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# GOOD GUYS WITH GUNS:

## *Hegemonic Masculinity and Concealed Handguns*

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*In most states in the U.S. it is legal to carry a concealed handgun in public, but little is known about why people want to do this. While the existing literature argues that guns symbolize masculinity, most research on the actual use of guns has focused on marginalized men. The issue of concealed handguns is interesting because they must remain concealed and because relatively privileged men are most likely to have a license to carry one. Using in-depth interviews with 20 men, this article explores how they draw on discourses of masculinity to explain their use of concealed handguns. These men claim that they are motivated by a desire to protect their wives and children, to compensate for lost strength as they age, and to defend themselves against people and places they perceive as dangerous, especially those involving racial/ethnic minority men. These findings suggest that part of the appeal of carrying a concealed firearm is that it allows men to identify with hegemonic masculinity through fantasies of violence and self-defense.*

**Keywords:** *men/masculinity; race; class; gender; violence*

An estimated six million people in the United States possess a concealed handgun license (Stuckey 2010), which means they have the legal right to carry a concealed firearm in most public places. Like gun use generally, the vast majority of concealed handgun license holders are men, and men are more likely than women to support concealed handgun licensing (Carroll 2005; Jones 2005). This study explores how gender dynamics shape the motives of men who are licensed to carry concealed handguns.

Previous studies have argued that guns are symbols of masculinity (Connell 1995; Gibson 1994; Melzer 2009). Stange and Oyster (2000, 22)

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explain, "In [men's hands], the gun has served a symbolic function that exceeds any practical utility. It has become the symbol par excellence of masculinity: of power, force, aggressiveness, decisiveness, deadly accuracy, cold rationality." Because of these associations, it seems logical that men could use them to perform masculinity. However, the only studies of how men actually use guns have focused on criminals (Kimmel and Mahler 2003; Stretesky and Pogrebin 2007). In this study, I investigate how masculinity motivates law-abiding men in their use of concealed handguns.

To understand the relationship between carrying a concealed firearm and masculinity, I conducted 20 in-depth interviews with men in Texas who currently have a concealed handgun license. Of the nearly one million licenses issued in the state between 1995 and 2009, 81 percent were to men and 19 percent were to women (Texas Department of Public Safety [DPS] 1995-2010a). Though Texas has a "Wild West" image in popular culture, its firearm laws can be considered "middle of the road." Texas' permitting process requires a person to be at least 21 years old, pass state and federal background checks, attend a licensing course, submit two sets of fingerprints, and remit a fee to the state. Moreover, the firearm must remain concealed or the license holder can be charged with a weapons crime.

In this study, I use the concept of hegemonic masculinity to examine motives of men who have a concealed handgun license. Hegemonic masculinity is Connell's (1995) term for the discursive practices and embodied dispositions that legitimize male domination. I argue that by having a license, economically privileged white men are able to define themselves in contrast to femininity and to alternative versions of masculinity that are vilified or ridiculed. In so doing, they shore up white male privilege in society.

My research suggests that some men see their gun carrying as central to what it means to be a good husband and father who is able to protect his wife and children from danger. For older men, who fear that they are losing their ability to physically dominate others, concealed firearms can act as a totem to boost their confidence in their interactions with men. Men also justify their need for a license by positioning themselves in contrast to vilified forms of masculinity. While these men see their own gun carrying as noble and just, they attribute violence and aggression to others, particularly Black and Latino men. Hegemonic masculinity provides a framework for understanding these discursive practices, and connecting the use of concealed handgun licenses to continued male domination in society.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on firearm use and gender has focused on three main themes: how firearms contribute to cultural constructions of masculinity (Gibson 1994; Jeffords 1994); how organizations such as the National Rifle Association (NRA) utilize masculine tropes to mobilize members (Connell 1995; Melzer 2009; O'Neill 2007); and how masculinity is implicated in violent acts in which firearms are used (Kimmel and Mahler 2003; Stretesky and Pogrebin 2007). Each of these themes is important for understanding why men want to carry a concealed firearm.

The first theme in the literature on firearm use and gender explores the relationships between firearms, violence, and masculinity in fantasy life. James Gibson (1994) argues that movies celebrating war and the warrior ethos, such as the *Rambo* series, emerged on the cultural landscape as a response to the U.S. defeat in Vietnam. The warrior ethos was an extension of the larger cultural shift that linked masculinity to muscularity and physical toughness (Jeffords 1994). The body is central to how this operates because “to be fully, appropriately masculine, a male person must exhibit physical control of his space and be able to act on objects and bodies in it” (Crawley, Foley, and Shehan 2008, 59). This post-Vietnam ethos ushered in a more militarized version of masculinity that helped to popularize the use of guns for personal defense, led to a proliferation of paramilitary organizations, and contributed to the popularity of simulated war games such as paintball (Gibson 1994).

The willingness to engage in violence is central to meanings of masculinity (Messerschmidt 2000) because “real men” must show others that they are not afraid (Kimmel 2010). Yet few men have culturally legitimate occasions to express this violence, making simulated scenarios ideal settings to engage in violence fantasies. They promote a “New War ethos” where power, force, and might are celebrated as socially necessary when used to protect “good people” from evil. In this worldview, firearms endow “good guys” with the strength, power, and moral right needed to defend the world from “bad guys.”

