Camouflaged Collectives: Managing Stigma and Identity at Gun Events

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ABSTRACT *Gun violence persists in the United States, claiming lives and escalating healthcare costs. This article seeks to contribute to social justice work on the "gun problem" by studying gun collectives. To understand gun culture and to identify gun violence reduction strategies, we study places where gun owners organize – legal (and sometimes illegal) settings that facilitate dialogue about gun issues. Based on participant observation and collaborative event ethnography at gun shows and a private shooting party, this analysis presents findings about the practices gun collective members use to manage stigma. We conclude that when participants in gun events attempt to subvert core stigma through everyday stigma management practices, they effectively facilitate the unfettered exchange of potentially dangerous goods, promote the invisibility of oppressive structures, and normalize violence.*

KEYWORDS gun culture; social justice; gun violence; stigma; identity; firearms; collaborative event ethnography

Gun violence is a persistent social problem in the United States, yet national dialogue about gun violence frequently results in dichotomized, political debates about gun ownership (Melzer, 2009). In this paper, we argue that reducing gun violence is a social justice issue, and that social justice scholars must engage in national discourses about guns in order to ultimately reduce gun violence. For this analysis, we turn our gaze to the organization of gun collectives, places where gun owners and gun culture are accessible, to begin to understand how "gun culture" and "gun owner identities" unfold. Understanding gun collectives is an essential first step in untangling the divisive, life-and-death conflict currently taking place in the United States about guns.

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Gun collectives are frequently stigmatized and membership and activities within gun collectives can be considered "dirty work" (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Tangling legal, illegal, controversial, and stigmatized actions together with political advocacy, gun collectives and gun collective members must grapple with a myriad of techniques to manage their identities. Much of this identity work occurs through macro discourses about gun ownership; thus, studying gun collectives and the discourses that both permeate from and influence gun owners through a social justice lens is critical (Dempsey et al., 2011). Vendors, attendees, and other individuals related to gun events, such as people who rent space to gun shows, or people who provide advertising services, engage in similar discursive practices, which mutually reinforce one another in efforts to manage stigma. The co-constructed discourse serves to bond gun collective members together, even as many individuals view guns, gun laws and rights, and gun culture in different ways.

Taking a social justice approach to academic scholarship suggests a particular focus on creating transformative social change, "helping to build a better world" (Dempsey et al., 2011, p. 257). Social justice work "assumes that there is an urgent and immediate need to transform social and material relations. Social justice scholarship brings with it a diagnosis and a call to action" (Dempsey et al., 2011, p. 258). Further, as social justice scholar Larry Frey described, social justice scholars try to make interventions in contexts in which racism, conflict, oppression, and cultural struggle occur (Frey, in Dempsey et al., 2011; see also Broome, Carey, de la Garza, Martin & Morris, 2005). Certainly, gun violence is an issue wrapped in racism, conflict, and cultural struggle. Scholarship from a social justice perspective takes a transformative approach: intervening in discourse and, as Mohan Dutta argues, offering "entry points for engaging with the truths that are hidden or erased" (Dutta, in Dempsey et al., 2011, p. 259).[1] Our analysis is an attempt to uncover some hidden and erased discourses within gun collectives, in an effort to contribute to the larger social justice agenda of reducing gun violence.

Politicians, public health advocates, and outraged citizens have lobbied for and endorsed efforts to curb gun violence in the United States. To date, success has been limited for many reasons. One reason is that the relationship between "firearms and their use in homicide… is complex and obviously involves cultural factors" (Editorial, 2007, p. 1403). Cultural understandings about firearms and firearm use are necessary to better understand why firearms are used to effect violence. However, gun culture and socialization are very difficult to study because the issue of gun ownership is tangled up in discourses of individual rights, laws, and stigma. Further, members of gun collectives are vastly different in their relationships to guns, in their opinions about gun control, and particularly in their gun use habits (Melzer, 2009).

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[1] Bud Goodall, a communication social justice scholar claims "intervention in discourse is our job" (Dempsey et al., 2011, p. 264).

One approach to studying gun culture and socialization is through gun organizations, where individual members collectively identify with some shared values and practices.

This paper is part of a larger project aimed at understanding gun culture in an effort to identify effective gun violence reduction strategies. A first step in this effort was to identify places where gun owners organize – legal (and sometimes illegal) settings that facilitate dialogue about gun issues. To situate this study, we first provide background information on gun collectives and firearm violence. Next, we examine scholarship on stigmatized organizations and the practices organizational members used to manage core stigma, including privacy, secrecy, and false transparency. Then, we discuss our use of collaborative event ethnography as a method of data collection, and present our findings about the practices gun collective members used to manage stigma. We conclude that when participants in gun events (i.e., vendors and attendees) attempt to subvert core stigma through discursive stigma management practices, they effectively facilitate the unfettered exchange of potentially dangerous goods, promote the invisibility or oppressive structures, and normalize violence.

Gun Collectives and Stigma

Gun collectives, firearm events, and even dialogue about gun ownership are rife with stigma. Particularly because of the association of guns with violence, gun collectives must manage the stigma that is often attached to guns. Gun shows, in particular, are often considered as a problematic area in debates about firearms and violence. Associations between firearms and violence are not unwarranted: the United States has the highest rates of homicide and firearm homicide rates of all industrialized democracies (Editorial, 2007). Mass shootings are far more common in the United States than in any other high-income country, and are often committed with legally acquired firearms (Brent, Miller, Loeber, Mulvey & Birmaher, 2013). For example, the shooters in the Columbine High School mass shooting had a friend legally purchase some of their firearms from a gun show without a background check, taking advantage of what is known as the "gun show loophole" (Kirk, Gilmore & Wiser, 2015); the shooter in the Aurora, Colorado, movie theater attack purchased his guns legally at three different gun stores (Castillo, 2012). In addition to the cost of human life, gun violence in the United States is expensive. The annual cost of medical care for firearm-related injuries exceeds $2.3 billion (Corlin, 2002) and more than $27.3 billion when both medical costs and loss of productivity are calculated (Max & Rice, 1993).

