

“My gun doesn’t shoot bullets, it shoots freedom”

Qualitative research on experiencing firearms as part of American culture, and their connection to identity, politics and fear



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Abstract

The controversy of the firearm in the United States has long been up for discussion, being the subject to many debates and studies, but how gun ownership and culture is experienced by owners and supporters is still up for elaborate research. We have analyzed publications and theories on guns and gun culture in the United States, preparatory to conducting qualitative research of our own. To answer our research question ‘How do legitimate gun owners in Pensacola experience firearms as part of the American gun culture, and how is this connected to identity, fear, and politics?’, we have conducted anthropological research in Pensacola, gathering data through in-depth interviews and participant observation at gun stores, shooting ranges and target practices. We have researched the way the gun is part of American culture, is represented in political debate, and how the gun can be used to recognize, embody, and deal with fear. We found that the gun is seen as normal, and signifies the freedom of the common people. There is a narrative connecting gun owners, and the gun debate is a metaphor for the division of power in American society. This thesis gives individuals a voice by building on their views and statements.

Keywords: qualitative research, anthropological research, Florida, Pensacola, guns, firearms, gun culture, gun enthusiast, gun ownership, Second Amendment, identity, nationalism, politics, fear.

Introduction

Who wants to go first?”, Paul asks while loading the magazine of a .22 handgun with the corresponding size ammunition, looking questionably at us. We look at each other in slight discomfort. While we have wanted to shoot a gun for a while, as it always had some appeal to both of us, the reality is starting to hit us that we will be shooting a firearm, in our eyes a deadly tool, for the first time. Brandon walks up to me and instructs me to come with him to the spot where we’ll be shooting most of the day, aiming at the plywood and paper construction that we, rather unprofessionally, had just built up to form our targets in the middle of the open private field of some friends (Appendix 1. and 2.). “Ok, keep your finger off the trigger until you are ready to shoot”, Brandon states as if he has instructed people this way many times before. “Remember everything I told you, and you’ll be fine”.

On that day we joined the Bennet family to shoot their personally owned guns, on a private property owned by their friends. After we had maneuvered the two SUV’s, and the small Honda we would call ours for the next few weeks, Brandon opened the hatch of the pick-up truck, showing the

small, but quite impressive armory of shotguns, hunting rifles and pistols (Appendix 3.).

The gun is a ubiquitous, albeit controversial, part of American culture and society, represented in popular culture and part of daily reality. The controversy, however, stems from this daily reality where, as proposed by anti-gun advocates, the relatively straightforward relationship between the high figures of gun possession in the United States, and its relationship with high rates of gun related injury and fatality, fuels the argument for increased measures of gun control (Kohn, 2000). Seven weeks after our return from the States, as we were fully in the process of writing our thesis and getting close to the deadline, the awful news reached us of a mass shooting that happened in a nightclub in Orlando, where 49 people were killed and 53 injured, marking it the largest mass shooting in the history of the United States. While the gun is, and has been for a long time, a topic of high controversy, and a subject of heated public and political debate, such incidents cause the gun debate to be restarted, and make it even more relevant, highlighted throughout the country, at the dinner table and virtually every news station and medium. This study adds to crucial contemporary political and social debates, set in the United States, as stories of incidents such as mass shootings travel across the nation and beyond.

With the help of authors like Huntington (2004), Kennett and Anderson (1975), Kohn (2000), Goss (2002), Anderson (2006), Tudor (2003), and Beck (2002), we explore, respectively, the theoretical themes of American identity and its values, the gun and its history in America, gun culture, nationalism, fear, and individualism. These are themes that have proved, over the course of our research, fruitful in exploring our research questions, and, consequently, in displaying and explaining the answers to these questions.

After researching gun culture in Pensacola, the question this study ultimately tries to answer is: How do legitimate gun owners in Pensacola experience firearms as part of the American gun culture, and how is this connected to identity, fear, and politics? The aforementioned factors consisting of fear, (national) identity, and contemporary politics, are key in depicting the local gun culture as it is experienced in daily realities of the citizens of Pensacola. To do this, we first examine who the legitimate gun owners in Pensacola are, which guns they have, and how they use them. Then we identify how American Identity and Nationalism are connected to the way people perceive the gun and its uses. Finally, we attempt to complete the perspective on the American gun culture as thoroughly as possible, within the scope of this research, by exploring the connections of the gun culture with the fears of the local population, and the way politics are intertwined with these two concepts.

The research population this study addresses consists of anyone legally owning a firearm within the population of Pensacola. Although the fact that our research population is characterized by firearms possession may imply that we will avoid contact with anti-gun participants, this has not been the case. We found that those participants were able to provide useful information mainly playing a reflexive role. The characteristics of our participants are diverse, thus we have attempted to sample

each different extremity, to cover an extensive range of the gun culture, as it is manifested in Pensacola. We have attempted to address a research population with diversity in race, religious background, class, gender, and residency.

To research the field properties of American gun culture, we have executed an eleven-and-a-half-week fieldwork research on this subject in Pensacola, Florida. We chose this location specifically, due to easy accessibility to the field and its inhabitants, and a high density of gun owners. This quickly turned out to be true, as we held a gun for the first time in our lives only one day after arrival, and shot one six days later. Gun related crime rates are relatively infrequent in Pensacola (www.slate.com), which is key to the proposition of researching the legitimate gun culture, as opposed to the potentially illegal form the subject of gun cultures can take.

There is sufficient information available on the descriptions and quantities of firearms and their use (both legal and illegal), but the explanation why firearms are part of American (sub)culture, is scarce and has been displayed in few articles. By exploring how the gun has taken such a critical position in, according to some, a subculture of American society (Goss, 2006), we can better understand underlying structures, and as such better understand firearms possession and use as a cultural phenomenon.

We have practiced participant observation by observing and taking part in the daily lives of our participants, conversing with and accompanying participants, taking part in their gun related activities, by visiting many local gun shops and shooting ranges with different members of our research population, and participating at shooting practices at gun ranges and private properties, and special events like gun shows.

We have stayed with locals while we were in the field, adjusting to their routines and helping out, which made us able to study everyday life of a part of our research population from up close and from their perspective. Staying with locals makes it more convenient to adjust to the field, and gain more participants in order to expand our contacts and escape a social bubble in which you inevitably end up at a widespread area like Pensacola.

We have used in-depth interviews to provide the opportunity to learn about social life through the perspective, experience and language of those living it. Participants, or interviewees, were given the opportunity to share their story, pass on their knowledge, and provide their own perspective on a range of topics. We have used a prepared range of topics determining what to discuss during interviews. Depending on the participant, these topics were followed almost completely, or used as guidelines over the course of the interview, merely letting the participant decide the interview's content. We have had interviews that were very structured or semi-structured, and other interviews that were rather unstructured, more in the direction of a conversation. The more interviews we executed, the more experienced we got in knowing which questions to ask and what attitude to have

towards the participants, resulting in having less of a question-answer structure, leaning more towards a conversation, creating the impression to the participant of an easier, more spontaneous and not too fixed discussion.

In chapter 1, a theoretical framework is provided to identify gun culture, identity, nationalism, fear, crime, and politics as central concepts. This is followed by a section mapping the context of Pensacola in chapter 2. Chapter 3 and 4 analyze our gathered data from the field, by giving our participants a voice through quotes and descriptions, and after thorough analysis, presenting our results. Finally, we present a conclusion, centralizing a summary of our most important findings, leading up to an outcome that provides an answer to our research question, with afterwards a proposal for further research that we recommend to expand the exploration of American gun culture.

1. The gun in America

As will become clear in this chapter, the gun culture is subject to common themes crossing the anthropological components of culture. The gun culture is learned, for example through education on American history and heritage, often quite literally in schools (Kennett & Anderson, 1975). Gun culture in America is shared, transmitted in society through pop culture and media, through groups such as the NRA, and communicated among the more gun-minded (Kohn, 2000). The gun culture is inextricably instrumental, connected to the object of the gun and its components, and the activities one can perform with it (Braman & Kahan, 2006).

But as Geertz (1973) states, culture is not merely the expression of these concrete behaviors, but more so a “set of control mechanisms” that influence and govern behavior, as significant symbols impose meaning upon the experiences of these behaviors (Geertz, 1973:9). The same goes for gun culture, as it is, we argue, highly symbolic in nature. The gun, for many, symbolizes independence and self-reliance (Braman & Kahan, 2006). Similarly, the gun, and the meaning it can convey, is, for parts of American society that relate to the gun culture, highly integrated, connected for the more gun-minded people to the core values that they call American, and related to their ideas and ideals of what society is and what it should look like. The gun, for example, supports their independence and liberties, protects their rights, and is congruent with American individualism (Huntington, 2004). While these seemingly positive ideals are indeed integrated in this culture, they are not the sole components, as there is a more sinister side integrated with the American gun culture too, and an analysis of the American gun culture would not be complete without it. The American gun culture has fear intricately woven into it, in various forms, and as such the gun is a symbol that conveys that fear too. The gun, or rather, the fear of it being outlawed, is representative of the fear of the government, that might impose their power onto the people by taking away rights and independence (Huntington, 2004). Simultaneously, the gun, being presented as a tool of self-defense, represents fear of the deviant, unlawful other within society (Kennett & Anderson, 1975). The undeniable presence of the gun debate is symbolic of the fear of the gun itself, outside of, but still related to, the gun culture (Aborn, 1994).

We are not first in using the term “gun culture” (i.e. Harcourt, 2004), but we have failed to find, in these publications, an abstract definition of the term itself. As such, we try to explain the term in an anthropological context, so it can be applied as a framework to this thesis. The American gun culture is a component of American culture, that people in American society produce as a vehicle for conveying their ideas and interpretations on how American society should function, through processes of meaning making which governs behavior in lines of transgression congruent to these perspectives of what America is, or should be, with the gun as its most significant symbol. As this does not

encompass the entirety of the American citizenry, the American gun culture is often seen to be subject to merely the sub-cultural group of gun-minded Americans (Goss, 2006).

1.1 The rise of the gun

Through the relatively short history of the British New World, later the United States of America, the gun has had a major role in the establishing of this contemporary powerful nation. Several forces from England created an early on aversion to standing armies among American colonists, leaving them with the other option of forming a militia of male colonists, instead of creating a specialized group, with defensive purposes in case of threat from “colonial fears” such as predators, but also Indians and foreigners trying to claim the land as theirs. These militias were armed with European made muskets and rifles, not suited for the local hostile environments, thus leading the colonial militia to manufacture their own rifles, better suited for American needs, and simultaneously forming the opportunity for the highly specialized gunsmith to become an early and essential American professional. This led to the uprising of an American weapons industry, which grew in time and is unrivalled to this day (Kennett & Anderson, 1975: 40).

The common possession of guns opened up the domain of hunting with firearms for the common people, contrary to European norms of hunting as a private domain for the rich. The necessities and economic gains of hunting for food and fur, resulted in the familiarity of most American males with their firearms, forming a reputation and arguably an identity of the “American as the best marksman in the world” (Kennett & Anderson, 1975: 42).

The American system of self defense rested on the entire male population, lacked certain degrees of training and organization but more importantly, a “professional sense of identity”. This had important social consequences, as “[t]he frontier had led the American to believe his personal safety lay with his gun; by 1776 he would take it up as a symbol of civic obligation” (Kennett & Anderson, 1975: 56). This is represented in quoting the Second Amendment in the United States Constitution: “A well-regulated militia being necessary for the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed” (United States Constitution, 1787).

The reliance on a civil militia, as opposed to a professional army, formed, through time, a crucial part of the American national conscience. Although the meaning and interpretation of “the right to bear arms” has been and is still heavily debated, the Second Amendment has been key to the preservation of the “tradition” which, according to many, this sentence seems to carry out, namely the right to keep and carry firearms as a United States citizen, even in the context of present day society, where colonial realities have presumably diminished and a standing military has long been established (Kennett & Anderson, 1975).

The foundation of an American use of firearms is inextricably connected to national pride, as legitimate use will have only few men “disposed to use arms unless for their amusement, and for the defense of themselves and their country” (Kennett & Anderson, 1975: 82). This national conscience takes shape in a contemporary belief that, while national protection is the responsibility of government forces, the citizen himself can and in many cases should “accept the responsibility for protecting [oneself] and loved ones and for own self-defense before crimes happen” (Findley, 2015:2). Owning guns is thus a right as citizen of the United States, and a necessity for the individual in case of emergency, and for many Americans part of their heritage and culture, and consequently their identity.

The United States’ affinity with firearms is, on the other hand, not unique in existence. Countries like Brazil and Russia have, compared to most other nations, high numbers of firearm related victims, by some estimates proportionate to those in the United States (de Souza, 2007; Kates & Mauser, 2006) Other countries like Switzerland have, due to military characteristics, relatively high numbers of civilian gun possession and training (Grabherr, 2010). While these forms of commerce concerning the modern firearm do exist elsewhere, the ‘militia nature’ of the American gun culture, combined with the legal personal choice of possession and trade of firearms, does seem exclusively American in its composition.