As Gibson suggests, the fantasy of using guns to fight “bad guys” is not only an acceptable form of violence in U.S. culture, it is also celebrated. But unlike Gibson’s subjects, the vast majority of people who carry a concealed firearm will never be in a position to enact this New War ethos—even as a playful performance. Furthermore, according to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, 883), exalted versions of masculinity need not be based in reality, and might instead “express widespread ideals, fantasies,

and desires” that justify masculinity’s dominance over femininity. In the case of carrying a concealed firearm, an object that is particularly useful for communicating strength, it is important to ask how fantasies of domination allow men to construct masculine selves, whether or not their guns are actually fired.

The second theme in the literature on gender and firearms focuses on the gun lobby’s role in linking gun use with hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995; Melzer 2009; O’Neill 2007). Connell argues that the gun lobby is engaged in masculinity politics, “those mobilizations and struggles where the meaning of masculine gender is at issue and with it, men’s position in gender relations” (1995, 205). The gun lobby has been active in producing meanings of masculinity as it works to expand gun rights, even in the face of public outcry over the danger of guns. Connell argues that the gun lobby is able to defeat opponents of gun control by explicitly appealing to discourses of masculinity. By evoking concepts like security, family values, or individual freedom, the gun lobby works to make masculinity “a principal theme, not taken for granted as background” (1995, 205).

Scott Melzer (2009) utilizes Connell’s framework to analyze how the National Rifle Association (NRA) exploits popular understandings of guns as masculine symbols to mobilize its members. Melzer attended NRA conventions, analyzed the history of the organization, and interviewed its members to understand how the NRA has used masculinity discourses to become the most powerful lobby in the United States. He argues that gun ownership is associated in NRA discourse with self-reliance, rugged individualism, and a strong work ethic, a constellation of traits that Melzer refers to as “frontier masculinity.” He writes that “guns and masculinity have long been inseparable” (2009, 30) thanks to mythologized narratives of the American frontier. These narratives appeal to working-and middle-class white men who are threatened by the civil rights and feminist movements. According to Melzer, the predominantly white male membership of the NRA is motivated to act in defense of guns because they symbolize individual freedom.

The NRA’s magazine *The American Rifleman* is the most popular of the organization’s monthly publications. Kevin O’Neill (2007) examines how the magazine’s section “Armed Citizen” relays stories of violent crimes thwarted by private citizens using guns. For example, the author cites one story that tells of a man whose children rushed into his room in the middle of the night to tell their father that two men were breaking into their home. The father, who was disabled, grabbed a handgun, shot one of the intruders

and held him at gunpoint until the police arrived. O'Neill finds that most of the victims in these stories are women, the elderly, or in some way disabled or in failing health. He argues that these "classically vulnerable" people heighten the narrative structure of the stories, because as otherwise helpless victims, they are able to "achieve masculinity" with firearms. According to O'Neill, the NRA uses discourses that simultaneously construct masculinity and terror, and they produce an "especially vigilant kind of citizen who is distinctly masculine in character" (2007, 459). Though defensive gun uses are statistically rare events,<sup>1</sup> the NRA is able to use its monthly publication to circulate stories of "real-life heroes" who use guns to defend the defenseless.

The literature on the NRA illustrates how this powerful lobby links gun use with hegemonic masculinity: Gun users heroically defend the defenseless (O'Neill 2007) and they care deeply about "American virtues," particularly individual freedom (Melzer 2009) and family values (Connell 1995). These NRA discourses "provide a cultural framework that may be materialized in daily practices and interactions" and thus represent what Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, 850) call a "regional" hegemonic masculinity. Though it is important to understand how masculinities emerge in particular contexts, what Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) call the "local level," dominant culture frames and shapes the possibilities for enacting preferred versions of masculinity in everyday life. In this article, I explore how this regional discourse is materialized in the daily practices and interactions of men who are licensed to carry concealed handguns.

The third set of studies on guns and gender examine how some men actually use firearms. However, these studies have focused on the commission of violent crimes and on what Connell might label "alternative" or "marginal" masculinities (Connell 1995). Some researchers consider criminal behavior an attempt by some marginal men to accomplish masculinity when they lack alternative resources to do so (Britton 2011; Messerschmidt 1993).

In this vein, Kimmel and Mahler (2003) analyze random school shootings in the United States. All of those shootings were perpetrated by boys and young men and "all or most of the shooters had tales of being harassed—specifically gay-baited—for inadequate gender performance" (Kimmel and Mahler 2003, 1440). By using firearms to commit acts of violence, these boys attempted to move from margin to center, from being the wimp who was picked on to the aggressor who dominated and controlled others. Similarly, Stretesky and Pogrebin (2007) interviewed gang members serving prison time for violent crimes. The

authors found that the reputations of both the gang and the individual gang member were determined by their willingness to defend their honor and to be seen as masculine. The primary way this was accomplished was by using firearms. The authors write, "Guns provide gang members with a sense of power" and guns "help gang members project a tough image" (Stretesky and Pogrebin 2007, 90). Because guns are so lethal, they imbue their users with traits associated with masculinity—control and power.