Of critical concern is the strong link between firearm violence and high rates of firearm ownership. While we do not wish to imply that all gun ownership results in violence, the connection between firearm ownership and firearm violence is important to flesh out (Ott, Aoki & Dickinson, 2011),

particularly because only nine percent of privately owned firearms are registered around the world (Karp, 2007). The United States has a very high rate of private firearm ownership, and also extremely high rates of gun violence. The link between gun ownership and gun violence suggests that studying gun ownership is an important step in studying gun violence.

Gun-oriented organizations are sometimes forced to engage in hidden practices (Scott, 2013) because their businesses face frequent opposition. Guns shows often attract protesters and must deal with petitions to shut down their businesses, particularly in locations with high-profile shootings (Parker, 2012; Yee, 2013). Recently, for example, Florida's New Orlando Gun Show scheduled George Zimmerman, former neighborhood watchman who was acquitted of murdering 17-year-old Treyvon Martin, to sign autographs at the show. The scheduled appearance drew intense community criticism and the host facility, the Majestic, denied the New Orlando Gun Show the space, forcing the organization to find another location for the show (Buchanon, Brown & Murphy, 2014; Ober, 2014).

In another example, the Saratoga Arms Fair, a New York gun collective, drew immense pressure to postpone their gun show after the nearby Newtown, Connecticut elementary school shooting. The owner opened the show to protesters, counter protesters, and intense media scrutiny. One attendee applauded the organizer for "not giving into the pressure" (Yee, 2013. p. 1). Another explained, "I feel we're kind of persecuted…Gun owners are blamed for certain things. We've been under attack for a long time, and we've been framed for things" (Yee, 2013. p. 1). Although the show hosted a record number of attendees, the collective must renew its license and permit annually, and is subject to ever-present legislation which would make the entire show, or the sale of specific items in the show, illegal (Yee, 2013).

The National Rifle Association (NRA), the largest and most visible gun organization in the United States, has received intense media exposure and is considered highly contentious (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). As Melzer (2009) describes it, the NRA is a "four-million-member conservative social movement organization (SMO) and political lightning rod" (p. 1). Although it originally organized primarily to provide gun safety training, it has evolved into the highly public face of opposition to any restriction on firearms. The NRA's uncompromising stance on gun and ammunition control is the defining characteristic of its identity, which can cause controversy for NRA members and nonmembers (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). In recent years, the NRA has been engaged in a heavily covered battle about legislation to ban assault weapons, which are sold at most gun shows and used in many shooting ranges.

Because the national debate about gun ownership is so contentious, gun organizations face different constraints than other organizations. The assumption that gun events can be dangerous adds to the pressure sponsoring organizations experience. Recent tragedies at gun events, such as the case of an eight-year-old boy who accidentally shot and killed himself with an Uzi at

a gun show in 2008, a nine-year-old girl who accidentally shot and killed her gun range instructor with an Uzi in August of 2014, and the death of *American Sniper* author Chris Kyle, who was shot to death at a gun range in 2013, are reflective of the potentially dangerous conditions that exist at events involving firearms and ammunition (Berman, 2014; Lavietes, 2011). For these reasons, although gun events are typically highly publicized, organizers must also manage aspects of their business in relation to controversy.

The notion of organizational stigma stems from Goffman's (1963) work on individual stigma, and describes negative judgments that are applied to an organization. Hudson (2008) describes *core stigma* to describe the unshakable taint some organizations experience by their very existence. For core stigmatized organizations, routines, attributes, outputs, customers, or purpose carry enough stigma to make legitimacy impossible. For these organizations, complete social acceptance is an impossibility. Examples of core stigmatized organizations identified in the academic literature include men's bathhouses (Hudson, 2008; Elwood, Greene & Carter, 2003), brothels (Blithe & Wolfe, 2016; Wolfe & Blithe, 2015), or white power organizations (Dobratz, 2001; Futrell & Simi, 2004; Simi & Futrell, 2009). The very nature of these organizations induces outside stigma. Hudson (2008) also describes *event stigma*, to explain the stigma attached to organizations as the result of a specific event, such as the 1989 Exxon Valdez or the 2010 BP oil spills. In cases of event stigma, organizations suffer a spoiled image as a result of the event (Hudson, 2008). Organizations that experience event stigma engage in practices to address the stigma associated with that event, such as a public relations campaign, in order to survive.

Gun collectives experience both core stigma and event stigma. They are core stigmatized, rife with political controversy, illegal activities, and extensive legislation to set boundaries around their operations. However, gun collectives are also subject to repeated event stigma. Individual or mass shootings – particularly shootings in surprising or public places – carry event stigma that attaches to gun collectives. Because these events are so frequent, the event stigma attached to gun collectives constantly reinforces the core stigma. Gun collectives become further entrenched in stigma, polarization about gun issues is reified, and, as a result, these organizations retreat into a shadowy existence.

