

A Qualitative Research

Guns in the United States

American Identity and the Right
to Keep and Bear Arms





Photograph Frontpage¹

¹ This picture shows the flags of the United States (on top) and of Arizona State (on bottom). It was taken by Emma van Ameijde on February 9 2014. Location: Jerome, a town nearby Flagstaff.

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Universiteit Utrecht

Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology
Bachelor Thesis 27-06-2014

Emma van Ameijde 3686957
e.a.vanameijde@students.uu.nl

Florian Helinski 3496163
f.a.l.helinski@students.uu.nl

Thesis Supervisor: Pooyan Tamimi Arab





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Acknowledgments

When we both pulled the trigger of an AR-15 for the first time, we knew how it felt to be an anthropologist in the field and participate in the activities of gun owners in Flagstaff. ‘Participant observation’ is a concept we heard about on the first day of college and now, four years later, we finally experienced the true extent of it in the field. Arriving in a city where almost everything is unknown, we quickly got to test our social skills and passed it with flying colors as we met many kind, unexpected and interesting people along the way. ‘Hanging out’ with people who think different, discuss different and eat different made us, for over a period of eleven weeks, feel like true anthropologists. A huge part of our success in the field, if not the biggest, was our host family. We were warmly welcomed by our hosts Robert, Andrea, Marmalade and Frank. They did not only make us feel at home in Flagstaff, they also showed us around and brought us in contact with many people who were interesting for our research. So first of all, we want to thank Robert and Andrea, for their great hospitality during our three months stay in Flagstaff. Of course we want to thank all our informants for the time they spent on our research. The information and trust that they gave us was key in making this research possible. A special thanks goes to Sergio, Enrico, Peter and Chris for letting us hang out in their gun stores and for giving us a great insight into this part of the ‘gun-world’. Enrico, for your warm friendship, gifts and wise words. We also want to thank John, William and Larry for learning us how to shoot and inviting us into their homes where we met more interesting people who were again very kind to us. At last, but definitely not least, we like to thank our thesis supervisor Pooyan Tamimi Arab. Without his help, positivism, and additional ideas, our thesis would not have been the final product that it is today.

Emma and Florian

The first time I heard about the obligation of doing research in couples, I was not thrilled. However, after working together with Florian for almost nine months and still being the good friends we were before we started this research, I think I can say I am very fortunate that we had to do our research in couples. I want to thank you Florian, for being there when I was stressed and sometimes did not have the overview anymore; you were there to rationalize things and to show me that our research was actually going pretty well. I think we complemented each other in the field and working together made our research more exceptional than I could have ever done on my own.

Emma



I also like to take this opportunity to thank Emma, I knew that if I ever wanted to do research in a couple it had to be someone I could trust and work with on multiple levels. The year before our research we worked together in Djembé, the student association of the Anthropology Department of the University of Utrecht. The fun and excitement we had during that year strengthened my belief that working together with Emma would be pleasant. Indeed it did. Our fieldwork was a tremendous experience. We have had great fun in Flagstaff, we enjoyed the company of our hosts, made some beautiful road trips around some of the most magnificent national parks in Arizona, Utah and California and met interesting people along the way. I like to thank Emma for making my eleven weeks in Flagstaff Arizona a life time experience that I can cherish forever.

Florian



Introduction

Flagstaff, Arizona 2014. Sergio², a gun-shop owner in his fifties, asks us, two anthropologists, the question: “*Do you know why people are so polite around here?*” We look indifferently towards him, shaking our heads. He then takes a sharp look towards his belt and says: “*It’s because everybody is carrying one of these*”³ slightly tapping on the edge of his gun while he said it.

The right for US citizens to keep and bear arms is the second of ten Amendments originating from the Bill of Rights which was ratified in 1791. The controversy around guns is one of the most polarizing debates of present day American society. Considering the numbers, it is understandable why the subject gives cause for such heated debate. In 2010 alone, 31.076 Americans died of gun violence in the United States. Another 73.505 Americans were treated in hospital emergency departments for non-fatal gunshot wounds in 2010.⁴ A comparison: the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan caused the death of 771 American soldiers in 2010.⁵ The aim of our research is not to judge gun owners or gun advocates. Instead, we tried to gain a better understanding of what these guns mean in the lives of gun owning citizens in Flagstaff, Arizona. A state known for its liberal policy around guns.

In the field a researcher can never be totally objective. We are coming from a society where guns are not difficult to purchase, and therefore cannot claim that we are not slightly biased towards the pervasive presence of guns in American everyday life. However, to the best of our ability, by listening to our informants we have tried to tell their story. Much quantitative research has been conducted on the subject of gun control and gun ownership. To our understanding, the research that has been carried out shows little depth on the deeper knowledge of how people think and feel about gun control, gun ownership and the Second Amendment. With our qualitative research approach we wanted to contribute to a better perception of gun ownership and the role it has in the daily lives of our research group. We conducted our research during the period between February and April 2014 in Flagstaff, Arizona. We concentrated our research on gun owners who live in Flagstaff. Through our fieldwork and the use of different research methods, we tried to better understand gun owners

² The names of our informants written in this thesis are pseudonyms

³ Informal conversation Sergio, February 2014

⁴ Statistics on Gun Deaths & Injuries, November 16 2012, www.smartgunlaws.org

⁵ Iraq Coalition Military Fatalities By Year, accessed November 29 2013, www.icasualties.org

and the reasoning behind their choice to own a firearm. For that reason, we started our research with ‘hanging out’ in the different-gun stores of Flagstaff. By talking with the owners, employees and customers at these stores, we started to get to know different gun owners and people with special interests for guns. The owners and employees of the stores were all aware of the fact that we were doing research and they gave us permission to hang out in their stores. By observing and having informal conversations, we tried to build rapport with the employees and get an insight in this part of the ‘gun world’. Another important method we used during our fieldwork has been participant observation. To get a better insight in the way people act around guns and activities they practice with guns, we found it an important experience to shoot for ourselves. We did this on numerous occasions, and met many informants in the process. We also used our shooting experience to build rapport with our (new) informants; by telling them that we went shooting ourselves and share our experiences. During our stay our informants firmly understood that we were not journalists seeking a story or there to pass judgment; they liked our open minded approach, knowing very well where we came from. In short: we really wanted to understand and get to know ‘their’ world and the many people we spoke were keen and kind enough to show it to us.

Another place where we used participant observation was at a training of The Well Armed Woman. We listened to the instructor and also took part in one of the exercises the women had to do with their unloaded gun. Here as well we had informal conversations and made various appointments to interview some of the women that attended the class. That brings us to one of the most important research methods we used: semi-structured interviews. In the beginning we did not know the people of Flagstaff, but by hanging out at these gun stores, visiting a gun market, going to target training, and experiencing guns first hand with different groups of people, we slowly got to know more people and got to arrange many interviews in the process. When we interviewed a person, on almost all of the occasions we had already met that person beforehand. This bettered the quality of the interviews, because in most cases a basic trust relationship between us and our informants had previously been established. At the beginning of every interview, we informed our informants about our research and told them that they would stay anonymous. All of our informants agreed that we recorded the interviews for transcription. Half way into the research we ran into some trust issues. We reflected on every one of our interviews and came to the conclusion that we were always open-minded to our informants, but that we perhaps did not challenge our informants enough to give unique answers. The result was that many people told the same story over and



over again. This led us to bettering our questions and being more critical during interviews, which in its turn gave us more unique answers and helped making our last interviews to some of our best. By combining these interviews, informal conversations, hanging out and participant observation activities, we tried to get a broad picture of the ‘gun-world’ in Flagstaff and how our informants think about- but also interact with guns.

Separating our research in the field was rather difficult, since we focused on the same group, we had to make a decision on who interviewed who. First thing we did was decide who should stay in which gun store. This led to both of us having our ‘own’ hanging out spot and meeting our ‘own’ individual informants. On the other hand, whenever we went shooting, we went together as a research couple. Our goal beforehand was to gather as much data and to get the best and most diverse research group as possible. Combining our data we believe that we have reached something close to that. Our collaboration together went effortless.

The structure of our thesis will be as followed: first we will take a look at the founding of the United States and the ideals from the Enlightenment period on which the US’ Constitution was built upon. (Norton et al. 2008) Liberty is one of the core values upon which the first Ten Amendments are constructed. The liberty to carry a firearm is one of them. We will continue with the description of the American Revolution and the enactment of the Constitution that holds the first Ten Amendments. The next paragraph gives an insight into the building of a(n) (American) nation. This part gives the necessary background information needed for the understanding of the American common heritage. The paragraph that follows will describe the concepts of patriotism and nationalism, both clearly visible in the field. We will mention different authors that are invested in these concepts. American identity is a concept that is closely linked to patriotism and nationalism, and this concept will be described in the consecutive paragraph. Finally we take a look at the crux between social liberty and social security. The next chapter contains a portrayal of the research that has been conducted on the subject of gun control and gun ownership. At the end of this chapter we will give a short overview of the laws around guns in Arizona and the way they are enacted in and around Flagstaff. At the heart of our thesis we will present and analyze our data in two empirical chapters. The first will focus on the American state and the ideals that were prominently mentioned by most of our informants during our research in relation to the Second Amendment. The consecutive chapter will focus on the diversity among the people who own guns and their standpoint towards guns and we will give an in depth look on the

term gun-culture and what that means through the eyes of our informants. Finally, in the conclusion we will come to an answer to our main question: how do gun owning citizens in Flagstaff, Arizona give meaning to freedom and security, what does it mean to them and how should the 'gun-culture' be interpreted within this context?

I. Theoretical Framework

Introduction

In this theoretical framework we will give a summary of relevant literature concerning a part of American history, ideals and social security. First we will take a look at the American Revolution. Later we will introduce terms like identity, nationalism, patriotism, social security and social liberty. We will take a look at some of the different scholars and what they have written on these subjects. Some authors have written about these concepts in relation to the United States, others have not. The diverse views and the discussions within some of these topics shall be addressed. At the end we will look at the tension between social security and social liberty.

American Revolution

“There will never be a really free and enlightened state, until the state comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats accordingly. I please myself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor; which even would not think it inconsistent with its own repose, if a few were to live aloof from it, not meddling with it, nor embraced by it, who fulfilled all the duties of neighbors and fellow-men.” - Thoreau 1849:243

Henry David Thoreau summarized the above concept of state in the phrase “That government is best which governs not at all.” (Thoreau 1849:231) Philosophers like Thoreau had a huge role in the creation of the United States. As some authors mention, the United States (US) was built on a strong foundation of Enlightenment principles. Huntington for example mentions that: “a nation can be based on only a political contract among individuals lacking any other commonality. This is the classic enlightenment-based, civic concept of a nation.” (Huntington 2004:19) The United States as such could be seen as the embodiment of the ‘Enlightened State’.

