door. (R101)
This type of border maintenance was prominent enough that some respondents’ comments indicated that they perceived their viewpoints to be quite unlike other gun owners’. Respondent 345 indicated that he felt this way due to his opposition to some actions of, and positions taken by, the NRA: “I'd say I'm not your typical, probably, gun owner. That most people who bleed NRA, man. They bleed that blood if you're a gun owner, you know what I mean? I just- I'm not against them … I just have some issues with them” (R345).

Whatever the actual stigmatizing content, in general this type of internally-generated stigma has to do with respondents looking down on other gun owners who, for whatever reason, do not appear to be enacting the values and responsibilities that they believe that gun owners should. These types of reactions should make it clear that gun owners are not a monolithic group. There is disagreement among gun owners – some of it significant – and there needs to be a better understanding of how these differences emerge, and how they shape gun culture as a whole.

**Internally Generated Stigma – Self-Stigma Created by a Stigmatized Group**

There is another type of internally-generated stigma that it is important to discuss: self-focused internally generated stigma. This refers to stigmatization that is created, or enhanced, by the stigmatized group itself, and which is focused on the group itself. In the case of firearms ownership, this stigma is often created to serve the purposes of powerful groups. For example, in addition to being a strong pro-gun voice, Feldman (2007) identified as a key NRA tactic the practice of sending alarmist messages to members in order to solicit donations and political support. Recent e-mails from the NRA’s political advocacy organization, the NRA Institute for Legislative Action, suggest that this practice continues unabated and that their content tends to
paint gun owners as a stigmatized, marginalized group. Recent newsletters from the NRA-ILA included such headlines as “"Big Three" News Networks Show Anti-Gun Bias,” (02/08/2013) “This Is It- NJ Assembly Officially Schedules Massive Attack on Gun Rights,” (02/08/2013), and “Your Governor Wants to Personally Victimize Law-Abiding Gun Owners” (02/01/2013), as well as an article which begins, “On January 30, the U.S. Senate Judiciary committee held a hearing entitled, "What Should America Do About Gun Violence?" It should have been called, "How Do We Attack Second Amendment Rights?"” (02/01/2013). This approach clearly casts gun owners as an embattled minority engaged in a struggle to maintain their rights while under assault from a variety of institutions. And while this approach might be warranted while under threat of the passage of major federal gun control legislation (such as that proposed following the school shooting in Newtown, CT), issues of the same newsletter issued prior to the proposed legislation include alerts in a similar tone: “Anti-Hunters Want You Labeled as a Domestic Terrorist” (12/07/2012); “You Must Act Now to Stop EPA from Regulating Your Ammunition” (11/30/2012); “Lawrence County Officials Hope to Strip Your Right to Carry in the Courts” (11/02/2012).

At the same time that the NRA is very politically powerful, and well-known for its urgent calls to action, the vast majority of American gun owners are not NRA members (Silver 2010), and the opinions of actual NRA members often differ from the organization’s official viewpoints (Weil and Hemenway 1993). Therefore, it is important to speak with actual gun owners to determine the effects of the NRA’s approach to self-stigmatization, even if it is not explicitly identified as such.

In discussing the NRA, as noted above, most respondents felt that one of the most important roles of the NRA was to keep members updated on political events, and to keep track
of those events over time. In that sense, then, the organization is fulfilling its role by constantly contacting members to keep them informed about relevant political issues. However, by choosing to present this information in a stigmatized light, the NRA has cultivated an understanding that they are under threat. Respondents described the NRA as “constantly under attack” partially because “anybody that disagrees with what the people that are in power have to say are somehow belittled, and made fun of, and persecuted because of that” (R128). Others said that those running the organization are “the only people who are pro-gun” (R362), and that fighting for the NRA’s point of view is “like swimming uphill, I'm guessing, or against the tide” (R242). Some other respondents reported general agreement with the NRA’s position that they need to hold firm on every single gun issue because otherwise “it’s just letting the other side get one step closer to what they’re actually trying to get, which is banning all firearms” (R138). Yet another cited a specific example where New York’s state government “didn’t respond too well” when Wayne LaPierre “laid it to ‘em” (R178) in a public speech challenging the state to change its method of dealing with firearms crime. These statements indicate a degree of belief that the NRA is beleaguered and doing the best they can against powerful aggressors, a position that casts them as losers in the battle of stigma.

Not everyone feels this way, however. Respondent 297 was very critical of the NRA’s messaging, arguing that controversy over firearms laws is good for the NRA’s bottom line: “if people aren't afraid of losing their gun rights, the NRA is out of business” (R297). Respondent 262 also disagreed with the NRA’s media strategies, saying that “I hear some of the responses on television, and it's always to the extreme” (R262). Even those who viewed the NRA positively overall occasionally gave negative statements about the NRA’s messaging. Respondent 138, who said that the NRA has his “best interests in mind in regards to not losing more of the freedoms
that I have with firearms,” nevertheless specifically called out the their media messaging, calling it “a little crass” and arguing that it is designed “to shock people” (R138). Respondent 242, too, argued that the tone of the NRA’s rhetoric is “a little high” (R242), although he argued that this tone was necessary due to the strong polarization in government.

To sum up, from the small amount of evidence on this issue, my respondents’ accounts indicate that the NRA’s stigmatizing messaging appears largely successful. Respondents tended to view gun ownership as a disadvantaged status, with the NRA as its main (and perhaps its only) champion. These conclusions must be viewed as provisional, however, since the current study was focused on stigma more broadly, and so I can only comment briefly as there is limited evidence on this particular issue. Furthermore, this research was not intended to explore this issue in particular, and because it was not a focus, respondents tended to talk about the NRA in general terms rather than discussing in-depth their views on stigmatizing portrayals specifically. Nevertheless, these indications are quite interesting and hopefully future research will explore this issue with gun owners specifically, as well as with other stigmatized groups.

Reflection

Given the differences between my respondents’ experiences and those reported by other major researchers in this area, it is important to reflect briefly on some possible causes. Perhaps the most obvious concern is that my respondents were being untruthful and were reporting a lack of stigma to intentionally alter my research conclusions. This seems unlikely given the wide variety of respondents I interviewed, and their apparent lack of connection to one another, or to a single person or group that could have influenced them to say what they did. Furthermore, as described elsewhere in this dissertation, I employed traditional interview techniques – such as
cross-checking, and probing – that are intended to reveal when a respondent is being untruthful. When used, these techniques did not reveal any systematic attempt to misrepresent the day-to-day experiences of gun owners. And finally, if a person or organization were trying to skew the experiences of gun owners in a particular direction, it is not clear that it would be beneficial to push for a finding of less stigma. As noted above, the most powerful pro-gun organization seems invested in presenting gun ownership as a highly stigmatized status, rather than as an unproblematic one. Therefore, intentional alteration of the data seems unlikely.

Another possible source of this observed difference is the type of people with whom I spoke. As noted in my methodology, my sampling frame included only those gun owners who “exhibit some significant connection to the firearms community, such as the donation of money or time, involvement with firearms-related organizations or causes, advocacy about firearms, and/or choosing to inform themselves about, and become involved with, important community issues.” This obviously leaves out casual gun owners, and those who tend not to be as engaged with firearms ownership more broadly. It is entirely possible that by speaking only with those who are strongly engaged with firearms ownership, and identify themselves as being part of a community centered around that ownership, I unintentionally limited this research to people who are comfortable with their status as gun owners, and therefore experience relatively little stigma as a result. However, both Kohn (2000) and Albers (2003) used a similar approach to their sampling, and even Taylor’s (2008) sampling frame was intended to sample gun owners who were not simply casual owners, but rather “collectors” or “enthusiasts,” indicating a greater involvement with the subculture.

A third possibility, and one that I find the most likely, is that gun owners in this area actually feel less stigma than gun owners do elsewhere. As noted above, gun ownership is
common in upstate New York and so it may well be the case that gun ownership in this area is relatively uncontroversial and therefore yields few stigmatic consequences. This conclusion is bolstered by respondents’ statements identifying other parts of the state, or other parts of the country, as being places where firearms ownership is looked down upon more so than it is where they live.

Even if my respondents experience less stigma than other gun owners, however, that does not mean that this dissertation is staking a claim that gun ownership is an unproblematic status. The ongoing battles over gun control, and demonizing language used by people on both sides of these arguments, clearly indicate otherwise. However, it does represent a call for open-mindedness about the status of firearms ownership. Even within a contested status, there may well be those whose location, experiences, attitudes, circumstances, etc. shield them from the effects felt by other others who do not share those attributes. This is why it is important to seek to identify generic processes by which stigma, and the perception of stigma, may arise. The use of these processes will help us identify variations within groups, and allow us to explain why those who seem like they “should” be stigmatized might not actually be that way.

Neutralization Theory

Leaving aside stigma, there is one more area where my research allows me to make a contribution to study of firearms ownership: Neutralization Theory. This theory has a long history in criminology, and its use is common in studies of stigmatized populations, including firearms owners. However, given the lack of stigma experienced by my respondents, I believe that the applicability of this theory to the population of firearms owners is limited. In this section, therefore, I will briefly explore Neutralization Theory’s origins, the expansion of its use, and –
using my respondents as an example – I will propose general guidelines for its future use, as well as argue against its application specifically to the lives of firearms owners.

Sykes and Matza’s Original Formulation of the Theory

In their original article, Sykes and Matza (1957) were weighing in on the ongoing debate about the genesis of delinquent behavior, and commenting on the works of several contemporaries. Specifically, they were discussing Cohen’s theory of the delinquent subculture – a sub-group of society, the values of which are completely opposed to those of the main culture. Sykes and Matza largely dismiss the existence of such a thing, arguing that if it were to exist then the members of this subculture would not perceive their illegal actions as being wrong and would “exhibit no feelings of shame or guilt at detection or confinement” (664). Instead, they argue that there is evidence that juvenile delinquents do regularly feel these emotions when committing crimes, and also that they “distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate targets for [their] deviance” (666), further indicating that “the "wrongfulness" of such delinquent behavior is more widely recognized by delinquents than the literature has indicated” (665).

Having established that delinquents do perceive the wrongness of their actions, Sykes and Matza go on to point out that a certain degree of flexibility exists in all human behavior, so that even actions that appear to be wrong in every instance – such as intentionally killing a person – can, in fact, be justified in some instances (e.g., killing in self-defense). They further extend this idea to argue that delinquents manage their emotions about breaking the laws through a series of justifications that “protect[t] the individual from self-blame and the blame of others after the act,” but which may also “precede deviant behavior and make deviant behavior possible” (666). These justifications therefore allow the individual “to engage in delinquency without serious
damage to his self image” (667). In terms of the final outcome, then, the delinquent can be seen as “remain[ing] committed to the dominant normative system and yet so qualifies its imperatives that violations are "acceptable" if not "right." Thus the delinquent represents not a radical opposition to law-abiding society but something more like an apologetic failure, often more sinned against than sinning in his own eyes” (667).

