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Gun Control: College Student Attitudes and the Meaning for Appalachian Social Workers

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Abstract. Senseless and tragic shootings across communities such as Newtown, Connecticut have riveted public attention on gun control. Bombarded by pro- and anti-gun-control forces, policy makers are often reactionary. Social workers must deal with these policies and the clients who fear them. Social scientists have suggested that cultural world views have greater influence on this issue than any other predictors. A survey of rural Appalachian college students (N=294) explored gun control attitudes in order to consider what makes compromise and consensus on the issue of gun control so difficult. It considers these influences and their implications for rural social workers.

Keywords: rural social work, gun control, Appalachia, culture, attitudes

The December 2012 Newtown tragedy resulting in the deaths of 27 school children and adults reignited gun control debates nationwide (CBS New York, 2013). However, immediate public outcry to change registration requirements, restrict certain types of weapons and ammunition, and arm teachers and college students has largely faded. Politicians' promises to work with "both sides of the aisle" have led to little progress and few cooperative policies (Saad, 2013).

A few states have changed their gun control laws with some enacting much stricter gun control legislation. For example, Connecticut (CBS New York, 2013) and New York (Walshe, 2013) placed restrictions on people with a history of mental illness, banned assault weapons, limited magazine capacity, and implemented stricter background checks and tougher penalties. Colorado enacted universal background checks and limited ammunition sizes (Cordon, 2013). In some states, though, law enforcement officers are refusing to comply with new restrictive laws (CBS DC, 2013); and in other states, social workers are complaining of the lack of understanding and discrimination that new laws place on individuals with mental health issues (Arieta, 2013; Columbia University, 2013; NASW New York, 2013).

Other states have loosened their gun control laws. Kentucky citizens may now carry guns into government buildings, civic centers and the zoo (Halladay, 2013). The state also passed a nullification bill which prohibits enforcement of new federal gun control laws if enacted (CBS DC, 2013). According to Brockman (2013), even Kentucky citizens were surprised that new gun laws passed so quietly that public officials and various institutions were caught off guard.

Arkansas, North and South Dakota, and Georgia also loosened their gun restrictions (Parnass, 2013). In April 2013, West Virginia passed five laws relaxing gun control regulations. At the time of this writing, Garrett (2014) suggests that West Virginia laws are considered the least restrictive in the United States. Like Kentucky, a bill has been introduced to the West Virginia legislature to nullify federal gun control laws if enacted (Boldin, 2014).

Given the plethora of legislative activity, the question remains: Why is it so difficult for citizens on either side of the gun control debates to hear one another and find areas of agreement and cooperation? Motivated by this question, the current study gathered data relevant to student attitudes expressed in informal conversations and college courses. The authors are professors in a small college in rural, central Appalachia. It is not unusual for students to volunteer in general conversation or class discussions how many guns they own, the types of firearms and their magazine sizes, and how they buy or trade firearms without registration. In fact, occasionally a student has volunteered his or her fear of "the government taking control of our lives." Thus, informal comments and discussions such as these motivated this study.

This paper contributes to the current literature on cultural and ideological perspectives of Appalachia and gun owners. The purpose is to explore the powerful influence of culture and ideology on the issue of guns, and to consider what is known about influence and attitude change that makes it so difficult to find compromise and consensus, particularly in Appalachia.

Development of Gun Culture in the United States

Historians have suggested that a solid attachment to guns was initiated during the Revolutionary War. Although the militia system was inefficient and undisciplined, the use of improved rifles created the popular belief that guns made the average citizen soldier superior to professional European soldiers. In Appalachia, the Civil War was about states' rights and autonomy (Miller, 2011).

William Church and George Wingate established the National Rifle Association (NRA) after the Civil War. The intent of the NRA, in close cooperation with the national government, was to improve the marksmanship of American soldiers (Utter & True, 2000). The New York legislature provided land for a rifle range in 1872; and in the early 1900s Congress authorized the sale, at cost, of surplus military firearms to rifle clubs, and later provided free ammunition to NRA sponsored clubs.

Utter and True (2000) describe how in the 1930s "mob gangsters" and outlaws like Bonnie and Clyde introduced advanced firearms such as the Thompson machine gun and sawed off shotgun. Roosevelt and Congress responded with laws prohibiting the sale and transportation of these weapons used by the gangsters.