Managing Identity

Hughes (1958) describes *dirty work* as tasks that contain *taint* in a physical, social, or moral sense. While many occupations are partially or wholly "dirty," people engaged in dirty work challenge their stigmatized identities in order to construct a positive self-concept (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). In general, people like to think of themselves in a positive way, and consider their actions as socially important. Social identity theory suggests that

individuals enhance their self-esteem through social identities and thus work hard to improve their self-definitions (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Hogg & Abrams, 1990). Of particular interest to this study is a technique that Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) call *reframing*. Reframing allows individuals to transform the meaning attached to their identities by either *infusing* stigmatized aspects of work with positive outcomes, *justifying* the societal need for their work, *neutralizing* or negating stigmatized aspects of work tasks, or *normalizing* the stigma of dirty work by rendering stigmatized aspects of work as normal, everyday, non-stigmatized tasks (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark & Fugate, 2007). Studying the practices of people engaged in dirty work provides a rich context for understanding how positive meanings arise from identity construction in stigmatized places (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

Participants at gun shows – vendors, attendees, and other related individuals, such as people who rent space to gun shows – experience moral taint because they engage in activities that are sometimes considered sinful or dubious, illegal, or require deception or confrontation. They also experience physical taint stigma, which arises from potentially dangerous conditions (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). People manage stigma and taint as collectives and as individuals. The members of gun collectives engage in both group and individual attempts to subvert the stigmatized aspects of their individual and collective identities. The endeavor to manage stigma is placed on *all* gun owners to some extent, in or out of events, even those who do not engage in illegal practices, because the stigma attached to gun culture is so pervasive.

Managing Privacy

One common way organizations deal with stigma is to engage in privacy practices. Stigmatized organizations, which may or may not be at risk of exposure, take privacy seriously and regularly hide aspects of the organization deemed to be private. In a general sense, the concept of identifiable attributes, which can be linked to individuals, sets privacy parameters. Davis (2006) explains, "the privacy of individuals, groups, or institutions is their ability to determine for themselves when, how, and to what extent information about themselves is communicated to others" (p. 117). For a variety of reasons, individuals desire to remain unidentifiable (Adams, 2006), and in many Western countries most people consider privacy to be a legal and moral right (Davis, 2006; Hollander, 2001; Petronio, 2010). Specific aspects of personal identity, such as age, gender, name, location, political affiliation, health, wealth, and bank account number are determined to be aspects of an individual's life that require protection (Adams, 2006). When organizations take privacy measures, individual members', customers', and partners' information is not considered public. Organizations and collectives become co-owners of private information and are enlisted together

to protect it (Petronio, 2010). Further, specific organizational information might be kept private as well, such as profits, location, names, political affiliations, profits, and bank account numbers. For hidden or stigmatized organizations, the need for privacy is inherently important.

When privacy is threatened, individuals and organizational members may go to great lengths to protect sensitive information. The threat of exposure – i.e., the intended or unintended release of information about the discreet operations of an organization – can result in greater stigmatization or dismantling of the organization. To address the threat of exposure, organizational members engage in privacy management techniques (Adams, 2006) to ensure privacy. Petronio (2010) developed communication privacy management theory to describe the ways in which people manage privacy. She argues that managing privacy is rife with tensions that underpin the interplay between individuals and collectives. Among these techniques are secrecy, anonymity, reframing, forced invisibility, and false transparency. *Communication* in this sense does not necessarily equate with spoken words, but can include artifacts, gestures, symbols, and emblems, all of which are visible in the activities of gun collectives. For example, a background check is a communicative artifact. It signifies a particular type of sale, that there will be a record of the sale, and it identifies some relational boundaries between buyer and seller. Thus, even if no words are exchanged, conducting a background check is highly communicative.

Secrecy is one tactic to preserve privacy (Hollander, 2001). Protecting secrets may require lying and solitude, for sharing private secrets with other individuals compromises privacy. Because privacy is considered a right, secret holders take up power positions in the restriction or flow of private information. Other ways individuals protect the privacy of stigmatized collectives is through anonymity and invisibility (Marx, 2006). By removing names (Lucock & Yeo, 2006) and visibility (Burkell, 2006) members of stigmatized collectives gain more control over their privacy. As Rawlins (2009) points out, transparency does not equate with visibility. Rather transparency is the opposite of secrecy. Thus, transparent organizations are those which disclose as much information as possible – good or bad. In a time when expectations for organizational transparency have increased, stigmatized organizations may engage in false transparency, that is, the pretense of transparency, which draws attention away from stigmatized activities. Taking what we know about stigmatized organizations from research on privacy and its theoretical neighbors, secrecy, transparency, and visibility, we asked the following research questions: how do members of gun collectives manage stigma?; and what (if any) techniques do members of gun collectives use to manage their identities?

Methods

To address our research questions, we used qualitative, interpretive methods. Specifically, we employed collaborative event ethnography (CEE) to guide observations at seven gun shows across the country and one shooting party at a private shooting range. Details about the data collection procedures, the sites, analysis, and verification are included below.

Researcher Positionality

Over the course of our study, people have asked us how we, as individuals, feel about guns, gun violence, and gun control. Of course, our analysis is not separate from our experiences, so presenting our personal relationships to our research topics is important. However, our relationship to guns is complicated. Neither of us supports taking away all guns from civilians, and neither of us supports unfettered rights to firearm ownership. We are both concerned with gun violence, and throughout the research were sometimes shocked to see extremely violent images and slogans. We are both frustrated with attempts to shut down positive communication or decision making on the grounds that talking about guns is too polarizing.