In their discussion, Sykes and Matza appear to be focusing on behaviors that are illegal; they describe “violation[s]” (667), such as vandalism, auto theft, and gang fights (667), committed by “offender[s]” (665) against “victims” (665), and which may merit “confinement” (664). However, throughout their article they are clearly focusing on juveniles, and tend to refer generally to their actions as “delinquency” rather than “crime.” This focus may be largely theoretically driven, in that they are commenting on how norms are (or are not) transferred from a culture to individuals raised in that culture. (Hence their discussion early in the article of Sutherland’s work on learning criminal techniques and motivations.) For that reason, it makes sense to limit one’s arguments to those people who are most influenced by such a culture, and whose behavior would likely be shaped the most by it. In fact, the authors specifically contrast delinquent youths with “hardened gangster[s]” (665), indicating that they may consider adult behavior to be more immutable and, perhaps, requiring less explanation or justification.

Even though the authors focus on youthful delinquents, they appear to be open to the possibility that techniques of neutralization could be used by other groups. Towards the end of the article they seem to acknowledge this by calling for research into “the differential distribution of techniques of neutralization, as operative patterns of thought, by age, sex, social class, ethnic group, etc.” (669). However, while they are open to different effects based on demographic characteristics, their focus remains clearly on applying their theory to delinquent/criminal acts:
there is need for a greater understanding of the internal structure of techniques of neutralization, as a system of beliefs and attitudes, and its relationship to various types of delinquent behavior. Certain techniques of neutralization would appear to be better adapted to particular deviant acts than to others, as we have suggested, for example, in the case of offenses against property and the denial of the victim. But the issue remains far from clear and stands in need of more information. (670)

The one major area where they are willing to say explicitly that their theory might not apply is if the delinquents in question were “so isolated from the world of conformity that techniques of neutralization need not be called into play” (669).

Overall, then, it is clear that Sykes and Matza initially intended for their theory to be applied somewhat narrowly to criminal/delinquent behavior, though they foresaw no explicit restrictions on what types of people might exhibit these behaviors.

Modern Uses of Neutralization Theory

Over the years, there have been some who have been critical of the application of the theory because of its lack of evolution. Some critics argue, for example, that neutralization theory has not changed to reflect the needs of the criminological discipline, particularly that criminology has never “take[n] cognition or offender self-accounts seriously” (Maruna and Copes 2005:226) and has failed to reap the opportunity to use neutralization theory as a means for explaining persistence in and desistance from criminal behavior. And there is certainly room to criticize the theory on grounds that it is too simple, or underdeveloped. As Maruna and Copes further note, it is not the same kind of criminological theory as strain theory, or social disorganization theory. It does not propose macro-level explanations of “differences in crime across cultures, groups, genders, or the like” (237). Neutralization theory was initially intended to represent a subset of differential association theory, and while it has been claimed or
appropriated by a number of different theorists over the years, it has not been sufficiently expanded to stand on its own within the canon of criminological theories. Instead, neutralization does what it has always done: “propos[e] a relationship between neutralizing and offending” and explore how neutralizing statements “protect a person from pangs of conscience, cognitive dissonance, shame, guilt, remorse, self-awareness, loss of self-esteem, public labeling, and stigma” (255). In all cases, though, what is thought to be at stake is “serious damage to [the offender’s] self-image” (Sykes and Matza 1957:667). As Maruna and Copes (2005) describe, neutralization theory is all about “preserving a noncriminal self-concept, despite the commission of criminal acts. If an act has never been committed and is therefore not a threat to the person's identity, it requires no neutralization” (268). By extension, even if a particular act has been committed, but it represents no significant threat to the consistent self-presentation of a social actor, then there will be no need for that actor to employ neutralizing accounts of the behavior. It is for this reason, among others, that some theorists have viewed with concern the widening of the theory to include not only delinquent and criminal behaviors (Shigihara 2013; Lindblom and Jacobsson 2014) but also behaviors that are merely deviant, such as working as a topless dancer (Thompson, Harred and Burks 2003), having an abortion (Brennan 1974) or being a lesbian who claims a bisexual identity (Ault 1994). Some uses of the theory have even been entirely outside the realm of deviance – such as public defenders responding to clients’ negative evaluations of their performance (Rosecrance 1988) – and there is at least one instance of the framework being applied to acts of “positive deviance,” such as being a high academic achiever (Shoenberger, Heckert and Heckert 2012). Over time, the techniques of neutralization have widened in scope from being seen as providing justifications for delinquent/criminal behavior to instead being seen in a wider sense as a way to “free the individual to engage in deviant behavior without seriously
damaging one’s self concept, functioning as a “cognitive dissonance reduction strategy” (Eliason and Dodder 1999:236)” (Copelton 2007:472). Others have said it “can be applied to any situation where there are inconsistencies between one's actions and one's beliefs” (Maruna and Copes 2005:223).

Outside of this broadening of the theory’s contents, though, perhaps the most important aspect of neutralization theory – and one that has often been overlooked – is causal order. The original conception of neutralization was that it was something that occurred prior to offending, thereby allowing it to occur. Properly speaking, it is not a post hoc rationalization of why a particular act was carried out. Therefore, it is not a sufficient test of neutralization theory – as some theorists have done – to analyze the accounts of a group to see if they contain themes of neutralization. Not only does such a process not establish proper causal order, it also does not sufficiently establish whether similar groups of people also hold the same beliefs as the experimental group (Maruna and Copes 2005:264-266).

To give a non-crime example, consider a situation where two people simply disagree about something in their everyday lives. A wife may say to her husband at dinner, “This dish isn’t seasoned properly – it needs salt.” The husband then replies, “I must have forgotten to add salt because the kids were distracting me. But salt is bad for you, anyway, so it’s better without it. Also, you shouldn’t criticize me because last week you also made a dish that was under-seasoned.” This reply contains statements that map quite well onto three different techniques of neutralization – denial of responsibility, appeal to higher loyalties, and condemnation of condemners. However, a neutralization theorist would be unlikely to cite this as a good example of the theory in action, partially because the “neutralization” is obviously post hoc. It is unlikely that the husband in this story was debating about whether or not to properly season the food and
allowed himself to commit this “deviant” act based on his busy family life, health concerns, or his desire to respond to an earlier slight. Instead, it is far more likely that these are merely ways of trying to deflect blame after the fact for the quality of the food.

Of course, this objection has been previously raised in the literature, although there continues to be disagreement over whether it has been solved. Some, like Hirschi (1969), have proposed that “neutralizations might start life as after-the-fact rationalizations but become the rationale or moral release mechanisms facilitating future offending” (Maruna and Copes 2005:271). The authors go on to suggest that, given this interpretation of neutralization theory, it should be viewed as a theory of criminal desistance, or persistence, rather than as a purely causational theory. (The idea being that the more someone uses neutralizing statements, the more likely they are to continue their criminal pursuits. Or, conversely, the need to make neutralizing statements indicates a weak penchant for criminal behavior, suggesting that desistance is imminent.)

However, the other issue that the seemingly frivolous example of the under-seasoned food raises is that of the application of neutralization theory to non-criminal behavior. No theorist would seriously argue that cooking without sufficient spices is a stigmatized, much less criminal, act (though chefs might disagree!). And while it is certainly acceptable for theories to expand over time, and be applied to more situations as the theories themselves are more fully elaborated and more social situations are studied using the existing framework, I argue that the idea of techniques of neutralization may have become overbroad, and therefore less useful. Specifically, it should not be applied to actions that are merely contested, or which are being debated or disagreed upon, but are not actually stigmatized. To do so risks diluting its theoretical power. To use another example: consider a political debate where the candidates hold opposing
views. One might argue that Democrats view Republicans’ values in a negative light (and vice-versa) and debates frequently involve serious disagreements over these values (e.g., whether the government should handle health care versus whether privatize businesses should do so).

However, in this example, which is the normative side and which is the stigmatized one? When political candidates clash over which party’s platform more closely approximates their concept of “American values,” are they both equally stigmatized, and equally responding with the neutralization of appealing to higher loyalties? Or if they disagree about which party is more responsible for an ongoing governmental boondoggle, are they both responding to a stigma with a neutralizing attempt at denying responsibility?

Simply put, not every account – even those that offer explanations for the reasons behind one’s own behavior, or discount other possible means of behaving – can be accurately considered neutralizing accounts. To do so risks labeling every defense of a contrary viewpoint as an employment of neutralization, including those of people who simply find themselves on opposite sides of a political issue. Instead, I would argue that without a significant stigma behind it, clashes like the one described above, are more likely to represent something akin to debate, or impression management, or political “spin,” than they are techniques of neutralization (though confusion is certainly warranted since their linguistic forms are quite similar).

**Neutralization Theory as it Relates to Firearms Owners**

*Introduction*

With these considerations in mind, we turn to the specific case of techniques of neutralization and firearms, where another key issue is raised. Even if we accept that techniques of neutralization represent merely a “cognitive dissonance reduction strategy” (Eliason and
Dodder 1999:236), rather than a pre-emptive “permission slip” to commit an act, we have to consider the possibility that no cognitive dissonance exists in a person who uses firearms. Just as Sykes and Matza (1957) caution us that some criminals might be “so isolated from the world of conformity that techniques of neutralization need not be called into play” (669), the same could easily be said of people raised in a pro-gun household/neighborhood/geographic area, as is the case for many of my respondents. And, even if a person acknowledges that something they do is contested – or that not everyone agrees with them about something they value – their reaction to that disagreement or conflict may not properly constitute a “neutralization” of the views that are contrary to their own.

Consider an escalating verbal disagreement between pro-gun and anti-gun activists. Each will argue to the other that the values they serve are superior, and minimize the harms that are alleged to come from their point of view. However, when the pro-gun activist says, “people need guns in their houses to protect themselves from criminals – you can’t protect your family by hiding in a closet and hoping the bad guys don’t find you!” and the anti-gun activist responds with, “you’re putting your children in danger by having guns in the house, though, and the actual danger they face from your actual weapons is much greater than the danger they face from the possibility of being robbed!” In this case, it becomes difficult to tell who is appealing to higher loyalties, since both seem to be alleging that their actions are in service of the same greater good of protecting one’s family. To argue that both sides are stigmatized is illogical (see the discussion elsewhere in this dissertation about what constitutes a “stigma”) and to say both experience “cognitive dissonance” is to argue that everyone feels cognitive dissonance every time they encounter a viewpoint counter to their own.
This is an important discussion to have because, as I argued earlier in this chapter, my respondents do not experience serious stigma. Therefore, it may be stretching the bounds of neutralization theory to argue that gun owners are using neutralizing accounts when they claim that pro-gun activists do not respect the Constitution, or when they argue that using firearms is no more dangerous than other common activities.