According to Utter (2000), the "Wild West" has been credited for its influence on American gun culture. The earliest Wild West shows, and then television productions of the 1950s glamorized cowboys as heroes who epitomized strength and independence, and a willingness to use violence. Cowboys needed guns for safety, but historians indicate that the level of violence and disruption from fights, accidents, and murders soared when cowboys came to town. Regulations prohibiting guns in cattle towns were widely ignored until employers, wishing to avoid physical altercations and property damage in their establishments, were able to limit firearms in their businesses.

It was also at this time when the NRA, "initially an organization that cooperated with the national government to improve marksmanship among American soldiers, began its long history of opposition to gun control legislation" (p. 72). According to Melzer (2012), the NRA believed

that the assassinations of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy in the 1960s were watersheds in history. By the late 1970s the organization was "primarily, if not solely, dedicated to preserving gun rights" (p. 38).

Melzer (2012) conducted a multi-year, multi-faceted, ethnographic study of the NRA wherein he describes frontier masculinity values such as independence, freedom, and self-reliance as key features of NRA culture (p. 253). Melzer contended that the NRA's most palpable emotion is fear – that gun rights are under attack, and that a threat to guns is a threat to all individual rights and freedoms. The organization asserts that gun control is a "slippery slope," and if gun rights are jeopardized, then American democracy is undermined.

Appalachian Culture

Appalachia, and particularly West Virginia and eastern Kentucky, was initially settled by the Scots-Irish, a group of people who came from economic and political disenfranchisement. They had a defensive outlook, a propensity for fierceness, and an eye-for-an-eye mentality. The Scots-Irish were determined to establish a life independent from restraints of law. They were passionate for freedom, prized autonomy, and resented collective interference. They developed a system of private justice based on personal relationships common to their clan (Miller, 2011).

Their physical isolation was enforced by the mountains, cultural isolation, and clan mentality already present in the settlers. Young adults settled close to parents, grandparents, and kin. The geography and low population density increased the culture-of-honor tendencies. The remoteness and ruggedness of the land made law enforcement difficult (Nesbitt & Cohen, 1996). The mountain man was the provider, protector, and lawman. He who was most economically and socially independent was most respected. Laws such as prohibition refreshed the mountain family's resentment and suspicion of outsiders, and solidified family clannishness (Miller, 2011). According to Sloan (2009), the law and its enforcers were considered enemies, and anything and everything was fair in trying to outwit them. "Settlers perceived their isolation as inevitable, and bore it with stoical fortitude, until the mountain family grew to love solitude for its own sake" (Weller, 1965, p. 72).

First suggested by Robert Merton in 1938, strain theory suggests that reduced or frustrated economic opportunities produce resentment and feelings of injustice (Lilly, Cullen & Ball, 2010). Contributing to the Appalachians' attitudes towards outsiders and government agencies was the exploitation of the region's natural resources. Appalachia has a long history of conflict with "outside" people and organizations that captured land, timber and natural resources (Nesbitt & Weiner, 2001). Businessmen took advantage of the mountaineer's isolation and ignorance. "Coal operators and their allies in government and business formed powerful economic and political alliances to combat legislative remedies that would threaten their control over the industry or lead to higher costs" (Rakes, 2002, p. ii). Industrialists opened coal mines, cut down trees, built saw mills, and operated quarries, all with cheap labor. The mountaineer signed contracts that he could not read, bargained away rights that he unknowingly had, and only much later discovered that he barely owned a scrap of land to consider home.

Though fabulous wealth was generated in Appalachia, the mountaineer's share was minimized. The mountain family came to see all forms of business and government as dishonest

and scheming against him. They were exploited by government and business often enough to justify these feelings (Weller, 1965).[1]

Appalachian Tradition

Weller (1965) noted that tradition is a significant trait of the mountaineer. The mountain family is amazingly bound to the past, a bond that others cannot understand. Guns are a common gift from parents to their sons and daughters, oftentimes at birth. Many schools close during hunting season, or hunting is considered an excused absence. This sentimental attachment to guns is a part of the culture. Guns symbolize honor, human mastery over nature, independence, and confident self-sufficiency – the very characteristics which lead to a good society (Primm, Regoli & Hewitt, 2009). Frontier masculinity, as characterized by self-reliance, self-defense and self-determination, is an identity that many NRA members believe is threatened (Melzer, 2009).