There was much debate in the United States on how the new government would work after the revolution of 1783 was over. The debate took place between two major parties, the

Federalists, and the Antifederalists. (Smith 1988:237) The Federalists wanted a strong central government and the Antifederalist held close to Thoreau's view: "That government is best which governs least." (Thoreau 1849:231) The Antifederalists feared a too-powerful central government. (Norton et al. 2008:187) The Federalists, on the other hand, claimed that the nation should not fear centralized authority if their leaders would be good men drawn from the elite. "A republic could be large, they declared, if the government's design prevented any one group from controlling it. The separation of powers among legislative, executive, and judicial branches, and the division of powers between states and nation, would accomplish that goal." (Norton et al. 2008:187) Thus the policy for a nation based on enlightenment ideals was born. "People did not need to be protected in a formal way from the powers of the new government. Instead, their liberties would be better guarded by 'distinguished'—men of the 'better sort' whose only goal was 'the merit the approbation of good and virtuous men'." (Norton et al. 2008:187) Considering the timeframe, it made the United States a unique and liberal nation in an otherwise monarchist world.

Huntington mentions on this particular part of US history: "As their debates over their relations with Britain intensified, Americans also began to invoke more universalistic enlightenment self-evident thrust concerning liberty, equality, and individual rights." (Huntington 2004:47) The Constitution paved the way for a state which held liberty as its most valuable asset. "Liberty meant liberation from British tyranny and from the rule of kings." (Bellah 1967:28) The liberties of the American people were listed in the first draft of The Constitution. The first Ten Amendments were held in the Bill of Rights. (Norton et al. 2008:195) The Second Amendment dictates: "A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a Free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed."⁶ The Second Amendment is one of the most controversial and fundamental rights in the United States. It has received much scrutiny through the ages and in particular in the last decades and was an important aspect of our research.

The Nation

With the formation of the United States there came a time of community building. As Benedict Anderson mentions in his book, a state and a nation are imagined communities: "It is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.

⁶ Bill of Rights Transcript Text, accessed June 25 2014, www.archives.gov

It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” (Anderson 1983:5-6) In 1790 there were almost four million American citizens⁷; in order for them to make them feel part of an imagined (American) community, citizens had to believe in nationally constructed ideals. The US had to be built as a sovereign nation, independent from British rule. Where, for example, France had a tradition and history as a people that was well documented, the US was a country that was relatively ‘new’. There needed to be a sense of unity for it to succeed. The American people had to see themselves as “The Great Nation of Futurity”, according to John L. O’Sullivan (1839). He stated that the US had a mission. It needed to spread the ideas of universality of freedom and equality over the world, Americans had the chosen right as they were the “light of truth” and the prime example for any nation and it would “smite unto death the tyranny of kings, hierarchs, and oligarchs.” (O’Sullivan 1839) Anderson relates to this by saying: “The most messianic nationalists do not dream of a day when all the members of the same race will join their nation in the way that was possible, in certain epochs, for, say, Christians to dream of a wholly Christian state. It is imagined as *sovereign* because the concept was born in an age in which enlightenment and revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm.” (Anderson 1983:7) Finally, we can say that equality and freedom are some of the most important ideals of the United States. The US was built on the belief that that law-abiding citizen should be sovereign, have a great deal of liberty and should not be constraint by monarchs or any other absolute power.

American Patriotism

Huntington (2004) makes a distinction between ‘patriotism’ and ‘nationalism’. According to him, words that describe the first are: civic, political, revolutionary and liberal. Words that describe the latter are: ethnic, cultural, tribalist and integral. (Huntington 2004:29) He calls patriotism ‘civic nationalism’ and, in theory, it assumes an “open society based on a social contract to which people of any race or ethnicity are able to subscribe and thus become citizens.” (Huntington 2004:29) Instead of ethnic nationalism, which was predominantly the form of nationalism in the greater part of Europe, the US was built on civic nationalism, strongly based on ideals from the Enlightenment period of the 18th century.

⁷ 1790 Fast Facts - History - U.S. Census Bureau, accessed May 19 2014, www.census.gov

Bonikowski (2008) discusses three ways in which research can be done on the concept of nationalism: political, psychological, and cultural. The first, political, “deals primarily with nationalism at the level of the collectivity and its elites”; the second, psychological, “deals with nationalism at the level of the individual”; and the third, cultural, “deals with nationalism at the level of individuals embedded in structures of social relations that pattern the cultural resources to which the individuals have access.” (Bonikowski 2008:4) The emphasis of our research will be on the first and the latter, which, therefore, will be explained further.

The political perspective studies the history and the origins of a (modern) nation-state. It also looks at non-state actors that want to establish authority over a population that is bounded by a territory. This first variant is relevant for the United States, whereas the latter is less important. Many scholars have done research on American nationalism that had to do with “the way in which the national idea gained prominence among the population of the colonies and the early Republic and how its meaning has subsequently evolved over the course of American history.” (Bonikowski 2008:5) In our research we will focus on this area, for that reason we started with the American Revolution in the 18th century and the creation of The Constitution that was built around the ideals of The Enlightenment. Are these ideals still prominent in present-day American society? How are these ideals constructed as part of American identity?

The cultural approach to nationalism “treats it as a cultural phenomenon, that is, a set of shared scripts and symbols used by individuals to make sense of their world and to justify their strategies of action.” (Bonikowski 2008:7) Bonikowski quotes Billig (1995) who writes about nationalism: “Daily, the nation is indicated, or “flagged”, in the lives of the citizenry.” We believe that the Second Amendment is a very visual right, in contrast to for example the First Amendment (right of free religion and speech). What we mean with visual is that, in a manner of speaking, you can actually ‘hold the Second Amendment in your hand.’ This is why we think that the visual representation of the Second Amendment in the modern US society is of great observational value for our research.⁸ Finally, it will also be a great ethnographic tool for our qualitative research.

⁸ For more information on the subject of Mediation: Oration Patrick Eisenlohr: <http://dspace.library.uu.nl/bitstream/handle/1874/35975/Eisenlohr%20oratie%20text.pdf?sequence=1> and oration Birgit Meijer – Mediation and the Genesis of Presence, Towards a Material Approach to Religion

American Identity

According to Huntington (1983), the United States' national identity is not based on a particular ethnicity or heritage, but on its national creed. To be an American, 'Americanism', is defined by the belief in liberty, equality, democracy, and the rule of law under The Constitution. Huntington argues that these beliefs (this creed) are shared by most of the people living in the United States, across various classes, ages and ethnicities. As discussed earlier in this paper, these beliefs were developed early in American history and, according to Huntington, have had little alteration over time. "To be an American is an ideal, while to be a Frenchman is a fact." (Friedrich 1935 quoted in Huntington 1983:30)

There is a tension between these ideals as part of the American identity and bringing the political institutions into accord with these ideals. Huntington (1983) calls this the "gap between ideals and institutions." He explains this gap by saying that a part of the American creed is its antigovernment character. This can be traced back to The Enlightenment ideals. Huntington (1983) describes these ideals as follows: liberalism means individual freedom, as long as you do not restrain the freedom of others. It calls for constraints on governmental control. Individualism is closely linked to the ideas of liberalism, because inherent to individualism is the idea that each person has the right to act according to their own will. Egalitarianism stands for the idea that there is some level of equality between persons and that no one has the right to rule over another. To get closer to these ideals, it will mean that the power of the US government is constantly challenged and weakened. This is what Huntington (1983) means with the gap between ideals and institutions.

Smith (1988) criticizes the description of Huntington (1983) of the American identity, solely based on national creed: "In past times of great economic and social change, the most influential segments of the American populace have not felt they could meet their longings for a secure sense of civic identity and for protection of the existing social order by uniting around the "American Creed". Instead, they have established and sometimes later reestablished civic laws based on non-liberal ideas." (Smith 1988:227) Instead, Smith argues that there are three distinct notions of American identity that are based on three political ideologies: liberalism, republicanism, and ethno cultural Americanism. Liberalism focuses on the universal right of individuals, republicanism focuses on community self-governance, and ethnoculturalism focuses on the dominance of white, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon majorities. He describes different cases in history where there were tensions between these three

perspectives. He illustrates this with two examples of Supreme Court cases. The first one that he describes is the *Bradwell v. the State* case, that denied females the right to practice law. The second case he describes is the *Chinese Exclusion Case*, that prevented Chinese laborers from re-entering the United States (Smith 1988:245-246). According to Smith (1988), the ethno cultural view of citizenship was in these cases more important than the liberal imperatives of the Bill of Rights and they show that ethno cultural ideology cannot be seen as an indication of the “ideals versus institution gap”, but more as an alternative to republicanism and liberalism.

Huntington (2004:49) responds by saying that he agrees with Smith (1988) and that American identity defined only by this national creed “[...] is at best a half-truth.” American identity has had and still has different components, but he thinks that this national creed is one of the most defining features of American identity. In the next paragraph we will discuss the crux between social liberty and social security in American society. We believe that this can be seen as an example of the “ideals versus institution gap” that Huntington (1983) describes.

The crux between social liberty and social security

“The heart and the life blood of liberal freedom is the view that people are free only when they are not subject to constraint by others. Everything else is elaboration, explanation, or justification.” (Brenkert 1991:66) Liberal freedom asks for a critical analysis on how far a subject’s freedom can go as part of a larger community. What would be the costs of such liberal freedom?

Inasmuch as humans must live amongst others and the institutions they create, restraints on certain forms of behavior will be necessary. Thus, if people are to be politically free, we must also secure for every individual a certain private area within which he or she will be exempt from political constraint. We must also reduce as much as possible the constraints, in other public areas, which must be imposed on individuals. Finally, since freedom is one value among others, the extent of freedom in a liberal society will depend upon what other values society also wishes to realize. For example, to achieve greater security it may be necessary to reduce liberal freedom by imposing greater constraints on individuals. (Brenkert 1991:66)



According to Thoreau it is a fact that the state is most of the time inexpedient to the good of the people. “A standing army is only an arm of the standing government. The government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will.” (Thoreau 1849:231) A government is only temporary; the government consists of individuals which are chosen by the people. The people do not consent in all the government’s measures and have limited options to defy these measures. The people choose their government by democratic ends, but have little to say about the decision making process and its implications. As Thoreau discusses: “Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in a least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and *subjects* afterward.” (Thoreau 1849:232) So adding restrictions to the Second Amendment can be interpreted as a direct insult to the conscience of its American subjects.