1.2 American heritage and the gun

On the subject of gun cultures many would quickly regard to the United States, which, in contrast to most other modern industrial nations, has relatively unrestricted gun laws. While in most nations in the world the gun has been present, the gun has been prominent in the United States, as part of daily realities in American Society. The country is uniquely gun-minded, and firearms are part of American tradition, folklore, heritage, and popular culture (Kennett & Anderson, 1975:249-250; Kohn, 2000).

Although firearms are often seen as part of American culture, according to Goss, nuance is in place: there is a gun subculture in the United States, however it does not necessarily encompass a majority of gun owners. In fact, a majority of gun owners support moderate gun control measures (Goss, 2006:6). The relative gun-mindedness is, nonetheless, reflected in the weapons legislation currently in place in the United States, as compared to other countries.

While it is often argued that the United States has, compared to other industrial nations, fairly few and unrestrictive gun laws, weapons legislation is undeniably in place, and arguably quite elaborately so (Goss, 2002:8). The difference mostly lies in the ways in which the American Firearms regulations are less restrictive. There seem to be five ways in which American gun legislation deviates from more common gun legislation in other countries. First, where the laws of others are often preventative by controlling access, the United States tend to penalize misuse. Second, rather than limiting availability to legitimized individuals, the United States laws, keeping in mind the current broad

availability, mostly focus on potentially risky individuals, restricting only their access to firearms. Third, the decentralized nature of firearms legislation makes for a wide variety of regulations across the United States. Fourth, regulation mostly focuses on primary market sales, whereas the regulations of informal sales are relatively few. Fifth, gun legislation is often subjected to “political compromise”, leading to easily exploited gaps in gun laws (Goss, 2002:8).

Support for the gun is often accompanied by a representation of the “cultural artefacts” which is constructed in such a way that it reduces the “gunness” of firearms (Dorst, 1993:9). The aim is to avert attention from the most immediate and threatening characteristics inherently linked to the gun, particularly the primary functions of destruction (Dorst, 1993:9). In this case the gun in itself is not regarded as a weapon, but as an artefact of considerable cultural value, which happens to be capable of physical harm when in the hands of the wrong people. This is represented in a common phrase used by gun advocates: “guns don’t kill people, people kill people”, or as Findley states “Remember, your mental state of mind, training and preparation are much more important than the equipment you carry” (Findley, 2015:2).

A central question in the gun debate is whether or not more guns make society less safe. Individuals are motivated to favor or oppose gun control by their cultural worldviews (Braman & Kahan, 2006:750). One segment of American society, which opposes gun control, maintains the value of meanings such as honor, human mastery over nature, and individual self-sufficiency that guns symbolize, and highlight the vision of the “good society” that these meanings construct. However, for another segment of American society guns express the continuation of illegitimate social hierarchies, the increasing notion of “force over reason”, and “collective indifference to the well-being of strangers”, and stricter gun control embodies meanings such as “equality, social solidarity and civilized nonaggression”, as an alternative vision of the “good society” (Braman & Kahan, 2006:570). These gun control advocates desire increased measures of gun control which generally means the tightening of restrictions on gun ownership in general, the ban on owning certain kinds of guns, such as fully automatic “assault weapons”, and, in some cases, the registration of all forms of handguns (Kohn, 2000:2). These measures emerge from the idea that there is a relatively inseparable relation between the high numbers of guns owned by Americans and the high rates of homicide in American society. For many, the firearms used in violent incidents have come to symbolize those incidents themselves. “The idea that a gun is useful for self-defense is rejected as unnecessary: if there were no guns around, you wouldn’t need to use a gun for self-defense” (Kohn, 2000:3). On the other hand, this argument suggests that because there are guns around, one needs to own a gun in order to be able to protect oneself. This argumentation, premised with an underlying fear of being surrounded by guns, offers an explanation to gun ownership legitimization of one segment of gun owners.

Gun enthusiasm, however, is not a simple matter of purchasing a gun for home protection, or even going to a shooting range to practice shooting several times a year. Though guns are widely owned by large segments of the American population, gun enthusiasm is not as common as gun ownership (Kohn, 2000:6). Gun enthusiasm is an interest or pleasure in guns as collector's items, guns as cherished pieces of sporting equipment, and guns as a way to achieve certain states of feeling or states of consciousness. The latter could be defined as an enjoyment in the way a gun is used, or a pleasure in the feelings derived from the activity of shooting (Kohn, 2000:10). These gun enthusiasts often call themselves shooters. Although most of the shooters use guns for sport and recreational purposes, they also keep guns in their homes for self-defense purposes (Kohn, 2000:17).

In the case of self-defense, the gun is viewed as equipment, a tool, utilized to fend off the acts of lawbreakers, experienced as an exceptional but existent and clearly defined minority, supposedly being in a perpetual state of war with authorities and American citizens. This minority can not only be "outgunned", but it functions as "its own antidote", equalizing the balance of power in favor of the victim (Kennett & Anderson, 1975:252).

As such, the gun, being part of the American culture, is not merely heritage in the object, where guns are, being passed down from father to son, and displayed in museums (Dorst, 1993). The firearm is also heritage to the American, in the way that it creates communication, and meaning making, in the present, through objects of the past, in the way that heritage does regularly (Smith, 2006). They are part of a social and cultural process, engaging the American with the act of remembrance, working to establish ways to understand and engage with contemporary society, by integrating part of the national historical discourse.

1.3 American Identity and Nationalism

When addressing culture, one quickly finds that there is the necessary question of the 'self' and the 'other', the question of Identity. This identity in relation to culture is "at once personal, cultural and political" (Kuper, 1994: 538). Both individuals and groups have identities, simultaneously and interchangeably, dependent on the current context the person or group resides in. The identities are constructed and can be renegotiated and restructured over time, influenced by changes in the self and by social interaction with others, or events. As social interaction between the self and other produce meaningful identities, one's aspired group identity, as any anthropologist engaged in fieldwork might acknowledge, cannot be attained unless they are accepted as having that identity by members of the group (Kuper, 1994).

Anderson (2006) proposes that an anthropological definition of the nation "is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently political and sovereign" (Anderson, 2006:6). The national identity then is the self-defined (as opposed to the other) identification with this imagined

political community. According to Anderson nationalism partly has its roots in “fear and hatred of the other”, while this national identification simultaneously often inspires “self-sacrificing love” for the nation. The Nation has, in the twentieth century, become a key feature to peoples around the world, imagining the borders on a map to be the product of historical and natural occurrences, shaping what and who is and is not part of them and their group. A national identity exists thus exclusively when individuals from this group imagine themselves as being within these imagined borders, as a part of the nation (Anderson, 2006).

At the downfall of traditional institutions, such as the church and the dynastic realm, according to Anderson (2006), the space and the need was created for a new way of interconnecting individuals: the nation-state that transforms individuals to citizens, and connects them by linking them all to the origin of the nation-state.

After liberation from the British rule in the country, every individual in the United States was free to give shape and meaning to their lives as desired, as freedom has since always been paramount. The United States was reshaped as one of the first nation-states in the world. Because of the renunciation of the dynasty and the religious community (Anderson, 2006), as a precondition for the reorganization of society and individuals’ lives, where Freedom and Independence, as well as decentralization through appointing sovereignty to the states, were a priority, individualism is deeply embedded in American society and its national identity.

National identity, like any other, is never the only identity of an individual, and depending on private and public events, is always variable, constructed and deconstructed, upgraded and downgraded, embraced and rejected, negotiated and renegotiated. Different people judge their national identities differently, comparing it, may this be tacit or explicit, to the other identities they connect with. (Huntington, 2004: 8-9).

The American identity is commonly accepted to be the expression of the two propositions that America has its foundation in immigration and diversity, and that the American identity is constructed, not based on ethnic heritage, as American culture is constructed through various peoples from various backgrounds, but more so based on the ideological features of liberty, equality, individualism, representative government, human rights, private property, and democracy, what Huntington calls the “American Creed” (Huntington, 2004: 37).

While the national American identity consists of more than solely these two propositions (i.e. race, ethnicity, and particularly religion), and historical accuracy is subject to great debate, they are of critical importance to the lived experience of the American identity. The identification with ideological philosophy, contrasting the identification with ethno-cultural and territorial identification of other countries, legitimates the American claim of having an identity of a civic nature, reinforcing claims of

an identity defined by principle rather than ascription, one that is universally applicable to human societies. (Huntington, 2004: 48-49).

A result of the civic national identity, defined by principle, American criteria for citizenship are arguably relatively modest, (simplified) consisting of mainly an adequate base of the English language and of American history and politics, as well as five years of residence and “a good moral character”, which mostly means an absence of a criminal record. These principles of civic nationalism, of being an American, come with support, and often an experience of naturalization of, the characteristics of liberty, constitutionalism, the law, democracy and, rights. Consequently, for many, the right to bear arms is so too naturalized (Lieven, 2004).

The American national identity has not always been the most salient identity among the population of the United States, but the importance of national identity gained new primacy after the events of September 11, 2001 for virtually all Americans, after it showed Americans that physical distance was no longer a realistic defense (Huntington, 2004: 108). The era of the “war on terror” in the beginning of the twenty first century, and the consecutive years, shaped the revelation of threat towards, and vulnerability of the United States of America, and while the prominence of national identity seems to be subsiding, new conceptions of global security, and a hostile world, might generate relatively sustainable salience of the American national identity (Huntington, 2004). Subsequently, this perceived threatening and vulnerable position, may in fact reinforce the salience of the position of firearms in American culture, as fears become more prominent in daily realities.

1.4 Fear

Fear has been extensively studied psychologically, as a human, individual emotion. However, a sociology of emotions has recently developed, including undertaking to research fear macroscopically, as, according to Tudor (2008), fear is “part of the very fabric of everyday social relations” (Tudor, 2008:239). As Tudor explains, fear should be analyzed more on a macro level, we argue that research of fear has been lacking in anthropological studies as well. With this thesis, we attempt to add to the analysis of fear within the field of anthropology.

Tudor argues that human societies have “cultures of fear”, that provide cultural materials out of which fear and fearfulness are constituted. He claims that people do not fear something just because that is what they have learned or been told through structures of their culture. According to him, people have fear because a of range of factors, “cultural and non-cultural, psychological and social” (Tudor 2008, 252). Tudor explains that cultures are a fundamental base for researching the factors people consistently use to “give expression to our fears”. He talks about fear on a macro level, a social fear, as we will as well, but we will apply fear in a different way.

Based on our research, we have found that there are three types of fear. We will speak of social fear, but also of cultural fear. Besides cultural and social fear, we have found that there is another type of fear, physical fear. Physical fear can also be called emotional fear, where the phenomenon of the fight-or-flight response is eminent. This type of fear has been subject to many studies, mainly in the field of psychology (Tudor, 2008:238). Physical fear is very different from both social and cultural fear, as it applies more so a direct peril, on a micro-level, and is not so much lingering, but directly projected onto the individual and the surroundings. Physical fear applies to the way many of our participants get training for unsafe situations, such as a Citizen's Police Academy we attended multiple times, where citizens were taught what to do when a dangerous situation emerges, like a robbery or an active shooter. People think about what they would do in a situation like that, and carrying a gun with you will make people feel like they are safer when a fight-or-flight decision has to be made. However, in the course of our thesis, we will no longer examine physical fear, as it is not relevant to our research based on the stories that our participants have shared with us. Physical fear is not part of the daily reality of the gun owners we have spoken, as none of them have experiences a situation where physical fear would appear, and they do not experience physical fear discussing threats and insecurities that they face in their daily lives.

Cultural fear is like social fear, however it does not encompass more eminent threats such as crime and terrorism, but it covers a societal threat to cultures. Cultural fear is on a macro level, and defines the threat of the loss of cultural property and characteristics. It applies to the level of the community, both on local, regional, as national and even international.

Social fear is more comparable to Tudor's theory, where societies have fearfulness in general. In this case, this implies that it is more of an ominous kind of fear, of different factors that pose a threat to humanity and society. Examples of social fear are fear of crime, unjustness and terrorism.

As social and cultural fear are both on a macro level, they may be seen as similar. However, we will discuss them as two different categories. We have come up with these categories because they apply to the gun in different ways. Both social fear and cultural fear connect to the different concepts of fear that we will discuss throughout this thesis.