The first author is from Littleton, Colorado, two miles (3.2 km) from Columbine High School, the site of the 1999 mass school shooting, 17.5 miles (28 km) from Aurora, the site of the 2012 mass theater shooting, and seven miles (11 km) from Arapahoe High School, the site of a 2013 deadly school shooting. She also grew up in a hunting family with several guns in her home. The second author is married to a United States Marine. She has spent time in an environment supportive of responsible firearm use and possession throughout her marriage. She first learned to use firearms on her uncle's farm at age 12 and has used various firearms at shooting ranges as an adult. These personal relationships to guns undoubtedly shaped our research motivations, observations, and analysis.

Data Collection Procedures

Our first step in collecting data was to gain access to our desired sites. Our initial research design included interviews with participants at gun shows and gun ranges. After gaining Institutional Review Board approval, we contacted the organizers of three gun shows. All three show owners denied us access. One of the organizers explained that "asking questions about gun violence or safety might make show attendees aggressive or violent." The show owners explained that for *our* own safety, we could not have a booth in the show with our cards and questions, nor could we formally interview attendees. We also pre-purchased time in an indoor gun range. However, before we had a chance

to enter the site, police shut the range down, arrested, and indicted the owner for selling illegal firearms – some without serial numbers – to undercover police (Bellisle, 2014). In light of these events, we decided to begin with observations of public gun shows. We soon realized that our observations of gun collective events would prove a rich source of data, and decided to conduct a collaborative event ethnography at multiple sites.

Collaborative event ethnography (CEE). CEE helped us to study large events in action (Büscher, 2014; Brosius & Campbell, 2010; Ganesh & Stohl, 2013). Designed to help researchers engage with numerous participants and a large geographic space in the moment, CEE allowed us to take in some overall observations about gun collectives, large amounts of visual communication and texts, as well as detailed information from individual members we spoke to at events. More traditional ethnographies emphasize local, individual, organizational, or smaller group experiences, and tend to draw data from deep immersion in a culture. CEE takes the concept of "studying up," or taking on massive scale sites while also "studying down," or drilling into individual stories and experiences of people within the site (Brosius & Campbell, 2010, p. 248). This dual approach helped us build what Robbins (2002) calls "ethnographic symmetry" (p. 1511) and what Büscher (2014) describes as "empirical nuance" (p. 133). The logistical constraints of conducting research in such conditions are substantial. To overcome these difficulties, we used a multi-sited ethnographic approach (Hannerz, 2003), and looked for themes and striking differences across shows. We also used a team approach when conducting the observations, and attended most events together, sometimes with the additional eyes of research assistants.

The CEE technique also allowed us to handle multiple subcultures within the larger umbrella of "gun culture." At each show, we observed some prevalent subgroups (such as hunters, veterans, survivalists, conceal and carry advocates, the NRA, historical artifact collectors, women, and machine gun enthusiasts). CEE allowed us to gather data from all of these groups while also observing the culture of the event as a whole.

We cannot emphasize enough the importance of the team aspect of our observations (Büscher, 2014). The two researchers and the research assistants all came to the shows with vastly different backgrounds. Our relationship to, thoughts about, and experience with guns, differed greatly. Our different theoretical, methodological, and content expertise framed our observations such that our observations were sometimes overlapping, but also quite different. For example, the first author, a communication scholar, included information about evident discourse, while the second author, a criminal justice scholar, frequently made note of particular illegal weapons; some of these observations might have gone unnoticed without the diversity in our expertise and interest. We debriefed every event together, and conducted all coding and analysis together in order to make sense of these differences. Our interdisciplinary collaboration marked an essential component of the CEE.

We wrote scratch notes and headnotes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) during the shows. Our scratch notes included brief handwritten notes. Headnotes included mental recordings of important, interesting, or shocking conversations, our feelings, and impressions. We each wrote detailed field notes after the events, which resulted in over 50 single-spaced pages of notes and nearly 200 artifacts (flyers, business cards, pamphlets, booklets, stickers, etc.).

Sites. We observed seven gun shows in three states (Nevada, Ohio, and Virginia). Observations lasted between one hour and fifteen minutes to over two and a half hours. The two biggest shows each boasted over 1,000 displays, and one and a half acres (0.61 ha) of exhibits. At the shows, we walked around, listened to conversations, observed visual displays, collected texts, and interacted with other participants. Vendors eagerly engaged in conversations with us in efforts to sell their products or to have us sign up to support their causes or specific organizations (such as the NRA). Sometimes our roles as researchers were part of the conversation, other times we simply listened to others' conversations as we walked through the show.

During the course of our research, one of our research assistants was provided a contact for an organization that took people to a secret gun range to shoot "big guns." She arranged for us to observe an event. After securing permission from the owners, we received oral directions to the meeting spot, which was marked with a temporary flag, and we followed the company owner to the range. There, we met the range owner and four range masters. On the day we observed, a bachelor party had booked the range and requested to shoot an AR-15 slide fire, an AK-47 slide fire, a Mac-11, and an MP5. They also had the option of shooting the 50 caliber Browning Machine Gun (BMG) for an additional fee.[2] The prospective groom got additional rounds, and all of the participants had the option to shoot other guns, for an extra charge, if they decided to on site. The shoot lasted four hours. Before the bachelor party arrived, we had the opportunity to converse with the owner and range masters about our research.