According to Waldron (2003) there is a ‘common suggestion’ – which he himself does not per se agree with – that it is necessary to balance security against liberty. In society, there is a need for the individual to have a certain amount of liberty to do as he pleases, but there is also the need of the society for protection “against the harm that may accrue from some of the things it might please an individual to do.” (Waldron 2003:192) According to Waldron, nobody argues for anarchy, so civil liberty will never be unlimited, there have to be limits to how far society needs protection – social security – from the state, because that can limit the people’s liberty. So, a balance with on the one hand social liberty and on the other hand social security has to be struck, according to this ‘common suggestion’. It also proposes that as the threat to security increases, this balance is bound to change and that it can be celebrated when, in certain situations, this balance does in fact shift. In his article, Waldron writes about post 9/11 US society: “Change in the scale and nature of the harms that threaten us explains and justifies a change in our scheme of civil liberties; and that process is best understood in terms of ‘striking a new balance between liberty and security’.” (Waldron 2003:192)

On the other hand, Waldron (2003:196) argues that there are also people who consider civil liberties as rights, “rights as trumps”, as Waldron uses the concept introduced by Dworkin in 1977. From such a perspective, rights and thus civil liberties should not be vulnerable to changes for social utility. Even when a society is more vulnerable to violence, when social securities are affected or the fear for violence has grown, measures undertaken to improve social security, by modifying civil liberties, need to be justified by well-informed

beliefs that such modifications will really make a difference. There is always this fear inherent to increasing the power of the state, because this increased power of the state/government can be used not only for the greater good – social security – but also against their own population. Waldron (2003) uses Judith Shklar's phrase "liberalism of fear", and links this to the idea that a commitment to civil liberties is born out of this fear for the government: an apprehension what the state might/can do with their available power and force against their own people.

Verbrugge (2004) also writes about the right of the free, autonomous person that is part of a society, and what should be done with a person that misuses this freedom/liberty by acting criminal and thus lowering the social security of that society that contains free, individuals. According to Verbrugge (2004), who uses Kant's idea's about retributivism, these criminals need severe punishment, because the society sees it citizens as autonomous, free persons, and in that way the criminal 'choose' for his or her criminal act, and by punishing this person it shows that a community takes this freedom of individuals very serious, and does not blame external influences for the behavior of 'the criminal'. Being part of that community, the person that committed the crime was well-aware of the laws and the punishment that comes with violation of that laws. In that way, Verbrugge (2004) argues, the punishment is not something that is imposed on the offender by an external factor, but something that he imposed on himself as a member of that community, because he – a free, autonomous person – chose himself to violate the law. Without punishment, the rights and freedoms of the community/society are something abstract, something that only exists in the minds of the people. But when these rights are being violated and there are severe punishments for violating the law, it shows how much the community values the freedom and well-being of their citizens. This punishment sets an example what will happen when you abuse these freedoms. Looking at civil liberty and social security in that way, it does not restrain the freedom of people by imposing laws that will prevent, for example, violence with firearms (e.g. making it harder to purchase firearms), but instead it tries to increase the social security by punishing the people that abused their freedoms and violated the laws of that society.

The Second Amendment is caught in this discussion, so the question arises: how do American citizens give meaning to freedom and security, what does it mean to them and how should the Second Amendment be interpreted within this context?

II. Context

Gun control in the United States

"This year will go down in history. For the first time, a civilized nation has full gun registration. Our streets will be safer, our police more efficient, and the world will follow our lead into the future!" - Adolf Hitler 1933

"I think it was a semiautomatic, and he must have got off 20 rounds", said Dr. Steven Ray, a witness of the shooting on Senator Giffords in Tucson, Arizona. On January 8 2011, congress member Gabrielle Giffords was wounded in an attack which involved the killing of six others by a shooter named Jared Lee Loughner.⁹ It caused a new turmoil on the already heated debate on 'gun control' in the United States.¹⁰ To understand mass shootings¹¹ like the one in Tucson, Arizona we must take a look at the current debate on gun control in the United States. After all, weapons have changed since the musket and canon of the late 18th century.

Times may have changed, but the Second Amendment has remained constant. After the implementation of the Bill of Rights, the first Ten Amendments have stayed unchanged for 222 years. (Norton et al. 2008) This has been cause for numerous debates, specifically on the Second Amendment. In 1994, President Bill Clinton invoked the Federal Assault Weapons ban and the Brady Bill as a means to limit some aspects of the use of guns in the United States. It was a breakthrough on a more controlled way of gun ownership in the US. The Federal Assault Weapons Ban consisted of a ban on certain semi-automatic weapons. The Brady Bill entails a background check for individuals who want to buy a firearm at a federally licensed dealer. (Gulasekaram 2010)

During the Bush administration the Assault Weapons Ban was not renewed and was therefore revoked. The Brady Bill has remained active ever since. Since Obama became President of the United States in 2008, gun sales have grown significantly. (Gulasekaram 2010:1569) During the Obama presidency there have been multiple attempts, stopped by Congress, to put further restrictions on gun control. Nothing of that kind has yet come to pass.

⁹ In Attack's Wake, Political Repercussion, January 8 2011, www.nytimes.com

¹⁰ Is Gun Control Dead?, April 24 2013, www.nytimes.com

¹¹ An FBI crime classification report from 2005 identifies an individual as a mass murderer if he kills four or more people in a single incident (not including himself), typically in a single location. Source: What Exactly is a Mass Shooting?, August 24 2012, www.motherjones.com

A year and a half ago there was another mass shooting, this time at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown. Twenty children and six adults were shot and killed.¹² It was another tragedy and cause for President Obama to make a firm statement on the issue of guns. Obama said that there need to be a more rigorous approach to gun control to stop tragedies like Newtown and Tucson from happening.¹³ A recent article by the New York Times showed that, since the mass shooting in Newton and Obama's appeal for stricter gun laws, things have changed. Almost all the states have enacted new gun laws. Of the 109 new state laws since Newtown, 39 laws were for stricter gun use and seventy for less control on guns.¹⁴ It is interesting to see that in the last year the opposite of what Obama appealed for happened in the majority of the cases.

The quote by Adolf Hitler, written at the beginning of this paragraph is an example of a quote that is referred to by many 'pro-gun Americans' when the words gun registration are mentioned. (Harcourt 2004:1) The Adolf Hitler quote has been published in editorials, letters and in news stories in papers across the United States. People who are against stricter gun control say that, for example, the genocide of Jews during World War II was possible because Hitler enacted strict gun control registration. What is interesting to note is that this infamous statement of Hitler, quoted by so many people, has probably never been said according to Harcourt. As Harcourt (2004:7) puts it: "The citation reference is a jumbled and incomprehensible mess that has never been properly identified or authenticated, and no one has been able to produce a document corresponding to the quote." The Hitler quote is just one of the tools that some people can use in the heated discussion on gun control.

Guns?

In 2009 there was a total of about 270 million guns owned by about 124 million people living in the United States. (Lott 2013) Much research has been conducted concerning gun ownership and gun control. (Cook et al. 1997; Lott 2013; Pew Research 2013) A research conducted in 1994 discussed the motivations for people why they own (a) firearm(s) or why they do not own (a) firearm(s). (Cook et al. 1997) The main reasons given by people who owned one or more guns was recreation. About 35 percent of the people who own a gun hunted in 1994 and an equal percentage was engaged in sport shooting other than hunting.

¹² Wapenwet VS soepeler na Newton, December 14 2013, www.nos.nl

¹³ In Policy Heavy Speech, Obama Appeals to Emotion on Guns, February 13 2013, www.nytimes.com

¹⁴ State Gun Laws Enacted in the Year Since Newtown, December 10 2013, www.nytimes.com

The other main reason given by people who own a gun is for self-protection, primarily for protection against crime. 46 percent of gun owners gave this as their main reason to own guns. (Cook et al. 1997:3) On the other hand, the main reason for people who did not own a gun was that they viewed firearms as dangerous, immoral or otherwise objectionable.

Another survey concerning firearms was conducted in February 2013. (Pew Research 2013) Different questions were asked about stricter gun laws. 54 percent agreed with the stand that stricter gun laws would reduce the number of deaths caused by mass shootings. On the other hand, in the same survey, respondents stated that stricter gun laws would give the government too much power (57 percent) and that it would make it more difficult for people to protect their homes and families. According to this research, the gap between Democrats and Republicans about the consequences of new gun laws became wider than it was twenty years ago. Around 29 percent of the Republicans agree that stricter gun laws would reduce the number of deaths from mass shooting, or it would help to keep guns out of the hands of criminals, compared to seventy percent of Democrats who agree on these statements. (Pew Research 2013)

Even though much quantitative research has been conducted concerning gun control and gun ownership, there have not been many researchers who conducted qualitative research on the issue concerning guns and American citizenship. As Gulasekaram (2013:1542) writes: “Less explored is the historical relationship between guns and citizenship.” He also states that, since Obama became a frontrunner in the presidential election, gun sales have spiked significantly. Those opposed most to gun regulation – rural white male citizens – were asked about the timing of their purchases. Most of them said that they were worried that a President from the Democratic Party would increase gun control. However, Gulasekaram (2013:1569) says that “there is not enough evidence to determine if such fears are well founded or not.”

Peter Squires (2000), a professor in Criminology and public policy, is the author of the book ‘Firearms and Violence: Safety and Society’. Among many other things in his book, Squires goes in depth about gun legislation in the US, looking specifically at the issue of gun violence in the US. Gun violence according to Squires is an intricate question. According to him: “Even the best available quantitative data can seldom do justice to complex qualitative factors such as culture, tradition, prosperity, cohesion and community, factors which are known to have significant influences upon rates of crime and violence.” (Squires 2000:17) Switzerland, according to Squires is often seen as an example of how high gun ownership does not necessarily have to lead to higher rates of crime offenses. On the other hand, Squires

quotes Killias (Killias 1993 in Squires 2000:17) who says: “international research does tend to suggest that the more guns there are in a society, and the more freely available they are, then the higher the rates of firearm-related offending will be.” In this sense, the US provides the gun-controllers with their best case. Squires stated that the identification of the gun issue is contextual, cultural and ideologically determined. He explains: “This is not a retreat into relativism, but simply recognition that there is unlikely to be a single truth, a single solution or right answer to the problem(s) of the gun.” (Squires 2000:365) Having done qualitative fieldwork in Flagstaff, Arizona, we hope that we have attributed in filling the gap around some of the contextual, cultural and ideological factors that shroud the American gun debate.

Flagstaff, Arizona

Cook et al. (1997:7) mention that carrying a gun outside the home is problematic, because “the public is at risk if the carrier is reckless or inclined to violence.” According to Cook et al. (1997), the result is that in most states guns are prohibited or restricted. Those who have obtained a special gun license are acquainted from these restrictions. However, this is not the case in all the states, as it is not for Arizona. In Arizona it is allowed for any person 21 years of age or older to carry a weapon openly or concealed without the need for a license, with an exception for “prohibited possessors”. Arizona is one of the states in the US that has mild restrictions concerning firearms. Just to name an example: last year a state law has passed the first Chamber which allowed certain employees, at rural schools, to carry a concealed weapon in the schools.¹⁵ Therefore, it is an interesting state for our research.

Flagstaff is a city located in the state of Arizona with a population of almost 70 000 inhabitants.¹⁶ In Flagstaff it is allowed to shoot a firearm a mile (1.6 kilometers) outside the city-limits and at least a mile away from any occupied road.¹⁷ As Flagstaff is a city that is not as big as Phoenix – the capital of Arizona – and Tuscon – the second largest city of the state – therefore there are plenty of opportunities for gun owners to practice with their firearms in the forest surrounding Flagstaff. The next two chapters will give an insight into the gun culture in Flagstaff, Arizona. We will start the following chapter with an on the ground impression of firing a firearm in the forest near Flagstaff.