1.5 Fear of the government

The first form of fear, commonly discussed by pro-gun advocates, and with a solid foundation in American experienced history, is the fear of a governmental monopoly of power, by taking away firearms out of the hands of the American citizen. The government would gain the ability to take unrelenting control over its citizens, taking away their individual rights, and firmly contrasting with American values of liberty, equality, individualism, and private property. (Kennett & Anderson, 1975; Kohn, 2000). This concept of fear fits within the category of cultural fear. Cultural fear represents the

fear of our participants that guns might be taken away from them by the government. While this applies to the idea that cultural fear encompasses the fear of cultural loss, since the gun is considered, by our participants, part of the American culture and heritage, this is also the case for the fact that the gun has been such an important part of the culture since nationally significant historical events such as the Civil War, as it has since been there to protect citizens from a tyrannical government.

The loss of private gun ownership would mean a loss of cultural heritage and tradition, one that serves a practical purpose, and at the same time keeps history alive among Americans (Grillo, 2003; Dorst, 1993). Taking away the gun would be in stark contrast with the right given to Americans by their forefathers, as stated in the Second Amendment, to keep and bear arms (Huntington, 2004). The fear that the gun might be taken away from the citizen, therefore belongs within the category of cultural fear.

An example of this form of fear in practice, is a quote from Adolf Hitler, often addressed by pro-gun Americans in reaction to gun control discussions: "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!" (Ameijde and Helinski, 2014: 21-22). Americans who are against stricter gun control often address the strict gun control enacted by the Nazi government, which is thought to have enabled them to perform the atrocities in the Second World War (Harcourt, 2004). While this quote has never been officially authenticated, the regarding of it shows, so too visible in, and quite possibly a reaction to experienced American history, an aversion to a totalitarian governmental power monopoly. Fear of misuse of this power, and subsequent vulnerability of the civilian, fuels pro-gun Americans to further support private firearms ownership.

1.6 Fear of the other

In connection to the gun and fear, 'the other' takes an important role in the argumentation of the gun-minded people, as their legitimization of gun ownership relates to the dangers imposed by the other that they fear. The process of othering is constituted in an unconscious manner, that relates to crime in a way that is connected to individualism, and to the tendency of no longer being connected to people that do not belong to the own environment, group or identity.

We discussed in chapter 1.3 that individualism is deeply embedded in American society. Individualism disconnects individuals from one another (Beck, 2002), which creates space for the process of 'othering'. To explain the concept of othering, we refer to the definition that Jackson (2012:188) constructs. "Othering consists of 'objectification of another person or group' or 'creating the other' which puts aside and ignores the complexity and subjectivity of the individual. Just like stereotyping, Othering allows individuals to construct sameness and difference and to affirm their own identity. Thus, othering is not just about the other but also about the self" (Jackson, 2012:189).

Furthermore, othering takes place between groups, and “leads people towards a widespread tendency to differentiate in-group from out-group and Self from Other”. Othering serves to reinforce and protect Self and group identity (Jackson, 2012).

The other, in relation to gun possession, is a threatening other, which can take several shapes, such as the deviant criminal in American society, which is generally seen as a minority, but nonetheless highly probable of gun possession and unjustified use (Kennett & Anderson, 1975:252). Another example of the other, popularized since the acts of 9-11, is the terrorist, feared to have an uncontrolled desire to strike and kill as many as possible (Huntington, 2004: 108-109). We conceptualize this fear of the other as social fear. Social fear makes the gun a handful tool to carry with you or have in your house for self-defense, as something that can give someone self-confidence in everyday life. The gun offers a kind of back-up, just in case something might happen. It helps people feel more at ease while there is fear of criminals breaking into your house, robbing you and threatening you, that threatens the law abiding citizen, and of terrorism that threatens the honest and safe society.

While these fears are commonly present among pro-gun American, there is, on the other hand, in connection to guns, also a fear of the imbecile, the mentally unstable and the inadequate. These three types of gun owners are considered as illegitimate and incapable of handling the responsibility that comes with owning a gun. Most commonly connected to pro-guns Americans, this fear is a result of the many gun related deaths and injuries taking place in America each year. In this case there is a general notion that the way that the existing laws are enforced in the United States, does not discourage violence, and explains high numbers of crime, accidents, and suicides (Aborn, 1994), as these people are not checked well enough on their mental health, training, and knowledge of guns. However, in connection to pro-gun control Americans, there is a general notion that the ease of firearms possession in the United States promotes violence, which in turn causes a higher chance on these numbers of crime, accidents, and suicides (Aborn, 1994).

The tension between the ideas of pro-gun and anti-gun Americans is an important factor of the ongoing discussions on gun control, a critical aspect of contemporary American politics. Two important parts of America’s virtues are liberty and individualism after all, and at the same time the United States government is expected to provide a certain degree of security, situating the gun debate in a grey area, easily conflicting with the values the American citizen holds dear, forming a crux between the values of liberty and the necessities of security (Ameijde & Helinski, 2014; Kennett & Anderson, 1975:252).

This brings us to the connection between the concept of nationalism and the concept of fear. On the one hand, the idea of Liberty - unmistakably related, typical and essential to Americanness - is often considered as America's most important virtue. On the other hand, there is no denying that the desire for more security, strongly increased after September 11, 2001, is becoming a reality that has

to be dealt with, either by the government or by citizens themselves. This is simultaneously where the gun brings the dilemma in American society, as liberty and security for some means being free of guns, with only a governmental power monopoly securing the safety, while for others the liberty of owning the gun secures the personal and individual safety. The crux between liberty and security (Ameijde & Helinski, 2014), is thus reason for much debate, represented, and influential in American public spheres and politics.

2. Context on firearms in the United States

America is famous, or rather notorious, for its view on firearms. Examples, such as the quote by Donald Trump at the introduction of this study, leave many opposing people aghast, while others firmly believe and support such statements. But to put these views on firearms in perspective, there is the need to look at the numbers of guns, gun related violence, and the legislation intended to control, in the case of America mainly the violence, which guns can produce.

As stated before, the keeping of firearms in America has been of long debate, and is seen as a serious matter, mainly due to the numbers of victims caused by gun related violence. While no official number of firearms, possessed by United States citizens, exists, the total number is estimated to be around 300.000.000. Annually more than 25.000 gun related injury is inflicted in the United States, of which 12.000 were fatal towards the end of 2015. Reasons, besides homicide, for fatal shooting incidents are accidental shootings, self-defensive purposes, police shootings, and suicide by gun (BBC, 2015).

The gun related incidents most commonly sparking new debate among American public, and political figures are mass shootings. From the start of 2015 to December 3rd, 2015 there have been 353 gun related incidents classified as mass shootings, which is defined as a single shooting incident killing or injuring more than 4 people. That number comes down to an average of one mass shooting every day. (Mass shooting tracker, 2015)

On a national level there are two acts that impact the regulation of firearms. First is the National Firearms Act, amended in 1934, which effectively defines firearms and their different classifications, and prevented unregistered trade among United States citizens, by registering NFA recognized firearms, while simultaneously providing the state with tax revenue. Second there is the Gun Control Act of 1968, which is meant to cure the constitutional flaw of registration, effectively diminishing the prevention of unregistered trade (ATF, 2015).

2.1 Florida legislation

Because of the location of study, we will look at gun legislation in the state of Florida. In Florida, openly carrying a weapon is largely illegal. One may carry a concealed firearm, but only if in possession of a CWFL (Concealed Weapon Florida License). Without a CWFL you are allowed to possess a firearm in certain places, such as a private motor vehicle, if the firearm is securely encased, one's residence or working site, and when someone is fishing, camping, or hunting. When there are children under the age of 16 near the location of the firearm, it must be secured and unreachable for the individual (USLawshield, 2015).

In Florida a person is justified in using deadly force, when it is reasonable to believe it may prevent death or serious injury to themselves or another person. It may also be used to prevent an act of forcible felony, which includes “treason, murder, manslaughter, sexual battery, carjacking, home invasion, robbery, burglary, arson, kidnapping, aggravated assault, aggravated battery, aggravated stalking, aircraft piracy, unlawful throwing, placing or discharging a destructive devise or bomb; and any other felony which involves the use or threat of physical force or violence against an individual.” (USLawshield, 2015).

How many guns are in Florida is unknown. However, in 2013 a record high of nearly a million background checks were done in Florida on people interested in buying firearms. By agreement with Florida gun laws, these background checks are a required part of the purchase process at stores (Valverde, 2013).

2.2 Pensacola, Florida

Pensacola's location is very near the border between Florida and Alabama and the states of Georgia, Mississippi and Louisiana. In fact, most our contacts informed us that Pensacola shows more resemblance to Florida's surrounding states, often more so connected to Alabama than to Florida itself, as Pensacola diverges from southern Florida regions such as Miami and Orlando. Therefore, the city is an accurate representation of typical southern state culture, which has not been studied much in connection to firearms. Along with the importance of the gun in Pensacola, this has proved it an apt place for our subject of study.

According to a website for tourism in Pensacola, “Pensacola is proud of its rich heritage, historically significant events and landmarks”. They recently marked their 450th anniversary. Pensacola was actually the first European settlement in the United States (Visitpensacola, 2015). Around 1559, a Spanish explorer planted a colony on the shores of Ochees: “the primitive Pensacola” (Gonzalez, 1909:9).

Pensacola is a small city at beachfront in northwest Florida, with a population of over fifty thousand. There is a University (University of West Florida), a military base and a Naval Air Station: Naval Air Station Pensacola was the first commissioned by the United States Navy in 1914 (military.com, 2015). With 66,3%, the majority of the Pensacola population is white, 28% is black or African American and 3,3% is Hispanic or Latino (quickfacts.census.gov, 2015). According to research at Escambia county district, Pensacola (2015), republicanism is the most supported (escambiavotes.com, 2015). In Pensacola there are 20 gun shops located, some of them only specialized in firearm sales, some also have a legitimate shooting range. Furthermore, there are pawn shops where, in addition to firearms, liquor or jewelry is sold.

According to the Gun Death Map from slate.com, updated to show all incidents up until December 31, 2015, there have been 3 shootings in Pensacola in the past year, 1 fatal and 2 non-fatal (www.slate.com, 2015). However, according to Gun Violence Archive, there have been 18 incidents related to gun violence in Pensacola the past year, of which three victims were killed and four injured (gunviolencearchive, 2015).

Pensacola is characterized by several surrounding factors. First, while these are not absolute compositions, the way people look at guns is influenced by being part of the categories of people that we identified as relevant for the way people perceived guns in Pensacola: residential area, being more urban or more rural, and on a grander scale, classifying the North and the South of the United States; gender, being either male or female in the area of research; and race, being either white American, or African American, as these were the groups we gained access to throughout the research.

Second, we noticed the importance of military, especially naval, presence in the area. One of the larger United States Navy bases is located just outside of Pensacola, resulting in a high military population. This also, according to our informants, makes for a diverse population, as the military presence results in a highly mobile residency, due to job opportunity and moving to and away from the area in relatively short timespans. Especially the local Jet fighter demonstrations team, the Blue Angels, are depicted in many places, represented as local heroes and often recommended by Pensacola residents to visit for a demonstration display.

Finally, we found that law enforcement is present all around, and it is easy to find people from either the police department or the sheriff's department, on and off duty, in and around the Pensacola area. While we haven't found these last two groups to be directly connected to the way the firearm is experienced in Pensacola, they are significant in their presence through their relatedness with guns, and the way they are represented in the Pensacola society, often as heroes, and sometimes as villains, but always a reality in the social presence surrounding Pensacola.

3 Experiencing the gun in Pensacola

The first time we, ever in our lives, experienced a gun in its full, (in)famous glory, firing it down at the plywood targets, was on that same day we joined the Bennet family on the field we introduced earlier. Over the course of almost five hours, we shot the eight different guns, enjoying it with the family and their friends, who we had met only a week before. In the morning we had loaded the guns in the back of the truck, with boxes full of bullets corresponding to the sizes, calibers, millimeters, and gauges, which those particular firearms are capable of launching down the field (Image 3. and 4.). The way people experience, value, and communicate the gun, and the things it can convey, according to them, will be elaborated in this chapter.

3.1 Different Guns

The shapes and practical uses guns can take are as diverse as the people shooting them, as there are many different ways of utilizing the gun. All of these firearms come in different forms and designs, which becomes very clear when one steps foot into an American gun store. Racks with firearms are set in rows, and the different variations of firearms are, in most cases, ordered according to type (Image 5.). While this is by no means an exhaustive list of the variations that the firearm can take, we will discuss five categories of guns here that we encountered most in Pensacola, the handgun, the shotgun, the hunting rifle, the military based rifle, and the historical firearm.