Taken together, the literature on guns and masculinity reveals a gaping hole that has implications for how we understand both the way guns factor into cultural constructions of masculinity and how hegemonic masculinity operates. On the regional level, guns factor heavily in displays of masculine violence that are celebrated in action films through fantasies of "good guys" killing "bad guys" (Gibson 1994). The gun lobby taps into and expands this discourse by tying guns to American virtues (Connell 1995; Melzer 2009; O'Neill 2007). But the only analyses that examine how real men use guns to construct masculinity have focused on criminal uses by men who embody marginalized masculinities (Kimmel and Mahler 2003; Stretesky and Pogrebin 2007). Thus, while on the regional level it is clear that guns are discursively linked to hegemonic masculinity, it is unclear how men on the local level might use guns to construct versions of masculinity that are celebrated in culture.

Race and class are central to hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), but have been virtually ignored in the literature on guns and masculinity. This elision is significant particularly because the image of the ideal gun user constructed by the NRA emerges alongside controlling images of Black masculinity that frame Black males as "threats to white society" (Collins 2006, 75). As a symbol that at once signifies violence and protection, gun use will likely take on different meanings when analyzed at the intersection of race, class, and gender.

The men that are the focus of my study are positioned quite differently from the marginalized men in the literature: Instead of being defined as "criminals," they consider themselves law-abiding men and are licensed by the state to carry concealed guns. Furthermore, they are predominantly white and upper middle class and thus are socially privileged. To fully explore the significance of their gun carrying, it is important not only to interrogate the meanings they give the practice, but to understand the extent to which they are able to position themselves in relationship to the larger discourses around guns and hegemonic masculinity.

The following questions emerge from this literature: How do law-abiding men use concealed firearms to signify masculinity? How are race, class, and gender implicated in the production of hegemonic masculinity? This study extends the literature on masculinities and guns by examining the gendered meanings of concealed firearm carry by law-abiding men. It also extends the literature on hegemonic masculinity by utilizing a race/class/gender focus in examining dynamics of power between local and regional levels of analysis.

## METHODS

I conducted in-depth interviews with 20 men who are licensed to carry a concealed handgun. To develop a sample, I first contacted concealed handgun licensing instructors, four of whom agreed to be interviewed. Those initial contacts referred me to others. Seventeen of the interviews were face-to-face and were conducted in Texas; three respondents were interviewed over the phone (and recorded using a telephone recording device). Sixteen of the respondents identified as white, two identified as white and Hispanic/Latino, and two identified as Hispanic/Latino (see Table 1). All but two of the respondents were married, and they ranged in age from 26 to 66 with a median age of 44.

Though it is difficult to discern the extent to which my sample mirrors the population of men with a concealed handgun license in Texas, it is clear that the majority of license holders are white men. Between 1995 and 2010, 81 percent of the nearly one million licenses issued in Texas were to men, 88 percent of whom were white (Texas DPS 1995-2010b). Because the fees associated with getting a license are typically between \$200 and \$250, it is likely that the expenses associated with licensing make concealed handgun license cost-prohibitive for Texans with low incomes. Nearly all of the respondents in my sample had high household incomes, though two refused to answer this question. Four of the course instructors I interviewed said that most of their students are middle-class, college-educated professionals.

Because firearms are aligned with conservative politics (Melzer 2009), I had some apprehension about being accepted into the networks of license instructors and holders. All interview participants wanted to know if I was "pro-gun" and if I shot firearms. Though I do not own a gun, I am not opposed to them. As a part of this research project, I have regularly visited



**TABLE 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

<i>Name<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Estimated Income</i>
Adam	M	36	White	High school degree	\$61-80,000
Alex	M	26	White	High school	\$21-40,000
Bill	M	38	White	Technical (military)	\$101,000 +
Chris	M	63	White	College degree	\$41-60,000
David	M	66	White	Advanced degree	\$21-40,000
George	M	40	Hispanic	College degree	\$101,000 +
Gil	M	65	White	High school degree	\$101,000 +
Greg	M	57	White	High school degree	\$101,000 +
Jack	M	46	White	College degree	\$101,000 +
Jeff	M	48	Latino and White	College degree	\$81-100,000
John	M	44	White	Advanced degree	NA
Joseph	M	45	White and Hispanic	Associate's degree	\$81-100,000
Larry	M	54	White	Associate's degree	NA
Leo	M	52	Hispanic	Advanced degree	\$101,000 +
Mark	M	34	White	High school degree	\$61-80,000
Mike	M	36	White	College degree	\$101,000 +
Nick	M	46	White	Trade school	\$81-100,000
Paul	M	34	White	Technical (military)	\$61 - 80,000
Richard	M	38	White	College degree	\$101,000 +
Steven	M	30	White	Advanced degree	\$101,000 +

a. All names are pseudonyms.

local gun ranges and rented guns for target practice. When I told participants this, it seemed to put them at ease and signaled to them that my intention with this research is not to bolster an antigun position, but is instead to learn about their experiences as concealed handgun license holders.

Interviews lasted between one to two hours and were conducted at locations chosen by the respondents. Sites included a gun range, the respondent's office, coffee shops, restaurants, and a church. During the interviews research participants were first asked to describe their background experiences, including their earliest memories with guns, whether either of their parents were gun users, and at what age they received their first gun. I then asked what motivated them to get a license and whether they have friends or acquaintances who are license holders. The third set of questions involved their firearm-carrying practices, including whether they carry a gun every day, if they avoid places where carrying a gun is restricted, and if they have ever had to pull their gun from its holster. The fourth section included questions that asked participants their views on gun-free zones and gun rights. I digitally recorded and transcribed each interview, then read through each transcript to identify themes.