**Previous Research**

Having discussed the theory of techniques of neutralization, it is important to see how recent empirical work has treated the topic. Albers (2003) found that techniques of neutralization were a major stigma management strategy employed by firearms owners. He uses some of the terminology from Sykes and Matza, but tends to refer gun owners’ neutralizing stories as “accounts” in order to describe the reasons for which they engage in the behavior that they do (2003:133). Albers says that the types of neutralizations that firearms owners used most often were “denial of injury,” “appeal to higher loyalties,” and “condemnation of condemners.” Of these, “condemnation of the condemners” was the most common type of rationalization used by his respondents, where they “characterized critics of gun ownership as hypocritical, incompetent or ignorant, and corrupt” (Albers 2003:139). Within these criticisms, many fault lines were evident – rural vs. urban, emotionality vs. rationality, self-reliance vs. interdependence, conservative vs. liberal, traditional vs. cosmopolitan, and common sense vs. academic knowledge. In general, the firearms owners perceived those who opposed them to be misguided at best and deceptive at worst, with the consequences being cultural (traditional values; personal rights) more so than physical (loss of life due to inability to protect oneself), although occasional references were made to the latter category.
“Denial of injury” was used as well, and Albers found it to be an especially important neutralizing tactic because it explicitly opposes the assumption that firearms are inherently dangerous. In using this technique, even when acknowledging that there was some danger in using a firearm, respondents would compare it to other sources of danger in everyday life, such as driving, or to other common daily activities (Albers 2003:135). While it is possible that respondents may be intentionally minimizing risk in order to be able to justify taking that risk, it is also possible that they might simply understand risk differently than their critics do. This would be an interesting point for further research to address.

Albers’ respondents also frequently utilized the “appeal to higher loyalties.” One common form of this neutralization was when respondents made reference to the “uniquely American values” (2003:137) that guns represented – and helped preserve – and many of them “viewed gun ownership as instrumental in their efforts to preserve a proud heritage that is increasingly lost in contemporary society” (136). Frequent references were made to the Constitution, as well as the values it represents, as were appeals to more fundamental concerns such as self-protection. Not surprisingly, firearms owners tended to believe that people who carried firearms would be able to successfully defend themselves and others if they were put in danger. This concept was discussed in general terms, but some respondents specifically referenced well-known public shootings, implying that armed civilians could have successfully thwarted the gunmen there (138). This point of view – which sees gun use as a path to greater safety – seems to be in direct contrast to those held by the people who stigmatize gun ownership. That point of view is based on firearms being seen as a cause of violence rather than a solution to it – a key distinction between the two poles of the argument.
Albers is not the only one to document the use of neutralizing techniques among gun owners, however. Taylor also applied Sykes and Matza's Techniques of Neutralization to stigma management, although he describes the use of “denial of injury” as by far the most common neutralization used by his respondents. Similar to Albers's respondents, Taylor's also used “appeal to higher loyalties” – asserting their right to self-defense, as well as invoking their Constitutional right to firearms ownership. He also acknowledged firearms enthusiasts would “condemn the condemners” in the pursuit of “providing explanations and 'accounts' (Scott and Lyman 1968) that justify suspect or questionable behavior” (2008:158). In this case, the condemners in question are those perceived to be anti-gun – “liberals” of all kinds, as well as anyone who would seek to take firearms rights away from the public – and they are deserving of scorn largely for “failing to embrace the loyalties to which stigmatized individuals are themselves deeply committed” (159).

As described above, although Kohn does not specifically use the language of Sykes and Matza's Techniques of Neutralization, her respondents' accounts nevertheless contain some elements that could fit into that approach. She describes, for example, how John (one of her respondents), as well as several others, viewed freedom, and other perceived American values, including the right to self-defense: “this handgun gives anyone in any profession, in any capability, at any age, at any sex, any religion, any sexual preference, at any anything, the ability to be themselves, to not be victims, to not be prey ... But to me it's something very important” (72, ellipsis in original). This kind of approach is a type of “appeal to higher loyalties,” placing personal rights at the top of a list, above any objections that anti-gun groups might have. This point is made even clearer when Kohn notes how “[s]hooters in the study stated frequently that freedom is one of the most important core values or symbols that they identify with gun
ownership” often talking about “how inextricably linked freedom and gun ownership are to them” (62). Again, the “appeal to higher loyalties” helps cast their ownership of firearms as virtuous rather than allowing it to be seen as negative by those who are anti-gun.

However, this love of freedom at times can even become akin to “condemnation of the condemners,” as when some respondents “asserted that the antigun[sic] stance is part of an unwillingness to serve one's country, or, on a larger scale, a lack of respect for the United States as a nation” (2004:63). She also noted how one of her respondents, Harold, saw gun control legislation “as hypocrisy perpetuated by the state” (64), especially when the state can require individuals to fight and die in its service, and yet will not allow those same individuals to exercise self-defense as they see fit in order to protect their own lives.

Harold also expressed a view which can be seen as “denial of injury,” when he asserted that:

> It’s my right, my choice as a citizen, as long as I don't infringe somebody else's right with it, I should be allowed to own a nuclear device if I want. That's my personal opinion. And that's what it really represents, I think, is freedom. (Kohn 2004:64)

Although his position is intentionally extreme, Kohn states that “Harold ... believes strongly that his gun ownership has not literally hurt anyone, and as long [as] he does not infringe on the rights of others, he should be able to continue with his interest in guns” (64). Another respondent, Peter, said essentially the same thing: “[Gun ownership means] the freedom to indulge yourself in whatever interests you, as long as you don't step on the rights of the next person” (68, bracketed section in original).

As a group, these accounts indicate that techniques of neutralization are a common means of describing the ways that gun owners relate to their critics. The most often-cited techniques of
neutralization appear to be denial of injury, appeal to higher loyalties, and condemnation of condemning. The other two – denial of victim and denial of responsibility – typically do not factor in to these types of discussions. Later in this chapter I will explore how this particular set of theories does or does not apply to my respondents.

Current Research

As discussed earlier, my respondents perceived little in the way of stigma in their lives. It may come as little surprise, then, to learn that they used few true neutralizing statements because, generally speaking, they felt that there is no bad/stigmatized behavior to neutralize.

The one area where their accounts came the closest to neutralizing statements was when discussing the negative perceptions of firearms ownership. While discussing these views, respondents disagreed with how gun owners were negatively characterized, and tended to offer alternative accounts of what it means to be a gun owner. Superficially, these efforts tend to resemble techniques of neutralization (associated with Sykes and Matza), but I argue that these accounts represent something different. As noted above, Sykes and Matza’s (1957) theories are based on the assumption that offenders are aware that what they are doing is widely considered to be wrong, and so they need to offer an explanation for their behavior that will allow them to avoid “serious damage to [their] self image” (667). In the case of firearms owners, however, there is no such inconsistency. As described in an earlier chapter, most gun owners are raised in families that value firearms, and they have largely positive associations with their ownership and use. They see nothing wrong with firearms ownership and, in fact, they view it in anything but a negative light. If firearms owners were to be compared to Sykes and Matza’s delinquents, they would most closely resemble hardened criminals who “exhibit no feelings of shame or guilt at
detection” (664). But, of course in this case, crime is not what is at issue. So they resemble this group only insofar as they appear completely unapologetic for their behavior, as if they do not believe that it is wrong. And that is exactly the point – gun owners, for the most part, believe that their participation in gun ownership and use is, at worst, a neutral activity, and at best a strongly positive one.

This is not to say that gun owners are naïve about how gun ownership is perceived – far from it; gun owners are aware that there are plenty of people who view firearms in a negative light. However, their reaction to these negative views is typically not that of a group seeking to justify their deviant behavior, but rather one that acknowledges the existence of negative views of their legitimate, contested behavior, and seeks to dispute those views.

Nowhere is this distinction more obvious than in the case of criminality. As discussed in a previous chapter, gun owners tend to be very supportive of strictly enforcing the criminal law, often calling for stricter penalties to be assessed on those who break the law. And yet, as noted above, one of the strongest associations that the public has with firearms is the connection to crime. Predictably, this mismatch of outsider and insider perspectives on an issue of such importance creates a sense among gun owners that they are being fundamentally misunderstood. As a result, gun owners’ accounts were filled with efforts to distinguish themselves from criminals in a variety of ways. The key thing about these accounts, though, is that they do not attempt to neutralize the behavior of those who break the law. Rather, they are strongly critical of that behavior and are attempting to distinguish themselves from those who use firearms in a way that is not consistent with the values of mainstream legal firearms owners. They are also distinct from “dignifying accounts” (Stenross 1990), in that they do not attempt to “dignify the very aspects of the activities that others devalue” (56) by “us[ing] the most devalued aspects of
the activities as ‘raw material’” (62). Rather, in this case, they are attempting to manage others’ negative opinions of them by simultaneously acknowledging and deflecting them. In essence they agree with the mainstream idea that criminal and violent users of firearms should be stigmatized; they just disagree that all gun owners should receive this stigma. Instead, they claim a set of practices and values that criminal users do not have, and protest when legal or social processes cause gun owners to be associated with gun crime.

**Conclusion**

Stigma has been considered by many to be an important attribute associated with firearms ownership, and which affects gun owners’ lives. However, based on the evidence gathered from respondents, there are few indications that a serious stigma exists around firearms ownership in upstate New York. While some processes related to stigma did occur among gun owners, they appeared to be relatively uncommon, and their effects were typically minor. In only a handful of cases did individuals report anything approaching the level of negative outcomes typically associated with highly stigmatized conditions such as having a mental illness, or a visible deformity. These results conflict with previous research which has tended to show that gun owners are wary to reveal their ownership status for fear of provoking conflicts with those around them, and that they offer a number of different accounts intended to neutralize negative perceptions of their gun ownership. My respondents, in contrast, tend to feel that their ownership status is relatively non-controversial, and rarely attempt to restrict knowledge of it, except to avoid perceived targeting by criminals.

These conclusions are surprising not only because they contrast so sharply with previous results, but also because of the circumstances surrounding them. In many ways, New York
appears to be a state where anti-firearms stigma could thrive – it is a state that has traditionally had a great deal of firearms regulation, and where further regulation was recently passed in the form of the controversial SAFE Act. Such a situation could lead to firearms owners being viewed with suspicion, and help create or maintain a stigma against them. However, this seemed not to be the case – gun owners generally reported feeling comfortable with their status, and with others knowing about it. These results should help push researchers to rethink how gun ownership is viewed, and question the idea that gun owners generally are viewed with suspicion and that these perceptions translate into stigma in their daily lives. Further research is needed to determine under what conditions anti-gun stigma emerges and is sustained.

Also important to understanding these results is the unique power structure within which they occur. One element of this power structure was the media, which was generally viewed with suspicion by respondents. They saw it as promoting inaccurate or uninformed viewpoints about firearms ownership, though there was disagreement about whether this was done intentionally to slander gun owners, or whether it was merely a symptom of ignorance about guns in general.