The first gun we held in Pensacola was a handgun, according to the man behind the counter of the sports and hunting store we were in, the firearm he personally carried every day. We found that these handguns have two different ways of utilization among the participants we observed: defense of the person and home, and target practice. In the case of defense, the handgun ranges in size from a small, concealable firearm, that can easily be put away in a pocket or purse, to larger sizes, for home defense or people who want larger rounds, for what most licensed carriers called “more stopping power”. Target practice handguns are often specially designed for the development of the target shooting discipline, usually .22 pistol rounds, small and not effective for self-defense, but accurate on the firing range, and easily modified to fit the user’s style of shooting. Finally, there are special types of handguns, some of which can fire shotgun shells, for example useful in the case of protection against wild animals such as snakes or rabid dogs, in which case one would utilize their handgun in combination with specially designed rounds in bigger pistols, like snake-shot rounds. One particular gun we held in the store, called the Desert Eagle .50 cal., stuck with us, due to the reactions we got from people that knew the gun, most of them stating that it was “an utterly useless gun”, and getting the occasional “...but it is a hell of a lot of fun to shoot” (Image 6.). Handguns are, among our participants, the most

prevalent, and while some had no firearms at all, most participants that did were the owner of at least one handgun.

The Shotgun is very prevalent among the people from Pensacola, the second most popular to own among our participants (Image 7.). While they are not practical for cases such as self-defense in public, participants do state that they would be able to use the shotgun as a tool for home-defense. The bullets that can be fired from a shotgun vary wildly, the most familiar being the buck-shot, which fires multiple pellets per round, but there are also things like slug rounds, a single big chunk of metal, that, when fired, transforms the shotgun almost into “a small cannon”, with plenty of stopping power. The Shotgun, in our experience is mainly used for hunting, of course with the specially designed rounds, such as Turkey loads, as the name suggests, designed for the Turkey hunt. But also target shooting is something regularly done with shotguns, as we did going to a range in the area to practice some trap shooting with Robert and Thomas, and Thomas’s personal shotgun, trying to hit sporting clays that fly all over the place (Image 8.).

Hunting Rifles (Image 9.) are, as the name suggests, intended for hunting, and most consequently most popular among the avid hunters among our group of participants. In the surrounding area especially deer hunting was popular, and as Brandon had, quite recently, shot a deer with the same hunting rifle that we had fired on the day of shooting portrayed in the first paragraph, we were able to get a taste of the fruits of labor that this brought forth.

An important category of firearm, and arguably the most controversial type of firearm discussed here, are the military designed, civilian purpose rifles, such as the AK-47, or the AR-15, based off of the military issued M16 rifle. These rifles are utilized for target practice, home defense, and in some cases for hunting, but are according to our participants easily abused, for its capability of firing multiple, high power rounds, in mere seconds.

Finally, there is the type of firearms that is easily overlooked by the general public, the historical firearm. While these can be part of any of the above stated types of firearms, the intention is different. These firearms are part of personal collections of firearms, not with the intention of the shooting practice, but for the sake of historical significance. We met several participants that collected all kinds of antique or, to them, historically significant firearms, obtained as heirlooms from parents, or traded by other collectors. A gun repair store we visited multiple times had a wall full of old muskets and original flintlock rifles, presented to the customers with a visible sense of pride. Another participant and friend, Wayne, had whole bookshelves full of information on these antique firearms, and owned, and occasionally shot, many of these guns himself.

3.2 Different people

As many people have stressed while we were in Pensacola, asking questions about guns, “without a

person, a firearm is just a piece of metal". For that reason, we will now explore the people behind the guns, the participants we spoke with, befriended, and shot guns with over the course of our fieldwork. First we explore three categories of people we met in Pensacola, according to their "gun-mindedness": the gun enthusiast, the moderate gun owner, and the non-gun owner.

First we will take a look at the most gun-minded of these participants, the gun enthusiast. As Kohn (2012) explains, the gun enthusiast is not a person for example owning a firearm for the sole reason of home defense, practices shooting at a range several times per year, or goes hunting every year with their hunting rifle. A gun enthusiast is someone that is interested in the gun itself, and the surrounding values that come with being a gun-owner and enthusiast. We take the guidelines that Kohn used for determining gun enthusiasm among her participants, four characteristics that she established to fit informant's characteristics: For a participant to be characterized as a gun enthusiast there should at least be "1) an interest in owning and using guns of any type, 2) legally owning at least one gun, 3) enjoying talking about guns and shooting with other gun aficionados, and 4) organizing regular activities around his or her gun interests." We feel that, in the case of our fieldwork area, this system is quite well fit to place people inside the category of gun enthusiasm. This is though mainly an elaboration to clarify our use of the term "gun enthusiasm" throughout this research, as we try to let the gun enthusiasts themselves shape the way gun ownership and enthusiasm is constituted throughout their lives.

Gun enthusiasts tend to be adamant on sharing their enthusiasm for guns, and the slightest hint of our interest in guns has more than once triggered stories of firearm centered adventures, like Wayne showing us his different variants of revolvers (Image 10.), and led to several occasions of us joining the person for an afternoon of shooting. We joined Wayne to a pistol match going on at the shooting range where he is a member (Image 11. and 12.). Directly after the match was over we were approached by Howard, one of the participants. "Do you want to try?" he said immediately after we introduced ourselves. He was clearly determined in sharing his experience of shooting with us, as we spent several hours shooting his .22 target practice pistol first, and afterwards aiming a .44 Magnum revolver at cans and bottles downrange. At the same time, he started telling us about what he did at the shooting range, joining the pistol matches with friends and having a beer afterwards, and how we didn't have to worry about the costs of the ammunition we consumed, as he "reloaded" the bullets himself, saving him the costs of buying prepared ammunition, as he would just buy or reuse several components, like cartridges, powder, and bullets separately to make them into the ammunition that he would use on the range.

Besides the gun enthusiasts, there is another group of gun owners in Pensacola, the most prevalent group of people we encountered, the moderate gun owner. The moderate gun owner is categorized, first and foremost, by gun ownership, but contrary to the gun enthusiast, does not fit one

or more of the above stated categories 1), 3), and 4). While not all people we encountered owns firearms, in many cases at least one of the members of a household did.

In most cases of gun ownership, but not enthusiasm, the participants see value in the ability to own a firearm, but where the gun enthusiast participates in firearms related activities regularly, the moderate gun owner sees this less as an invitation to regular events and communication, and more so as a necessity alone. These participants often agree that, while they have a firearm, they do not necessarily, as Todd stated, “think about the subject of firearms much” and “it does not naturally come up in conversation when I’m talking to friends or something”. As we talked to many participants that fit this category, it was apparent that most of the people we have encountered in the field are indeed for the most part not particularly interested in the object itself, but merely in what it can do and convey, mostly the practical uses that a gun is seen to be intended for, such as personal protection and hunting. Unlike the gun enthusiast, most moderate gun owners do not care too much for the object of the gun itself, or for the multiplicity of activities surrounding it, what they care about is that it works in case they *need* to use it. Thus most activities that they perform with their personal firearms are aimed keeping up their performance with the gun and to make sure that the gun actually works.

Finally, we recognize the group of people that do not own a gun, the non-gun owner. When we were in Pensacola we met several people that did not own guns, but substantially less so than those that did. Most participants that did not own guns, did so very consciously, as they were often more on the side of increased gun control. We will not go much further into this aspect of the participants we interviewed, but the perspectives they gave us into the gun culture were significant, leading us to not ignore this group.

While we have discussed here, the categorization we found to be present regarding gun perspectives in Pensacola, there are several factors that influence the chance with which people belong to which group. We found that in more urban areas the handgun was more prominently utilized, mainly as personal protection tool (note that utilization, especially in this case, does not mean shooting). In the more rural areas surrounding Pensacola, - people that visit those more for i.e. hunting or because they grew up in such area, tend to own more types of guns, most of the time next to handguns. The more rural the area, we found, the more familiar people are with firearms, possibly due to the more practical need and possibility for the use of different types of firearms in these areas, but also resulting in a higher chance of being a gun enthusiast, and in the case of more urban areas vice versa, resulting in a higher chance of being a moderate gun owner, or even a non-gun owner. A similar difference on a grander scale is often stated to exist between North and South, as these so called “Southerners”, that live “below the Mason-Dixon line”, are, according to themselves, more gun-minded than their “Northerner” counterparts.

Another difference in gun-mindedness is visible when looking at the differences of firearms use and ownership among men and women. Many women do own firearms, but more often than not, for the sole purpose of personal protection, resulting in them owning mostly handguns, and ultimately owning less firearms per person. Men tend to be the owner of the guns that are present in the household, and many times when we spoke to or interviewed women, they stated that we should really talk to their husband for the more intricate information on firearms, as Jana stated: “ladies tend to listen to their fathers or husband when it comes to guns I think. I don’t think there is a whole lot of ladies sitting around thinking about owning guns, because there is the husband that does that for them.” She added though “Now Southern rural women, yeah, there the gun is just for everyone”, showing that there is an interaction between these different categories.

Race has presented a difference to us too. While we cannot speak of other defined races in the area such as Hispanics and Asians, there was a difference between the African Americans and the White Americans, at least perceived by themselves, as “a lot of blacks were never familiar with guns”, according to Philip, an African American participant in his 20’s, who I met in the church he frequented. “I don’t have a [Concealed Carry] License or a gun myself, I have never even shot one. Actually, I am sort of indifferent towards guns” but then Philip ads, after considering it for a few seconds, “but I mean, due to rising crime and violence, I might get a personal protection firearm soon, just in case”. As this fragment portrays, again the protective reasons for keeping and maintaining guns are very pervasive among the African American population in Pensacola, but the value that white Americans lay on the gun outside of this protection characteristic is mostly absent. Consequently, we found that people that proclaim themselves as African American have shown to, more likely, be moderate gun owners or even non gun owners.

Ultimately, the difference between these groups was something that we encountered firsthand through recruitment for our fieldwork. People were willing to share their contacts, but as these were most of the time white, male, gun-minded people that our contacts knew, as these were the first to pop into the mind of participants when telling them about our research, we had to expand by explaining that we were not merely looking for people with that particular profile.

Finally, all these distinctions we found do interact with each other. For example, while women from urban areas might be less interested in guns, this can be completely different for women from more rural areas, as was made clear by two women from a pawn shop just outside of the Pensacola central region, where the women behind the counter stated that they “come from small towns, just up North, less urban than here ... but I have never really noticed a big difference between men and women using guns where I’m from”. in this case the distinctions between man and woman regarding firearms seems to blur, and similar things are the case for other combinations.

3.3 Socialization in the gun enthusiast subculture

As is visible in our first encounter with firing a gun, one of the utilities of the gun in Pensacola is the socialization surrounding the objects. Almost three months in the –Pensacola- area has taught us that, if you are open to the social aspects surrounding firearms, the options of shooting a gun are plentiful. We went shooting with friends within the first week, were invited by our loyal informant and friend Wayne to join him to the Pensacola Rifle and Pistol Club, one of the shooting ranges surrounding Pensacola and the club we found to be the most prevalent among our more enthusiastic gun owners, and we joined our new friends Thomas and Robert on a day of airsoft gaming with remarkably realistic “toy guns”, after which they took us skeet shooting. On these trips we had a lot of fun, no bad experiences with the firearms, and made good friends. We imagine that this is the same for the locals, and, like us, if they are open to finding contacts to socialize around guns, one does not have to look far to do so.

In our conversations became clear multiple times that the gun was regarded as something that was pleasant, an activity to share with friends and family, especially among gun enthusiasts, and while some were weary to address this, possibly with the argument that the gun is not a toy, many stated that they collected guns with friends, went to gun shows to speak with likeminded people, and, as we did when joining Wayne and Howard, went to the shooting range with friends to train their discipline with some buddies and have a few beers afterwards. Like other sports, for these people shooting firearms with friends is a socializing context, one that is fun and thrilling, for some a way to blow off some steam, and for others a way to train their discipline and compete with friends. Danny articulated very accurately, what, in his mind, was the epitome of the gun enthusiast:

“but the fact is, I’m part of an old gun club in town. It has been here for a long time, and I would have to say that most of us are just simply shooters. Most of us aren’t even hunters. But I shoot close to 2000 rounds a year. Now why would I do that? Because I am afraid? No, because it’s a little bit scientific, trying to get all the holes on the same spot at 100 yards. It’s a bit like playing one handed solitaire, you know it’s fun. We love it.”

What Danny shows here, is that there is more to the firearm than can be conveyed solely in its practical use. It is part of a socialization process, with people that are like minded and see themselves as part of that particular group. This is expressed in the different identifications that you can come across in Pensacola. These identifications are different according to who elaborates them. Gun enthusiasts tend to call themselves names such as “shooters”, “gun person” and “hunters”. People that are less gun-minded occasionally state different names, with more negative connotations, such as “gun nut”, which you should not call a gun enthusiast, as he might be offended. When we dropped the term with Mike

he stated rather exasperated: “I am certainly not a gun nut, I am not nuts am I? I’m a perfectly sane, law abiding citizen”.