Through my analysis of the interviews, three primary themes emerged in men's explanations of why they want to carry a firearm in public: (1) to protect their wives and children from violent crime; (2) to compensate for lost physical strength as they age; and (3) to make them feel more secure in places they feel vulnerable. I will argue that each of these themes is connected to fantasies of violence and heroic defense that contribute to hegemonic masculinity.

### **FAMILY DEFENDER**

Defending the family is significant in men's accounts of carrying a concealed firearm. Nearly all of the men I interviewed are married, and ten have children living at home. In almost every case, the men I interviewed explained their gun use as deeply tied to defending their families. Adam, 36, says that he first bought a gun around the age of 21 because, having just finished college, he could afford to live only in "lower income neighborhoods where there's more crime and there's more shootings and violence." Adam described that neighborhood as "a bad part of Houston" and said he used his gun only for protection in his home and was never very serious about self-defense. All this changed when he and his wife were expecting a child. He explains his perspective: "I'm the dad. I think my role is that I have to protect my family. That's my number one duty as a dad: to provide . . . food, shelter, and protection for my wife and my child. I mean that's what being a dad is." I asked Adam if that is a role he is trying to learn or if it's one a man automatically assumes when he gets married. He responded,

I think you automatically assume it when you get married. And, then especially when you have a kid. And I don't know if that's my belief, or it's just the way I grew up or whatever. But you know, when you get married, you're supposed to do certain things. You know, you have roles. And I know that in today's society [pause] a lot of people like to think well, men and women, they're the same and you know, the women work and so do the men and all that stuff. Which, to some extent, I agree. But there's other certain inherent parts of being a man and being a woman that you have certain roles. I can't have a baby! You know, physically I can't have a baby and physically I'm stronger than my wife. And, it's just up to me to protect her, in every situation. And if, you know, if we were ever attacked or accosted or something then, then it's up to me to protect her until she can, you know, be safe.

Adam became very animated about what he termed "his role" in his family and seemed exasperated by the suggestion that men and women are equals in all senses. Adam sees his wife and child as dependent on him for their safety. Rooting his argument in bodily differences makes the distinction seem natural and inevitable (Connell 1995; Hollander 2001).

Like many respondents, Adam says that a gun is a superior tool for self-defense because it doesn't matter if a criminal is larger or stronger than he is; with a gun, he can defend himself. This is what is meant when guns are referred to as "equalizers." Presumably, this logic would also apply to women and would suggest that there is nothing inevitable about Adam, and the other men who made such statements, occupying the role of the family protector. Instead of stemming from a natural consequence of him being "the dad," Adam utilizes discourses that link masculinity to physicality and aggression and femininity to vulnerability (Hollander 2001) to place his wife and children in positions of dependence.

Mark, a very tall and physically imposing man, is 34 and married with two small children. Standing 6 feet 10 inches, his first jobs after college were in personal security. Mark says he never felt particularly vulnerable until he and his wife were expecting their first child. Mark describes developing a deep-seated need to ensure that his family is protected. He says, "You know, I've got a newborn child that is relying on me to not only protect him, but to protect myself and his mother." As his perspective shifted toward a focus on defending his family, Mark not only obtained a concealed handgun license, he also pursued advanced training in handgun self-defense tactics. He now carries a gun everywhere he goes—including the gym and his own home—whether it is legal or not. Like Adam, he suggests that becoming a father was a transitional moment for how he

thinks about vulnerability and self-defense. Both men went from only having guns in the home to wanting to carry a gun in public because, as fathers, they feel it is their duty to protect their family.

Though Mark says that he carries a gun to protect his family, he also explains that he spends much of his time apart from them. Mark says that he would love for his wife to carry a firearm because “if something happens to me, you know, if I get shot, she can take it and use it. If I’m not there. If she’s by herself.” He elaborates by saying, “I can’t be with [my kids] 24 hours a day. She can’t be either, but you know, she’s more . . . likely to be there than I am.” In this explanation Mark wants his wife to be armed not because she would also become a family defender but because he cannot always be with his family. Like Mark, many of the other married men I interviewed said that they wish their wives would carry a concealed handgun, but in contrast to how they see their role as fathers, they do not see their wives as bad mothers because they are not licensed. Moreover, their wives’ refusal to be armed further emphasizes that it is a father’s job to protect his family.

When I asked Mark if he is ever stressed about his wife’s safety when he is not with her, he replied, “No, I mean . . . she’s a good girl. She can take care of herself [laughs]. But you know, it’s been in the back of my mind always. You . . . gotta kinda balance the practicality versus the, the uh [long pause] oh, what’s the word? The paranoia.” There is a disconnect between how Mark explains his need for a concealed firearm—because crime can happen to anyone, anywhere—and his general comfort with the fact that his wife does not carry a gun. His contradictory response underscores how, in addition to simply being a tool for self-defense, Mark’s possession of a concealed handgun license signifies that he is a good father and husband.

