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Women and their Firearms in the American Midwest

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**Who Needs a Man When You Got a Gun?: Women and their Firearms in the American Midwest.**



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**Abstract**

Gun culture is an aspect of American life which has been neglected in anthropological literature. I examine how armed women feel that carrying guns 'empowers' them. Guns, a symbolically masculine object, are 'the equaliser' for women, making violence central to personal security, and as I argue, a marker of a responsible, American citizen. Firearms allow armed women to break culturally produced stereotypes concerning their capacity for violence, facilitating self-defence. The capacity to commit legitimate violence, which is gendered and racialised, is central to concepts of American gun ownership.

**Keywords:** gun culture, women, self-defence, United States



Figure 1. A Common Shooting Target (photo and bullet holes by author)

My first experience shooting a gun was in December of 2017 (Figure 1), although growing up in Winchester<sup>1</sup>, I have been surrounded by guns all my life. Residing in this large city in the American Midwest, I have long seen firearms being sold in stores where I buy my work-out gear and have noticed them being carried on people's hips as I have walked around the city. During one shooting practice, one woman told me how, 'Winchester is saturated in firearms!'. Our city is one that is inundated within gun culture. I follow Kohn who posited gun culture as a culture which:

'...places enormous social, historical, and political emphasis on guns...[and] uses common language about guns and shares a set of signs and symbols pertaining to them in everyday life' (2004: 4).

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<sup>1</sup> I have anonymised the city, my informants' names and shooting ranges for privacy.

Firearms are legally allowed by the Second Amendment of the American constitution, which finishes with:

‘A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free state,  
the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.’ (Hall 2005: 111)

The Second Amendment’s multiple interpretations have been a source of tragedy, vindication, and debate. Despite this, there continues to be few anthropological ethnographies concerning gun culture, with even fewer discussing its importance to women. In media, armed women are sexualised, and painted as a seductive fantasy. For example, Sigourney Weaver in *Alien*, and Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* – they are both hyper-feminine women while brandishing a large weapon (King 2007: 92). In reality, gun ownership gives the armed women I met an easy and viable solution for their fears of victimisation. As one of my informants put it, ‘guns give me a short-cut to protect myself’.

My informants were all self-defined ‘armed women’, women who enjoyed shooting regularly and who usually carried at least one gun on their person. I met these women by attending one national ‘Ladies Only’ shooting organisation at a local range once a month over the summer of 2018. At the time of conducting fieldwork, Winchester had five popular gun ranges, three of which have Ladies Only courses. I visited these ranges and talked to the gun instructors, and also attended a few lessons at one of the ranges. Knowing my intentions, armed women were happy to talk to me, so this paper is composed of casual and formal interviews with them. My informants tended to be enthusiastic about my research. One informant was happy that I was

‘giving a voice to the normal gun owning population, instead of those gun-nuts we see in the news all the time’.

My female informants believed that they were inserting themselves into a ‘man’s world’ by attending gun ranges and shooting firearms. In fact, a common motivator for joining Ladies Only classes was the large numbers of sexist attitudes and questions of legitimacy my informants encountered outside these classes within gun ranges. Many women explained to me how an inclusive, all-ladies space allowed them to target shoot more comfortably, while also introducing them to like-minded women, creating new friendships.

The ranges I visited were made up of white, middle class armed women. This absence of diversity cannot be ignored, as the gun industry positions whiteness as the ideal gun owner through their advertisements and publicity (Browder 2006: 212). My informants did not address this directly, but I want to make clear that racial and class inequalities exist within the gun ownership community. This implicates and reproduces ideas of who is a threat and who is legitimately allowed to wield a firearm and commit violence if necessary. Existing within a certain position of privilege, the armed women I met were more capable to facilitate gun ownership for empowerment and equality than poor white women or people of colour (Carlson 2014: 372). Although I appreciate gun ownership is an important facet of my informants’ identities, I note that the armed women who advocated to me that they genuinely benefited from carrying also fit into the gun industry’s ideal consumer: a white American.

The gun industry has given my informants a ‘short-cut’ for self-defence, reproducing a narration of American citizenship that supports white, cisgender, middle-class gun owners.

Like Diaz (1999) and Browder (2006), I use the term ‘gun industry’ to refer to gun ranges, gun manufactures, and the political gun lobby, the National Rifle Association (NRA), which yields massive influence over gun culture. By evoking the potential to be violent, my female informants viewed gun ownership as an ‘empowering’ act. When I inquired about this ‘empowerment’, informants would explain to me how guns allowed them to feel secure, safe, and powerful, permitting them to navigate society with more confidence. I argue that my informants dismantle culturally produced stereotypes of female weakness and non-aggression through this potential. They become an aggressive agent from a ‘non-violent, patriarchal object’ (McCaughey 1997: 12). By engaging in a potential for violence, the armed women that I met challenge and transgress the gendered assumptions of physicality and aggression.