Data Analysis and Verification. Consistent with our data collection, data analysis proceeded as a team effort. We analyzed the field notes together and developed themes inductively, grounded in the data. We assigned every piece of data a rough categorization, achieved through our joint observation and understanding of the notes. Next, we refined, reduced, expanded, and collapsed categories as some themes featured more prominently and others faded into the background. We reread the data in the categories to see if we

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[2] The AR-15 slide fire and AK-47 slide fire are semi-automatic rifles with bump-fire stocks. These stocks reduce recoil and cause the shooter to discharge rounds at a higher rate. The Mac-11 is a sub-compact machine pistol. The MP5 is a sub-machine gun. The BMG is a heavy machine gun. This is a crew-served weapon, which means it requires more than one person to operate it.

reached a clear pattern in the data. We present representative observations in the analysis. Data verification included triangulation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) of the themes between both researchers' individual field notes across events and the artifacts.

How Gun Collectives Manage Stigma and Identity

The data revealed that members of gun collectives engage in a number of practices to avoid or reduce stigma associated with gun culture and with instances of gun violence. Specifically, gun collectives managed identities through the use of privacy or secrecy tactics, drawing a historical narrative, and through normalizing activities.

Privacy and Secrecy

The use of privacy and secrecy is one practice that allowed members of the gun collectives to manage stigma associated with the illegal or legal but stigmatized aspects of gun collectives. As previously discussed, illegal activity sometimes occurs at gun shows. The sale of illegal guns, hollow-point bullets or Teflon-coated bullets (otherwise known as "cop killers"), which are illegal in some states and controversial in others, occur at some gun shows. However, the organizational values and practices of privacy and secrecy allow members to de-identify with this stigmatized aspect of the collective, so they can still maintain a positive identity. The specific methods used to secure privacy and secrecy varied between gun shows and the shooting party. Generally, these methods revolved around concealment and limiting access to information.

The gun events featured several practices with either the intent or effect of securing privacy or secrecy regarding the purchase or possession of firearms and ammunition. These practices revolved around rendering it difficult to track transactions and firearms. Specifically, we observed cash only transactions, few background check requirements or enforcement, methods to conceal firearms, instructions and materials to build firearms, covert transactions, and secret locations.

Cash only practices featured prominently at the gun shows. Some gun show organizers deal exclusively in cash. Vendors inside the shows also dealt predominantly in cash. Booths often included signs that read, "cash only" or "credit cards not accepted." Cash only transactions may serve several purposes. While cash is certainly convenient and helps vendors avoid additional fees, it also helps vendors and customers avoid credit card transactions, which produce searchable records. Gun collective members may wish to avoid searchable records of gun transactions for a couple of reasons. First, searchable records of transactions create tax obligations. Second, cash

only transactions allow vendors and customers to avoid background checks. We witnessed only *one* transaction during which a vendor called for a background check. In all other transactions we witnessed, vendors did not ask customers for their state of residence or documentation of a background check. Requirements to purchase firearms vary by state, but pre-sale screenings for criminal history, restraining orders issued for domestic violence, and severe mental disorder are one of the most common gun regulations. Failing to complete these screenings is another way the gun collectives ensured privacy. In all three states we visited, all licensed firearm dealers are required to conduct background checks on buyers. Dealers in Nevada may also accept a concealed carry permit issued after July 1, 2011, which obviates the need for a background check. However, gun shows are temporary sale sites and are often loosely regulated (Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, 2013). We only saw a background check booth at one show. The booth was strategically positioned away from traffic, tucked in a corner far from the entrance and exit. When we asked the woman working at the booth if background checks are required for firearm purchases, she shrugged her shoulders and winked. Neglecting to conduct background checks works well to ensure privacy. Without documentation, there is really no way to know who purchased firearms, how many firearms were purchased, and which firearms were purchased at the shows.

The concealment of weapons was a popular theme at the gun shows, and also served as a privacy strategy. A diverse array of products to aid the legal and illegal concealment of weapons was available for purchase. Weapon concealment goods included items such as holsters, concealed carry clothing, and purses with compartments to conceal handguns. The gun shows we observed usually included several vendors advertising courses for people wishing to obtain concealed carry permits. Weapon concealment facilitates impression management. The possession or carrying of firearms is a divisive issue in the United States, and may result in stigmatization and considerable difficulty moving through the business of daily life. Hiding their weapons permits owners to be selective about with whom they share their gun ownership. Gun owners can conceal their weapons when surrounded by people who are not supportive of gun ownership. This type of situational negotiation and impression management has been documented in people who participate in sub-cultures or groups that involve core stigma, such as white supremacy activists (Simi & Futrell, 2009) and women who have had abortions (Astbury-Ward, Parry & Carnwell, 2012). Being careful to conceal an aspect of one's identity or life that may trigger stigma is also a tactic that reduces scrutiny of one's activities (Kanuha, 1999).

One extreme method we observed to ensure firearm ownership privacy was the *build-your-own* guns. At these booths, multiple gun parts are available for purchase, so that individuals can customize their weapons. These booths also sold instructions for building handguns, rifles, and machine guns. Building firearms rather than purchasing serialized weapons from a legitimate dealer

makes it difficult to track weapons. Not all gun parts are serialized, and savvy customers can purchase a receiver that is 80% or less complete, build the remaining firearm, and never be required to engrave a serial number on the completed weapon (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms & Explosives, n.d.). As one gun collective member noted, people can buy barrels and other non-serialized firearm components "with reckless abandon." Homemade weapons can be very difficult to identify in gun crime cases, because the parts can be modified, thereby complicating ballistics analysis.