¹⁵ State Gun Laws Enacted in the Year Since Newtown, December 10 2013, www.nytimes.com

¹⁶ Flagstaff (city) QuickFacts from the US Census Bureau, accessed June 2 2014, www.census.gov

¹⁷ Arizona’s Gun Owners Guide, accessed June 15 2014, www.gunlaws.com



III. America: Ideals and State

As I lay in the grass, I feel the gentle breeze of the morning wind on my cheek and the sounding twitter of birds around me. I take a deep breath, aware of the environment but focused on my target. As the red dot of my crosshair is just a little above the target, I fire and then a loud boom! A cloud of smoke arises on the field fifty yards in front of me. Why shoot at paper targets when explosive targets are that much more fun? We are being taught to shoot with an instructor in a national forest just outside of Flagstaff. Our instructor mentioned everything there is to say about gun safety and the importance of treating every weapon as a loaded weapon. He teaches us the placing of the fingers, how to pull the trigger, to reload, the variations in techniques and finally the ability to hit your target. Because: *“In danger, you will not rise to the occasion, but fall back on the amount of training you have had.”*

Emma and I were shooting with three instructors and eight students in a so called fire-pit. A place littered with trash and bullet casings. The trash consists of vacuum cleaners, toilet paper rolls, gas canisters, computer screens, skulls of elk heads and much more, all with the common feature of bullet holes. A place nature lovers would probably be best to avoid, even though it is in the middle of a national forest. After about an hour another truck pulls up with two young guys; they are drinking beer and cracking jokes. They get out of the car, greet us lukewarmly, finish their beers, and place their bottles in a position where just a moment earlier (our) bullets were flying. They take out their snuff revolver, clearly not aware of all the rules we just learned about gun safety, and start shooting (and missing) the beer can. Our instructor looks at the scene in ill-response. He watches closely however. Afterwards I asked him what he thought of those guys: *“It’s stupid, but it’s allowed.”*¹⁸

Thoreauan

“That government is best which governs not at all.” (Thoreau 1849:231) During our research we have spoken with many people who embrace the ideas of Thoreau. Many of our informants gave us their view on what a government should be and how it should work in accordance with the Second Amendment. It led to interesting insights on the role of guns in present day American society in relation to nation and security. In the following chapter I will

¹⁸ Descriptive notes Florian, participant observation shooting, March 2014

take a look at some of the ideas our informants have on governing, ideals and state. First, some of the Thoreauan ways of thinking that our informants expressed will be addressed. The next part will focus at how these ideals are represented through the use of guns. Furthermore, the government and the relationship that the government has to guns and the people will be further elaborated. I will try to show why the debate around guns, according to our informants, never really moves in any direction. Finally this chapter will answer the question: what is the interpretation of Thoreau's words through the eyes of our informants, how do they affect them and what gives cause to this reasoning?

One of our key informants was Coffey. Coffey is 62 years old, owns two businesses, has long hair and a moustache and is a fervent gun collector. I once asked him how many guns he thought he had. He did not want to answer that question. That they were lying in a vault was all I needed to know. He did however have a strong opinion on many of the topics interesting for our research. He was Thoreauan in many of his views, such as the role of the US government: *"As far as the federal government goes. The Second Amendment is 'shall not infringe'. [...] That means feds are not supposed to pass anything. The feds shall not infringe in any way. [...] So in other words, infringing is for stupidity."*¹⁹ Coffey was not alone in his opinion on what he thinks of the federal government and what that means for the Second Amendment. Also George, a spare time hunter, who was about to enlist into the American army, said: *"I think, personally, the federal government probably reaches too far. I think that the state can handle things better than the federal government can. States are more localized. [...] I would be ok if the federal government would be much smaller."*²⁰ Like George there were many more who thought the government should actually be less involved. Larry a man of 53 years old, who occasionally likes to shoot targets said:

*"I want my federal government to make the phones work across the country, that the interstate routes are well maintained and that our borders are protected. I want my federal government taking care of the big stuff, but I want people locally in control of things that matter to them. [...] So a central warehouse of legislators from Washington telling me how I should behave here in Flagstaff is a mistake."*²¹

¹⁹ Semi-structured interview Coffey, February 2014

²⁰ Semi-structured interview George, February 2014

²¹ Semi-structured interview Larry, April 2014

Across the spectrum of informants we spoke, between different generations and the difference in how they use and interpret the Second Amendment, one single minded thing came out of the vast majority of them: the government should be small. Some informants, like Larry and George, were unhappy about the involvement the government already has in their lives. John is 37 years old, father of two small children and has a master degree in criminology; he summed all of the above in one phrase: *“I think the government should stay out of our lives for the most part.”*²²

The majority of the people we spoke were believers in the ideas of Thoreau, his voice still echoed through many of our informants' heads and they genuinely stand behind his reasoning. In his book ‘Gun Safety or Gun Control’ author Peter Squires states: “Pro-gun American commentators argue that libertarian foundations create a more democratic and a responsible citizenry.” (Squires 2000:381) For our informants the right to keep and bear arms is a responsibility that makes them proud. Attacking those libertarian foundations (like liberty and individualism), through infringing by the government in the individual responsibilities of the people, would be a violation of the responsibilities of their citizens and therefore a breach in one of America’s core values. Which core value? Liberty. Our informants were, for the most part, widely against more involvement of the government, in our case meaning more gun legislation. Of course there were also other views from some of our informants, people who believe government involvement is not intrinsically bad. However, concluding from our findings among gun owners, they are a minority. How do these American ideals, liberty and individualism, translate to reality from our informant’s perspective?

Liberty through the Second Amendment

In our theoretical framework we described Huntington’s view on the American creed as a major element of the American Identity. Ideas about liberty, equality and individualism played a dominant role in conversations with informants. Even though our research group had different uses for guns and different ideas about them, there were also many similarities. The debate around the Second Amendment is a debate about- and the cost of liberty. Understanding the extent of this liberty and how it is perceived is vital for the understanding of the discourse around The Second Amendment. So what do our informants think of their liberty?

²² Semi-structured interview John, February 2014



*“I treasure freedom and independence above all else. That is as sane as I can put it.”*²³ The way Coffey answered my question is in many ways the summarizing answer of all the other informants. Later he added the aspect of guns to the above mentioned statement *“They are a tool of independence”*. Tampering with liberty or meddling with freedom by the US government through created laws around the right to keep and bear arms is wrong. The Second Amendment is a right, not a law. The right says clearly “shall not infringe” and thus it should not be infringed. A 19-year-old anthropology student said: *“People just need to realize that we’re gonna do what we’re gonna do, and people need to stop trying to regulate each other so much. Like: it’s in the Constitution, I don’t see why people are even fighting it.”*²⁴ This comment by one of our informants is one of the main points why the debate around the Second Amendment has never really moved in any direction. The Bill of Rights is a document that is unchangeable in many ways. Mainly because laws may be changed, but rights however can never be changed. They are “God-given” and there for undebatable. Squires (2000) states: “The question (around guns) remains far from resolved and, in Federal legislative terms, something of a political stalemate has been reached. Though it is fair to say that the right to private possession of handguns is probably more controversial now than ever before.” (Squires 2000:51) Fourteen years after this statement and 21 mass shootings²⁵ later, leading to countless casualties, it is safe to say that policy, at least on a federal level, has not changed on handling weapons and therefore still remains in stalemate. Again, it is because possession of guns is a right, and rights cannot be changed. Chris, one of the younger gun store owners we spoke, called the Bill of Rights *“The greatest document ever”*. He explained:

*“Our constitution does not say that you need to be trained [in order to buy a gun], just that you can own a gun. To me that would be the same like saying, you need to take a test before you can vote. Which I actually think [laughs], cause a lot of people have no idea about anything ever. [...] Personal feelings aside, that’s how our constitution is intended, and I think the Bill of Rights is the greatest document ever.”*²⁶

²³ Semi-structured interview Coffey, February 2014

²⁴ Semi-structured interview Sarah, March 2014

²⁵ MAP: Timeline of mass shootings in the U.S. since 2000, December 12 2013, www.metro.us

²⁶ Semi-structured interview Chris, March 2014



Asking about the need for the Second Amendment, some informants brought up the argument that the Second Amendment keeps all the other Amendments in place. It gives individuals the freedom to act against oppression. The Second Amendment is there to protect all of the other Amendments through the hands of the people. It can be seen as a physical way of maintaining the freedoms and liberties of American society. George, an undergraduate engineering student, said:

“I think it absolutely has to be there [the Second Amendment]. [...] The Second Amendment is there, I think, to give the people autonomy against the government. It keeps the government in check, the government cannot impose their decisions that the people don’t see fit. [...] If the government is out of control, the people have the right and the means to reign it back in. So if the government controls the gun, then that amendment, that right, means nothing. Because then there is no difference. If the government controls, than the people have no way to keep that in check.”²⁷

Infringing in any way with the Second Amendment is always unconstitutional. Many of the gun owners we spoke to agreed with that statement. It is because of the Second Amendment that our informants are free and it is through that freedom that they can be independent, so how can you even start questioning that right?

There is definitely a side of the gun owning citizens who state that infringing does not always have to be bad. One informant speaks about the gun laws in Arizona *“It’s pretty cool, but it’s also ridiculous. [...] They are trusting everybody with weapons, deadly weapons. It’s kinda scary.”²⁸* Frank is 32 years old and an army veteran, he owns three guns. He lives with his wife whom we also spoke. She agrees with many of her husband’s viewpoints. Like the idea that weapons should be more regulated. *“I want gun reforms, I want things to be better and more strict, but I don’t have the capacity in my brain to figure that out. Because it seems like there are extremes. Australia went like super strict on their gun laws in the past 20 years or so, and made basically owning any gun illegal. But it wasn’t always like that.”²⁹*

²⁷ Semi-structured interview George, February 2014

²⁸ Semi-structured interview Frank, January 2014

²⁹ Semi-structured interview Marie, January 2014

She explained further *“Guns are a huge part of our culture. I don’t want them to go away, but I want them to be taken more seriously. Guns are made to kill.”*³⁰ Informants like Frank and Marie like to believe that there is better policy possible around the Second Amendment in which people who want guns can still have them, but have to abide to a little more laws in order to get them. Another informant said on regulation:

*“I believe people should at least have to be trained, and not like, just registered. You don’t have to get a permit, but just so that you can try and keep track on who does what. [...] If you have to make people get educated on it [a gun], it’s for their own good and for other people’s good, so I don’t see why it should be much of a hinder, to make sure that they at least know how to take it apart, put it back together and shoot it.”*³¹

This side of the gun owners in general would like to see more control on firearms, even if that would infringe upon some of their liberty. They are definitely not anti-gun, but want just a little bit more legislation so that not everybody without a criminal or mental record can get his or her hands on a gun as easily as liberty now permits in Arizona. Concluding you can say there is a side of the gun owners that is for more involvement of the state, and another that is principally not. There is also a third party who think infringing would not be that bad, but call it *“a slippery slope.”*³² They are afraid that if you allow a little bit of infringing it would be the beginning of the end for their right to carry weapons, so they rather oppose all efforts of constraining firearms, afraid of the possible future when more laws come to pass. *“Afraid of letting the camel’s nose in the tent,”*³³ as one informant jokingly explained.