One of the ways we found that gun enthusiasts, and the more gun-minded moderate gun owners in some cases, perceive themselves to be a separate group, one with a certain identity, is by the way they perceive othering from outside sources, mainly conveyed by the media. A somewhat infuriated Danny stated that he didn’t mind people discussing, and even implementing common sense laws that the “Northern anti-gun people” try to push through, but he stated afterwards: “But what I won’t put up with is the idea that we are all crazy people and that ... we’re all just waiting for the big revolution, whatever the hell that is”. People that identify with being pro-gun thus tend to feel like they are not being taken seriously, as they are categorized as “crazy” and “nuts”. Another good example of this came several weeks after the fieldwork, when one of our main informants, Laura, shared a story on Facebook, one that supposedly deliberately embarrasses pro-gun activists in an unfair way, commenting that “the media really has a problem”.

The gun enthusiast seems to care for the firearm, for example shown by Curtis, as he said “I am a gun person, and I engraved my gun that I carry, because I care about it”. The gun enthusiast generally cares for the object that is the gun, and for the optional activities that this object opens up for them, the social aspect if you will.

This social aspect of firearms doesn’t just end with firing your guns with friends. We found that people can use the shared interest in firearms to form groups of friends outside of the metaphorical shooting range. While we were in Pensacola we met with a group of old hunter friends on multiple occasions, as they met each other every Monday at a Mexican restaurant. We spoke with this group for hours in total, and found that the firearm, although it was the initial connecting factor for this group to get together, was only a part of the topic of conversation. Still, people were interested to share their stories, and we got insight in the social connections that people have surrounding guns.

One of the occasions where even bigger groups of gun-minded people gather are the frequent gun shows that take place in the surrounding areas. “I don’t really go [to the gun shows] to buy guns, because they are too expensive there” Glenn stated on a sunny Monday afternoon in the taco place “but I go to meet people, friends and new people, to talk to them about guns and the new trends, and sometimes I buy some ammo there”.

When we attended a gun show in the area, to see how these social interactions displayed in public groups, we noticed again, how gun-minded people ascribe to themselves certain identities and categories. Apart from the hundreds of guns that were on display, and the concealed carry license that you could obtain there, the NRA was presented to us with a big sign, and a recruiter tried to talk us into subscribing to their cause. Slogans on the coming elections were displayed, some of which were pro-Republican, but most of which were anti-Democratic (Image 13.), and one man even stated that

Bernie Sanders was “equivalent to the devil” and would be “the worst-case scenario for the United States presidency”.

What we see here, we argue, is that this is all the display of a subculture, one consisting of people that interchange information, have connecting identities, and socialize together as a group. It has social borders, similar to what Goss states, not consisting of the majority of gun owners we encountered, but more so limited to gun enthusiasts and the more gun-minded moderate gun-owners, that identify themselves as being part of the pro-gun Americans (Goss, 2006). But while this sub-culture is indeed in place, this does not mean that there is not a wider, more encompassing gun culture present, at least in Pensacola, and possibly in the United States as a whole.

3.4 An American gun culture?

The firearm seems to be a local reality in Pensacola. When driving around in Pensacola, one can see the billboards informing the locals on the gun shows that are held in the coming months, while listening to commercials on the radio for the sports stores that sell guns for both hunting and personal protection, and, with a trained eye, can spot the NRA stickers on the cars in the next lane. While these are all present, they are not overabundant, and while firearms are a reality, they are not the daily subject of conversation. One of the reasons for this might be that the gun, within the local context, is by many seen as normal, not the anomaly that it often becomes in discussions on its controversy. Many of our informants simply stated that they are not busy with guns on a daily basis, and while they own them, it is “not something I think about very often” as Todd stated. An indication of the acceptance of the local reality of the gun, is the fact that of the informants that we have interviewed, even the ones stating they are less gun-minded, often more liberal, not a single one stated that there should be a total ban on guns per se.

The reality of the gun in the minds of the people of Pensacola takes two forms. One is imposed by the gun-minded person, where the gun is an object to be comfortable around, while keeping safety in mind. The other form is taken by the less gun-minded people, moderate gun owners and no-gun owners alike, keeping the gun generally more distant, but simultaneously acknowledging that they are present in their surroundings, resulting in the common discourse that communication about it should not be avoided, but educated on.

The normality of the firearm in practice, was displayed in a very personal and friendly hunting sports store. Here they sold many guns, from personal protection handguns, to all different kinds of shotguns and hunting rifles. “This is a normal display of guns in hunting stores, at least in the deep south”, Warren said. When I was having an informal conversation with him after we interviewed him and the other employees in the store, something happened that struck me, something that was unfamiliar to me as a greenhorn to the gun-rich environments, but simultaneously familiar in a

different sense. While we were talking, he held a revolver in his hand, which he had showed us before, stating it was his personal defense weapon, and letting us hold it after he thoroughly checked if it was empty and safe to hold inside the store. But by this time, while he was holding the “empty piece of metal” as he had called it half an hour earlier, he was opening and closing the revolving chamber of the gun playfully, not consciously, but in a similar way I would open and close my old slide-open cellphone. This scene conveys some meaning in its triviality, as Warren had such a familiarity with the gun, that he needn’t be aware of the empty and thus, at that point, innocent tool that he was holding. As such could play with it, similar to how some would doodle during a phone call, or others might twirl a pen between their fingers.

A good indication of the acknowledgment of the gun being a local reality, was the way people addressed education among gun owners and even children. Especially education on the gun for children was stressed, as people frequently addressed that the possibility of their child finding a gun somewhere, on the street, or in a friend’s house, was omnipresent. In the case of such an event, most people stated that they rather have their child know what the object is and is capable of, so not to become, according to Oscar, “the next story in the newspapers of a child that accidentally killed their friend with a firearm while playing cowboys and Indians”. Even when people explicitly stated that they were no proponent of the objects and the way they are utilized in their society, education on guns was frequently stressed, as opposed to the alternative of avoiding all information on guns, just to avoid problems with it. That guns are a reality in Pensacola, and as such education should not be avoided, is stressed by Alejandro, a man in his twenties, that had just a week before shot a firearm for the first time. He stated that “If people knew how [the gun] really worked, that would be a good thing. Just like safe sex, it needs to be taught. Guns are very much in the world over, they’re here, so I think better education would be beneficial for society as a whole.”

When one talks to people in Pensacola about guns, which is not a taboo, but indeed seemingly normal for most, several narratives reappear many times. For example, the story of Japanese General Yamamoto, that supposedly stated that “invasion of the United States mainland impossible because behind every blade of grass, there is a rifle...”, according to Curtis, is something that we heard from many gun enthusiasts, as this quote bestows pride upon the pro-gun American. But also more common narratives, known more widely, by gun enthusiasts, and moderate gun owners alike, are often explained to us in favor of the gun’s presence. Some examples came by in the theoretical framework, such as Nazi Germany taking away the gun, and the sentence “guns don’t kill people, people kill people”, are stated in nearly every interview. This indicates that there is a discourse regarding the gun, among the American people, that is not limited to Pensacola alone. And as Jonas, a man from Norway, in town for a few days, was the first one to tell us that the phrase “they’ll have to pry [the gun] from

my cold dead hands” gained popularity after actor Charlton Heston stated this on an NRA conference, it seems as if these discourses span even wider than just the United States.

To most of our informants, the fact that the gun is a reality in, and a part of the American culture, at least as it is interpreted in Pensacola, is not surprising, especially when one looks at the history of how the United States of America came to be what it is today. Many people stress the role of the gun in the American Revolutionary War, the expansion of the Western Frontier, and the American Civil War. “People are very historically conscious here, or at least they think they are. And people are still very influenced by it. Sometimes when you read things you think, oh so that is where that comes from and that is where that comes from” As Lynn explains “it has all changed into something that it didn’t originally use to be, but it’s still those same narratives, those same lingering ideas of what makes one an American and what we do in life and how you deal with life.” And while indeed, some of the history lessons people presented to us, are more empirically sound than others, they do carry similar narratives. A civic nationalist discourse of freedom and independence (an alternative name for the American Revolution is the American War for Independence), of individual protection and the use of militia’s, and of naturalized rights, displayed in the founder’s ideals (Lieven, 2004), and important parts of the American Creed (Huntington, 2004), has been revealed to us during nearly every interview, as a question on American values, whether it be with more or less gun-minded people, where answers, similar to “self-reliance”, “the rights of the American people”, and “the liberty to defend yourself and your rights, from people and from the government”, as, respectively, Dustin, Wayne, and Alejandro put it, and even the firearms related industry occasionally used these terms on their products, such as Liberty Ammunitions and The Judge handgun (Image 14. and 15.). In one case, when we went trap shooting with Thomas, he showed us just how aware he is of the illustrious connection often made between liberty and the gun, when he stated: “my gun doesn’t shoot bullets, it shoots freedom”. Especially for the gun enthusiasts and the moderate gun owners, these discourses are inherently connected to the gun, through the historical relevance of the object in those historical narratives.

One of the most important parts of this historical argument, that still has a direct impact on the lives of the American people, is the American constitution. This document is highly esteemed, and sometimes even sanctified in its value for participants. For example, Dustin stated:

“I think that the writers of the constitution were brilliant, they were really beyond their time, and personally I think that those people were inspired by god to do that, to write what they wrote. And I think that, like the other liberties, freedom of speech, the right to keep and bear arms, is a fundamental right.”

Most gun owners see “the right to bear arms” as this fundamental, natural right, as it is part of their history, for some part of being American. As such, this, what Ackerman (2000) calls, “mythmaking”, the constant repeated retelling of stories about the American people and its culture, through history and the constitution, that is stressed to be “more than 200 years old”, is characterized by “deep continuity” (Ackerman, 2000).

According to most of our informants, whether they are gun enthusiasts, moderate gun-owners, and even, in most cases, non-gun owners, the gun is part of the American culture, as part of the well-known, and highly esteemed American constitution, and represented in the teachings on American history in schools and disclosed to interested foreigners. This is very visible in the reaction Dustin, gave us to a question on the Second Amendment:

“The second amendment, as part of the constitution, is something that all our elected officials are sworn to uphold, and by law I think that they should affirm the second amendment, because (...) guns are so woven into our culture. I mean, we have pictures on thanksgiving day and the pilgrims have muskets. Little grade school kids have cardboard muskets. You know. Our heroes, our frontiersmen, and the westerns all the cowboy’s guns. I mean I couldn’t imagine guns not being part of our culture actually.”

For the most part, among our participants, this statement found quite solid grounds. This is something represented in our data by the fact that, while we had a part of our participants that saw themselves as either less gun-minded, or even relatively anti-gun, there was only one person we spoke to in 2 and a half months, that stated that he would want firearms prohibited among American civilians, and he, rather counterintuitively, owns two firearms. And in line with the statement of Goss that most gun owners are not opposed to moderate gun control, we found that this goes even further, as many gun enthusiasts, including Danny stated that they are “all for common sense gun laws”.

Nonetheless, people in the Pensacola region have come to see the gun as part of them, and consequently of their heritage. In the interview with Paul and Lynn, they reflect this on their own experiences:

Paul: “Well, they can’t take my guns. I mean those are like family heirlooms, that would be like breaking into somebody’s house and stealing their table that their grandmother left them. Like you can’t replace that. (...) yeah definitely guns are heritage. Okay, so one of the guns that I have in the safe, my great grandfather broke the stock off of the back, because he hit a black bear with it, like how cool is that, ha-ha. I’m not gonna give that gun away to the government.”

Lynn: “This is why guns are part of America, you cannot separate America from guns. See I think, the whole security and personal protection stuff, I think that is largely a political argument. The real reason why people want guns is right there, what he just said.”

As such the gun can be heritage in the object, through inheriting guns from parents, as was the case with many participants like Paul, Oscar, and, Todd, and through collecting them for historical interest, as participants like Wayne, Warren and Danny do. Even companies play into this, by branding their firearms with the notion of heritage (Image 16.). the right to own the gun is by many not only seen to be a right, but also a heritage, as Todd explained:

“Yeah, I think [being able to have guns this way] is very American. I can’t think of any other country that has guns as an intrinsic part of their constitution ... it’s American to care this much about [guns] ... I think that the ability to own a gun is seen as a national heritage. I don’t think that all Americans have guns, but I think that all Americans can relate to the fact that all Americans could or can own guns”.

As such, this heritage is a way for people to “construct, reconstruct and negotiate a range of identities and social and cultural values and meanings in the present”, and as such, to communicate the gun owner’s idea of the importance of historical “remembrance and commemoration while negotiating and constructing a sense of place, belonging and understanding in the present” (Smith, 2006: 3), an ideal national continuity, in line with the successful constitution.

In short, the gun culture we encountered is not American in the sense that it encompasses the entirety of the Nation, or that every American gun owner is against any form of gun control, but more so in the way it is constituted, elaborated, and identified by the people of Pensacola, and possibly outside of that area, in a way that they believe is true to the ideals of the American nation. But, as Pensacola residents perceive their federal governmental system to fail in adhering to these same ideals, a sense of distrust is spurred among them, influencing the way they perceive guns and the gun culture itself. Consequently, a portrait of the way the American gun culture is constituted, is, with the information we have described in this chapter, not yet sufficiently inclusive. Therefore, this will be elaborated in the next chapter, where we will discuss the way fear is connected to, and has an impact on, the people of Pensacola regarding the gun.