However, I add that gun culture simultaneously reinforces female stereotypes and expectations, especially in terms of motherhood. I add to Kohn’s definition of gun culture, arguing that gun culture reproduces ‘frontier masculinity’, which can be defined as core American, hegemonic male ideologies, associated with rugged individualism, a strong work ethic and self-sufficiency (Melzer 2009: 30). ‘Frontier masculinity’ is a term to describe hegemonic masculine traits originating from the era of the American frontier which is supported by the gun industry and further reproduced by gun owners (Melzer 2009: 30).

I argue that when armed women use firearms, they appropriate and reproduce this narration of American citizenship which mainly privileges ‘frontier masculine’ men, leading to an equality of violence, rather than an equality of safety. My informants use guns as a solution to their fears of victimisation and violence, which I argue naturalises violence, and makes my informants and other potential victims responsible for their own self-defense. One of my

informants, Taylor, explained to me how she was enthusiastic to speak to me specifically, as she believed more young women should own guns, as we should 'put our lives in our own hands'. She considered the ability to protect herself with a gun a key feature in how to become and act as a responsible, mature American citizen.

My female informants cited solely self-defence as their reason for gun ownership. 'Women want protection and guns give us that', one informant reassured me. One woman described to me that she carries a gun as, 'you can't carry a policeman in your bag!'. Women at gun ranges discussed with me how they began shooting and carrying after 'becoming victims', that is, rendered powerless against violence. 'My ex-husband started to stalk me' one woman explained to me, 'my home was broken into and I became scared' another said.

After experiencing very real attacks, their fear of violence transcended reality as an 'evil force'. All of my informants cited 'evil' for their reason for carrying. I argue that this evil can be seen as an 'ambivalent power' (Parkin 1985: 13) which is personified into 'bad guys'. My informants' explanations of 'bad guys' sometimes followed xenophobic caricatures, but 'bad guys' were always seen to be irresponsible gun owners, like a criminal or even a mass shooter. McKayla, one of my informants, described to me how she was protecting herself from 'evil', with this fear of attack manifesting into a fear of a male, usually non-white, attacker. This analysis lies outside the scope of this essay, but I mention it to show the ethical practice my informants worked within.

## **My Gun Makes Me Happy**

I met Taylor, an armed woman I knew from the monthly meeting, at a fried chicken restaurant on a rainy afternoon in mid-June. Taylor is in her mid-60s, and lives outside Winchester on a five-acre farm. Like every Wednesday, she had driven into town to go to Bible Study. Taylor had advocated in the state's capital city to urge law-makers to lessen gun safety laws. She explained she 'loved' going to the legislature as she 'isn't the white, male shooter people expect'. She carries her gun by her appendix, proudly raising her shirt to show me the .9 mm Glock strapped to her trousers. 'Guns are the equaliser, letting me break down social expectations of being a girl!' she exclaimed. The gun for Taylor, and other women that I met, is an object of female resistance as it allows them to engage in masculine forms of violence. Taylor went on to tell me how carrying had enabled her to experience a complete change in her self-confidence:

'When I go into a restaurant with my husband and two sons, I am now the most dangerous person!! Me! In my wheelchair! I have the element of surprise...I am able to inflict the most damage. I never thought this way before I carried, I would be afraid to go into parking lots, but now? I carry my head high.'

No longer was she a victim, 'weak and powerless', as she described it, but she now had her 'fate in her hands'. Self-defence shows how gender is performative (Butler 1990) and my informants follow heteronormative constructions of femininity and masculinity. In 'traditional American gender frameworks', American men are expected to be 'protectors' (Kohn 2004: 107) while women are taught to be 'targets' (Silko 1995). This implies that men are inherently violent, while women are naturally weak, and are victims. My female informants fight this particular expectation by being armed American citizens, which facilitates empowerment for

them. By engaging in the potential for violence, the armed women that I met with challenge and transgress gendered assumptions of feminine physicality and aggression.

Taylor continued:

‘Guns are for ladies too! I know more men have them, but that’s just because that’s what has always been. This is sad, ‘cause women need guns more than men. It’s more useful for us because we are attacked more, I am no match against a typical 6-foot-tall guy.’

Taylor saw her ‘embodied vulnerability’, her likeliness to be harassed or hurt, as the main motivator for arming herself (McCaughey 1997). This is where the paradox within gun ownership emerges. Gun ownership cites empowerment solely on women’s potential to be violent through carrying a gun. However, when women appropriate the gun, they subscribe to ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (Connell 1995). I utilise ‘hegemonic masculinity’ to show how the gun industry maintains a particular type of masculinity that supports competitive, ruthless male domination over women (ibid). The gun, a symbolically masculine object associated with ‘hegemonic, frontier masculine’ traits, like aggression, facilitated Taylor’s empowerment (Melzer 2009: 30).