Some of our informants could not envision a life without guns. I asked the question to Chris who owns many guns:

“[...] I literally have like fifteen pistols. I’ve got one that I use to target shoot, I have my tactical pistol, my battle pistol, like when I go out with my marine buddies and we shoot. I use that one. Then I got a bunch that I carry. I feel like a woman with purses because it depends on what I am wearing, I

³⁰ Semi-structured interview Marie, January 2014

³¹ Semi-structured interview Sarah, March 2014

³² Informal conversation John, March 2014

³³ Informal conversation Hershel, April 2014

will carry a different pistol. If I have jeans on, if I have a jacket on, if it's hot outside, if it's cold outside, if I am going to a sporting event. I will pick a different gun depending on what I am going to do for that day. So my big thing with guns is self-defense.”³⁴

He then further explained how he defends himself in his home:

“If I am in the shower and I hear somebody break in, I don't wanna get out and go into a safe to get a gun. So I keep one in the bathroom with me. I take one [a gun] with me in every room. For a long time I was really big in having a kitchen gun and stuff like that. Now I don't leave so many guns out, because of so much violence, just doing my part. [...] At home I'll carry a gun with me everywhere. If I go to the bathroom, it's on the toilet.”³⁵

For someone who has not grown up in a society with firearms this might appear extreme, but for Chris it is just an everyday aspect of his life. Chris is of Italian descent and mentioned that he would like to go to Italy once. When I asked him how he would feel if he could not carry around a firearm for the duration of his stay in Italy, he answered:

“That would feel so weird to me. I have thought about that. [...] I wanna go see my family that's still there. I don't even know how I'd feel, cause it would be like going out without shoes on. It's really that important to me. I always like put my gun on, put my shoes on, tie my shoes. I can't even imagine... Having to go around for like weeks and travelling. Especially somewhere where I don't know my way around without a gun. That's crazy, I know I have to do that eventually, but I can't even begin to fathom that.”

This example is one of the better explanations from one of our informants of the importance of guns in their lives. Chris compares not having a gun on him like not going out with your shoes on. Ask yourself, how much are shoes a part of your identity? What would walking without shoes prohibit you to do? Would we not also lose a big part of our freedom and

³⁴ Semi-structured interview Chris, March 2014

³⁵ Semi-structured interview Chris, March 2014

independence if we would not have shoes on? The example shows just how much guns are a part of his being, of his identity and finally how important it is for him.

To come back to the question I asked at the beginning of this chapter, how American ideals translate to reality from an informant's perspective, the answer is not simple, but it is clear. It is through liberty, because of the Bill of Rights, that people can have a unique individual right like the Second Amendment. Our informants are able to protect ideals of liberty, equality and individualism, through their right to keep and bear arms. To a certain extent, and what some of our informants say, the Second Amendment hands them a tool to defend these ideals. Finally, what is the thing gun owners of all spectrums have in common concerning firearms and the liberty that they have through those firearms? That they never want to totally abolish guns. Guns are a right and that right is part of their identity. "[...] gun culture is not understood as an attribute only of the weaponry itself but also, significantly, a tradition of the people, an aspect of history and ideology." (Squires 2000:381) Guns are intertwined with the American tradition of liberty and are a physical reflection of that liberty. Our informants feel more independent and thus ultimately more free thanks to the right to keep and bear arms. But why can there not be any regulation from the government to stop some of the gun related violence in American society? According to our understanding, from what we heard from our informants, it is because of the general distrust towards the government.

The Umbrella

"[...] to achieve greater security of justice it may be necessary to reduce liberal freedom by imposing greater constraints on individuals." (Brenkert 1991:66) This idea of Brenkert, a professor in philosophy and ethics and author of the book *Political Freedom*, would probably cause shivers among the spines of many of our informants. Living in a liberal society, especially one with the size of the United States, might give cause to more safety regulation, according to Brenkert. Our informants however disagree, they see expanding the bureaucracy or government affairs as a no go. When the United States was founded there were four million people living in a mostly agrarian society. Modern day United States counts 318 million inhabitants³⁶, where the majority of the people live in urban centers. Larry says:

³⁶ U.S. and World Population Clock, accessed June 24 2014, www.census.gov



“One of the things that makes legislation on this topic [gun control] difficult is population density. When population density is low the likelihood of irritating conflict that arising is also low, but when you have these mega cities and a wide, disparity range of wealth and poverty people get angry. When they are in close proximity their driving habits are bad and their ability to handle a gun are bad. [...] On the one hand I like that the Constitution is difficult to change, but we have to be somewhat flexible, we wanna be deliberate about it, but we gotta be able to deal with 38 million in California, 20 million people in New York city. That’s almost 20% of the country in those two states. They need the flexibility to do what they need to do to control their [gun] situation.”³⁷

Larry is very much pro guns, but flexible towards more gun regulation and he was not alone in that standpoint. Since the founding of the Bill of Rights, the interpretation of the Bill of Rights has changed dramatically. Specifically if you look at the advancements liberal society has made since 1791. The abolishment of slavery and women being able to vote are mayor ‘improvements’ to the amount of freedom inhabitants of the United States have gained. It is interesting to see how many of our informants are pointing at the Bill of Rights, saying it is unchangeable and it should not change, even though its interpretation has the facto undergone changes. In one crucial aspect they are right however, those changes of interpretation were for the benefit of freedom. The main difference between for instance the abolishment of slavery versus the gun debate is the following: the abolishment of slavery gave the citizens of the United States more freedom, much like the ability for women to vote, while trying to regulate the use of weapons is in fact the complete opposite, it conflicts with freedom. People would become less free, and in the heart of a true American, a policy like that is un-American. For a nation created on ideals like liberalism and freedom, you can say it is logical why the debate around guns causes so much trouble and is being fought in such heated fashion. Maybe this conversation is not even about guns, but about the cost of freedom in modern day American society. One fear of our informants is: if the government would succeed in federal gun legislation, what would be the next step? If the government is so powerful that it has that kind of control? Squires mentions: “As opposed to the type of juridical interventions against individual firearm offenders outlined earlier, social scientific

³⁷ Semi-structured interview Larry, April 2014

findings are more amenable to policy level interventions to address 'problematic' conditions - in effect, 'gun control' strategies. The claim that few legal gun owners actually misuse their weapons is no argument against such policies for the latter are (in rationalist models of policy making at least) meant to be informed by objective evidence of 'risks' and seek, accordingly, to achieve aggregate harm reduction.” (Squires 2000:19)

What is wrong with the government trying to reduce violence? From a social-scientific standpoint, it is, to stay in Squires words, rational policy making. In the United States however, things are different. Waldron (2003) uses Judith Shklar’s phrase “liberalism of fear”, and links this to the idea that a commitment to civil liberties is born out of this fear for the government: an apprehension of what the state might/can do with their available power and force against their own people. It is in this light why it is logical for our informants to disallow a higher form of legislation. Ultimately they have a fear of losing control if they ever trust the government. As one informant said: “*Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely.*”³⁸ How can you ever counter corruption in a government if the right that allows to fight back gets restricted? It is through fear of the government that these ideals are still so prominent, through fear that there cannot be legislation. It is a vicious circle. Larry spoke openheartedly on his fear of the government, in stark contrast to what he previously said about people being open to flexibility:

*“I don’t trust that our government has my best interests in mind. I’m not confident that they are gonna reach the right conclusion. So in the last thirty years our country has become more polarized around issues and to a greater and greater degree our government is lying. For their own benefit. So when you don’t trust somebody, you don’t have confidence that they are gonna take the information and reach the right conclusion. That’s the umbrella, which drives this gun ownership conversation, because I don’t trust the government. I don’t think they are gonna reach the right conclusion based on facts. I think they have another agenda.”*³⁹

Larry describes the gun debate as part of something bigger, we need not look at the gun question, but rather the ‘umbrella’ that hangs as a veil over this entire discussion. What is this

³⁸ Semi-structured interview Larry, April 2014

³⁹ Semi-structured interview Larry, April 2014

umbrella? According to us: people do not trust the government. A 22 year old gender study student who was anti gun said the following:

“[...] when your government teaches you to be fearful, it does create fear for you, but at the same time I see what my government does and I don't like it, I don't trust it. I don't...the things that I have heard. [...] I don't think they are there for our interests, I think they have their own. I do recognize that that is a fear, like my own fear. But I think it's a warranted fear. [...] When you can see what you government does to its own people. The poverty, the hunger. It's justified. So maybe I sound like a huge hypocrite, but that's just my personal view.”⁴⁰

She calls herself a hypocrite as she thought that there should be more gun legislation, but at the same time she does not trust her government. When people trust the government then there might be some room for gun politics, a time for flexibility. But looking at the Bill of Rights, being a document that limits government control out of fear of that same government, creates a status quo that can hardly be changed. Closing down on the gun question for now, the discussion about guns is not just about guns, it is also a question about freedom and the cost of that freedom in a modern society. Related to this, one informant said: *“If you want a freedom, you have to in some ways tolerate the abuse of that freedom by others and hope that they get punished for that.”⁴¹*

Brenkert (1991) states: “The heart and the life blood of liberal freedom is the view that people are free only when they are not subject to constraint by others. Everything else is elaboration, explanation, or justification.” (Brenkert 1991:66) The majority of our informants see government regulation as a constraint on their freedom. Until the umbrella is cleared and put to rest, in other words: trusting the government, the gun debate is just elaboration, explanation or justification for something that is essentially not the real problem. My analysis is that this distrust or fear towards the government among our informants is a major obstacle towards enforcing any legislation around guns. This closely relates to a second problem: the Second Amendment is there for one major thing: to keep the government in check, that government then trying to take that right away sounds irrational from a gun owners perspective. Talking to our informants, the majority of them accept the daily casualties that

⁴⁰ Semi-structured interview Elaine, March 2014

⁴¹ Semi-structured interview Hank, April 2014

occur by hands of gunmen, because they honestly do not see the gun as the cause of the problem. If the convulsively conducted debate around guns could ever move in any direction, it needs to come from a vast majority of the gun owners themselves, but until that day arrives, the stalemate will remain intact.