Another important element of the power structure was the NRA. After all, with an organization as powerful as the NRA in their corner, it seems as though no effort to apply stigma to gun owners could be successful. And, in fact, respondents do tend to feel that it is a powerful organization that protects them from the negative effects of anti-gun activists, and they generally support it. However, there is also an undercurrent of discontent with the NRA on certain issues. In keeping with existing research, my respondents reported some misgivings about certain aspects of the NRA’s policies, their approach to advocacy, or their level of influence. Nevertheless, support for the organization remained generally high, especially since they tended to be identified as the only group protecting gun owners’ interests.
There is a larger role to the NRA, though, of which it is important to be aware. This is because the NRA benefits from the image of gun owners as being under attack, or as part of an embattled minority, and it is an image they openly cultivate to give a sense of urgency to their messaging. These efforts appear to have been at least partially successful, as some respondents perceived themselves as being part of a disadvantaged group despite feeling few day-to-day effects of stigma. Further evidence would be needed to support such conclusions, but my initial findings suggest that more attention needs to be paid to not just the reality of stigmatized statuses (as outlined by Link and Phelan) but also the perception of this reality by members themselves. Members may perceive more (or less) stigma against them than actually exists, and this could have profound effects on their outlook about their status, as well as how they enact and experience it on a day-to-day basis.

In addition to stigma, this chapter also explores Neutralization Theory and its relationship to firearms ownership. While previous research has concluded that respondents utilize neutralizing statements to manage negative perceptions of themselves and their enjoyment of firearms ownership, my respondents used few such statements. This finding further underscores the lack of stigma experienced by this group by showing that they do not perceive enough negativity coming their way to require statements designed to maintain a positive self-perception. These findings are then used to make a larger critique of the over-expansion of the terminology associated with Neutralization Theory.
Chapter 6 – Conclusion

In this chapter, I will summarize the main findings of this dissertation, and attempt to show how the concepts revealed in the separate chapters fit together. I will also attempt to broaden the understanding of these topics beyond the context of this dissertation and explore how they can be understood in a broader context as well. I also briefly explore some key limitations of this study, and propose future research.

Summary, Conclusions and Expansion

Where my research produced some of its most surprising results was in the area of stigma. Most research on gun owners has focused on the stigmatized nature of this population, and found that being part of this group has negative effects on respondents’ lives (Kohn 2000; Albers 2003; Anderson and Taylor 2010). And, to be clear, my respondents are certainly aware of negative feelings about gun owners – particularly the association of guns with violence – and they seek to actively repudiate any link they may have with such an idea. Interestingly, though, their accounts almost universally contain a sense of gun ownership as a fundamentally unproblematic status that merely appears tainted through either incorrect information, or through negative experiences that could have been avoided. Therefore, fundamentally, respondents who attempt to dispel negative views of gun ownership are not doing so from the perspective of someone who understands their membership in a stigmatized category and seeks to mitigate the effects. Instead, respondents’ accounts generally indicate that they believe they are, at best, correcting inaccurate information or, at worst, having an intractable dispute with a person whose emotions or personal experiences are blinding them from seeing the truth. My interviews failed
to discover multiple people who had been confronted publicly by someone who did not share their beliefs (Albers 2003:127) or who reported that casual acquaintances found them “weird” and appeared “terrified” when they learned of their firearms ownership status (Anderson and Taylor 2010:46). Along these same lines, I found just one person who chose to conceal his ownership status from his employer, whereas Albers (2003) had several respondents who did so. And few, if any, respondents exhibited the “verbal defensiveness” (Kohn 2000:159) that Kohn’s respondents had developed over repeated negative interactions with hostile outsiders.

It should be noted that respondents tended to see themselves as members of a group that is occasionally misunderstood, and they did report the occasional negative encounter surrounding their enjoyment of firearms, but such instances were relatively few, tended to be brief, and – most importantly – were clear departures from the norm. This finding was replicated throughout my respondents’ accounts, with essentially everyone telling a very different story than what has been seen in most previous research.

Perhaps as a result of this lack of a stigmatized feeling, few respondents reported making any effort to hide their gun ownership status from those around them, and those who did attempt to conceal it tended to report that they were doing so for security reasons rather than to prevent the imposition of stigma. One key reason for this difference is likely the physical and political context in which the respondents live. While previous studies drew their respondents from areas near large cities in California (Kohn 2000), or North Carolina (Albers 2003), I sampled almost entirely from rural, upstate locations in New York. In these areas, the presence of legally owned firearms is normative (mostly due to the prevalence of hunting in the area) and largely non-threatening, and so relatively few people there view gun ownership negatively. As a result of living in this area, for gun owners, criticism of gun ownership is typically remote; it is something
they are aware of (especially via media and through the publications of national firearms organizations) but seldom experience personally, if they do at all.

While the current study is at odds with previous research on the issue of gun owners’ experience of stigma, I believe that this gap can be bridged with additional research. Future projects should explore what types of gun owners experience stigma and, for those who do, what the nature of that stigma is, and what factors affect it most heavily. Based on the findings of the current work, I recommend that studies be undertaken comparing samples of gun owners from a variety of physical locations, cultural backgrounds, and ideological viewpoints in order to explore multiple potential sources of difference. While the current study implicates the urban/rural divide, limiting research to only this factor might overlook other important differences. To give just one example, one might reasonably assume that liberal gun owners who live in New York City might have different experiences of stigma than, say, conservative gun owners who live in Dallas, Texas. While both of these large cities are more liberal than the surrounding areas, the gun cultures and political/legal contexts of their respective states — as well as respondents’ own political views — might well affect the experience of stigma. Research of this type might help link the findings of the current study on the issue of stigma with those of previous studies.

Regardless of what future research discovers, though, it is clear that my respondents experienced very little of what has traditionally been associated with the sociological meaning of “stigma.” However, my results also indicate that we should not eliminate stigma from the discussion because respondents’ accounts suggest that internal stigma is indeed an important part of the experience of gun ownership. My respondents discussed two important types of internal stigma, the first of which is stigma generated by the group against other “undesirable”
individuals within the group. Some examples of such individuals include those who might cause gun ownership to be seen in a negative light, such as by enacting harmful stereotypes, or those whose political views were perceived as extreme. The second important type of stigma is self-focused internally generated stigma. In the case of gun owners, much of this type of stigma comes from the NRA in an attempt to generate the feeling that the group itself is disliked by outsiders. By creating the perception of threat, the NRA intends to motivate members to advocate more effectively on behalf of the group. Preliminary results indicate that a good amount of respondents’ perceptions of stigma may come from these sources. However, the conclusions reached regarding internally generated stigma must necessarily be viewed as provisional because the current research was not specifically designed to explore these topics. Nevertheless, these preliminary findings suggest that research about the extent to which gun owners perceive, and are affected by, negative internal or external assessments is essential to understanding how firearms owners develop their perceptions of what such ownership is like, and what kinds of opposition they face. Additional research in this area could help disentangle the sources of such beliefs, and the extent to which they influence actions that gun owners take (especially as it relates to how they perceive their relationships to non-gun owners).

Moving beyond stigma, my research also revealed some interesting findings about how respondents viewed the law. In Chapter 4, I explored Ewick and Silbey’s (1998) concept of “legal consciousness” as it related to the accounts given by my respondents, but I also attempted to go beyond their initial formation. In their original work, Ewick and Silbey treated the three types of legal consciousness as three largely distinct aspects of the concept of legality. While they acknowledge that there is both overlap between understandings of the law, and contradictions within them, they still tended to treat the three concepts as if they are
fundamentally distinct from one another. They continue to argue this even while acknowledging
that individuals may access different types of legal consciousness within one interview, or even
within a single statement. However, they tend to dismiss this by suggesting that even within such
contradictions, “the different images of legality … do not necessarily find equal expression”
(228) and suggest that, essentially, one type of legal consciousness wins out over the other.
While the distinctions between the types of legal consciousness make sense as interrelated – yet
distinct – components at the level of theory, this distinction becomes less satisfying at the level
of individuals’ accounts of how they react to different aspects of the law. For that reason, I
attempted to explore in my data the contradictions between when respondents’ accounts
appeared to describe different types of legal consciousness. Furthermore, I tried to give some
explanation of why my respondents’ accounts tended to vary across situations. Primary among
these findings were the ways in which respondents’ attitudes shift depending on which aspect of
the law was being discussed. When criminal law was the focus, their attitudes most closely
reflected Ewick and Silbey’s category of “before the law” – they viewed the law as rational and
impartial, existing outside of day-to-day affairs. They tended not to see the form of the criminal
law as the sum of actions taken by individuals, but rather as a system driven by the abstract idea
of justice. This is distinct from how they viewed the legislative process, which more closely
represented the category of “with the law.” In this case, the law is perceived to be game-like in
nature, in the sense that actors can affect the outcome through the strategic use of available
resources. Respondents tended to see the desired outcome of politics being the realization of the
will of the majority, and expressed negative feelings about situations where politicians used their
office to advance a perceived personal agenda, or when the ability to freely cast a vote was
compromised.
The strength of these preferences was highlighted when certain aspects of the game-like structure of politics were violated, causing respondents’ views of the law to shift. In this case, the contents of the SAFE Act certainly presented a challenge to respondents’ subcultural norms of firearms, but the manner of its passage in particular also violated their preferred way of thinking about how the law should operate. Broadly speaking, they perceived the new law as one which would not only be ineffective at crime control and which would negatively impact their safety, they also saw its passage as the outcome of deceptive and unfair political tactics that went outside the traditional game-like structure of politics to which they were accustomed. These things together caused respondents to switch to the “against the law” perspective because they no longer perceived the law as a means through which their influence could be used to achieve desired ends. This change in attitude even lead some respondents to propose various forms of self-help – such as gun-carrying, as remedies for the inadequacies of the form of the law that they saw emerging.

These large attitudinal shifts demonstrate the importance of studying the effects of ideas such as legal consciousness, both with this population and others. Knowing a population’s relationship with the law can help us understand not only their position on future legislation, but also their perceptions of the techniques used to achieve that legislation. If – as is the case with firearms legislation – effective regulation is an ongoing process that requires extended collaboration among groups, violating a population’s concept of law could lead to significant distrust even within an area where relatively little trust exists to begin with. At best, it will entrench negative beliefs about political opponents, and at worst it could derail collaborative efforts in areas where consensus might otherwise have been possible. Politicians may still pursue these avenues, of course, perceiving that it is their only chance to make progress. However, the
case of New York’s SAFE Act – and the significant, sustained backlash it produced among gun owners – should be instructive for what the consequences of such a move could be.