Covert transactions were observed at several shows. Private sales are not highly regulated. The *Gun Control Act* of 1968 includes no federal requirement of documentation of firearm sales between private parties. However, some state statutes regulate private transactions. At the Ohio and Virginia gun shows, we observed secret transactions. A gun collective member alerted us to the practice of engaging in illegal sales by walking the perimeter of the show and listening for people to say "selling." Once aware of this practice, it was fairly easy to observe this type of sale. If the person in possession of the firearm was willing to sell it, then both parties walked over to a less obvious location, engaged in a brief discussion, and exchanged cash for the firearm. There was no exchange of documentation. This may be legal in some states, but it is illegal in others, and generally inadvisable in case the firearm is used in a future crime and the serial number is still associated with the original buyer. In either case, these covert transactions prevent the tracking of the firearms in question.

Stigmatized organizations regularly convene in secret locations. In our observations, the gun shows were public, but the shooting party was held at a secret location. The owner of the company running the party indicated that he would meet us at the turn-off for the range. It was a non-descript turn-off with no markings that would indicate to what the unpaved road led. Upon his arrival, the company owner got out of his truck and posted temporary flags to mark the turn-off and path for the shooting party participants to follow through the mountains to the range. We met the land owner after we reached the range. He indicated that the location is secret, and both the company owner and land owner repeatedly requested that we not divulge the location of the shooting range.

The privacy practices used by gun collective members helped the collectives and individual members avoid stigma. However, these practices also generated loopholes through which illegal activity was possible. People who are legally prohibited from possessing firearms (e.g., individuals convicted of felonies) or people conducting straw purchases (e.g., purchasing firearms for other people) would easily have been able to purchase multiple weapons. The combined privacy techniques used by gun collectives maintains vendor and customer privacy from government surveillance, facilitates the violation of laws, and helps members manage stigma.

Historical Narratives

We estimate that over 75% of the booths at the gun shows sold items which could be considered controversial, racist, or anti-Semitic. However, vendors selling these items drew upon a common historical narrative to justify their products. The practice of framing racist or anti-Semitic items as historical preservation allowed gun collective members to maintain a positive self-concept and identification with the collective, while tactically deidentifying with the racist, colonialist, and anti-Semitic aspects of the organization. By reframing their sale and display of highly racist artifacts as historical preservation, rather than acknowledging their racist implications, the vendors (and buyers) avoided the stigma attached to the sale of controversial items.

Through this practice, gun collective members deidentified with the racist implications of their artifacts. For example, one vendor had a 24 by 18 inch (61 x 46 cm) framed certificate which read "Jap Hunting License." Beneath the certificate, the vendor's sign read, "largest collection of rare WWII documents." The racist implications of displaying such a sign in modern times were reframed in terms of historical interest. In other examples, we witnessed a man walking around in a Confederate Civil War costume near a Confederacy canon, and saw a metal sign that read "Colored People" with an arrow below it. Other offensive historical artifacts included a number of figurines and other trinkets (tea sets, lunch boxes, drawings etched on hides, etc.) depicting American Indians as savages, or as the captives of white men. At most booths with these kinds of historical items were also a plethora of antique guns.

By far the most common stigmatized artifacts were Nazi paraphernalia. At some booths, small Nazi medals were mixed in with other war medals. In one extreme case, an entire corner space (the largest exhibit space at the show) featured a 10 by 18 foot (3 x 5.5 m) Nazi flag, a full uniform, Nazi firearms, a plethora of medals, anti-Semitic signs (such as "No Jews"), and Jewish identification armbands. Field notes from every gun show included references to the abundance of Nazi items. A few booths had signs saying "Hitler was right" and "Mein Kampf," the title of Hitler's autobiographical manifesto.

The prevalence of these booths was perhaps the most consistent thread across the gun shows, and historical knowledge seemed to be a high point of pride. We overheard this exchange at one show:

Buyer: Wow, man, this is amazing (leafing through Civil War documents).

Vendor: Thanks. Yep. It's pretty great. I get to sell history here.

The pride with which the vendor spoke of "selling history" was evident in his smile and vast collection of war artifacts. Some booths even had pamphlets with information for joining historical or collector societies, some of which required a sponsor or private invitation.

In many cases, the connections to history seemed to imply life was better in the past, particularly with respect to owning guns. For example, the NRA was giving away Betsy Ross flags, with the 13 stars in a circle, for people who registered at the event. One woman explained her connection to history and her interest in historical flags. She said, "We need to remember just who America is *supposed* to represent." The women in this example wanted people passing by her booth to rewind the clock to a time in history that she perceived to be better than the present. One of the researchers noted this sentiment in her field notes. She wrote,

> There are lots of Civil War materials. They seem to be nostalgic for a "better time" when they could possess firearms without regulation. This was also a time when a large percentage of the population didn't have many rights. How do they feel about equal rights for women and people of color?

Of course, much of U.S. history is rife with inequality, oppression, and racism. The sheer number of artifacts which now symbolize hate and oppression on open display likely created tension for some people at the shows. However, by reframing the sale of offensive items as the sale of historical artifacts, the vendors and people purchasing the items avoided some stigma and kept non-racist identities intact.

In an interesting twist, the historic narrative was also used for new items. For example, a bumper sticker read, "Governments support gun control" with the Nazi swastika next to it. In another example, one vendor featured a John Wilkes Booth bobble-head figurine. John Wilkes Booth is clearly a historical figure (he assassinated President Lincoln), but the bobble head is a new product. Another vendor had a collection of purses with hand painted scenes of American Indians in captivity. The purses are new, but they are depicting scenes of historical genocide. The image of former President Obama was frequently placed alongside other historical figures. For example, we observed bumper stickers and t-shirts featuring Obama's picture beside Adolf Hitler and Mao Zedong with phrases beneath, including "We've seen this before" and "Brothers in Tyranny." Comparing a recent U.S. president to historical leaders who promoted genocide drew on a historical discourse, even though the items themselves were recently produced. While clearly political, these items were set in a historical context, which was prominent and seemingly valued at every gun show.