McCaughey (1997) argues that when women participate in methods of self-defence, they rework considerations of their ‘embodied vulnerability’. This can be understood as the misogynistic stereotype which is a part of compulsory heterosexuality concerning women’s culturally connotated weakness and likelihood to be victimised (1997: 21, 98). Therefore,

McCaughey argues that self-defence confronts and dismantles embodied vulnerability, which has made women easy targets for victimisation. I argue that this understanding of self-defense does not apply to gun ownership, as a woman's embodied vulnerability is not negated, but merely suppressed through carrying a gun to prevent victimisation. While I acknowledge that physical violence at the hands of men is a lived reality for women, I position McCaughey's argument here to show the limits of female gun ownership; I argue that gun ownership does not address this culturally connotated female weakness, but instead masks it and provides an easy solution for women - hegemonic masculine violence.

### **'The Equaliser'**

The gun industry supports 'vulnerability ideologies and the victimised female body' to further their political agenda and consumer market, which rests on women's real fears of victimisation (Carlson 2014: 371). Representations of armed women by the gun industry replicate their veneration of hegemonic masculinity as they emphasise female self-sufficiency, insinuating that women must be violent to be equal to men (Browder 2006: 212). I note that this continues to naturalise violence as hegemonically masculine.

During my interview with McKayla at a local Starbucks, she advocated to me how 'firearms are *the* equaliser'. McKayla had grown up around guns all her life, but she only began shooting once she began to live alone. She described how she enjoyed the safety she felt through gun use. When armed women use firearms, they appropriate and reproduce this narration of American citizenship which mainly privileges 'frontier masculine' men. This is reflected in the fact that the gun industry glosses over women's vulnerabilities to appeal to a rhetoric which fits with their conceptualisation of 'frontier masculinity'. For example, the gun industry actively promotes guns to women while assuming a 'masculine perspective on crime which

emphasises fast, warlike violence perpetrated by strangers’, while in reality, women are more likely to be victimised by someone familiar to them (Carlson 2014b: 63).

The gun industry positions gun ownership as a form of protection, primarily to allow women to protect themselves and their family in the absence of a man (Carlson 2014b: 62). As McKayla conveyed to me:

‘Guns are such *boys*’ toys, so us women are totally breaking stereotypes by shooting. My generation was the first to feel that you don’t need a man... such independence! That empowerment! Instead, of a man, we can use a gun for protection! It’s real progress.’

McKayla saw a gun as replacing the need to rely on a husband to enact violence for self-protection. That is where the empowerment in gun ownership occurs. My informants reproduce women’s embodied vulnerability and their likelihood of victimisation for their reasoning for gun ownership. They imply that the gun, a symbolically masculine object, is needed to empower her to prevent assault. Gun ownership ‘essentialises women’s frailty and sees their weakness as inevitable’, suggesting that women are vulnerable and ‘incomplete’ without a gun (Carlson 2014: 371).

Armed women that I met would not view this reinforcement of embodied female vulnerability as problematic. McKayla views her ability to enact self-defense as ‘progressive’, and it is a rhetoric which many of my informants would agree with. For these women, gun ownership is necessary to their protection. They see the ability to protect themselves as a form of empowerment and feminine progress. From this, I have argued that gun ownership naturalises

violence as a key trait of a responsible, American citizen. While armed women in Winchester dismantle assumptions about their capacity for violence, they continue to reinforce hegemonic masculinity and the embodied vulnerability of women. This creates an equality of violence between men and women, positioning the responsibility of self-protection onto the victim, rather than of non-violence onto the perpetrator. The gun industry reproduces this as it suggests that the only way to protect one's self is through gun ownership (Carlson 2014: 371).

I am not implying that armed women are merely pawns of gun discourse. Taylor advocated to me that, 'guns make my life better' and give her a 'short-cut' to self-protection. I don't think that this genuine confidence and happiness cannot be reduced to exploitive propaganda. Armed women turned to firearms for self-protection as the gun industry supplies them with a genuine answer to their fears of victimisation. My female informants have welcomed the privileged discourse produced by the gun industry as it benefits them.

## **Conclusion**

I have overviewed what guns signify for armed women that I met in Winchester, a large city in the Midwest. For my informants, carrying and shooting guns allow self-protection which facilitates empowerment. I have argued that gun ownership empowers them as it evokes the potential to be violent. While armed women are challenging masculine order and feminine norms based on their capacity for violent action, they reproduce their assumed, embodied vulnerability, which other methods of self-defence negates. My informants therefore suggest that the only method for equality is to be aggressive and carry a firearm. Guns are symbolically associated with hegemonic, 'frontier masculinity'. Therefore, I have argued that their

empowerment reproduces ideologies concerning masculine strength and female vulnerability, reflecting an equality of violence, rather than one of safety.

This ability to commit legitimate and acceptable violence through self-defense is central to American gun ownership. The gun industry has given my informants a 'short-cut' for self-defence, which reproduces a narration of American citizenship which supports white, cisgender, middle-class gun owners. I want to conclude with re-iterating the point that female gun ownership adds another dimension to the complicated and seemingly unending gun debate troubling America. As I have conveyed, guns are a genuine source of confidence and empowerment for my informants, and their interest in firearms cannot be reduced as naïve pawns of gun discourse. Gun culture should be included within anthropological study, as it is an important and symbolic object for many Americans.

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