IV. Gun Culture, Liberty and Security

“It fits perfectly in my purse,” a small woman who is in her fifties points to her green bag, with a picture of Jesus on it. *“Mine doesn’t fit, it’s too big for my favorite purse,”* another woman says. *“Well, then you have to sell it back to Chris and buy a new one,”* is the response of the tall woman with long orange hair, who is standing in front of the group. *“I don’t want to sell it, ‘cause it is so cute!”* Next to me, I hear a phone ringing. A woman who is in her thirties answers her pink phone, and leaves her bag open. Next to where the bag was holding the pink phone, a 9mm black hand-gun is pointing out. *“Okay girls, let’s start the training,”* the tall woman says to the group of fifteen women. She tells them about an idea that she had, that she calls the ‘Concealed Carry Weapon Fashion Show’: *“That’s the big challenge for girls and women you know, where do you keep your gun? You still want to look fashionable, and don’t wear these wide manly shirts, but you don’t want people to see that you carry a gun. So I thought: we organize our own fashion-show, were we show people ‘woman-holsters’, like one you can clip on your bra, or put it in your boot.”*⁴²

Different Gun Owners and their Perceptions of Freedom

The Well Armed Woman (TAWW) meeting every week in Flagstaff is just one of many examples of the variety of (social) activities practiced with guns. During our research, it became clear that there is not one ‘gun culture’ but it is better to speak of many different ‘cultures’ inside the gun world, and in those groups there is much diversity as well. In this chapter, I describe such different groups and diversities within these groups. Despite the differences, there are also ideas and concepts that connect these gun owners in Flagstaff, which can be linked to the ‘national creed’ and ideas about freedom, individualism and the Second Amendment or the right to keep and bear arms. Another important factor that associates these different groups are their views on social security. These firearms bring the gun-owning people in Flagstaff a sense of liberty, but what about social security? Is there a so-called ‘crux’ between this social liberty and social security for them? Based on the different stories of the people we have spoken with (and observed) in Flagstaff, this chapter

⁴² Descriptive notes Emma, participant observation at ‘The Well Armed Woman’ meeting, March 2014

will show that for them there is no such crux between, on the one side, social liberty (in this case: the right to have firearms) and, on the other side, social security.

Some of the different groups we have seen and heard of in Flagstaff are the following ones: (trophy) hunters; people who have guns mainly for self-defense; gun-collectors; members of the shooting range; gun-show visitors; people who go shooting in the woods at targets; sport shooters; people who like to reenact old times; and there are many more groups/cultures/things people do with guns, but these are the most prominent groups we have seen and heard of during our research. The most mentioned reason for owning a firearm is self-protection. This main reason crosses the lines of the different ‘gun cultures’, because self-protection is a reason for almost all our informants we have spoken with to carry a firearm, regardless of the ‘group’ they belong to (e.g. hunters, collectors, or sport shooters). Sophie, a girl in her mid-twenties who carries her gun with her all the time, links this idea of self-protection to being independent from her boyfriend: *“Cause it’s nice, you know, you can go out at night in a shady parking lot and not have to worry. Well, that guy is shady, I can defend myself. I can go out by myself, I don’t have to go out with him [her boyfriend].”*⁴³ William⁴⁴, a man in his forties who works for the Courthouse in Flagstaff, said about *“shady parking lots”* or *“dark alleys”* that he can walk in these dark, maybe dangerous, areas thanks to the gun he is carrying. For him, his gun brings him the freedom to walk everywhere he wants to, without anyone restraining this freedom. Both of the examples show that carrying a gun for self-protection is linked to freedom: the freedom to go out by yourself without the protection of your boyfriend, and the freedom to walk anywhere without fearing a ‘bad guy’ doing something to you or, even worse, avoid the neighborhood. This importance of being free as doing what you want to do can be linked to Huntington’s (1983) idea of the American national creed and hence the Enlightenment ideals of liberalism and individualism. Huntington describes liberalism as individual freedom, limited only by the freedom of others. In the examples above this feeling of individual freedom is given to our informants by their firearms. Firearms protects them from being harmed by other people, whom in this way cannot restrain the freedom of the gun owners.

Another group who thinks that firearms give them freedom, but in a different way than the way self-protection can provide freedom, are the hunters. George and Henry are two men who live together, both in their twenties. The first thing you see when you enter their house is a deer antler hung on their front door. An elk skull is put up in their house next to the

⁴³ Semi-structured interview Sophie, February 2014

⁴⁴ Semi-structured interview William, April 2014

dining-room table. Henry tells us that the elk was not shot by a hunting rifle, but with a bow and arrow. The deer on the other hand was shot by one of their hunting rifles. Why Henry enjoys hunting so much is the fact that he can just be outside and be part of the wilderness. That is the thing that brings him, in his words, “*all around freedom.*”⁴⁵ Besides that, it brings him also the freedom to provide his own food, because he and George eat most of the animals they shoot. Lara, another informant who is in her forties and a licensed NRA-concealed carry trainer, also hunts so she can eat the meat from the animals she has shot. She says about hunting and self-provision: “*And our food here is so messed up, they feed the animals for consumption such horrible stuff that, hunting has got more popular even for that reason, just to know what you’re eating.*”⁴⁶ For that reason, she thinks hunting has become more popular in the last years in Arizona. When I asked Peter, a student in his twenties working in a gun store, if he eats the meat of the animals he shoots while hunting, he answered:

*“Yes, I waste nothing. Some folks hunt for trophies, and I’m really not a fan of that. Cause there are people out there that are really dependent on being drawn for deer, elk, so they can feed themselves and their families. But that’s a privilege that we can still enjoy, and I will exercise that privilege as often as I possibly can.”*⁴⁷

There is of course more diversity between the people of the ‘hunters group’, but a clear division can be made between people who hunt and eat the meat, and people who hunt to collect hunting trophies. For our informants, being able to hunt brings them freedom through different ways: being outside and be part of the wilderness, and the opportunity to provide yourself with your own meat.

Another important group of gun owners, at least in Arizona, are the people who shoot at targets in the woods with their friends and/or family. It is very easy to do this in Arizona, because you can go shooting anywhere a mile (1.6 kilometers) outside the city/town limits. Partly, this can be seen as a social aspect of the ‘gun-world’, as we have heard, seen and experienced it ourselves in Flagstaff. Most of our informants would go shooting with friends, family or their husband. It is something you can do in the weekends with your family, as Hank told us: “[...] *when there’s nothing to do on the weekend and everybody is like: ‘hey,*

⁴⁵ Semi-structured interview Henry, February 2014

⁴⁶ Semi-structured interview Lara, March 2014

⁴⁷ Semi-structured interview Peter, March 2014

let's go to the woods and shoot some targets', we do that."⁴⁸ Other informants told us that they go out in the weekend with their friends or family to shoot in the woods or at the shooting range. According to Chris, the most fast-growing group of gun owners in the US are women.⁴⁹ Regardless if it true or not on a national level: the gun shop owners we spoke in Flagstaff all agreed on the fact that women are the largest rising group of consumers in their stores. Lara said about this: *"The fact that all of a sudden their women become interested and they can go out and go do something together that they both enjoy, they're really excited. So the men want the women to go learn."*⁵⁰ So on the one hand the fact that more women are learning how to shoot and own a gun themselves gives couples the opportunity to do something together, but on the other hand, according to many of our informants, because women are becoming more independent of their men (or are divorced) they are learning how to shoot. In this way, they do not need their husband to protect them and take responsibility for their own safety. The beginning of this chapter gives a little 'snapshot' of one of the trainings of The Well Armed Woman and the instructor in the vignette is Lara. An important reason for Lara to be an instructor for TAWW is to get a higher amount of the population involved in the Second Amendment rights:

*"Where they don't grow up around the gun culture, and where they don't understand why we need them, or whatever, you get these women involved. I think that could make a difference in whether we got to keep the right to carry arms in the future."*⁵¹

Where this is an important aspect for Lara to teach the women how to shoot, most of the women we have spoken with are getting more involved with firearms because, as Sophie stated, they want to be able to protect themselves but also many of them just think it is *"fun to shoot"*⁵² as Hanna said it.

What I have tried to show with these different examples of 'gun people', is that the 'gun culture' consists of manifold aspects, groups, and people and the variety of activities you can do with- and reasons for having a gun. It is not the case that these people represent all the gun owners in Flagstaff, but these stories give an idea of- and insight into the diversity

⁴⁸ Semi-structured interview Hank, April 2014

⁴⁹ Semi-structured interview Chris, March 2014

⁵⁰ Semi-structured interview Lara, March 2014

⁵¹ Semi-structured interview Lara, March 2014

⁵² Semi-structured interview Hanna, April 2014

of the gun owners, as I want to emphasize the fact that gun owners in Flagstaff cannot be seen as a homogeneous group of people.

Social Security

Chapter one and the section above gave a sketch of how different gun owners in Flagstaff think about freedom, and how a gun brings them that freedom. For all those people, freedom is a highly valued right, and as guns are for them connected to this right, these guns are very important for them too. But what about social security? Among developed countries, the US has the highest rate of gun related deaths per capita (Cook et al. 2000). At the shooting at the elementary school in Newtown in 2012, 28 people were killed, including the shooter himself.⁵³ Utah, April 2014: a girl who is three years old shoots her little brother of two years old with the handgun of her dad and the boy dies.⁵⁴ These examples are just a few of the gun-related crimes and accidents that happened in the last two years in the US. What do gun owners in Flagstaff think about these crimes and accidents and what are their views on social security in the US related to guns?

First of all, all the people we have spoken with agree in their opinion on the ‘mass-shootings’ and other gun-related crimes that you should not look at the firearm the crime was committed with, but that you should look at the person behind that particular firearm. Of course, they cannot deny that there are gun-related crimes in the US, and yes, these crimes are terrible, but is the firearm to blame, or should the shooter be blamed? Or, how Peter puts it: *“That kind of puts her [his mother] in a perspective that guns are bad as opposed to: these are just tools and people who operate them can be good or bad.”*⁵⁵ The gun is *“just a tool”* and there are *“good people”* – the law-abiding citizens like our informants see themselves – and *“bad people”*. Hanna, a woman in her forties who takes part in The Well Armed Woman trainings, said to me:

“It’s kind of frustrating when there is a mass-shooting, which are horrible of course, all of the sudden it’s the guns fault, and we need to have more rules, stricter laws, which is not going to change anything. Most of these people got their guns illegally, one of them killed his mother and took her guns. They’re

⁵³ Newtown School Shooting, accessed May 12 2014, www.huffingtonpost.com

⁵⁴ Girl, 3, fatally shoots 2-year-old brother in Utah home, April 21 2014, www.nydailynews.com

⁵⁵ Semi-structured interview Peter, March 2014

gonna get these guns, so, I don't think it's gonna help [gun legislation]. And it's just frustrating all the bashing, the gun bashing."⁵⁶

She, as almost all of our informants, thinks that there is too much attention for the gun, "*the gun bashing*", instead of paying attention to the person behind the gun. Because of that, our informants think that there is too much negative attention being paid towards guns (especially by the media). They do not believe that when there are stricter gun laws, it would reduce the crime. Derek, a student who works in a gun store, said:

*"That's why I kind of have the stance that I do, I mean I hate to see these tragedies happen and everything, but I want something actually to change out of it. And restricting gun rights isn't going to change anything. There's over 350 million [270 million] guns out there, already. I mean, if criminal want to get a hold on guns, they will get a hold on guns."*⁵⁷

In other words, Derek also agrees on the idea that it is not the gun to blame, but the person behind the gun. If "*the criminal*" wants to, he will get a hold on guns anyway; gun restrictions will not help to reduce the crimes committed by those people.