Another possible area of study stemming from my findings would be the exploration more generally of the relationship between perceptions of a law’s legitimacy and the degree of compliance with it. Weber’s (1978) idea of rational-legal authority notes that legitimate authority “rest[s] on a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands” (215). However, the content of the SAFE Act, as well as the manner in which it was passed, clearly caused many gun owners to question that law’s legitimacy. This viewpoint was widely held enough that it resulted in the extensive county-by-county efforts to pass resolutions opposing the SAFE Act, and it gathered steam as legal and political processes subsequently invalidated or suspended enforcement of portions of the Act. What remains unstudied, however, is the true extent of compliance with the law (partially because New York State initially expressed opposition to publishing statistics regarding the effectiveness of the Act, such as how many people registered assault weapons before the deadline [Karlin 2015]), and the degree to which the perception of the law’s legitimacy impacted decisions about compliance. Following Weber (1978), we would expect to see respondents object to the lack of a consistent system of rules which afford predictability, and potentially the perception that Governor Cuomo’s insistence on passing the SAFE Act (without the normal amount of time to review it) violates the principle that even powerful individuals at the head of a political system are subject to the rules of the system and cannot change those rules capriciously, as all changes to the system must come from outside the system (217-223). One way these issues could be effectively researched would be through using an in-depth interview methodology, which would allow the complexity of respondents’ views on legitimacy to be fully explored. The
results of such a study could be useful not only in New York, but also elsewhere when exploring how gun owners perceive the legal changes that affect their ownership and enjoyment of firearms.

Beyond the issue of legitimacy, my research also indicates that the lessons of the SAFE Act may be especially useful for those living in states with similar political situations to New York’s. My respondents perceived state politics as being dominated by New York City – a large, Democratic stronghold where the people and politicians are perceived to share neither the same experiences nor the same values as those from upstate. (This situation is undoubtedly exacerbated by New York City’s physical remoteness, since respondents have few opportunities to encounter people from there, or to reap significant benefits from its presence, the way they might if they lived within easy travel distance.) It would be no surprise to learn that a population that already felt marginalized due to the political situation caused by a rural/urban divide would take greater offense to political processes that mirror the existing conflict. We could speculate that similar situations might be observed in other places that are geographically similar to New York – Democratically leaning states dominated by one major city that is physically remote from a large, politically dissimilar rural area. Some good matches for this setup might include Michigan, Minnesota, Oregon, and Washington, as well as contrast cases such as Texas and North Carolina where strongly liberal urban centers exist, but they generally do not dominate state politics.

One final area where my dissertation can make an important addition to existing literature is by contributing to the understanding of the lives of gun owners themselves, and specifically the strength and depth of feelings associated with gun ownership. Those outside of the subculture may view firearms ownership as a temporary or trivial status, but my respondents cited a variety
of important experiences and deeply held values they associated with owning guns. To begin
with, many respondents reported that their connections to firearms extend to the earliest times
they can remember, and often connected them with family traditions that had persisted for
generations. Furthermore, the experiences and values they associate with gun ownership often
came from interactions with family members – almost universally fathers, uncles, and other male
figures – giving extra significance to their enjoyment of gun ownership because of its connection
with these individuals. This melding of personal values, familial relationships, and both present
and past experiences showcases the depth of my respondents’ connection to gun ownership.

In addition to their personal connections to firearms, respondents also saw firearms as
having a rich historical tradition, which they perceived as being connected with the Constitution,
and specifically the Second Amendment. And while respondents’ views on the meaning of these
rights tended superficially towards an insurrectionist point of view, further analysis revealed that
such an interpretation was limited at best. Instead, these viewpoints are likely connected with
respondents’ general attitudes about their location within the political system in New York.
Specifically, given the composition of the legislature, they see gun owners as constantly being
the target of increasingly tough regulations, with little or no ability to successfully pass laws that
reflect their preferences. In such a climate, it would be possible for some to see drastic action –
such as insurrection – as the only option available to protect their interests. However, while there
are indications that respondents do indeed take the potential loss of rights seriously, there is little
reason to believe that they would actually support – much less lead – an uprising. Even those
who appear to espouse such views often did so with significant caveats attached, and – on
balance – tended to hold moderate views about gun control. These results show the need for
research with firearms owners in particular to seek further details and explanation in this area. In
this study it was only through asking additional follow-up questions focused on values that respondents’ views on the Constitution – and especially the limits permitted on firearms ownership – were revealed. The nuanced nature – and wide variety – of respondents’ beliefs would have been lost in a survey where respondents were offered limited-choice responses to describe their politics, or their attitudes about the Constitution. (For example, while almost every respondent I interviewed would likely have described themselves as Republican, and strong supporters of the Constitution, some individuals nevertheless expressed support for a range of gun control practices, such as background checks, and some even felt that the idea of a citizen militia was unnecessary in a modern context. These nuances, and many others, would have been lost if respondents had simply chosen their political party on a survey, or made some other indication of their overall political views.)

Beyond their familial and historical connections to firearms, respondents also report a number of key values that inform their enjoyment of guns. Contrary to the primary stereotype of the violence associated with firearms, my respondents instead stressed safety as being the primary value they associated with gun use, along with the related, multi-faceted concept of “responsibility.” Given the powerful outsiders’ narrative that firearms are associated with violence, it was surprising to see the extent to which my respondents reported the opposite. It was clear that these concepts are important to individuals’ sense of themselves as being viewed positively within the subculture, and there was evidence that others’ safety practices are used to judge their fitness within the subculture (especially in the case of hunters).

However, not all individuals or groups associated with firearms come to the same conclusions about safety and danger. This is evident if for no other reason than the fact that many respondents had stories of being in dangerous situations – or knew those who had – or reported
being concerned when the values they associated with safety and responsibility were not held by others. And additional evidence suggests that these dangerous occurrences may be more than just momentary lapses of the rules; not all gun owners hold the same views on safety as my respondents do, nor is safety always seen as a priority. Rather, this viewpoint is the product of years of socialization within a subculture that values safety, and seeks to promote it among its members. Contrast this, for example, with Harcourt’s (2006) youthful offender sample who reported desiring and enjoying guns, but who tended to see them as “instruments of death” and any “attraction” they associated with them was “an attraction linked to the danger of guns” (58). Only a comparatively few of Harcourt’s respondents reported a set of beliefs about firearms encompassing such concepts as “respect,” and this tended to be true mostly of youths who, like my respondents, used firearms for hunting or target shooting and had a family background of gun ownership. These findings suggest that safety and danger are indeed salient points for many, if not all, subcultures involved with gun use. However, the veneration of safety that my respondents report is not the only possible outcome of this debate.

This issue of safety emerges, of course, because guns are necessarily destructive. As a result, legal firearms owners have developed a series of subculturally appropriate ways of managing the danger associated with them. This occasionally takes the form of externalized, explicitly expressed rules, enforced by law or through social control; examples of this include safety signs posted at gun ranges, or the commands issued by range officers at shooting competitions. However, due to the highly individual nature of gun ownership and use – especially among my respondents, who tend to live in areas with relatively low population density – much more often, safety relies on the internalization of subcultural norms and the self-policing that arises from this norm adoption. The emergence of such an individualized approach
to safety leads to a multiplicity of ideas of what constitutes safety, and differing normative support for how these ideas get enacted in practice. (Nowhere is this tension more evident than in the debates over how best way to introduce children to firearms in a safe way – a topic about which respondents failed to reach consensus.)

Also, related to the issue of safety, I had anticipated that a major component of respondents’ responses would have to do with self-defense, but this turned out to be only a minor theme. The pattern that emerged was that this concept was very salient for only three or four of my respondents, who tended to identify self-defense as a major reason for having a firearm. Most other respondents, however, mentioned it only in passing. And when these people did bring it up, they often linked it with other concepts such as the ability of the people as a whole to defend themselves from tyranny, or a larger emphasis on self-reliance, rather than as something of primary importance on its own. This contrasts with dominant cultural narratives that depict gun ownership as being instrumentally focused around self-protection. Instead, as the previous evidence indicates, respondents tend to cite more expressive motivations behind their gun ownership.

In the end, I believe that this dissertation has revealed some important aspects of the lives of upstate New York’s gun owners, and provided some needed context to examine beliefs about the universality of the experience of gun ownership. While my findings indicate some continuity from previous research, there is sufficient discontinuity that it warrants further research in a number of areas in order to explore the extent and nature of these areas. Furthermore, these findings suggest a need for additional qualitative research in a variety of areas related to firearms research. Publishing just one major qualitative project every 5-8 years – as has been the pattern for the study of firearms – is insufficient to the needs of a country where firearms ownership is
such an important issue.

**Limitations of this Dissertation**

Research projects are rarely capable of capturing all of the desired information, and this one is no exception. Many of the limitations of this particular study come from the nature and composition of the respondent population. My sample was limited in the sense that it included only individuals from upstate New York who identify as having a strong connection to firearms culture. The geographic specificity of this sampling was necessary for a number of reasons (see Chapter 2 for a lengthier discussion of this) but it also precluded me from being able to comment upon the lives of people who are merely gun *owners* but not gun *enthusiasts*. For this reason, my results are more likely to represent the experiences and perceptions of those who are most dedicated to firearms ownership – and have the greatest connection to its norms and traditions – than those of the average everyday gun owner. Since the goal of qualitative research is to get the most detailed data possible (Lofland et al. 2006:15) it is appealing to sample the most dedicated and involved members of a group, as they are likely be the ones who have the most in-depth information to analyze about the subculture of which they are a part. However, restricting analysis only to these groups can create gaps of understanding regarding the numerically larger set of people who are less connected to the focal activities of the group. We must remember that “there is something to be learned in all settings and groups” (Taylor and Bogdan 1998:10) and, in this case, there is undoubtedly much to learn from these more peripherally involved individuals regarding their motivations for joining, sustaining membership in, or leaving the subculture, as well as comparing their experiences with those of firearms enthusiasts. For this reason, the sample used in the current research represents only the beginning of the groups with
whom research could reveal important information about firearms ownership.

A further limitation of the sampling strategy that I used is that the vast majority of upstate NY gun enthusiasts are male and White. Because of this, my research is unable to explore the experiences that women and racial minorities – both of whom are underrepresented among gun owners – might have in the world of gun ownership, or gun enthusiasm. It might be reasonable to assume that members of a numerical minority within a subculture would differ from those of the majority group. However, with women and minorities in particular, this suspicion comes into clearer focus in the current work. When we review the number of findings from the current study that bear on issues of gender and masculinity, as well as stigma, it seems almost inevitable that women and racial minorities often have different experiences than White men do. Unfortunately, the current study cannot comment on these issues, which – until further research can be done – leaves open a variety of questions about the extent to which my findings apply to members of these minority groups.

Additionally, by seeking to reach a sample the general population of upstate New York firearms enthusiasts – rather than a particular type or kind of gun owner – I was not able to draw comparisons across sub-populations, or get in-depth information on a single group. My data would not allow me to explore, for example, why people choose to become target shooters rather than hunters, or what attributes are most common among cowboy action shooters. Even some of the earliest statistical firearms research suggests that different types of firearms enthusiasm tend to attract different types of people (Lizotte, Bordua and White 1981), indicating that gun enthusiasts are a multifaceted group. By treating these groups as if they were similar, what the current study gained in generalizability it lost in differentiation. Additional studies are needed to explore how groups of gun enthusiasts differ from one another, and the extent to which those
differences indicate meaningful gaps between the backgrounds, experiences, and attitudes of their members.