The men I talked to consider themselves law-abiding, virtuous, and brave defenders of their families—matching the image of the ideal gun owner perpetrated by the NRA (Connell 1995; Melzer 2009; O’Neill 2007). But paradoxically, carrying a concealed firearm does not actually enable them to defend their families. Though Mark suggested that as his family’s breadwinner, his defense is integral to his family’s security, he nevertheless minimized the threat to his wife and children when he is away from them. In fact, the fathers I interviewed recognize that their wives are more likely than they are to be in a position to use a gun in defense of the family. This contradiction suggests that while carrying a concealed gun may symbolize their fatherly role, it may not actually translate into an ability to protect their wives and children from harm.

Though they may never be in a position to carry out heroic fantasies of masculine bravery, their concealed handgun suggests to them that they could. By signifying that their wives and children are dependent on them for protection (whether or not this is actually true), the men I interviewed are discursively positioning themselves as brave leaders of their families; thus, their concealed handgun license is very useful as a symbol that allows men to construct hegemonic masculinity. In many respects, it is an ideal symbol because it signifies to them that they are good fathers and husbands, even when they are away from their wives and children.

### THE AGING MALE BODY

Few respondents younger than 40 said that they needed a gun primarily to defend themselves; however, five of the 12 respondents 40 and older explained that age factored into why they have a concealed handgun license. For example, Jeff, 48, is an affable gun enthusiast. He regularly participates in shooting competitions and carries a firearm with him whenever he can. Like many respondents, Jeff reports that he cannot carry his gun at work. When I asked him how that makes him feel, he replied, "Vulnerable. [Laughs]. As I'm being reminded, like today at my orthopedist, trying to get my knee fixed, I'm not as young as I used to be. And [pause] I don't, I don't want to have to dance with somebody if they want to do me violence." Jeff explains that with a gun he does not have this sense of vulnerability and instead feels relaxed knowing he has "a superior ability to deal with a situation harshly if I have to." He then tells the following story:

Years ago I was practicing martial arts regularly. And a friend of mine at the office—a good friend of mine—was just always real aggressive. And, he had his usual fifteen pots of coffee that day, and got vulgar like he always did, and I think . . . he said, "I'll kick your ass" or something like that. I just turned around and smiled at him. And he said, "Oh man, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. I was just joking." I said, "I know. I know you were joking, don't worry about it" [laughs]. Then we laughed it off. And he was very visibly shaken. I wasn't gonna do anything to him, but he knew and I knew that I could've. No big deal.

Jeff felt proud that his officemate feared him. Though he is older now, and not able to do martial arts, carrying a firearm gives him the same sense of confidence. Jeff's firearm supplies him with a virility that his

aging body has surrendered. He says he feels “calm and relaxed” when he’s carrying a gun and that when he is armed, if someone threatens him, he can just smile back, rather than worrying about how to handle the situation. Without having to show his firearm to others, Jeff’s gun makes him feel at ease, confident he can handle any confrontation.

Gil, 66, lives in a major metropolitan city in the Southwest. He says he carries a firearm because “I refuse to be a victim. I refuse to put myself in the position where . . . someone can exercise that kind of control over me.” Gil relayed a story about a time when he felt physically threatened and did not have his firearm with him. He was coming out of a sporting arena in a major metropolitan city. “We were goin’ into the parking ramp to get our vehicle. And there were a bunch of [long pause] young [pause] punks.” Gil struggled to find the words to describe the group of people he was approaching. “It was pretty uncomfortable for about five minutes, until I was certain that they were goin’ somewhere else and not to us.” When I asked if the group of people were being hostile toward him, he replied, “Well . . . let’s just say I was uncomfortable.” And, after a long pause, he said, “I think we’ve all had that experience in a public place.” Because sports arenas are gun-free zones, Gil could not carry his gun and had left it in his car. When I asked him how his behavior would have been different if he had his gun on him, Gil said he would have been more confident. “In what ways?” I asked. He replied,

Confident in that I can take care of myself. You know, at my age, I’m not gonna win many kung fu fights with an assailant [laughs]. And, you know, 34 years ago if someone wanted to mix it up, I probably would’ve been okay taking my chances. But you get to a certain age and you’ve got some problems. You know, dealing on a physical level. And you don’t run as fast [laughs]. You know what I mean?

Gil then said, “You know the old saying ‘Don’t piss off an old guy because he’ll probably just kill ya’? [Laughs].” This joke was an abrupt response to the admission that Gil no longer sees himself as physically strong. It seemed intended to convey that, though getting older has taken its toll, if provoked, he could still defend himself.

Another example of how firearms can compensate for lost capacities as bodies age comes from Larry, 54. When we met, Larry arrived on a Harley motorcycle and was wearing a black bandanna and black leather vest. A tall, stout man, he sported a goatee. Throughout the interview Larry projected a very tough, almost threatening persona. When Larry told me he carried a gun long before he had a license to do so legally, I asked him if

that was because he had experienced a violent incident or if it was because of a “generalized fear that something could happen.” Larry quickly dismissed the notion that he feared violent crime. Instead, Larry says, he’s realistic: “Most people have this delusion that the world’s this warm happy place, and for most of them, it is. But that’s only because nothing’s happened to them yet.” Similar to the New War ethos Gibson (1994) studied, Larry has constructed a worldview in which there is a perpetual struggle between forces of good and evil. This worldview justifies Larry’s tough and aggressive, thoroughly masculine, self-presentation. Later in the interview, I asked him if he had ever felt physically threatened when he was not armed. Again, Larry dismissed the idea that he would feel threatened, attributing it to his military training in hand-to-hand combat:

If I’ve got a stake or a pool cue, I will own your ass. As far as not having anything? When I was a little bit younger and in a little bit better shape, I was comfortable with up to three people. So, no, I didn’t particularly feel threatened. If worse gets to worst, I can grab one person, they will scream like a little girl before it’s all over with and the other two people will not want to get that close.