4 Fear and the gun

Although the gun is deeply embedded in American society through its heritage, has a socializing function and is a part of the local reality in Pensacola, the gun culture cannot be studied without regarding its legitimizing function as an answer to many fears that the American society and our participants have. This chapter will discuss the negative aspects of the gun culture, as the gun is often seen as a protective tool against dangerous threats because of its 'equalizing power relations' aspect.

4.1 The tyranny of the federal government

The government and distribution of power has been a recurring topic in our interviews. To our participants, this is inextricably connected to the right to bear and own firearms. However, according to our participants, many people in the United States, especially the South, get the sense that the federal government is slowly gaining too much influence in their lives, taking away their rights and freedom. This is constantly connected to the gun. As Dustin said during an interview:

"I think that it should be a personal choice here. But I think that you should have the right [to buy a gun], and the Second Amendment, to my understanding, was to protect the citizens from the government because there were no other checks and balances, if the government decides they want to be a tyrant and sweep the whole country. We go back to the story of the minutemen, and the local militia when they were fighting the British troops, and all that. And now that more people are disillusioned with the government, more people are concerned about their protection. And 20 years ago in this country, I couldn't have told you anything that was in the Constitution. At that time the constitution was something that you learn in school, take a test, and then you forget. But now in the last 20 years when there seems to have been more threats on your rights, people talk about this all the time. I never had political conversations with my friends, but now we do."

Not only does he connect gun ownership today the story of the Civil War and the Constitution, when the Founding Fathers of the United States Constitution decided that citizens should have a right to own and bear firearms in order to be able to organize themselves in militias, an army of citizens, not usually trained professionally like a full-time military, but in the case of the United States often still expected to reach the same standards, but he also claims that the Constitution has recently become important to people again, since the gun debate has really started flaring up.

Since the Civil War, decentralization has been sought after; there has been the idea that the separate states should be able to decide for themselves what kind of laws to implement and follow.

This is still what many people believe today. During an interview, Irene explained that different states have different settings.

“My belief right now sitting here in the middle of Pensacola, is probably a little different from sitting in downtown Chicago in the south side. You know it is just gonna be different. You know we are a very large country, and we span lot of different settings, we’re not all urban and were not all rural, so what may work for somebody in Montana is not necessarily working for everyone.”

Since the US is a rather large country, controlling everything through one government is often seen as challenging and not very realistic. Because every state has a different environment and different people, many participants believe that the state itself can determine best how official organization should be regulated. Just like Irene’s example, states like California and New York (urban) are very different from states like New Mexico and the Dakotas (rural). Therefore, their people want and need very different things. Accordingly, most of our participants are convinced that organization and laws should be regulated at a state level. Brandon gave some examples of how this is recognized in everyday life.

“Initially it was set up so that if I don’t like the laws in Florida, I could go someplace else that I like the laws better in. But the basic protection would be there, the basic constitution would be there. And I think that a lot of people now want to make it homogenous. But then there’s almost no sense in even having state lines anymore. Then everything comes down from the federal government. Not even just with guns, but with something as silly as a speed limit. The federal government said at one time that the speed limit would be 55 miles an hour, I don’t know what that relates to in kilometers. But previously it had been 70, but they’ve lowered it to 55. (...) But it’s not like that anymore, because that was one of the things to get more control back to the states, there was a big election one time in the late 80’s where the republicans got in rather than the democrats controlling the House of Representatives. But anyway that was one of the things they did. Each state got to decide its own speed limit. (...) But where the federal government gets involved is where I’ve got a problem. I think that more should reside with the states.”

The distribution of power and governance is the cause for much concern. In the field we have sometimes even heard the phrase “the tyranny of the federal government”, for example during a conversation with Paul and at a gun show. Many of our participants are afraid that the people working for the federal government have obtained too much power, and are willing to do anything to gain more. These participants believe that it would be beneficial if the state governments would become more powerful, while the federal government should have less power than they do now. In their eyes,

the key values of freedom and independence are in danger. By slowly taking away these values, the federal government will become too powerful and tyrannical, which will deprive the people of their freedom and independence. As Dustin said:

“I think our government has grown increasingly corrupt and bad, I don’t see it as doing what is best for people, I see it as doing what is best for the elected officials. I think that there is crime and fraud, and in Washington DC you can get everything with money. There is not a lot of faith in the government anymore. And see in school we learn this idea, that our government is a representative government that the community elected the person that they thought would be best for them. It was in their time even and fair and everybody had a voice, and a chance, and we believed that the president committed to upholding the constitution, and doing what is best for the country and national defense, but now there is so much cynicism, and maybe it’s because I’m older, but I don’t have that feeling anymore that it’s a fair game, I think it’s all a stacked deck.”

Dustin put it in a way that is representative of our participants and a realistic view of many people’s perspectives in Pensacola.

It has to be understood that at the basis of this insecurity are the ideals derived from the highly appreciated and even worshipped times around the Civil War. The ideals that the Founding Fathers had, and the developments and goals that they set up for the country, are still highly encouraged in Pensacola. By decentralization, a central, overruling government would be prevented and the power would be more in the hands of states and, therefore, the people, instead of a small group of governors deciding what is best for, or how to control, a very large country. At the time this was implemented, the federal government was very limited in their possibility to govern. To achieve this, the Constitution was constructed and militias were deployed for defense, instead of having one large army controlled by the government that would protect the entire country.

This paragraph has shown what is at the core of one of the biggest fears in the nation of the United States. The ideas and ideals of the Founding Fathers have weathered the course of time, and are still highly encouraged and embedded in society. Whereas times change and the organization of the country has been altered over the many years, these still fuel fears and insecurities about independence and freedom. Where outsiders might say that the federal government is working to achieve the best for its people, the people themselves still strongly distrust their government and many consider its actions dishonest, selfish and not trustworthy. Dustin proves this argument once again with an explanation during our interview:

“I think that, like the other liberties, freedom of speech, the right to keep and bear arms, is a fundamental right. But then discussing the freedom of speech, there is no freedom of speech in this

country, you can't say what you want to say. My point being, other rights have been withered away over time as well, and that is the same way with guns. And I don't totally disagree with it you know, I think common sense measures are good, the question is are the common sense measures really common sense, or are they just a stepping stone to achieve a result where the government has total control? And something like the 3 day cooling down period, to me that does not infringe on the Second Amendment. If you have common sense measures, background checks, cooling off periods, that is all very reasonable to me. If you trust the government there is no step too far, if you distrust the government, every step is too far."

Paul supports this argument by making the connection between the gun debate and the role of the government:

"I think this [gun debate] is just a vehicle for people to discuss the role of the government. Because if you believe that the government should be allowed to control your guns, to register your guns and all that, then you're also gonna believe that the government should regulate other parts of your life. And if you don't believe that the government should register your guns then you believe that the government should butt out of other parts of your life too, so it's kinda like this fault line on which the parties are split. I think the gun debate isn't intended for the gun per se, I think it's all about the role of the government of America. Because otherwise it doesn't make any sense. People talk about how guns kill people, but there is plenty of stuff that kills people. People die from diabetes, and smoking, and cars accidents every year, you know it's not about the lives I think, it's just about the role of the government."

As the whole gun debate is basically about the role of the government, our participants feel strongly threatened by the implementation of more laws by the federal government. In their eyes, more national regulations and laws are examples of the federal government trying to control the people by taking away their rights and freedom. The fear that the federal government is getting out of control, has been apparent to us in almost every interview we have had. Danny illustrated this fear vividly:

"You don't go disarming everybody so that they are exactly the same and put them all in jumpsuits, and make them the identical little clones of each other. Which seems to be what the government is trying to do, it may evolve into that. We all talk about 1984, George Orwell and the Orwellian arrangements, and so we have to fight back against such regulations that is going to make us all unequal to the government. The government is not our master, should not be our master (...) The government has gotten bigger and bigger, more encompassing, and those of us who lose when they create any more regulations, get pretty unhappy about it. The government is just out of control, that is all I'm trying to say about it, but I'm not getting deeper into that. What can you do? Join a group in Wyoming and occupy federal land? One of the reasons this Trump has gotten so big is because people have just gotten

frustrated with it. We know he is a fool, we know he speaks nonsense. It's more a statement than actually supporting his ideas."

When it comes down to the government doing the right thing, to most of our participants the right thing only means listening to what the people wish to happen or not happen: not deciding for the greater good, but to meet the people's wishes. By not meeting these wishes, distrust is created. Alejandro explained to us:

"I don't think that if the general population of a country is really pleased and happy and well taken care of, I don't think there is the mentality that one needs to own a gun so much, because you can go about daily life without having that threat looming, that your government is gonna do some kind of thing. Obviously governments can be corrupt or harsh, or ruthless, and do such a thing and just leave you out in the cold, but if they do not, and they take good care of citizens and provide, I think there is less of an aggressive nature toward needing ownership of very powerful things to defend your rights."

Naturally, people feel like they should be able to decide for themselves what they can and cannot do. This, in combination with the distrust in the federal government doing right and skepticism about the efficiency of actual laws, causes suspicion, making laws and regulations feel unjust and limited in what they can achieve. This can be extended to the level of firearms. By making firearms illegal, many participants have argued, a part of the people's freedom and independence will be taken away. The Second Amendment states that the people should have the right to own and bear arms to be able to organize themselves in militias. By our participants, this is often interpreted to a larger extend of having the right to own and bear firearms to be able to protect yourself and your family. The fact that it is part of the Constitution strengthens the feeling of unjustness when these rights might be taken away.

In nearly every interview we have had, there has been at the very least a comment that illustrates this distrust in the federal government. As Brandon said during one of our interviews:

"The thing in the US is, y'all have probably heard of the Second Amendment and the Constitution, we protect ourselves from our own government, too. I mean if you've got to line up all the guns you've got like the second largest army, if you just took the American citizens. (...) But I believe that, had the American citizens not had their own personal weapons, then somewhere along in history somebody might have tried to see what the army could do."

An argument that is often used to support this fear, is the idea that regulations on firearms are ineffective. This will be further discussed in paragraph 4.4 "The law abiding citizen", on crime and the gun.

Many participants have spoken about the media when it comes to the gun debate, as Laura showed, sharing an example of the article of the Washington Times on Facebook, as stated in chapter 3.3. To them, the media are dishonest and disloyal to the people, too much controlled by the government and only representing one side in political debates. Many southern people do not feel represented in both the government and the media, since the media represent only the opinion of the left, liberal north. Furthermore, many of our participants have claimed that the media only cover news about stories where something bad has happened with a gun, and no stories about something good that happened, for example when somebody owning a gun has saved lives by using it. To them, the media reports too much about the bad parts and blowing up every story to a much too large proportion that is not representative to the whole gun debate. The media is truly experienced as evil to some people, indoctrinating everyone to their and the governments will, and claiming too much power. It is believed that by giving criminals all this attention in the media, you give them what they are looking for. Peter argued:

“These people that want to get a little fame before they come to their death, and use their guns for that, unfortunately is driven up by the media a lot. Because if there is a mass shooting of any type, it’s up on that TV. What you don’t hear about is the guy that concealed carried in an Oregon mall and stopped a massacre from happening. They didn’t make a big media thing about that. You don’t hear about the teacher that had a gun in a school and they came in to start shooting, and she stopped it. You don’t hear about those because guess what, that is not a sensational story. Yeah the heroes, they give them five seconds, but when they have a mass shooting it goes on for weeks, until something else happens. And that is what drives the whole debate.”

The fact that the media cover stories that support the national politicians’ arguments of banning or putting more restrictions on firearms, cause people to feel like the media and the federal government are in cahoots. The fear of the government and the distrust that comes from not having their views represented, causes our participants to fear the media, but also to not only fear the government, but also the media. The fact that our participants feel like they do not have their views represented, causes them to not just distrust the media, but also to fear the government even more.

4.2 The slippery slope and decline of society

Often when the idea that the government wants to take all the guns away came up, the term *slippery slope* has been used by our participants. Many people are fully against any type of change towards stricter gun control, because they fear that it would be the start of the complete ban of firearms. They

think that once the gun laws are starting to get stricter, slowly and increasingly more restrictions will be implemented, making it impossible to get it back to the way it used to be. Mike explained:

“Unfortunately, as I know too well, you give them a little bit and they will take everything. So the Second Amendment is kind of a wall: if it breaks in one little place, the whole thing, the dam’s gonna break. And the whole thing is gonna get worked down or destroyed.”