Another key drawback of this study stemmed from the limitations placed on it by the IRB. Their high level of concern surrounding the gathering of potentially identifying information made it impossible for me to ask about important demographic information (e.g., income levels, educational attainment, family structure) in a systematic way, as other researchers in this area have. This limited me in two ways – first, it kept me from asking certain types of questions within the interview which might have led to productive new avenues of discussion. But additionally, it prevented me from using these attributes after the fact to categorize responses – using cross-tabulation, for example – and see if they lead to novel conclusions during my analysis. Having this information could have provided additional theoretical clarity, or suggested additional areas where firearms research could go in the future. The lack of this information also prevented me from being able to verify – even in the broadest terms – the extent to which my sample was similar to, or different from, gun owners nationally.

While there were drawbacks to this study, I do not believe that – individually or collectively – they represent serious flaws in the work as a whole. Rather, they reflect the size and scope of a project of this nature, and point to areas where future research can offer additional illumination and clarification.

**Future Research**

As noted elsewhere in this dissertation, relatively few qualitative researchers are choosing to conduct research on firearms ownership. As a result, there are a number of areas where additional contributions are needed to more fully understand the lives of gun owners.
First and foremost, following up on one of the major conclusions of this project, additional research needs to be done on gun owners’ experience of stigma. It is clear that different populations of gun owners experience different degrees of stigma, but additional work is needed to explore why they have the reactions that they do. Qualitative work can be especially impactful in this area where a deep understanding can be reached only by becoming knowledgeable about local subcultural conditions, and exploring how respondents’ backgrounds and their day-to-day experiences interact with those conditions, to produce – or fail to produce – stigma.

Additional work is also needed on the issue of internally generated stigma. Prior work, like the present study, has demonstrated the existence of areas in which different groups of gun owners may offer stigmatizing portraits of one another, or of hypothetical “bad” gun owners with certain undesirable attributes. These topics need additional research to explore the extent to which such fault lines are consequential within the subculture, or within the lives of individuals. There is also a special need to explore the ways in which pro-gun organizations use stigma to achieve their goals. The power of these organizations comes at least partially through their ability to motivate members to identify with the cause, and one way that this is achieved is through stigma generation. Research in this area could explore the extent to which subcultural members accept, and are motivated by, these techniques, as well as comparative research looking at how internal stigma generation in the firearms world is similar to, or differs from, other forms.

Finally, a group that remains under-researched is female gun owners. Existing research suggests that the vast majority of male gun owners were introduced to gun ownership by other men, and some evidence suggests this is true for women as well. However, it seems likely that female gun owners have different types of initiations into, and different means of sustaining their
interest in, the gun ownership subculture. With increasing efforts from pro-gun organizations on getting women interested in the shooting sports, this is a crucial moment for researchers to explore women’s trajectories into, and through, the world of gun ownership. This research is especially important, as well, given the studies that have shown the highly masculine nature of the firearms ownership subculture. While men are often hesitant to even acknowledge the gendered aspects of gun ownership (Albers 2003), much less discuss them in depth, female gun owners are uniquely positioned to be able to recognize and discuss the gendered nature of their experiences in this world.

Also, more generally, the types of methods utilized in firearms research need to be diversified. While I believe that qualitative methods have a lot to offer the field in terms of context and detail, it is also important to consider the benefits of mixed methods, and new methods of analysis. With the proper inputs, it is possible to utilize quantitative techniques – such as cross-tabulation – to enhance the theory-discovery potential of qualitative research. And as data analysis software expands beyond being a mere storage and classification tool and starts to offer increased assistance with suggesting avenues for analysis, it is important to ensure that researchers are up-to-date about how these tools can enhance traditional techniques. The use of visual methods, for example, can help enhance not only the researcher’s understanding of potential connections among data, but also a reader’s comprehension of complex topics. All of these methods should be applied to firearms research – as they are being applied in other areas – to ensure that we are getting the most out of the data that we gather.

However firearms research moves forward, though, move forward it must. My research demonstrates that much of what is assumed to be the basis of gun culture – violence, insurrectionist beliefs, opposition to all gun control measures – is not held by all, or even most,
members. Future research is necessary, therefore, to help reveal the true nature of gun ownership in America and to map its depth and breadth through obtaining accounts directly from gun owners themselves. Over time, this will allow stereotypical beliefs to be put aside in favor of well-documented, well-researched conclusions. The more research we have that helps reveal this complexity, the better we will understand this important social phenomenon.
Appendix A –

Chart of respondents’ demographic data, with comparison to national gun owning population

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<tr>
<th>Respondent #</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Sex</th>
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<td>M</td>
</tr>
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<td>M</td>
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</table>
My sample was drawn from Upstate New York, and while it was not intended to be a random sampling of gun owners – either in New York State or nationally – it is nevertheless informative to compare my respondents with gun owners more generally. My sample consisted of 37 individuals – 34 men and 3 women. At 8% of my sample, women are slightly underrepresented when compared with national levels. Various national surveys suggest that rates of personal female gun ownership range from a low of 9% (Cook and Ludwig 1997) to a high of 11% (Hepburn 2004).

The biggest departure from national statistics is that my respondents were all White, whereas estimated rates of African-American gun ownership range from 16% (Cook and Ludwig 1997) to 21.6% (Smith 2001). However, research has shown that approximately 7% of Upstate New York residents are African-American (Denton, Friedman and D’Anna n.d.), compared with 13.2% nationally (Census Bureau 2016). However, this figure is undoubtedly misleading since the Denton et al. definition of “Upstate” encompasses all of the counties except for those in New York City, on Long Island, and Putnam, Rockland, and Westchester counties. The remaining counties include population centers with relatively high African-American populations, such as Albany (30.8%), Poughkeepsie (33.5%), Buffalo (38.6%, and Rochester (41.7%), which tend to balance out places like Oswego county (1.1%) where I did much of my interviewing (Census Bureau 2016). So, while it is not ideal to have such a racially homogeneous sample, it is not entirely unlikely given the racial makeup of both the areas from which the sample was drawn and the gun owning population in general.

In terms of age, studies have indicated that the modal age category of gun owners is 40-49 (Smith 2001), 40-64 (Cook and Ludwig 1997), or 45-64 (Hepburn 2004). This is somewhat in line with my findings, which indicate that the average age of my sample was 55.8 years old, with
the middle-age range being the modal category. Younger people were under-represented in my sample, however, with just three respondents under the age of 40. This likely reflects both the nature of the sample being sought (people who identify as gun enthusiasts may be older simply because they have had time to connect with the traditions, and develop a sense of self that revolves around gun ownership) and the ways in which it was obtained (statistics show that people in the 55-64, 65-74, and 74+ age ranges have more free time than those in the 25-34, 35-44, and 35-44 age range, suggesting that older individuals have more time both to attend gun-related functions in the first place, and also have more time to participate in an interview (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2015)).
Appendix B –
Methodological Appendix

When approaching a project of any kind it is important to consider one’s location both within the topics being discussed and in relation to any participants who may be involved. Those considerations are especially important in an ethnographic research effort where the experiences of the researcher are a key source of information for the entire project. It is obvious that perceptions and experiences are shaped by background factors, and so it is important both to consider these privately for one’s own sake, and also to discuss them publicly with one’s audience. This section represents, among other things, the public portion of this process, and one element of an effort to ensure that the project is undertaken with a high degree of transparency.

In this section, just as I asked my respondents to do, I will disclose my own personal history with firearms. Just as, for them, this disclosure served as an entrée into how their experiences and attitudes were shaped by their life history with firearms, so too will my discussion of the same information shed light on my interpretation of the information my respondents shared with me. Although my parents owned no guns for the first decade or so of my life, growing up in Maine, I found myself surrounded by people who hunted. In the Fall, it was not uncommon to hear shotgun blasts in the distance signaling the start of one hunting season or another. While in the process of becoming an Eagle Scout, I participated in many outdoor activities, but I never felt any desire to hunt, even though I had friends who did, or whose parents did.

Much like my respondents, my personal experiences with firearms were largely driven by my parents’ attitudes about them. Neither of my parents hunted, and – as far as I could tell – they both opposed firearms, though in a low-key way. In fact, the only prohibition in the house related
to firearms was that my parents didn’t allow us to have toy guns that looked like real guns (which, given incidents like the police shooting of Tamir Rice, is completely understandable). We were allowed to have squirt guns, were not prevented from playing games that involved imaginary gunplay (e.g., “cops and robbers”), nor were we barred from visiting the households of gun-owning friends or acquaintances. Furthermore, while we did not use guns ourselves, there was never any negative sentiment towards gun owners themselves, other than criminals. While hunting was not something that we did, I never recall my parents expressing anti-hunting viewpoints.

My experiences with real firearms were few and far between as a child. And, to a certain extent, I can honestly report that I was afraid of guns; or, rather, what guns were capable of. But, at the same time, I was interested in guns. These two seemingly contradictory ideas can be seen perfectly in my first experience with a real firearm. When my grandfather was hospitalized in the early 1990s, my parents took possession of two .22 rifles that belonged to him, as well as some ammunition, to ensure that the guns wouldn’t be stolen from his house while he was not living there. While the guns were in the house, I would occasionally take them out and look at them, work the slide mechanism, and aim out a window. However, unlike the stories reported by my respondents, I never put any ammunition in the guns, nor fired them, due to my fear. However, my interest kept me coming back.

While I had used BB guns at Boy Scout camp before, my first real use of a firearm came at a Boy Scout jamboree, where there was a skeet shooting station available. Since I had never used a gun before, I was nervous to try it out, but overcame the fear by going with a group of my friends. We shot five shots in each round, and during the first round I hit just one of five clay targets. I enjoyed myself, though, and got back in line later in the day to shoot another round, but
that time I hit all five targets. I was excited to think that I might actually be good at shooting, even though I had little experience with it.

However, even this positive experience with firearms didn’t have much effect on my daily life. In fact, my overall attitude towards firearms – other than hunting guns – continued to be a negative one. While I acknowledged that hunting was a valid use of firearms, I saw little use for them other than that, and I was happy when the Public Safety and Recreational Firearms Use Protection Act (better known as the Assault Weapons Ban) was passed as part of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. As someone who typically leans left in my politics, during the George W. Bush administration – when the Ban faced an upward battle for renewal – I lamented the direction the country was heading when the public could be given access to dangerous firearms that had previously been banned. I expressed this view in an online posting and was challenged by a gun owner to read the AWB for myself, which I did. To my surprise, I found that the legislation did not cover automatic weapons (as I had assumed), nor did it seem to do much to regulate the kinds of weapons that I had previously thought it did. To me, the restrictions seemed largely cosmetic in nature, without addressing issues key to the underlying problems of firearm violence.