In this moment, and in many others during the interview, Larry seemed purposive in communicating to me that being tough and capable of violence are important attributes in a man, attributes he has always had. He is both willing to engage in violence and capable of domination, traits deeply tied to masculinity (Messerschmidt 2000; Messner 1992). However, he also admits that growing older has taken a toll on his body. Because he was so quick to dismiss suggestions that he might feel vulnerable or threatened, and because he feels like he can dominate other men without a gun, I asked Larry, “So, then, why do you carry [a gun]?” He responded, “Because you never know.”

Michael Kimmel (1996, 6) has argued, “Manhood is less about the drive for domination and more about the fear of others dominating us, having power or control over us.” Though men like Larry might scoff at the notion that he carries a gun because of fear, he is motivated by a desire to prevent his domination at the hands of another man. Getting older has meant that these men have begun to lose access to a fundamental aspect of masculinity: the capacity to physically dominate others (Crawley, Foley, and Shehan 2008). Carrying a gun allows them to recoup the sense of dominance that stems from having an ability to fight back. Unlike subordinate men who are unable or unwilling to fight, “real” men are able and ready to defend themselves, a position that allows them to claim dominance and

assert hegemonic masculinity. It is striking how elaborate the fantasies of potential domination can be. Larry describes an imaginary fight scene with a group of three men; Gil wishes he were armed when a group of young men, who did not physically threaten him, walked by him in a parking garage; and Jeff uses a gun to essentially recapture a kung fu warrior fantasy.

Though these men say that their guns are simply tools to prevent victimization, they are also symbols of virility, and, thus carrying one impacts how they see themselves as men. This helps to explain the appeal of concealed firearms for some men: not that they are communicating to others their ability to dominate them, but that they are reassuring themselves that they will “not be a victim.” Gil makes this clear when he says, “You know, none of us want to be victims. [It’s] not that any of us are cowboys or going out there looking for a fight, but nobody wants to be a victim.” Rather than serving as tools of aggression, for these men, having a concealed gun means that they will never have to “scream like a little girl.” The gun functions as a totem of masculinity, giving them calm assurance that they can defend themselves against attack—despite their aging bodies.

### DANGEROUS NEIGHBORHOODS

When I asked the men I interviewed how they make decisions about whether or not to carry a gun, eleven said they carry a gun wherever it is legally allowed and nine said they make decisions based on where they are going. For example, they will carry a firearm if they go somewhere they have never been; if they are traveling out of town; or if they go to a part of town with a reputation for being dangerous. “Bad parts of town” were always marked as areas with high poverty and often, though not always explicitly, as areas that are predominantly Black or Latino. When I asked Adam if he regularly carries a gun he said no, because he now lives in a safe city. Adam sets this in contrast to his experiences growing up in Houston, parts of which he describes as a “war zone.” Adam says he always carries a gun when he travels to Houston because, unlike his current city, where the “bad parts of town” are relegated to one side of the city and the “nice” parts of town are on the other, Houston isn’t “zoned.” Adam says his friends who live in Houston carry their firearms daily because

the gas station right down the street is totally different than the gas station one mile down the road. I mean you can have the one that’s right by your



house is fine and you've got no problems, there's no people hanging out there drinkin' beer and acting crazy. But you decide not to go to that one and you just drive down the street and all of a sudden it's like, you know, Compton down there.

Adam invokes "Compton" as a euphemism for race; it is code for a space he sees as predominantly poor, Black, dangerous, and scary. Like many white Americans, Adam links blackness with criminality (Feagin 2010). Because of Houston's uncertain racial landscape, he feels compelled to be armed.

Respondents' perceptions of danger were often loaded with similarly racialized notions of criminality and vulnerability. For example, Jack, a 46-year-old licensing instructor, blames Hurricane Katrina evacuees from New Orleans for what he perceives to be a steady increase in violent crime in Texas. Jack carries at least one gun on him whenever possible. When I asked him if he has ever had the occasion to use his gun, he told the following story:

I got lost and ended up in a predominantly Black neighborhood. [A man in] an old beat-up truck in front of me was driving around and he stops . . . in the middle of the road where I couldn't go around him. And he gets out, so I pulled my weapon out and put it right where he couldn't see it just below the door. Rolled my window down about an inch and he comes back and he asks me some stupid question about how to get to the freeway and I told him, "Don't know, can't help you." And he's like, "Thanks, God bless you," or something, gets in his truck and leaves. I don't know if that was legitimate or what, but I wasn't going to take the chance.

Explanations of threat that link perceived criminality to Black men create a "racialized fear of crime" (Davis 2007) whereby feelings of vulnerability are heightened when whites make contact with the racial Other. Jack is able to use his firearm to quell this sense of vulnerability, and to protect himself should the need arise.