Normalizing Activities at Gun Events

As discussed earlier, gun events are potentially dangerous sites. However, the members of the gun collectives we observed managed the potential stigma attached to the dangerous aspects of the events by normalizing them. They did this using three primary practices: (a) adopting a casual attitude to their actions and the events as everyday activities; (b) juxtaposing innocuous items

next to potentially dangerous weapons; and (c) making these events "family friendly." We describe each below.

The people attending gun events performed a highly casual attitude toward the events, and often acted as if they were not, in fact, handling potentially dangerous weapons. For example, in the parking lots of gun shows, people often walked to and from their cars carrying multiple weapons and ammunition. In one example, a man carried four transparent trash bags (two in each hand) full of ammunition through a casino, with three rifles slung around his shoulder. In a similar example, a man carried two rifles and a large axe. Another man walked through the parking lot with a bulletproof vest, a machine gun over his shoulder, and a bucketful of ammunition. A final example from the parking lot featured a father rather carelessly swinging an assault rifle in his right hand, holding the hand of a young girl with his left hand. These examples show how the weapons at gun events – guns, knives, ammunition, etc. – were treated as everyday objects. There were no provisions to wrap the guns separately from the ammunition, for example, or any measure at all to prevent possible violence that could have occurred as a result of procuring weapons and ammunition.

Inside the show, framing weapons as ordinary was also common. At every show, we witnessed people handling, aiming, and what could only be called "carelessly swinging" weapons as they explored the show. On one occasion, the show became very crowded. After feeling a nudge, one author noticed the barrel of a handgun on her side. Another time, one researcher noticed a handgun incidentally aimed at the other researcher's back. Yet another time, a young boy, aged around ten perhaps, aimed a black polymer rifle with a high capacity magazine at another passersby. A final example involves an approximately four-year-old girl handling a machete while her father purchased magazine clips for an assault rifle. Although the weapons in these examples were presumably unloaded, the ho-hum nature with which people at the shows engaged with the items suggested an air of casualness. Nobody seemed to be concerned by or even notice these behaviors, which were evident at every gun show we attended. This is similar to what Ott, Aoki and Dickinson (2011) describe as "converting weapons of violent conquering into ordinary, everyday objects. To domesticate means to make familiar, normal, and acceptable something that was formerly wild, dangerous, or uncontrollable" (p. 219). The weapons at the shows we attended were made ordinary through the casual nature with which the show participants interacted with them.

A final aspect of the casual atmosphere at gun collective events was the prevalent presence of alcohol. Many shows had multiple stands for purchasing alcohol, and individuals frequently walked around with bottles of beer or mixed drinks during the shows. Although mixing alcohol with guns and ammunition could heighten the potential danger of an event (Parker & McCaffree, 2012), the presence of alcohol also served to solidify the casual, everyday atmosphere of gun events. The casual handling of weapons and

alcohol for purchase normalized the experience of gun shows, turning gun events into social events, which overshadowed the potential for danger and stigma inherent in the items for sale.

A second way members of gun collectives normalized their activities was by juxtaposing innocuous items beside potentially violent or dangerous items. At every show, there were booths with jewelry and novelty pieces made of bullets, for example, a bottle opener made from a spent 50-caliber Browning Machine Gun (BMG) cartridge. This round could "split a body in half" as one show attendee claimed, yet it was for sale as a campy trinket. Similar items included a plastic ice cube tray in which each ice cube was shaped like a grenade and a WWII grenade hand painted and fashioned as a Christmas tree ornament. At a few shows, a booth with water meditation beads, was situated next to a table full of assault rifles. Dog toys, geodes and other rocks, guitars, scented candles, jerky, hot sauces and jams, jewelry, toys, and blankets were also sold, mixed in with the weapons, violent political t-shirts, and historical items for sale at the gun shows. These items seemed to make the gun show feel similar to a craft show in some places, which normalized the otherwise shocking items (such as the wall of magazine clips) at the events.

A final way the gun collective members normalized the event experience was to make it a "family affair." Children were present at every show, and every show had at least one booth that specialized in children's toys, including toy guns. Many participants attended the show together as a family, and at least four vendors at every show were children, selling goods alongside their parents. One show featured a rubber band gun shooting gallery for kids, and another had a marshmallow shooting range for children. One booth sold remote control helicopters which appeared to have two to three children watching throughout the show. At another show, a Boy Scout troop had a table at the entrance, and scouts were all over the inside of the show selling boxes of popcorn. At that same show, a balloon artist made balloon animals for kids. Another show had an ice cream cart with a line of families waiting to get a sweet treat. The gun events were clearly marketed as "child-friendly," and collective members brought children to the event.

Discussion and Implications

The data from this study reveal that members of gun collectives subvert stigma through the use of privacy and secrecy, by mobilizing a historical narrative, and by normalizing the experience of gun events. Although these techniques aid individuals in avoiding some of the core stigma attached to gun events, subverting stigma using these practices leads to a number of social justice difficulties. First, it allows for the exchange of potentially dangerous and illegal items to go on unfettered. Safety regulations can be ignored, and individual accountability does not exist because so many practices work to secure the privacy of members' identities. Part of the

difficulty in reducing gun violence is that laws and rules are easy to subvert. Because privacy and secrecy are so engrained in the gun cultures we observed, it is difficult to promote an open and honest dialogue about gun ownership, laws, safety, and violence. Historically, our mutual inability as a society to talk about gun ownership has allowed gun violence to continue. There has simply not been enough social action to resolve gun violence, partly because of stunted dialogue about this contentious issue.