Spurred by this experience, I began to question my attitudes about firearms. I began researching firearms, and eventually purchased a .22 rifle of my own. I also took the New York State course for getting a pistol permit, but I moved (to begin grad school) before the permit application would have come back, so I didn’t apply for my license at that time. After the first year of graduate school, I began to have the inkling that I might want to do some formal research in firearms. This was further cemented when I went to apply for a pistol permit using the certificate from the class I had already taken, and was told that the new county in which I was
living had stricter requirements than my old county, and that I was going to have to enroll in another course. Baffled at the patchwork of laws that existed within just a single state – to say nothing of the country as a whole – I began preliminary research into the topic, which then grew into my dissertation project.

Throughout my dissertation work, I’ve shared this story – typically in a much shorter form – with many of my respondents. I did this because, in many ways, I think it demonstrates the strengths I bring to the project. Even though I wasn’t raised in a family that owned firearms, I was raised in an area where hunting was prevalent, and I never held negative beliefs about non-criminal firearms owners. Furthermore, I had shown a willingness to consider new perspectives on firearms, and to change my opinion based on data and research. This is especially important because several respondents reported a belief that people who are anti-gun might find that they enjoy shooting if they were to try it out for themselves. To those people, and perhaps others as well, I may have appeared to be a living validation of that belief, which undoubtedly made them more comfortable with my presence than if I had not been perceived as a “convert.” However, my background also gave the additional benefit of making it clear that I wasn’t a member of the “own,” and perhaps only peripherally of the “wise” (Goffman 1963:19), but rather a newcomer to the world of firearms ownership. In that way, I could ask questions that might have been inappropriate coming from someone with a history of gun ownership, and respondents might feel like they needed to more fully explain their responses so that I would understand their perspective.

While I was open with respondents about my personal history with firearms, and my firearms ownership status, I was far less forthcoming about my political status and opinions about current firearms issues. I preferred to keep these to myself because both because I did not
want respondents to shape their responses based on my stated beliefs, but also because I perceived that my left-leaning politics might mark me as an outsider in the community (Albers 2003:35). Even though this strategy did involve a kind of deception-by-omission, I believe it was appropriate in order to build and maintain rapport with my respondents. I do not believe that, had my respondents known of my political orientation, they would have refused to participate in the project on those grounds. Furthermore, while many people assume firearms owners to be politically and ideologically identical in their support of all pro-firearms legislation and opposition to all gun control, this was not supported by my research. Unsurprisingly, given that they were dealing with a complex topic, my interviews revealed that individuals have a wide variety of different attitudes and positions on firearms-related issues; the fact that an individual owns a firearm does not mark them as having, or not having, any given political or social belief. Therefore, the fact that I did not necessarily agree with some of my respondents’ viewpoints – political or otherwise – did not mark me as an outsider, nor did my choice not to share my viewpoints mean I was being deceptive. In reality, few people disclose their full set of political viewpoints with others at any point, and even fewer do so with casual acquaintances (which was the typical relationship I had with my respondents). Plus, respondents may well have assumed I had liberal political beliefs anyway, given my academic background.

On that point – of greater concern than political differences is the potential for power imbalances, real or perceived, between my respondents and myself. As reported elsewhere in this dissertation, there is a certain amount of distrust of academics by firearms owners. One reason for that distrust surely stems from a power imbalance. As the author of this dissertation, I obviously retain a great deal of power when it comes to what information will be included herein and how it will be presented. Some of my respondents gave indications that they felt this tension,
though it manifested itself in ways I had not anticipated. More than one respondent gave accounts of giving interviews to news reporters and later feeling like they had been misquoted, or that the reporter had in some way failed to capture the essence of what they had said (or, at least, what they had intended to say). This experience, while not unique to firearms owners, demonstrates an understanding of the potential negative consequences of allowing someone – whether a reporter or a researcher – the ability to represent one’s opinions, or the opinions of group that one is a part of, to a larger audience. And yet, despite this danger, individuals may decide to take the risk for the potential payoff that such a relationship could bring – greater exposure for one’s cause, for example.

As a practitioner in a field that problematizes power relationships, I felt that it was especially important to be aware of actual, or perceived, power differences between my respondents and myself and eliminate or mitigate them wherever possible. One major way in which I did this was to send all respondents the transcript of their respective interview. That way, they had a chance to review what they said, reflect on it, and offer any edits or additional information that might have occurred to them since the interview. This was also an opportunity to show respondents what material I would be working from with my project, and so there would be less opportunity for a respondent to feel like something was used in a way that they disapproved of. Obviously it would be impossible to obtain every respondent’s approval of every aspect of the paper, but presenting respondents with a copy of the information from their own interview is a reasonable step in trying to level out some of the power imbalances between researcher and respondent.

Also, from the beginning I have committed to not only taking information from community members (in the form of interviews) but also giving back to them as well. I have
always anticipated making public presentations summarizing the findings of my project to any interested groups, but especially in the geographic areas from which my respondents were drawn, and from the groups they are a part of. That way, they will have the opportunity to see how their experiences fit in with other members of their community, as well as how their participation helped shape the outcome of the project. Furthermore, ideally these public presentations will give respondents and non-respondents alike the chance to engage in a dialogue with me, as well as other people, about any issues raised by the findings of the project. In this way, the dissertation need not be an isolated, one-off event in which people will be presented with data and simply asked to accept it. Instead, participants will be invited to be part of a process of reflection and dialogue on the issues the project raises. In this way, I will not be presenting a series of immutable “facts,” but instead presenting evidence for consideration, and hopefully creating an opportunity for dialogue surrounding the issues that this dissertation bears on.

Moving beyond practical power imbalances, there is also the issue of perceived power imbalances between the university community and firearms owners. As mentioned in the dissertation, some respondents reported a general feeling that gun owners were looked down upon, or thought of as “rednecks,” or as less intelligent than the average person. These stereotypes are typically the opposite of how professors, and other members of the academic community, are often perceived. So, while it is impossible to determine how all of the respondents felt about their social position in regards to mine, it is possible that a perceived power imbalance existed with at least some respondents. To avoid issues arising from this, I did my best to avoid highlighting our differences, and instead attempted to present myself as coming from a position of neutrality and openness. As mentioned above, I would disclose my personal
background with firearms, as well as my status as a firearms owner, to help put respondents at ease and emphasize that their stories would be listened to and taken seriously, rather than looked down upon.

This was also helped by the fact that my membership in the world of academia was incomplete in some ways. Respondents understood that I was a student of Sociology, and so I might have benefited somewhat from having the status of “learner” rather than a higher-status position like “professor” or “professional researcher.” (This is something that I will need to grapple with further if I do future research on this topic, or similar topics, when I do have one of these statuses!)

Whether or not they saw me as a learner, though, respondents may well have been more open to me because of my “academic” status because they perceived me as a beneficial anomaly (e.g. - “one of the good ones”), a status that both Kohn (2000) and Albers (2003) used to their advantage as well. Since “academic” status is often so strongly associated with anti-gun sentiment, to encounter a person who does not fit that stereotype will likely be surprising, and may also be perceived as a good opportunity to have an impact on ongoing debates. For example, at one meeting I attended to promote my study, I highlighted my personal background with firearms, and was subsequently asked by an audience member if my study was going to be “pro-gun.” Unwilling to commit to such a point of view, I instead replied that the study would be fair, in that I would do my best to report what my interviewees had said to me rather than starting from a point of view and making my conclusions fit that point of view. The audience member seemed satisfied by this, and the rest of the audience must have felt that way as well since I received many leads for respondents from those in attendance at the meeting. So, while I tried to avoid the impression of being a left-wing academic writing a hit-piece on firearms owners, I also
had to avoid the impression that I was a pro-gun “mole” inside academia, and that the content of my research was pre-determined to be favorable towards gun owners’ points of view. In walking this line, throughout the recruitment process I told various people that – since they were intimately involved with firearms ownership – the information contained in the dissertation would likely not be surprising to them, but that it might be surprising to people who did not know much about firearms owners. This response – identified by Katz (1997:392) as a generic feature of ethnographies – is both accurate, and seemed to satisfy people who were concerned about how their points of view would be represented. It benefits from not claiming that any point of view will predominate, nor that any individual’s perspective will even appear, in the final work. However, it nevertheless assures respondents that it is very unlikely that they will read the final work and fail to recognize it as representing widely held views within the firearms ownership community. These types of assurances were hopefully enough to clarify my role as an academic – someone seeking to write on the topic of firearms ownership, but with a commitment that my conclusions would be driven by my data rather than a predetermined ideological point of view. (Stressing this in-person data-gathering approach may also have helped to address the stereotype of academic work as theoretical, or conceptual, rather than as part of a systematic study of the real world.)

In order to further minimize the perceived differences between my respondents and myself I used many standard techniques common to ethnography to help establish and maintain rapport. For example, while conventional wisdom might indicate that, when unsure of a dress code, it’s a good idea to dress more formally than is required, that strategy could have backfired in this situation. Whereas in many situations people who are dressed more formally are treated with greater respect and deference, that is not always the case at a gun range, for example.
Rather, to wear a suit – or even a button-up collared shirt – would risk highlighting the wearer as an outsider, and magnifying the perceived difference between interviewer and interviewee. So instead, I intentionally wore clothing that would not stand out in the location where we were meeting. When conducting interviews at gun ranges, for example, I typically wore jeans and a casual shirt. Even when going to people’s houses, I chose to dress down from what I would normally have worn to an interview, simply to avoid the perception, or creation, of barriers between respondents and myself.

While I believe that my apparel choices were appropriate in establishing and maintaining rapport with respondents, other choices I made were less so. For example, previous literature (Albers 2003:35) and other accounts (Luo 2011; National Rifle Association 2011b) had lead me to believe that one of my major challenges would be to distance myself from my academic status, due to firearms owners’ distrust of academics. For this reason, when presenting myself to potential respondents, at first I strove to establish two aspects of my identity – a gun owner, and an NRA member. I believed that these two aspects of my identity would establish my credibility and prevent my academic position from being seen as master status. However, while several respondents did ask about whether I owned guns – and seemed reassured when I told them I did – the choice to highlight my NRA membership may not have been universally positive in the same way.

As discussed in the dissertation, while the NRA enjoys strong support within the gun owning community, it does not have universal support, as I had assumed from the stereotypes I held prior to my research. There were a wide variety of dissenting opinions about the NRA ranging from those who had minor disagreements over their approach to legislation or the methods they used with their members, to those who had significant disagreements with the
underlying philosophies of the organization. Once this range of beliefs became clear, I began to regret my initial reliance on NRA membership as a means of establishing credibility. In future research of this type, I would probably choose not to emphasize this point, and instead rely on things like personal connections (as discussed in more depth in the methodology section), which proved much more useful in my pursuit of potential respondents than did my membership (or non-membership) in any particular group.