When I asked Adam if he has ever had a situation where he thought he might have to use his gun, he says, "Let's say you pull up to a convenience store and there's some certain people outside that make you feel a little nervous. Then you've got your gun there." Later Adam elaborates:

You pull up and there's, you know, three guys out there, gangster guys, just kind of hanging around at midnight in front of the convenience store. . . . So you make your decision: Do I leave? Or do I protect myself? . . . So when it's just you outside and them outside, you know, I would just kind of

grab my gun and stick it in the back of my pants and pump my gas and be on my way.

The use of the term “gangster” coupled with his previous comment about “Compton” suggests that Adam is describing encountering a group of Black men. He feels threatened by this group, unsure if he should get out of his car. By putting a gun in his waistband, he does not let his fear of the criminal other restrict his behavior; he does not shirk from whatever conflict he imagines might ensue.

Another example comes from Mike, 36. We met at a café in a predominantly white, upper-middle-class part of town. Despite claims that he carries wherever he can, Mike was not carrying a firearm when we met; he had left it in his truck. As we talked he said, “I don’t feel strange sitting here and not having it. I think if I did have it, it would probably make me a little bit more aware of my surroundings.” I was taken aback by this comment, having assumed that the power a firearm bestows would allow a person to relax. Mike explains:

When I have it with me, I’m paying a lot more attention to people . . . somebody walks in, looks like they’re lookin’ for trouble. Somebody that doesn’t fit. You know, not to play the, uh, race card or anything, but there aren’t too many Black people around here. So if you . . . walk into a place and you don’t really fit in. Like if I went over to [a predominantly Black part of town] and walked into Martin Luther King, Jr., church on Sunday morning, I’m betting I’d be one of the few white guys. And people would probably look at me and go, well what’s this white guy doing here?

Mike’s explanation of how race factors into the way he imagines risk is cloaked in discourses of “color blind racism” (Bonilla-Silva 2001). Equating the experience of a Black man’s being seen as a potential criminal to Mike’s being seen as oddly out of place in a church minimizes racial inequality. Yet race plays a profound role in how Mike imagines risk. In this predominantly white space, Mike feels safe enough to not bother bringing his gun in; however, he suggests this safety could be disrupted if a Black man were to come into the store.

Three of the four men in my sample who identified as Hispanic/Latino did not differ dramatically from the rest of the sample in how they talked about the link between race and crime. For instance, Joseph, a 45-year-old license holder who identifies as white on forms, but says that his father is Hispanic, explained that he used his “Hispanic appearance” to

intimidate others when he lived in a high-crime neighborhood that was predominantly Black and Latino. He said that looking “pure white” would have made him a target. The only person in the sample who resisted racist constructions of threat was George, a 44-year-old licensing instructor who is Mexican American and lives in a predominantly Hispanic city along the Texas–Mexico border. He says that he grew up with guys who are now involved in the drug trade and that he tries to not have a “black and white” view of who is a threat. George says, “Some of the nicest guys I know . . . have tattoos from [head to toe]. Some of the meanest guys I know are the stereotypical middle-aged . . . white male professionals [who are] hot-headed, hot-tempered, on edge, on the defense all the time.” Of the 20 men I interviewed, George was the only one who did not rely on a racialized fear of crime. It is significant that George was the only person interviewed who was reared and currently lives in a region that is not predominantly white/Anglo. It seems his perceptions of criminality were not developed according to the white racial frame (Feagin 2010).

R. W. Connell (1995, 80) writes that “in a white supremacist context, Black masculinities play symbolic roles for white gender construction.” In this case, many of the men I interviewed identified Black men and areas of town marked as poor and predominantly Black or Latino as threatening. Indeed, race is conflated with social class, such that Mike sees it as impossible that a Black man would have a legitimate reason to enter a café in a wealthy part of town.

It is significant that in the previous descriptions of fear-inducing events none of the respondents describe being physically confronted or overtly threatened by the Black men they encounter. Instead, they report that simply coming into contact with Black men induces a desire to be armed. The men I interviewed project violence, aggression, and criminal intent onto the Black men they encounter. These characterizations are a form of “gendered racism” that are used both to “validate inequality [and] also to contrast Black masculinity with white masculinity as a hegemonic ideal” (Harvey-Wingfield 2007, 198). The men I interviewed construct their sense of masculinity in contradistinction to what Black masculinity represents to them: They presume the men they see are criminals, thus they are armed in defense. They imagine the men they see will be violent; thus they are prepared to respond. Whiteness is critical to these dynamics not because these men see it as an evident marker of status, but because (to them) whiteness signifies nothing at all.

## DISCUSSION

Concealed handguns, by definition, are not visible to others. Moreover, the vast majority of license holders will never fire their guns in public. Despite this, concealed handguns prove profoundly meaningful in the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity. For some of the men I interviewed, carrying a concealed gun in public allows them to position themselves as defenders of their families, and as embodiments of the American virtues of self-reliance, strength, and courage (Connell 1995; Melzer 2009; O'Neill 2007). Having a license is critical to how this operates because only people without a criminal record can obtain one, and only with a license can someone carry a gun legally. Being law-abiding is the lynchpin that distinguishes "good guys" from "bad guys" (Gibson 1994).