Honor is difficult to operationalize and subsequently seldom measured; however, it is consistently implicated through Appalachian literature and culture (Miller, 2011). According to Miller, while active support of violence has faded, the culturally embedded ideals validating violent behavior survive. They pass from one generation to another as normative behavior, heavily conditioned by an honor ethos (p. 283). As described by Nesbitt and Cohen (1996), honor in this sense is based not on good character, but on a man's strength and power to enforce his will on others (p. 4). Cohen, Nesbitt, Bowdle and Schwarz (1996) argue that states with culture-of-honor norms tend to have "looser gun control laws, less restrictive self-defense statutes and more hawkish voting by federal legislators on foreign policy issues" (p. 948). The persistence of these norms, despite changes to historical conditions that led to them, has been described by Vandello, Cohen and Ransom (2008). Their studies found that men from culture-of-honor areas are more likely to endorse norms for "honorable violence" (p. 162).

Rural versus Urban Aggression

Swaim, Henry, and Kelly (2006) found that the predictors of aggressive behavior among rural youth also predicted urban youth aggression: family actions against violence, peer violence, gender, anger, academic performance, and alcohol and tobacco use (p. 432). Cunningham, Henggeler, Limber, Melton and Nation (2000), and Slovak and Singer (2001, 2002) examined links among gun ownership and anti-social behavior. Urban youth tend to carry guns for protection and intimidation, to gain respect, and to frighten others, while rural youth tend to own guns for sport. Cunningham et al. suggested that the reason for urban youth gun ownership is strongly associated with rates of anti-social behavior (p. 432). These authors found that rural youth who owned guns had a relatively low rate of antisocial behavior, only slightly higher than rural students who owned no gun.

Gun Control Debates

The gun control debate has been heated for at least four decades without a compromise or solution that satisfies either side. For example, according to Braman and Kahan (2006), the problem has been that the debate tends to focus on a factual question: do guns make society more or less safe? Both parties offer statistics to justify their argument, and both argue that the

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[1] For a comprehensive history of the culture, the violence and hardships endured, and the exploitation of West Virginia and Appalachia, see Bailey (2008) and Lewis (1998).

opposing side is providing misleading information ("Guns", n.d.; National Rifle Association, 2013).

According to the 2011 Uniform Crime Report, violent crime has decreased 3.8% from 2010, and has decreased 15.5% since 2002. If violent crime and murder rates are down, why does the gun control debate remain so passionate and volatile?

Modern television offers a variety of crime shows, and media coverage of local and national crime tends to fuel misconceptions: if it bleeds, it leads (Stevens, 2011). People use these misconceptions to make judgments and decisions regarding crime and crime policy, sometimes called the "CSI Effect" (Lilly, Cullen & Ball, 2010). Indeed, Robbers (2005) found that students were susceptible to media suggestions when formulating opinions about criminal justice policy, even when they knew the source was biased.

Researchers have known for many years about "priming;" that the mere presence of a weapon leads people to behave more aggressively (Franzoi, 2012; Turner, Simons, Berkowitz & Frodi, 1977). The "weapons effect" depends on the meaning people attach to guns. Bartholow, Anderson, Carnagey and Benjamin (2004) found that because of the hunter's knowledge, experience and comfort with guns, the individual is not primed to aggressive thoughts as is a non-hunter. In addition, Primm et al. (2009) found that the hunter's day to day familiarity with guns inoculates him against fear of firearms.

People crave certainty and the feeling of being right. Neuroscience suggests that the state of not being certain is extremely uncomfortable (DiSalvo, 2011). Social scientists tell us that people attempt to avoid cognitive dissonance – the experience of having conflicting beliefs at the same time. Individuals will therefore make every effort to minimize or reject one of the conflicting beliefs. It is more comforting to believe that what is noble and honorable is also benign, and what is ignoble is dangerous (Braman & Kahan, 2006). In Appalachia, guns are considered noble, honorable and benign. In contrast, outsiders and government intervention are considered dangerous.

Kahan and Braman (2003) and Braman, Kahan, and Grimmelmann (2005) suggest that people assess risk according to context. Evaluation of risk must take into account the value that individuals attach to distinctive social meanings. Braman and Kahan (2006) proposed that culture comes before facts in the gun debate. They stress that cultural orientations more powerfully predict individual attributions toward risk than any other influences such as education, personality type, political orientation, race, south/north, and urban/rural (p. 579).

Individuals trust people who share their worldview. They defer to those who share cultural allegiances. Studies have shown that once we trust a source, we are less likely to scrutinize future information from that source (DiSalvo, 2011). Who individuals regard as trustworthy tends to be governed by the norms that they are socialized to accept. If an adversary disagrees with one's beliefs, that challenger is rejecting the authority and institution to which the individual defers. One might decide that the adversary is not merely misinformed, but dangerous or evil. Zealots reinforce the perception to citizens on each side of the debate that they are facing an unreasonable adversary bent on cultural domination (Braman & Kahan, 2006).