Another important theme that is linked to security is 'individual responsibility'. According to most of our informants, it is your own responsibility to protect yourself from (bad) things to happen. Enrico, who is in his sixties and works at the gun store of Sergio, told us that the US is geographically so big and extended, that it is impossible for the police to protect everybody. It is not the case that people do not trust the police, but they see it as common sense that the police cannot be around all the time to protect you. For that reason, it is necessary that you act as a responsible person and be able to protect yourself and your fellow citizens, what for our informants means: being able to carry a gun.⁵⁸ This is also something that takes its influence from history, as Coffey said:

"If you look at the United States' Constitution, it was designed after the Massachusetts territorial constitution, when we were a colony, or whatever you wanna call it . If you look at that original Massachusetts territorial thing,

⁵⁶ Semi-structured interview Hanna, April 2014

⁵⁷ Semi-structured interview Derek, February 2014

⁵⁸ Informal conversation Enrico, February 2014



it's stated in there, what I just said. You have the responsibility as an American citizen or as a citizen of Massachusetts. You have the responsibility to your neighbor. So therefore you will carry a gun."⁵⁹

Coffey's words show that the gun you are carrying does not only protect yourself, but also your neighbor. One of the employees in Chris' gun store told us that the fact that he is carrying a gun, contributes to our security – and thus social security – as well: if there are people in Flagstaff with bad intentions, he said, they do not know who is or who is not carrying a gun. That will make him think twice before he will violate the law.⁶⁰ For that reason, many informants agree with the possibility of carrying concealed and in that way contributing to your own safety, but also to your fellow citizens' safety.

That brings me to another point of the 'security discussion' related to guns: most of our informants emphasize the idea that a lot of gun tragedies and gun violence occur in places where there are strict laws concerning firearms, or even prohibition of firearms. Oakland, Los Angeles, and Chicago are frequently mentioned examples of cities with a high-amount of (gun-related) crimes while these are cities that contain very strict gun laws, especially compared to Flagstaff. So our informants ask the question: why impose these strict gun laws if it does not help to reduce the violence? As I already stated, they also argue that, because everybody is allowed to carry a (concealed) firearm in Flagstaff, it contributes to the (social) security in Flagstaff. Our introduction started with Sergio, a gun-shop owner in his fifties, who asked us the question: "*Do you know why people are so polite around here? Because everybody is carrying one of these.*"⁶¹ slightly tapping on the edge of his gun while he said it. Many of our informants believe that people are more respectful, polite, and friendly in a society where people are allowed to carry guns in comparison to cities where there are strict(er) gun-laws. Sarah, a nineteen year old anthropology student, puts it like this:

"I think having a gun does change the culture of the area specifically. I know we talked about Arizona and it does make a difference if you know someone is gonna be able to have a gun and they could use it against you. You're gonna be a lot more careful and respectful, versus if you, in California with their

⁵⁹ Semi-structured interview Coffey, February 2014

⁶⁰ Informal conversation Tom, February 2014

⁶¹ Informal conversation Sergio, February 2014

tight gun controls, you don't really know. It does change your way of thinking in how you're gonna walk around and how you behave, it really does."⁶²

That brings us to the point where Waldron (2003) states that when a society is more vulnerable to violence (e.g., mass-shootings, gun-related crimes) and measures are undertaken to improve social security (stricter gun-laws), these measures need to be justified by well-informed beliefs that such modifications will really make a difference. Derek states: *"The biggest thing, I guess, that I've noticed was during the recent push this last year for all sorts of new gun control stuff, there was not an actual single piece of legislation out there that would have realistically reduced crime."*⁶³ According to most of our informants, measures taken to reduce gun-related violence do not reduce gun violence or improve social security. Even worse: such measures make a society more vulnerable to gun violence. So why put restrictions on their freedom to buy firearms, lowering their social liberty, when it does not improve social security?

Severe Punishment

Putting restrictions on the purchasing of firearms can be done in many ways. There are many options between having the right to keep and bear arms, to banning all firearms from society. Examples are: a mandatory training before you can purchase your firearm to a five day period between the buying of the gun and actually getting the gun in order to reflect upon the purchase. For our informants it is not only the fear that firearms are banned from society, but any restriction or law that is added concerning the purchase of firearms, is seen as an infringement on their Second Amendment right and hence their freedom. The Second Amendment was created in the time when, after the American Revolution, the people of the US were 'liberated' from "British tyranny and from the rule of kings." (Bellah 1967:28) The liberties of the American people were listed in the first draft of The Constitution. The first Ten Amendments were held in the Bill of Rights (Norton et al. 2008:195). According to some of our informants, the Second Amendment is of crucial importance, because it protects the rest of the rights that are in the Bill of Rights, especially the First Amendment:

⁶² Semi-structured interview Sarah, March 2014

⁶³ Semi-structured interview Derek, February 2014

“[...] they [the Founding Fathers] were maybe thinking: we should be able to practice religion freely, and voice our opinions, and if that’s taken away there comes the Second Amendment where you can back it up with physical force, if someone threatens to take that away. [...] our First and Second Amendment are two of our biggest privileges that keep us, at least, a society that can be free enough to keep its government in check.”⁶⁴

These last words can be linked to Judith Skhlar’s phrase “liberalism of fear” and her idea that a commitment to civil liberties is born out of an apprehension what the state might/can do with their (increased) available power and force against their own people. A mandatory training can be seen as reducing the people’s freedom and increasing the power of the government/state. Hank does absolutely not want a mandatory training when you purchase a firearm:

“The only reason I would disagree with it is because I think the government tracks you as much as they want to. Anyhow, but anything that you have to do to say that you own a weapon, just puts you on the radar for when they do decide that the government doesn’t want to tolerate armed citizenry anymore, they’re going to be able to track you, even easier if you’ve gone to something like that.”⁶⁵

This idea about firearms fits better to what Dworkin (Dworkin 1977 in Verbrugge 2003:196) calls “rights as trumps” instead of the idea of balancing security against liberty. The Second Amendment can be used as a ‘trump’ to protect the citizens of the US against too much power of the government.

As is stated before in this chapter, our informants do not deny that there is gun violence in the US and they do find these shootings tragic and terrible. But instead of trying to prevent these tragedies to happen by putting restrictions on the Second Amendment (as most of them think that will not help anyway), they think that it is better to punish the perpetrator. In this way, the measures that the government takes do not reduce the freedom of the law-abiding-citizen, but instead punish the citizen that violates the law. William is very clear on this subject:

⁶⁴ Informal conversation Peter, February 2014

⁶⁵ Semi-structured interview Hank, April 2014

“I would make the penalties higher for misuse of guns and you will never get your right back on guns. Make the punishment to the price where people think twice. Some accidents are bad and should not happen. If some guys are drinking beer and accidentally shoot someone, they should go in prison for a while. Or work release and pay a huge amount of restitution to the family. If you drink and drive and hit someone, you should be paid held accountable, just like with a gun. Lose your ability to have it. Or get through a ton of classes to get your right back.”⁶⁶

As is made clear in our theoretical framework and first empirical chapter, American citizens, and in this case our informants, like to see themselves and their fellow society members as free and autonomous individuals. This idea of severe punishment is in accordance with the essay of Verbrugge (2004), who uses the ideas of Kant, that when a society punishes ‘their’ criminals, this society values the idea of free, autonomous citizens, because there is this idea that the criminal ‘choose’ for his or her criminal act (as he or she is a free individual), and in that way taking the perpetrator seriously, instead of blaming external factors that could lead to the way a person behaves. Hank says that if you want a freedom, you have to, in some way, tolerate abuse of that freedom by some people in society and hope that they get punished for their act.⁶⁷

We have now reached the point where, I think, there is sort of a paradox in the way gun owners in Flagstaff talk about gun violence, and the way the government should react to this violence. On the one hand, our informants think that it is important that the perpetrator is punished severely by the state/government, because the person violated the freedom that their own society has given them (free, individual person with no external factors that influenced their behavior), whereas on the other hand many of our informants say that the US has ‘social problems’ and that these problems need to be addressed instead of blaming the firearm. As Peter puts it: *“So, I understand why they [the government] want to have gun control, but gun control is ultimately not the answer to stop the violence, it’s not ultimately to stop aggression. Gun control is just scratching the surface of what real social problems we need to address.”⁶⁸* Peter talks about ‘social problems’, other informants call it ‘mentally ill people’,

⁶⁶ Semi-structured interview William, April 2014

⁶⁷ Semi-structured interview Hank, April 2014

⁶⁸ Semi-structured interview Peter, March 2014

and that US society has a problem with this ‘mental illness’. Different informants stated that it is better to look at the underlying problems, why people became ‘mentally ill’ and ended up, for example, shooting people, and address these issues in society instead of taking away their guns. What these ‘mental illnesses’ exactly cause is not clear, but what is clear is that many of our informants mention ‘mental illness’ and say that there lies the problem of gun violence. Chris, a veteran who owns a gun store in Flagstaff, says that the gun is the summation of the problem, and that people never talk about mental health, education, or anything in their country, but just blame the gun when somebody is killed by a firearm. He thinks that that is an ignorant thing to do and that the government is just trying to mitigate damage instead of addressing the real problems that society has. I think that is interesting, because in a way it is contradictory: seeing people as free individuals, violating the law in full awareness and for that, they should be punished (retributivism), but also emphasize the fact that US society has real social problems, that make people mentally ill and kill other people, and that is where the attention should go to. These social problems could be seen as external factors that influence the way people behave, undermining the notion of the autonomous, free individual who decided to act violently.

I think we can conclude that for our informants, there is no so called ‘crux’ between social security and social liberty (Brenkert 1991) if you look at the gun debate. They do not think that when there is more legislation around guns that it would improve social security. Rather, they think the opposite: law-abiding citizens who carry guns all the time everywhere actually increase social security. If the Second Amendment would ever come in danger by more legislation, in their eyes it would be an incorrect direction for the United States, as security and liberty would both decrease. They think that when they have social liberty (thus: their Second Amendment rights) that individual but also social security is higher than when that right is infringed.