Ironically, although men say they need a gun to defend their families, they are often away from their wives and children and thus would be unable to carry out their role of the defender should the need arise. Second, men who say it's their job to defend their families because they are physically stronger than their wives are among the same people who say that guns are needed for self-defense because as "equalizers" they reduce whatever physical differences might exist between a perpetrator of violent crime and themselves. Third, these men say that they wish their wives would be armed (a claim that is not surprising given that the threat of ever-present victimization is precisely what justifies the need for a concealed handgun license). These contradictions suggest that concealed handguns function as props for doing masculinity by asserting the "father/husband as protector." The consequence is that it heightens the extent to which women are presumed to be vulnerable, in need of protection by the men in their lives (Hollander 2001). Having a concealed handgun license is a material practice that sustains their belief in essential gender differences by enabling men to fantasize about being the defenders of their families.

The men I interviewed also have elaborate fantasies of potential violence at the hands of other men. As they age, some begin to see themselves as less capable of self-defense. Because the body's capacity for aggression and violence is central to what it means to be masculine (Crawley, Foley, and Shehan 2008), some older men feel that their masculinity is diminished. According to Kimmel (2010, 120), this gets to the root of men's fear, a fear that others might "unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men." With a concealed handgun, the capacity for aggression and domination is

restored. As Jeff explained, this can boost a man's sense of confidence, as he is able to regain access to the muscular version of masculinity and the capacity to dominate other, weaker men that is celebrated in American culture (Gibson 1994; Jeffords 1994).

No figure makes these men feel more physically vulnerable than the specter of the Black criminal. They ascribe a violent masculinity to men of color, and construct a sense of self in contradistinction. Because they assume that the Black men they encounter are potentially armed and dangerous, they want to carry a concealed handgun. Having a gun allows them to maintain a confidence that they are capable of responding to any threat, like Adam at the gas station: Should he get out of his car or drive off? Will he stand up to the threat or shirk from it?

It has been established that gang members—and other marginal men—can brandish and shoot guns to assert control and dominance over other men (Stretesky and Pogrebin 2007). The men I interviewed use guns in a similar way, but with profoundly different implications. When gang members use guns, they may be empowered in that instance by their masculine performance of domination, but it is also a sign of their marginalization. Indeed, the men Stretesky and Pogrebin (2007) interviewed were all incarcerated. In contrast, the men I interviewed are among the most privileged in society and already have access to culturally celebrated versions of masculinity: Most of them are white and middle- or upper-middle class, and all of them are heterosexual. Their state-issued license to carry a concealed handgun, a license that is expensive and available only to those who can afford it and who are not legally restricted, gives them an added level of privilege: It gives them a symbol around which they construct both an empowered and culturally celebrated masculinity.

This work extends the literature on guns and masculinity by illustrating how dynamics between masculinities of privilege and marginalization lead to qualitatively different meanings for the same object. Criminals use guns to do masculinity (Kimmel and Mahler 2003; Stretesky and Pogrebin 2007), and so do law-abiding men. Unlike boys who shoot their classmates in a desperate attempt to be seen as “manly” (Kimmel and Mahler 2003), or gang members, for whom masculine bravado is a valuable currency (Stretesky and Pogrebin 2007), the men I interviewed gain access to aspects of masculinity that are celebrated at the regional level of culture by media and the gun lobby (Connell 1995; Gibson 1994; Jeffords 1994; Melzer 2009; O'Neill 2007). That these men are able to tap into these discourses—to cast themselves in the light of versions of masculinity celebrated by dominant culture—reveals the extent to which they are

privileged. By contrast, Black and Latino men are assigned masculine traits of dominance, aggression, and violence, but this happens in a cultural context in which their skin color makes them suspect and they are assumed to be criminals (Collins 2006).

The implications of this study suggest the need for further research. The literature on hegemonic masculinity would benefit from closer attention to how dominant culture shapes and frames the discursive strategies that men have available to construct masculinities. One topic that should be addressed is the experiences of men of color who have concealed handgun licenses. How do Black men who are legally armed deal with the assumption that they are criminals? To fully understand how gender shapes the experience of carrying a concealed handgun, the case of women license holders must be considered. Does carrying a concealed handgun give women access to dominance in the way that it does for men? I am currently conducting interviews with women who have a concealed handgun license to understand how they explain their interest in carrying a firearm in public.

The men that I interviewed explain their desire for concealed firearms in light of versions of masculinity that are celebrated in culture: They want to be good fathers and husbands, they want to be able to fight back if attacked, and, unlike dangerous criminals, they are interested only in self-defense. Thus, their concealed handguns signify to them that they are “good guys,” men who will use violence if necessary, but only to fight “bad guys.”

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### NOTE

1. It is impossible to determine the exact number of defensive gun uses (DGUs) that occur in a given year, and estimates vary from 600,000 to 2.5 million (Cook and Ludwig 1998). While Kleck and Gertz (1995, 180) argue that there is “little legitimate scholarly reason to doubt that defensive gun use is very common in the U.S.,” many scholars provide evidence that does just that. For example, Cook and Ludwig (1998) argue that reported incidents of DGUs are wracked with

methodological problems that lead to highly inflated numbers. McDowall, Loftin, and Presser (2000) argue that reported DGUs often involve scenarios where the defender had no way of knowing the motives of their alleged offenders and so could not reasonably argue that their gun stopped a criminal act. Though the overall number is debated, what is known is that the vast majority of DGUs happen at home, while DGUs in public, the type that CHLs are intended for, are rare (Cook and Ludwig 1998).

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