According to Braman and Kahan (2006), it is unlikely that individuals will accept social science data that contradicts prior beliefs or those that they trust on assessment of gun risk. No matter how compelling the statistical proofs, citizens who care passionately about the meaning of guns are unlikely to change their minds (p. 606). "Those who generate empirical data on gun control will always be preaching to the choir" (Kahan & Braman, 2003, p. 1324).

Method

The survey was conducted in a small, undergraduate state college in central West Virginia, the only state whose boundaries fall entirely within the Appalachian region (Nesbitt & Weiner, 2001). The study was approved by the college IRB, and the questionnaire was sent electronically through Survey Monkey to all full-time students enrolled in the college. Descriptive data was calculated and compared to relevant studies in the literature.

There were 294 respondents to this survey, approximately a 25% response rate. Ninety percent of the respondents were from West Virginia and 97% were Caucasian. Respondents were nearly evenly split with 49% male and 51% female. A little more than 52% of the respondents reported that they were from communities with less than 2500 people (Table 1).

Table 1

Size of Home Community

Population	Percentage of Respondents
Less than 2500	52.4%
2501-8000	34.2%
8001-25,000	6.8%
More than 25,000	6.5%

Results

Of the respondents, 70% reportedly owned at least one gun. As expected, males were more likely to own a firearm (86%) compared to females (57%). Also expected, students (75%) disagreed that there should be a limit on the number of firearms in any one household. Eleven percent reported that they had a working firearm at college. The majority of students (78%) indicated that "firearms are an important part of family tradition." Most (75%) reported that they would worry about safety in their home if they had no firearm. A majority (67.3%) consider themselves to be religious.

Seventy-eight percent of respondents agreed that there should be mandatory background checks for any gun purchase, no matter where or how purchased. Fifty-eight percent indicated

that all firearms should be registered. Students were equally divided that assault rifles should be available only to military and law enforcement (48% agreed, 45% disagreed). Exactly 50% indicated that there was no need to change federal firearms laws (Table 2).

Table 2

Survey Questions

Gun Control Attitudes	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Firearms are an important part of my family time.	58.5%	19.0%	12.2%	6.8%	3.4%
I worry about the safety of myself and family if I do not have a firearm in my home.	48.3%	26.4%	12.0%	9.2%	4.1%
I worry about safety if I do not have a firearm in my vehicle.	18.5%	20.5%	33.6%	16.1%	11.3%
I consider myself a religious person.	41.8%	25.7%	19.2%	5.1%	8.2%
There should be mandatory background checks for any gun purchase, no matter where or how purchased.	53.1%	24.5%	11.6%	7.8%	3.1%
Assault rifles should only be available to military and law enforcement officers.	23.8%	14.6%	16.3%	14.6%	30.6%
All firearms (handguns, shotguns, rifles) should be registered.	38.8%	19.6%	17.5%	10.3%	13.7%
There should be a limit on the number of firearms in any one household.	8.2%	6.1%	10.2%	18.7%	56.8%
There is no need to change the federal firearm laws.	30.6%	18.6%	27.5%	13.4%	10.0%

Discussion

According to White (2012), 55.4% of West Virginia citizens reportedly own a firearm; and the percentage of gun ownership in surrounding states ranged from 21.3% in Maryland to 47.7% in Kentucky. This is considerably lower than the 70% reported by students in this study. Another national poll indicated that self-reported gun ownership is the highest it has been since 1993 (Saad, 2011). However, the number of gun owners nationally is approximately half of student participants in the current study (Table 3).

Table 3

Gun Ownership: Comparison of National Average
to Appalachian Student Participants

Population	National Poll	Current Study
Adults	34%	70%
Males	46%	86%
Females	23%	57%

Half of the students in this study did not see a need to change laws governing gun registration. Results from this study are very similar to those of a national Gallup Poll where 49% of Americans believe that the sale of firearms should be stricter, and half believe that laws should remain the same or be less strict (Saad, 2013).

Considering that students in class discussions often describe owning dozens of guns, frequently purchased at informal gun shows or from friends and acquaintances, the investigators were surprised that 78% of participants believed there should be mandatory background checks for every gun purchase. Similarly, although students voluntarily admit that many of their guns are not registered, 58% believed that all firearms should be licensed. Perhaps students did not perceive their discordant thinking, or other factors were involved. Or perhaps it is "federal" laws that participants do not want changed, as they may prefer states to make this determination. This would be consistent with Appalachia's historic system of private justice (Miller, 2011) and their resentment, suspicion and conflict with outsiders (Nesbitt & Weiner, 2001; Sloan, 2009).