Conclusion

“It really is kind of scary, knowing that you might have to take someone’s life to protect a person that you love, to protect yourself and everything that you both stand for. But above all things, it’s a responsibility that you’re proud to have.”⁶⁹

During our research we have met many gun owners in Flagstaff. The people we spoke were diverse in many ways: ranging from their ages, backgrounds and education to ethnicity, political preference and gender. All connected through the power of one object: the gun. The gun culture is very prominent in Flagstaff, Arizona. Whether people have a gun for protection, practice, fun, an army history or because their father used to take them out to hunt, many of them have a special connection to the gun for different reasons. We have tried to the best of our ability to understand the complex discourse behind guns and to see the essential use of the gun. Throughout our research we have met colorful people who often spoke passionate about guns and the pivotal role the gun culture plays in their lives. In the introduction we asked the question: how do gun owning citizens in Flagstaff, Arizona give meaning to freedom and security, what does it mean to them and how should the ‘gun-culture’ be interpreted within this context? In this conclusion we will answer this question by giving an overview of the key arguments we have heard and seen in Flagstaff, Arizona.

One of the things that was common for our informants was their strong belief in freedom and individualism and some of the other foundational principles of the United States. Most of our informants strongly stated that America has many internal problems, but they are proud of their national heritage, their rights and their ideals. In our theoretical framework we mentioned Huntington. Huntington is often under fire for his essay ‘The Clash of Civilizations’ and is and has been accused of over- generalization. According to Huntington (1983), the United States’ national identity is not based on a particular ethnicity or heritage, but on its national creed. To be an American, ‘Americanism’, is defined by the belief in liberty, equality, democracy, and the rule of law under The Constitution. Huntington argues that these beliefs (this creed) are shared by most of the people living in the United States, across various classes, ages and ethnicities. To a certain extent, many of our informants fitted in the framework that Huntington describes. Our informants were strong proponents of American ideals, ideals that Huntington summarizes in the term ‘American creed’. Having

⁶⁹ Semi-structured interview Susan, March 2014



said that, there were some who were the living opposition of some of the ideas of Huntington. People who loved their freedom and independence but were open to more government control. Nevertheless, there was also a sleeping hypocrisy in the statements which that group made on being more open for gun legislation. They who opted for more government control often did not trust the government. Larry called it the ‘umbrella’ that drives the gun ownership conversation. The umbrella meaning: not trusting the government. Not trusting the government has remained a constant reminder throughout our research. We are aware of the danger of generalization, but among our informants, the vast majority did not trust their own government or at least said that they did not. Whether they were for more gun legislation or less, almost all of them shared their doubts about the American government. This doubt filled the need for owning a gun, because the Second Amendment was founded on the belief that the law-abiding citizens could step in when the government turns out to be corrupt. According to us, this is why the debate around guns has hardly moved in any directions in the last decades. Peter Squires mentioned in 2000 that the political situation around guns had somewhat reached a stalemate, according to our understanding that stalemate has remained intact. Guns are intertwined with the American tradition of liberty and are a physical reflection of that liberty. Our informants feel more independent and thus ultimately more free thanks to the right to keep and bear arms. Taking that right away or talking about taking that right away by the government, goes against everything that the Second Amendment stands for. Like we said, it is logical that you do not infringe from a principal standpoint. But harvesting in the fact that there were around 30.000 casualties in 2010 alone by gun violence and 74 shootings in and around schools since Newtown in 2012⁷⁰ might give cause to reassess that principal standpoint. From an outsiders perspective the free availability of firearms in combination with excessive gun violence gives cause to more legislation. Many of our informants however disagreed with that statement.

There are different reasons for our informants why they disagree with that statement. First of all, our informants think that you should not look at the firearm a crime was committed with, but that it is better to pay attention at the person behind that particular firearm. They say that almost every time a shooting happens or when there are gun-related crimes, the gun is blamed for these tragedies, but is it not the shooter that should be blamed? Even when there would be more gun legislation, the persons that commit crimes are still in society, and if they want to commit a crime they will still do it anyway. They will try to get a

⁷⁰ There have been at least 74 shootings at schools since Newtown, June 9 2014, www.washingtonpost.com



firearm illegally or they will use another “tool” to commit the crime with. It is the “law-abiding citizen” that is constraint in its highly valued freedom, and “the criminal” will still commit its crime, even when it is harder to purchase a gun. Waldron (2003) states that when there are measures undertaken to improve social security (in our case: less gun-related crimes), these measures need to be justified by well-informed beliefs that such modifications will really make a difference. Most of our informants do not believe that measures such as stricter gun-control will make a difference and higher social security. Rather, it is the opposite for our informants: most of them emphasize the idea that a lot of gun tragedies and gun violence occur in places where there are strict gun regulations, or even prohibition of firearms. Oakland, Los Angeles, and Chicago are frequently mentioned examples of cities with a high-amount of (gun-related) crimes while these are cities that contain very strict gun laws. So our informants ask the question: why impose these strict gun laws if it does not help to reduce the violence? They even argue that, because everybody is allowed to carry a (concealed) firearm in Flagstaff, being able to own and carry this gun, protecting yourself and your fellow citizens, contributes to the (social) security in Flagstaff.

Another idea that most of our informants share is that people have individual responsibility to take care of his or her own safety. Some of our informants could be a little bit sceptic about the police, but it is not per se the case that they do not trust the police: they see it as common sense that the police cannot be around all the time to protect you. For that reason, it is necessary that you act as a responsible citizen and protect your social environment. For our informants that means: being able to carry a gun. What different informants also said is that they think that people are more respectful, polite, and friendly in a society where people are allowed to carry guns in comparison to cities where there are strict(er) gun-laws. For them it is not only the fear that firearms are banned from society, but any restriction or law that is added concerning the purchase of firearms, is seen as an infringement on their Second Amendment right and hence their freedom. According to most of our informants, measures taken to reduce gun-related violence do not reduce gun violence or improve social security. Even worse: such measures make a society more vulnerable to gun violence. So why put restrictions on their freedom to buy firearms, lowering their social liberty, when it does not improve social security? Some informants stated that it is better to have severe punishment for the perpetrator, instead of infringing the rights of the law-abiding citizens. In this way, the measures that the government takes do not reduce the freedom of the law-abiding-citizen, but instead punish the citizen that violates the law. Combining all these

different factors – the idea that stricter gun-laws do not improve social security; it is more safe in a society where citizens are able to carry a gun instead of a society where they have very strict gun-laws; severe punishment for the perpetrator – shows that for gun owners in Flagstaff, there is no friction between social liberty and social security. Rather, these two complement each other: when law-abiding citizens have social liberty through the use of firearms (thus: are able to keep and bear arms) they think that it improves (social) security.

Even though we gave an overall description of the things most of our informants agreed on, it is not the case that these gun owners are one homogeneous group with the same motives why they own a firearm: hunting, self-protection, shooting at targets, and gun-collecting are just few of the many examples. But what is the case for all of them, is that freedom is a highly valued right. For most of them guns are a physical representation of that right and this right is eventually mediated through these guns. It is a tradition that binds our informants and makes them feel proud to be an American citizen, a fundamental characteristic of their identity. However, we think that this part of their identity is not the whole story. As Smith (1988) criticizes Huntington's (1983) idea of the American identity, solely based on national creed, this can be said about their identity intertwined with the Second Amendment discussion as well. What we have seen and heard during our eleven weeks in the field is that this 'American Creed', and the characteristics of this creed, are very visible among our informants, and for that reason we do think it is an important aspect of their identity. Nonetheless, eleven weeks is not long enough to delve deeper into other aspects of American identity, the so-called ethno cultural identity (Smith 1988) for example. As Huntington (2004:49) states: American identity defined only by this national creed "is at best a half-truth". This 'ethno cultural' identification will make the 'gun debate' probably even more complicated, and therefore it would be an interesting future study.

Having said that, among our 'gun owning' informants the debate around guns was very much alive. There were differences in standpoints towards the availability of guns and 'gun owning citizens' can therefore not be seen as a unified front, or homogenous group. Finally we can say that even though our informants are connected through their right to keep and bear arms, they have conflicting opinions towards gun legislation. According to us, these differences are and will be of pivotal importance in the ongoing debate around guns in the United States of America.

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Attachments

Appendix 1. Summary

When we open the paper in the Netherlands, almost all the news we read involving guns is negative. Guns are not as freely available in the Netherlands as they are in some parts of the United States and mass shootings are not common in the Netherlands. The sheer scope of guns in the US aroused our interest. Therefore, we wanted to take a look at the other side of gun ownership, the ‘positive’ side sort to speak. The Second Amendment, the right to keep and bear arms, is after all a right ratified in 1791. The research we have conducted in Flagstaff, Arizona focused on gun owning citizens of Flagstaff, Arizona. We wanted to take a look at the ‘gun culture’ and how gun owners perceive their right to carry a firearm in modern day American society. Knowing that the country itself is divided on the topic, we choose Arizona as it one of the milder states involving gun legislative control in the US. Our main question was: how do gun owning citizens in Flagstaff, Arizona give meaning to freedom and security, what does it mean to them and how should the ‘gun-culture’ be interpreted within this context?

One of the things that was common for our informants was their strong belief in freedom and individualism as foundational principles of the United States. The gun owners we spoke did not want to ban guns, some did express their desire for more gun legislation, but abolishment of guns was out of the question. Whether our informants were for more gun legislation or less, almost all of them shared their doubts about the American government. This doubt, was one of the reasons, that filled the need for owning a gun, because the Second Amendment was founded on the belief that the law-abiding citizens could step in when the government turns out to be corrupt. Our informants feel more independent and thus ultimately more free thanks to the right to keep and bear arms. Taking that right away or talking about taking that right away by the government, goes against everything that the Second Amendment stands for.

From an outsiders perspective the free availability of firearms in combination with excessive gun violence gives cause to more legislation, but our informants did not agree. First of all, our informants think that you should not look at the firearm a crime was committed with, but that it is better to pay attention at the person behind that particular firearm. Even when there would be more gun legislation, the persons that commit crimes are still in society,

and if they want to commit a crime they will still do it anyway. Most of them emphasize the idea that a lot of gun tragedies and gun violence occur in places where there are strict gun regulations, or even prohibition of firearms. So according to our informants there is no crux between social liberty and social security. They even argue that, because everybody is allowed to carry a (concealed) firearm in Flagstaff, being able to own and carry this gun, protecting yourself and your fellow citizens, contributes to the (social) security in Flagstaff. It is necessary that you act as a responsible citizen and are able to protect your social environment. There is no friction between social liberty and social security according to our informants. Rather, these two complement each other: when law-abiding citizens have social liberty through the use of firearms (thus: are able to keep and bear arms) they think that it improves (social) security.

What is the case for all of our informants, is that freedom is a highly valued right. For most of them guns are a physical representation of that right and this right is eventually mediated through these guns. It is a tradition that binds our informants and makes them feel proud to be an American citizen, a fundamental characteristic of their identity. There were differences in standpoints towards the availability of guns and 'gun owning citizens' and can therefore not be seen as a unified front, or homogenous group. Finally we can say that even though our informants are connected through their right to keep and bear arms, they have conflicting opinions towards gun legislation. According to us, these differences are and will be of pivotal importance in the ongoing debate around guns in the United States of America.