A second problem that arises through the use of stigma avoidance techniques is the invisibility of oppressive structures. By ignoring racism, anti-Semitism, and the power imbued in the invisibility of whiteness, such oppressive structures can persist. Selling the symbols of oppressive regimes and creating new products which evoke hatred and persecution makes discursive space for the continuance of oppression. The historical narrative nourished at events, in particular, allows members of gun collectives to harken back and celebrate a time when many people in the United States were more oppressed (Ott et al., 2011). Revering a time of oppression, because it allowed for unfettered "rights" of individuals in power, is harmful to everyone, particularly people from historically oppressed groups. As McMurtry (2011) described, "rights" have slowly become absolute in recent years, "yet any deeper value principle to determine whether these increasingly totalitarian rights are valid has remained unconceived" (p. 11). The historical narrative of unfettered rights euphemizes the racist and anti-Semitist themes at gun events. Because members of gun collectives are actively involved in shaping laws, making structural and power inequalities at these events visible is a critical need. It is necessary to reduce racist, anti-Semitic and sexist discourse to promote social justice.

Finally, when members of gun collectives normalize their activities and weapons, they also normalize violence. By making it appear that gun events are safe, or "family friendly," awareness of the potential for violence at these shows is subverted. Further, when guns become everyday items which even children can aim, handle, and sell, people can more easily overlook the possibility for violence outside the confines of the show. Normalizing the potential for danger and violence might benefit stigmatized organizations and their members, but it can cause problems at the larger societal level. Gun violence is a social justice issue which requires intervention. Normalizing the violence and potential for danger inherent in gun events makes the need for intervention less visible.

Through this research on gun collectives, we contribute to knowledge about identity management strategies and stigma avoidance strategies, revealing some dark or unsavory techniques people sometimes engage in to manage hidden aspects of their identities. We have also shed some light on stigmatized collectives, which have been overlooked in research. Sykes and Matza's (1957) description of neutralization techniques among juvenile delinquents is useful for thinking through how members of gun collectives manage stigmatized identities. They describe how members of a stigmatized

(sub)culture deflect disapproval by denying responsibility for deviant actions, denying injuries which result from deviant actions, denying victims, condemning condemners, and appealing to higher loyalties. Although not all gun owners or gun collective members are "delinquent," the stigma and illegal activities observed in gun collectives create conditions which allow them to operate like a subculture which experiences disapproval from a large cultural group. As the data presented here reveal, the participants of gun events engaged in all of these techniques.

Additional Implications for Social Justice Scholars

Perhaps the most striking implication that emerged from this research is the desperate need for social justice scholars to engage in gun violence research. Discussions about gun violence are so polarizing that they are usually reduced to discourses of rights, laws, and control, rather than focusing on solving the issue of gun violence itself. As more scholars engage in social justice projects, this research provides an example of how to conduct interdisciplinary research about "wicked problems" (Caron & Serrell, 2009). Some social issues require interdisciplinary knowledge, and social justice scholars are uniquely positioned to be part of sticky conversations about big problems.

The intersections of gun culture with other social identities requires the sophistication of a social justice lens. Most of the participants in gun collectives are conservative white men (Melzer, 2009) engaging in what Gibson (1994) describes as a hyper masculine culture of warriors. Further, media coverage of gun violence is almost exclusively focused on mass shootings and white victims, when gun violence perpetrated against people of color rarely gains national media attention. In addition, at gun events, women are characterized almost exclusively as victims, in need of protection from men and guns. How social identity intersects with various gun cultures is a necessary next step in gun violence research which would be best facilitated through a social justice lens.

We began collecting data for this project just after the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting – a horriffic event which choked the United States with grief. At the time, it seemed as if the nation was ready to do something about gun violence. However, as the months wore on, the promised activism and passion expressed to end gun violence faded into familiar complacency. In the end, no new gun control laws emerged after Sandy Hook. Since then, at least 1,274 mass shootings have occurred in the United States,[3] including the 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting, the San Bernadino community center shooting, the Oregon community college

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[3] Mass shootings are events in which four or more people are killed, not including the shooter (Lopez & Oh, 2017).

shooting, and the South Carolina mass shooting at a historically black church, to name a few. The resulting loss of life is at least 1,409 since, as a nation, we said "never again." To clearly understand the problem of gun violence, we emphasize that mass shootings make up only a small portion of firearm deaths each year in the United States (Lopez & Oh, 2017). Our country has become a "rampage nation" (Klarevas, 2016). Different groups try to frame gun violence to suit political positions. Many try to silence discourse about gun violence, moving instead to talk about dichotomized positions regarding gun ownership. Overcoming these discursive difficulties in order to understand gun culture and to reduce gun violence is one of the most pressing social problems in the United States today. We call for more research to approach gun violence in different ways to generate a more nuanced understanding of gun culture and identity.

To conclude, in this study we identified three practices members of gun collectives used to manage their potentially stigmatized identities. These strategies included purposeful privacy and secrecy, drawing on a historical narrative, and normalizing their activities. We discussed how these stigma avoidance tactics ultimately allow laws and safety rules to be avoided, mask racist and patriarchal ideologies, and serve to normalize gun violence. Such practices allow gun culture members to remain camouflaged, hiding stigmatized and unsavory aspects of their collectives. Identifying these kinds of social practices of gun collectives is one step in achieving greater social justice through the reduction of gun violence.

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