When restrictions are made and become more and more, it will be much easier to achieve what our participants say is the federal government’s ultimate goal: getting rid of all the guns. This is what they mean with the term ‘slippery slope’: once you start, it’s dangerously easy for pro-gun people to lose control, and for anti-gun people to take over and quickly implement more gun laws so that ultimately, all guns would be banned. The National Rifle Association, which has come up in interviews as being responsible for bringing terms like the slippery slope into the world, is therefore generally reluctant to any type of change and will not be flexible or give in to compromise.

As discussed in the previous paragraph, many participants fear a total ban on firearms, and think stronger gun control ultimately means more power to the government. They fear that they will be less and less able to defend themselves against the tyranny of the federal government, because, when more limitations on the use of guns and ammunition are implemented, they cannot protect themselves as well as when the laws are less restrictive. Accordingly, more power to the government means less power to the people, and slowly their freedom and rights are taken away. This fuels the idea that they already have about a strong decline of society.

Many of our participants believe that the American society, and even the sociality of the world, is declining. According to them, a lot is going downhill, and while in the past people were polite, sociable and down to earth, now society is too individualistic and people have become egocentric, indifferent, and obsessed with materialistic satisfaction. This discouraging and distrustful thinking comes together with firearms. Elsa told us:

“It used to be like that we beat each other up when we were younger, we didn’t think of shooting one another, but now with the great teaching device of the TV, we all know that the only way to solve things is to kill each other. Or otherwise neutralize the problem. And I also was brought up in a very segregated part of the world, there were no human rights movements yet, so one would believe that this would be a better time than it was then, but it isn’t. nobody shot each other, nobody killed each other, there was no lynching.”

People also believe that the gun used to be an instrument to maintain this polite society. “An armed society is a polite society” is another phrase I have picked up in the field. This belief means that people will be more polite to each other when they know that people are or could be armed, since you don’t want to offend anyone that has the ability to shoot you. The participants who have used this phrase, all connected it to the past. They no longer believe that this phrase is applicable to today’s society. Since people think society is going downhill, and gun laws have become stricter, the gun can no longer help with conserving the polite society. The gun still has the potential to help with this, but, because of these stricter laws, no longer gets the room to be able to do so. The next part of a conversation with Brandon and Laura showed me how people use the argument of the decline of society as an explanation for gun violence.

Brandon: “Me and my brother were at the house all day long, and a lot of friends in the neighborhood same situation. And we would get in scraps and scrapes and argue and fuss, and sometimes even come to the blows and fight. Never ever somebody thought about going to get a gun. Nor today. Nobody ever pulled any guns out. Nowadays it seems that the first thing that people want to do this day and time, is to pull out a gun, go get a gun. And that’s absolutely the last thing that anybody should ever do.”

Laura: “I think a lot of that is just, as you grow up, that’s just something that you knew was wrong. I don’t know if that’s still taught in a lot of households, where you see the kids with guns, you know 15 year olds, and I don’t know if they’re getting that information at home. And a lot of the kids that get into trouble with guns, I don’t think they come from families that hunt. I don’t think they understand guns are not a weapon to fight people with.”

As a result of the fear of the government putting a ban on all firearms, some participants have claimed that since Obama has been president, the firearms sales have gone through the roof. President Obama, sometimes mockingly labeled “Obummer”, has publicly argued against the way the United States is handling firearms. He is known for his disapproval of firearms and according to our participants, this has intensified the fear that the people’s right to bear and own firearms will be taken away. As a result, many people have responded to this by starting to purchase more firearms and ammunition, under the guise of “while we still can”. Mike explained:

“I think lately (...) they’re constantly threatening to take them away, or limit our Second Amendment rights, you know, try to pull back. That’s just a certain, political segment of our society, that’s wanting to pull away, and I think people are afraid of that and that’s why they’re buying guns more, these days.”

In short, the fear factor discussed in this paragraph is constructed of the federal government limiting freedom and rights, and the protective capability of citizens. Dustin made the connection between this fear of the federal government, and the fear of crime.

“I would have never purchased my wife a gun before, and the sales have gone up so much. So there is two things here, one is the distrust in the government, one is more crime in the community. So probably I purchased her gun because of crime in the community, and I purchased my gun because of distrust in the government. And these are linked in a very subtle way.”

4.3 The law abiding citizen

The most obvious argument for the legality of gun ownership in the United States is the one about self-defense. The fact that the gun offers the possibility to have a safety buffer for people by enabling them to protect themselves against eminent threats, appeals to many, mostly, moderate gun owners, although gun enthusiasts are not secluded from this reasoning. However, for the moderate gun owner the main reason for owning a firearm is self-defense, while for the gun enthusiast this is just one of the reasons, often a subsidiary one. The reason for having a firearm for self-defense occurs in two different manners. The first one is having the gun in your home. Having a gun in your home, whether it is locked up in a safe or stored on a shelf or in a bedroom drawer, enables the owner to protect themselves and members of their families in the case of home invasion. The second one is carrying a gun. With the concealed carry license, one can carry a gun in public in the state of Florida, though concealed, but usually loaded and easy to access. Carrying a gun in public enables someone to protect themselves and their surroundings. This is considered useful for different reasons. While most of our participants have stated that you never pull your gun and point it at someone if you do not intend to shoot, we have heard some stories where somebody used their gun to prevent some mishap like a robbery. Another reason carrying a gun offers protection, is that carrying a gun puts you in a better position when something happens where a dangerous person pulls a gun. The gun can protect the individual carrier, when they have somebody else point one at them, or it can protect people in their surroundings, whether this is a loved one or a stranger, when they are in peril. Even in the case of an active shooter, when there is a mass shooting going on, our participants believe that being able to carry a gun with you is going to prevent (at least some) people from being hurt, as an honest carrier could grab their gun and take out the shooter that is taking people’s lives. This argument of the gun for self-defense also implies that there is a responsibility that comes along with carrying a gun in public.

The fact that most of our participants have stressed this aspect of the gun, the aspect of self-defense, as one of the most important reasons to be able to own and carry a gun, shows that there is

another kind of fear among our participants that doesn't have much to do with the fear of the government. Since you cannot know what another person is thinking or planning on doing, you never know if your life might be in danger. This brings along a certain kind of insecurity, which extends to fear of the other. Here, the theory of othering discussed in chapter 1.6 comes into practice. Danny told us:

"I call it constructive paranoia rather than destructive paranoia. Don't ever think that I know what you're thinking, I don't know what anybody is thinking except for me, and if I assume to know what other people are going to do I'm a fool. I have a good idea, but I don't know, and that is the reason for being armed. And even being armed you have a very small percentage of excess, because you'll feel most of the time that you don't need to be armed. But if you do need to be armed, and you do have the opportunity to keep yourself from being hurt, then it is nice to be able to do that. Kind of like insurance."

This shows how fear is embedded in the gun owners' daily lives. This fear of the other drives some gun owners to carry their gun anywhere they go.

One of the few people that we have spoken to who are not too excited about having guns in society, although she does not believe that banning them all together is an option, is Irene. Although she is not very similar to the rest of our participants, she is still a good example of how the gun culture is constituted in the United States. When we spoke about the connection between firearms and fear, she told us:

"There is a lot of othering going on. Like 'I'm not the issue, everybody else is, and you can't take guns away from me because of the other. I know I'm ok, but I don't know anything about you'. Although with the social media, you can find out much about everyone, but is that real? We become more fearful of the things that we know about, so how can I build up this sort of sense of security? I know all these things are happening in the world, so should I then come down and build my compound? Should I surround myself with people that are like minded, and let nobody else in because they are not like me? Or do we want to go out and interact with people and learn about them? I think that's the key. It has to be."

The process of othering causes people to be afraid of the criminal, the terrorist and the mentally unstable. In turn, this reestablishes their own identity, as this makes them 'law abiding citizens', who are honest and fair, building their choice of actions on the law, common sense and the American way of life. The law abiding citizen should, according to our participants, have the right to own and bear arms, because "the gun is a great equalizer of power". This is a phrase we have heard in the field which relates to both the fear of the other as the fear of the government. We have seen that the gun makes

citizens equal to the government, but the phrase also indicates that the gun makes the law abiding citizen equal in power to the criminal and the lunatic. The criminals will always have guns, because they do not follow laws. By giving law abiding citizens the right to have guns the advantage that criminals think they have because of their guns, is taken away.

We see here that the fear of the criminal connects to the fear of the government. Since criminals live outside of the law, stronger gun laws, according to many of our participants, would not stop them from doing whatever they want. They say criminals are not going to hand their guns over, or follow the rules on gun ownership; they are already neglecting the existing laws on guns. Hence, more or stronger gun laws would be highly ineffective to achieve the goal of having a safer society. Accordingly, as many participants have argued, the only thing stronger gun control would achieve is limiting the rights of the law abiding citizen, the right to own and bear firearms. Furthermore, no longer having guns means giving criminals an advantage over citizens. By being able to carry a gun, many tragedies could be prevented, as discussed at the beginning of this paragraph. This puts the law abiding citizen, who has legal access to guns, in high contrast with criminals, who are not allowed to own any type of gun, but will always find a way to obtain them. Danny illustrates:

“I would be pretty useless in a stressful situation because I’m not trained for that. But if you would come to me and threaten me, I would shoot you dead, that would be my reaction because I don’t want to be killed. It’s as simple as that. But that is what I call constructive paranoia and I think that is basically what most people that arm themselves for self-defense, they feel that way. And people, even my age, that have never had a gun, are coming in here to buy guns, because they think the government is going to make the sale illegal. And of course old people are very vulnerable to young thugs. And also the older people are thus more targeted.”

You can see from this quote that fear of the government and fear of crime are used in a variety of context, not fixed and separate from each other, but used interchangeably, in an interconnected dynamic.

Another aspect of this fear of the other manifests itself in the fact that many people see the misuse of guns as an act of the incapable and the mentally unstable. Whenever something bad happens concerning firearms, like a mass shooting or an accident, this is blamed on two factors: mental health or capability of handling a gun. The mental health factor is often used in case of a (mass) shooting, as a way of explaining this kind of behavior that is incomprehensible. Many of our participants therefore believe that a solution in gun related problems is to be found in better treating and detecting people that suffer from mental health problems. Capability of handling a gun has everything to do with training and carefulness. When an accident happens with a firearm, for example someone is

unintentionally shot, this is often blamed by the competence of the people involved. We have heard many times that proper training is the most important of owning a firearm. When somebody is not properly trained, this person does not have the right knowledge and skills to handle the responsibility that comes along with owning a firearm. Moreover, many participants have argued that there are some people, despite being trained or having grown up around guns, who forget or neglect the fact that you always have to be careful when you handle a gun, and that the rules regarding firearms are there for a reason and to be followed at all times. Brandon and Laura told us about a time when they were at a shooting range and there was someone who, in their eyes, was not being careful enough.

Brandon: “One time in particular, they called time out, they go down the line and they tell everybody, after so many more minutes we’re going to call time out, so that everybody can go and retreat their targets. And this one particular day that we were out there, this father and his son, every time they called a time out, they were always the last ones to stop firing. The range master had to go tell them each and every time, stop shooting. I mean there’s more than just, somebody has to be the last one to shoot, obviously, but it shouldn’t be the same guy every time, it shouldn’t be the same one, to be holding up everybody else on his own agenda, he shouldn’t do that.”

Laura: “Yeah when there’s a time out everybody lays their guns down, and they raise a rope, and it’s not going to keep you from walking up there but it reminds you that nobody’s supposed to step over that line to where the guns are until everybody’s back from getting their targets. Just so that nobody’s bent down up there and somebody starts shooting again.”

Some people, even though they might have had proper training, are accused of not having the right attitude in regard to guns. The aforesaid quote confirms that it is not the qualified, sensible, law abiding citizen that is responsible for incidents with guns, but it is the other: the criminal, the mentally unstable and the incompetent.

This brings us to the connection between liberty and security. The connection between the terms constitutes a sort of paradox. Whereas they seem to be contradicting, where liberty means less governmental interference and more freedom to the individual, and security means more governmental interference and more protection of society, they are actually not inherently conflicting. To our participants, liberty and security are cooperatively connected, as liberty stands for more guns (actually, less gun laws), and more guns stands for more security. by virtue of the gun, liberty and security are not contradictory, but work together as a harmonious connection.

4.4 Fear of the gun itself

Are people afraid of the gun itself, too? “I don’t think the firearms are more dangerous than they ever were, I think the attitudes are more dangerous than they ever were.” This quote from Danny shows our participants’ attitude towards guns. When something happens where firearms are involved, they generally do not blame the gun, but always the perpetrators.