Overall, I believe that this reflection represents an honest assessment of my relevant social positions as they relate to my interactions with respondents, and my interpretation of the data they provided to me. While no one can be fully aware of their own biases, and how those biases affect their perceptions, I believe that my introspection on the relevant points was sufficient to allow an honest assessment of my place in the field as part of this research project.
Appendix C –
Interview Guide

Introductory Questions

What is your name?

In what city do you currently live?

Do you currently own any firearms?

For what reasons/purposes do you own firearms?

Can you describe some of the ways are you involved with firearms?

Do you belong to any shooting, sportsman's, or pro-gun groups/organizations (NRA, Gun Owners of America, Jews for the Protection of Firearms Ownership, etc.)?

[If yes] Which one(s)?

[If yes] What do you like about those organizations?

Do you make financial contributions, or volunteer time, for any shooting, sportsman's, or pro-gun groups/organizations?

[If yes] How much?

Do you read any firearms-related publications?

[If yes] Which ones?

Why do you read these publications?
Identity Questions

How did you first become interested in using firearms?
   When did you first start using firearms?

What were your family's attitudes towards firearms when you were growing up?
   How typical were their attitudes, in comparison with others in your local area?

What does it mean to you to be a firearms owner?

What do you enjoy most, or find most appealing, about owning and using firearms?

In your own opinion, what makes someone a “good” gun owner?
   What makes someone a “bad” gun owner?

What is it like being a firearms owner in America today?

If you were going to describe to someone else what the experience is like of owning firearms in New York State today, what would you say?

Can you give an example, or tell a story, which might help someone understand what it's like to be a New York State firearms owner?

Do you think you would have a different experience being a gun owner if you lived in a different part of the state?
   [If yes, how?]

Law Questions
What are your general impressions of the firearms laws both in the United States, and in New York State?

What SHOULD the law do, if anything, as it relates to firearms? What is the role of the law?

What current firearms laws have the biggest effect on your life right now? Please describe how these laws affect you.

Under current laws, are you legally able to own and the kinds of firearms and accessories that you'd like to be able to own, and engage in the kinds of firearms-related activities you'd like to be able to, including self-defense?

What changes (if any) would you like to see to current law?

How well do you feel your viewpoints about firearms are represented in the various levels of government?

When firearms-related legislation is proposed that you're in favor of, do you think it gets a fair hearing at all levels of government?

Have you ever contacted an elected representative about an issue relating to firearms ownership?

[If yes] What was the issue?
Who did you contact?
How did you contact them?
What response did you receive?
Were you satisfied with that response?

[If no] Why have you chosen not to contact your elected representatives?
What kind of a response do you think you would get if you did contact them?
How well you think that courts, both in New York and nationally, deal with issues relating to firearms?

What do you think of the decisions that judges and juries tend to give in firearms-related cases?

How well do you feel your viewpoints are represented by national firearms organizations, like the NRA?

**Stigma Questions**

What are some stereotypes of gun owners?

Do most people believe these stereotypes?

Where do these stereotypes come from?

How do you think gun ownership is portrayed in the media?

Generally speaking, how do you think that most New Yorkers feel about firearms ownership?

Thinking only about the people who disapprove of firearms ownership ... 

For what reason(s) do you think they disapprove of firearms ownership?

What do you think of these reasons?

What do you think of the kinds of people who do disapprove?

How do you think firearms owners should react to this kind of disapproval, if at all?

Can you please describe an incident where someone looked down on you for being a firearms owner, or ever had something bad happen because someone found out you were a firearms owner? (This includes anything that might have happened with family, with friends, at home, at work, etc.)

[If example:]

How did the person/group demonstrate their disapproval?
How strong/weak did their disapproval seem to be?
What specific negative outcomes did you experience?
What did you do/say in response?
How often do you encounter this kind of disapproval?

Are there any situations where you feel you'd be better off if people didn't know that you are a firearms owner?

[If yes] What are those situations?
Why would it be better if they didn't know?
Does it have any effect on your relationships with the people you meet that you can't discuss this part of your life with them?

Thinking specifically about work – do you discuss your gun ownership with anyone there, or do you think it would be better if they didn't know?

Outside of work, do you take any steps in your everyday life to ensure that people do not find out that you're a firearms owner?

Have there been any situations where you had a good experience because someone knew, or found out, you were a firearms owner?

[If yes] What were those experiences like?

Wrap-Up Questions

What would you say to all of America if you could tell them one thing about gun ownership?

Anything else you wanted to discuss, or anything else you’d like to say?

What is your race?

What is your age
The New York Secure Ammunition and Firearms Enforcement Act of 2013 – commonly known as the SAFE Act – is a piece of legislation signed into law on January 15, 2013. In its text, the bill is described as “reducing the availability of assault weapons and deterring the criminal use of firearms while promoting a fair, consistent and efficient method of ensuring that sportsmen and other legal gun owners have full enjoyment of the guns to which they are entitled” (New York State Senate 2013). The major provisions of the bill make the following changes to New York State law:

- Alters the definition of an “assault weapon” to be defined as a firearm with a detachable magazine that contains one or more prohibited characteristics; previously, the law had defined such weapons as containing two or more such characteristics. (Prohibited characteristics for rifles include: a folding or telescoping stock; a thumbhole stock; a second handgrip; a bayonet mount; a flash suppressor, muzzle break, muzzle compensator, or threaded barrel; and a grenade launcher. Prohibited characteristics for pistols and shotguns are similar.)

- Requires registration of assault weapons within one year of the passage of the law, and allows owners of such weapons to dispose of them only by selling them out of state or to a licensed firearms dealer
• Prohibits the possession of magazines that can hold more than ten rounds of ammunition, including those that had been grandfathered in by previous legislation. The law further states that magazines that can hold between seven and ten rounds of ammunition may only be loaded up to a capacity of seven rounds. (This latter provision was later struck down by the courts.)

• Mandates that sellers of ammunition must be registered with the State Police, and that anyone selling ammunition must conduct a state background check on the buyer. (This latter provision was later put on hold following difficulties surrounding the creation and implementation of the state background check database.)

• Requires that firearms licenses be renewed every five years; previously, such licenses had not been subject to renewal.

• Increases the ease with which firearms licenses may be denied or revoked when an applicant or license holder is found to be mentally ill, or has an order of protection issued against them.

• Prevents private sales, including all sales at gun shows, from proceeding unless the purchaser undergoes a federal background check.

• Mandates that gun owners who live with individuals who are prohibited from possessing firearms store their guns in ways that are inaccessible to the prohibited possessors.
• Increases reporting requirements for mental health professionals who suspect that a patient of theirs may be planning to harm themselves or others, and mandates license revocation and firearms removal in cases where such a report is made.

• Stiffens penalties for: the murder of first responders; certain types of gang-related firearms offenses; possession of a firearm on school grounds; certain types of drug-related firearms offenses; commission of a violent felony with a firearm; recklessly injuring a child with a firearm; knowingly selling a firearm to a prohibited possessor; and making “community guns” available for the commission of crime.

• Makes changes to how school safety plans are developed and implemented (New York State Senate 2013)

The SAFE Act is a controversial piece of legislation for a number of reasons, the first of which is the manner in which it was passed. In normal circumstances, bills have a minimum of a three-day reading period during which their content can be scrutinized. However, if “the Governor authorizes and the Senate accepts a Message of Necessity for a certain bill” (New York State Senate n.d.) that three-day period can be skipped and a vote can be taken immediately. In order for this to occur, the governor must “certif[y] … the facts which in his or her opinion necessitate an immediate vote” (Department of State 2015) on the bill at hand. Legislators have expressed the opinion that this action should be used only for “crises” and “emergencies” but, in practice, this is not always the case; for example, this technique was used by Governor Cuomo in 2014 to force a budget vote and avoid the negative press associated with
submitting a late budget (Vilensky 2014). In practical terms, this tactic is used fairly often by New York governors of both parties, but its use is decreasing, with a report indicating that under Cuomo “an average of 13.5 bills per year has passed either house with a message, compared to 41 under the [Democratic] Spitzer/Paterson dyad and 89.2 under [Republican] Pataki” (New York Public Interest Research Group 2014). Nevertheless, pro-gun groups have argued that the message of necessity was used improperly in this case because none of the changes in the bill were so urgent that they justified the waiving of the three-day review period. Such critics tend to point to the lengthy implementation time of some elements of the legislation as evidence for their non-emergent status. On a related note, critics also highlight the fact that the newly banned firearms and accessories were not immediately confiscated, but were allowed to be sold to people outside of New York State. They argue that such policies indicate that if these weapons do not pose such an immediate danger as to prevent their sale, then there is no reason to suspect that they’re too dangerous for continued use.

Those who support the Act respond to criticism of the Message of Necessity by arguing that gun violence is an ongoing crisis that costs hundreds of lives per year, and that the tactic was necessary to avoid protracted debate that could have weakened the law’s impact. In responding to the out-of-state sales, they point to the cost and difficult logistics of orchestrating a gun and accessory buyback within New York State for all of the newly-banned items. They also point out that state laws vary greatly in a number of areas, including the regulation of objects and practices that may be dangerous (alcohol, fireworks, professional fighting sports, etc.). Just because New York determines that these things are too dangerous to be allowed within its own borders does not mean that other states will comply.
In addition to the use of the Message of Necessity, the law is controversial because of its timing. It was passed approximately one month after the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT and was the first major piece of gun control legislation to pass following the shooting (CBS 2013). Critics contend that Governor Cuomo was using the public sentiment surrounding the Sandy Hook shooting to pass a bill that would otherwise have failed, and that the governor was attempting to burnish his image in preparation for a presidential bid. Supporters, however, argue that the Sandy Hook shooting merely provided the necessary context for the passage of such a bill to occur, and that the motivations of the bill were only to protect the citizens of New York from similar violence in the future.

Another controversial aspect of the Act was the way in which some of its elements were implemented. Previously, most major gun control legislation – such as the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, of which one provision is the “Assault Weapons Ban” – had grandfathered existing weapons of the type that were affected by the legislation, and often postponed implementation of the law to allow a period during which the public could purchase the soon-to-be-banned firearms legally. However, some of the SAFE Act’s provisions – including the changes to the definition of what an “assault weapon” is – took effect immediately upon the law’s passage, preventing a lengthy pre-ban window, and offered only limited grandfathering of existing firearms. Proponents of the law felt that this was important to prevent a public buying spree from flooding the market with dangerous firearms, and their continued presence in the marketplace years after the passage of the law. Critics, however, felt that this was an unwarranted departure from previous legislation and that it deprived gun owners of the ability to dispose of their property the way that they wanted to, especially in terms of leaving firearms to people in their wills.
Finally, the SAFE Act has in some ways become more controversial as time has passed due to some of its elements being invalidated by courts, or being put on hold due to logistical issues. These changes have allowed critics to argue that the legislation was poorly written and violates New Yorkers’ fundamental rights. Supporters, however, respond that the core of the law remains intact and that the portions of the law that have been put on hold will be implemented as soon as circumstances allow.


24/phila-woman-avoids-jail-gun-charge/16172251/).