Another possible explanation for what appears to be a contradiction in attitudes and behavior is cognitive dissonance. According to Tavris and Aronson (2007), the need for consonance is so powerful that when forced to look at disconfirming or contradictory evidence, people may criticize, minimize, or dismiss the information in order to maintain existing beliefs. Self-justification reduces dissonance and protects self-esteem. It allows people to have "blind spots," a comforting delusion that enables individuals to see the errors of others but not themselves. "Blind spots enhance our pride and activate our prejudices" (p. 44).

The Appalachian culture of "us versus them" may contribute to the need for self-justification. Student responses may reflect safety for themselves and suspicion of others. Since

75% of the students worried that family safety would be jeopardized if they did not have a firearm at home, they may simply not consider their unregistered gun as illegal, but rather a necessary tool in their home. The cultural tendency to distrust outsiders could lead to thinking that restrictive gun laws are necessary for others, but not relevant for family protection.

The symbolism of the gun for Appalachian students may simply be cultural. Because of their familiarity with firearms, guns in the home may be as common as fishing poles, and considered no more dangerous than any other recreational equipment. Their perception of risk is minimal. When they consider gun laws, students may be thinking of violence as portrayed in the media and perpetrated by others.

It is also interesting to note that while 11% of our study participants reportedly had a working firearm on campus, Miller, Hemenway and Wechsler's (2002) study of college students in 38 states and the District of Columbia found that 4.3% of students sampled had a gun at college. Miller et al.'s (2002) study was conducted over ten years ago, however, so their findings may not reflect current college student behavior. Although a number of two and four year institutions now legally allow guns on campus, no other studies could be found that provide these specific data.

Study Limitations

There are many limitations to this study. First, it represents the opinions of a relatively small sample from only one college in a rural area of Appalachia, and attitudes of sampled college students are likely not representative of the larger regional population. Thus, results cannot be generalized to other areas of Appalachia or to college students elsewhere. Next, it would have been informative if survey questions had differentiated federal and state background checks, restrictions and laws. Student apprehension of federal regulation may be significantly different than of state intervention. Finally, students with particularly strong opinions regarding gun control might have been more or less likely to participate in the survey. Students who speak freely with peers and faculty about their unregistered firearms may have been reluctant to be honest in a survey. The outspoken fears of government expressed verbally by students may represent a small, but vocal minority, or those students may not understand the relationship to questions as asked in the survey.

Implications for Practice for Appalachian Social Workers

Considering Appalachian history, tradition, and culture, a social worker practicing in the rural areas of the region should expect that clients will have easy access to firearms. As a family outsider and possibly a government representative, the social worker is unlikely to be quickly or easily trusted. Indeed, the social worker may be perceived as more of a risk than violence occurring in the home, such as spouse abuse, child abuse, or erratic and disorderly behavior stemming from mental illness or drug and alcohol use.

As citizens of the culture of hunting, autonomy, and self-sufficiency, law enforcement officers may sympathize with clients' desire to keep their guns. They may therefore minimize, or be slow to file appropriate charges for offenses that involve firearms. This might intensify a

social worker's anxiety for potential victims and influence intervention plans and decision making. Additionally, social workers may have reason to fear retribution from angry clients.

The NASW Code of Ethics (2006) is clear that social workers do not have the right or the responsibility to try to change the culture or attitudes of clients; however, it is the social worker's responsibility to understand their culture and attitudes. Social workers must consider the value and distinct social meaning attached to guns in Appalachia. It would be unethical, undoubtedly ineffective, as well as foolish and unsafe to try to change the gun control attitudes of clients with whom they work.

Slovak, Brewer and Carlson (2008) found that the majority of social workers in their study did not assess for firearms and safety on a routine basis. In rural Appalachian areas, social workers must monitor safety issues, maintaining constant vigilance. Effective and responsible social workers must understand and appreciate the client's culture. They must consider clients' perception of risk, both of guns and of government intervention, as represented by the social worker. They must also consider the value and distinctive social meanings that guns represent. The client's cultural orientation and identity must be affirmed rather than denigrated. A basic social work precept is to "start where the client is." Therefore, social workers must be ever mindful to consider cultural perspectives and to promote socially responsible self-determination.

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