Safety has always been at the forefront of any discussion we have had related to firearms. As discussed in chapter 4.3, it is always the criminal, the mentally unstable and the incompetent that are responsible for incidents. But what if a law abiding citizen with proper training has an accident regarding a firearm? The following anecdote illustrates how this is explained and legitimized by our participants. A training officer we have spoken who uses guns on a daily basis, because he practices every day and trains police officers, knows exactly how to handle a gun. He knows that he has to be careful with it and never let his guard down. However, one day he was holding a handgun in his backyard when it slipped through his fingers. Although he always teaches people not to, he grabbed the gun from midair in a reflex. The round was fired and hit him through the shoulder, but luckily, he survived and fully recovered. While this story shocked us, and might to some people be an example of how dangerous guns actually are, the training officer picked up his gun again two weeks after the accident. He argued that he was being irresponsible when it happened, because he knew he shouldn’t pick up a falling gun, and that it was his own fault.

We would not say that among our participants, representative for many people in Pensacola, there is a general fear of gun the itself. People are extremely careful with them, and are constantly aware of the dangers that come along with firearms, but when an accident happens, most of them actually blame themselves not being careful enough, the stupidity of people involved, or the circumstances, rather than they blame the guns, because ‘guns don’t kill people, people kill people’. This slogan is used by many organizations, businesses and gun owners, for the practice of lobbying, public speech, marketing, conversations, and identification with the firearm. The gun is never blamed, and there is no fear of the gun among our participants. The fact that there is so much focus on proper training, and many people go target shooting on a regular basis, they are familiar with the gun and what it can do, gives them the feeling that they have control over the gun, that is merely a tool. This puts them in contrast with the non-gun owner, who is not trained, not familiar with the gun, and therefore has never learned to trust it. Is there fear among the non-gun owner then? That is a question that should be answered through further research, where the gun culture in America is studied not only through the vision of the gun owner, but also of the anti-gun activist.

Conclusion

We have discussed how guns are experienced in Pensacola, through a socialization process, connecting narratives and gun culture. There are several types of guns, just as there are several types of gun owners. The gun enthusiast is someone who, besides enjoying using the gun at target practice or hunting, has interest in the gun itself and the socializing aspects that come with being a gun owner. The moderate gun owner, the predominant type of gun owner among our participants, is merely categorized by gun ownership, not by enjoying to shoot the gun on a regular basis or talking about the gun with other gun owners, or other activities that typically characterize gun enthusiasts. Differences in gender, race, and location, influence the reasons and ways people are part of which group of gun owners.

People in Pensacola perceive a certain reality of the gun's presence, and tend to react to this, not with avoidance, but more so with awareness. Narratives and discourses stemming from the gun culture, are well known among many, even outside of this culture. Through this, and the knowledge of American history and heritage, of which the gun is part, people are aware of this reality of the gun's presence. As such, the gun culture in Pensacola does indeed not encompass every American, and more precisely, not even every Pensacola resident, in the same way. But the gun culture is American in the way it is characterized by gun owners, with the inherently American ideals and values put on the forefront of what the gun stands for.

It has, too, become clear, that in discussing the American gun culture, we cannot avoid the more cynical side, of how people view the governmental distribution of power in the United States, and how this is connected to their views on the right of the ownership and use of firearms. As the Federal government is slowly, but surely gaining too much power over the population, impeding on their rights and independence, the gun is a strong metaphor for this relationship.

The fear that the federal government has obtained too much regulative power, and is willing to do anything to obtain more, is omnipresent among the gun-minded people of Pensacola. The small group of supposed representatives that currently has too much power in hands, starkly contrasts the ideals of the, often sanctified, founding fathers and the American Constitution, and the right that they propose to be commonsensical and even natural. Distrust in the federal government's motives, and their perceived focus on the firearm in recent years, has made the gun debate part of this narrative of the tyrannical government, so governance should be left to the smaller-scale states, who are more closely and easily connected to the variety of people that is the American populace.

Common narratives, of, for example, the slippery slope and the law abiding citizen, are a reaction to the insecurities that the perceived governmental overpowering of the government has produced. Strengthened by world views of dangerous social developments and threatening global

circumstances, through media and global connectedness, the need for the firearm is higher, and more stressed than ever before, the reason for many to specifically now, in a time of much critique on the firearm, to buy and maintain their firearms. It is experienced as dangerous in the wrong hands, but also dangerous when absent. Through the gun, people protect themselves from harm to the physical body, in unsure times, while simultaneously defending the rights that protect their values.

People finding themselves associated with the local gun culture in Pensacola, in contrast to what the case may be for America as a whole as Goss (2004) stated, gun-minded people, are not merely the niche, the sub-culture connected through discursive events and communication, but find strength in numbers of moderate gun-owners as well, creating a large voice in pro-gun groups, spanning wider than the mere grounds of Pensacola. Specifically, those who feel threatened by, or are skeptical about federal governmental interference in gun legislation, don't merely associate this gun culture with America, but more so with the authentic American identity as it used to be, according to American historical discourse (Kennett & Anderson, 1975).

The change towards no guns, as governmental power exceeds the ideal, established by the authentic American beliefs, would indeed, in taking away part of American heritage and culture as Smith (2006) hints, disrupt the national continuity, that Ackerman (2000) spoke of, severely. The gun is, and according to many pro-gun Pensacola people has always been, for them, a great equalizer of power, not only when the criminal has a gun, and you need to defend yourself directly, equalizing physical power, but also in equalizing citizen and government, keeping the governmental power equation to a manageable level, as a leveling device to blur governance boundaries between the federal and the citizenry, proponing this ideal of the founding American values, as Huntington (2004) discussed.

The gun thus doesn't just give, or defend, the freedom of the common man, the individual, physically, but signifies it. Consequently, to take away the gun is not just impeding on the availability of the object, but taking away the citizens sign that he or she is still independent, by being capable of taking care of oneself and close ones. On top of that the gun is seen as normal, and is in most of their personal experiences a positive commodity. As such, the private firearm is part of the American culture for this, rather large, group of people, supporting their American values of freedom and independence, individuality, justice and responsibility for the family (Huntington, 2004). In this way, according to Pensacola people, the political gun debate is a metaphor to decide the division of power in American society, in the south mainly in favor of the American people, and in the north in favor of the federal government, often associated with socialism, a scenario bringing insecurity to many of our informants.

These arguments, that encapsulate the themes stressed in the theoretical framework and empirical analysis, point out how the gun culture is experienced in Pensacola, as part of American culture, and how this is connected to identity, fear, and politics. The gun, and its encapsulating culture,

is a symbol that stands for the conservation of the values and rights that are considered as inherently American. Politics and crime connect this to fear, as the federal government and the criminal jeopardize these ideals. It is demonstrated that the gun culture cannot be studied as a whole without regarding the different aspects of identity, fear and politics, because these substantiate, reconstruct and contextualize the gun culture. These aspects show that the gun is an undeniable part of the heritage of the United States, as well as peoples' daily reality. As such, the gun debate is often experienced as a metaphor, a vehicle, for discussing other social issues, like the distribution of power, crime and mental illness.

All this considered, several contextual aspects should be taken into account, that have been of influence on our data collection and analysis. Regarding the limited time we had in the field, we did not have the chance to speak to everyone as desired, and some aspects, although strongly connected to gun culture, had to be overlooked. For example, we have found that social categories like gender, class, religion and race, are of much importance in Pensacola, and should be considered as influential on the participants' reactions concerning firearms. Another social issue like justice has proven to be of importance in connection to the gun debate. One major group that has not been subject to this study is the anti-gun population. Qualitative research regarding this group would be very beneficial, as takes in the opposite side of the gun owner, in the gun debate and often other societal discussions. However, considering all these aspects would have made our research too extensive and there just wasn't time, but nonetheless, these would be interesting topics of further research, as research on the topic of gun culture is still scarce.

The period we spent in Pensacola was timed during the pre-elections of 2016, which placed our participants' reactions in an intense political context. This may have been of influence on our own impressions and our participants' answers and reasoning. Furthermore, our data analysis only concerns the area of Pensacola and surroundings, and a small group of people. Therefore, our analyzation is not fully representative over the entirety of the American gun culture.

We do not wish to give suggestions on how people should place themselves within the gun debate. We attempt to offer a relevant and detailed presentation, of the experience and perception of gun owners in Pensacola, on guns and gun culture, in order to give an impression of reality, and to make people able to place themselves in the gun debate, while having the possibility to be informed by other people's perspectives, and as such create a more informed view for themselves.

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Images



Image 1. Bennett family taking us out to shoot for the first time on private property.



Image 2. Home-made plywood boards, with paper target sheets and a plastic bottle, functioning as targets for the day.



Image 3. The SUV moving the Bennett's small armory to the private plot of land.



Image 4. According to the owners "a modest gun collection".



Image 5. A sports and hunting store in the Pensacola area.



Image 6. The Desert Eagle .50 caliber handgun.



Image 7. Thom reloading a 12-gauge shotgun.



Image 8. Trap shooting, firing the double-barrel shotgun at clay pigeons.



Image 9. Thom firing a 7.62mm hunting rifle.



Image 10. Wayne enthusiastically showing Jacintha several revolvers he has collected over the years.



Image 11. A 900 pistol match, taking place every Thursday at the local Pensacola Rifle and Pistol Club.



Image 12. Thousands of bullet casings spread around the floors of the Pensacola Rifle and Pistol Club.

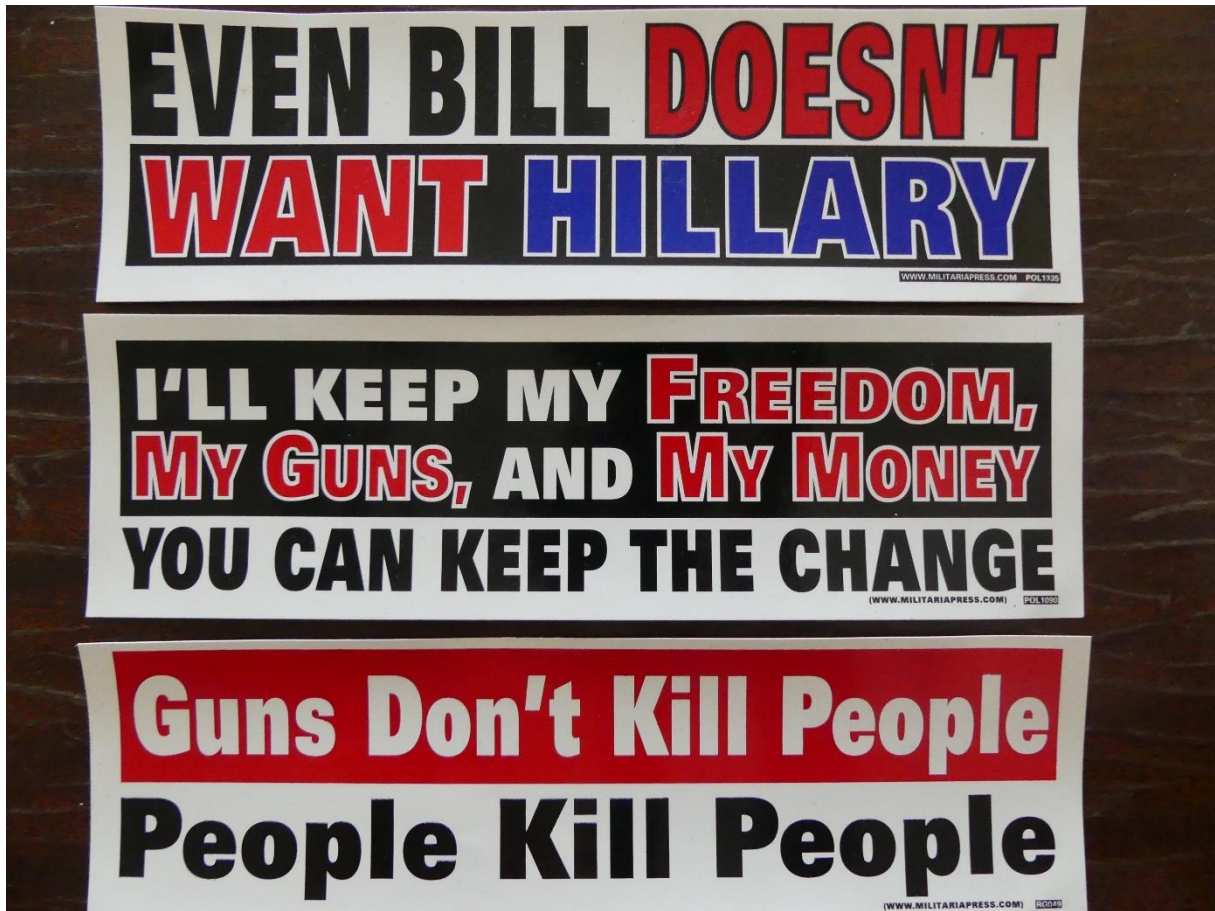


Image 13. Slogans on bumper-stickers, available at the local gun show.



Image 14. Liberty Ammunition.



Image 15. Jacintha firing shotgun rounds from “The Judge” handgun, with Paul keeping an eye on everything.



Image 16. Heritage Manufacturing Inc. revolver.