Preparing for the Attack: Mitigating Risk through Routines in Armed Self-Defense

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ABSTRACT Prior research has shown that owning firearms for self-defense can be motivated by perceived risks and a desire to mitigate those risks. Keeping and carrying guns for self-defense also introduces risks to owners and others. We examine ways that consumers mitigate these latter risks. We employ theories of practice and prior work on risky consumption to interpret observational, interview, and textual data gathered from a multi-sited ethnography of consumers of handguns for self-defense. We reveal that these consumers attempt to mitigate risks in three ways: through readiness practices with guns but no assailant, simulated scenario practices incorporating simulated assailants, and mental rehearsals incorporating imagined assailants. This research contributes a model of risk mitigation in risky consumption, explicates how social norms and mental activities foster a sense of security from specific risks, and shows that collaboration is required for development of practical understanding of risk-mitigating routines that incorporate multiple people.

Firearms are expressly designed to facilitate killing and injuring living creatures. Accordingly, US laws recognize firearms as deadly weapons[1] and acknowledge that, regardless of intent, a person holding a firearm is capable of threatening,[2] injuring, or killing others. Indeed, part of what makes a firearm appealing—to armed forces, police forces, and consumers—is that a gun holder is in a position of power over others and has the capacity to more successfully engage in offensive or defensive behavior.

Many Americans own firearms for the purpose of defending their person, property, or other people from threats (Cook and Goss 2014). With liberalization of gun restrictions in many states (Waldman 2014) and promotion of armed self-defense by institutions such as the National Rifle Association (NRA; O'Neill 2007; Lott 2016), self-defense has surpassed hunting and other recreational uses as the primary reason for American firearm ownership (Goo 2013; Jones and Stone 2015). Estimates of the number of citizens who possess licenses to carry handguns in public have increased from 8 million in 2013 (Cook and Goss 2014) to more than 14 million in 2016 (Lott 2016).

While engaging in armed self-defense could mitigate the risk of being powerless during an encounter with an assailant, doing so also introduces many risks to gun owners and others. In this article, we are concerned with the latter. Armed consumers take on multiple risks when keeping or carrying guns for self-defense, including: accidentally killing or injuring themselves; the legal and moral risks of killing another person; being targeted by a criminal because one is armed; and the host of legal, moral, and psychological risks of allowing a child, criminal, or suicidal family member access to a firearm (Dahlberg, Ikeda, and Kresnow 2004; Cook and Goss 2014). Further, in comparison to other firearm consumption contexts, such as hunting or collecting,

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1. See, for example, Vermont Statute 13VSA §1021(3), which defines a deadly weapon as "any firearm, or other weapon, device, instrument, material or substance, whether animate or inanimate in which the manner it is used or is intended to be used is known to be capable of producing death or serious injury."

2. Some have argued that "a firearm can be used to create fear of intimidation regardless of whether it is loaded or operable" (State v. Longley, 939 A.2d 1028 [Vt. 2007]), while others have argued that the weapon must be loaded and operable to be considered a "deadly weapon" (State v. Mustain, 675 P.2d 494 [1984]).

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armed self-defense poses distinctive legal risks; while self-defense with lethal force is legal in some circumstances, there are restrictions on the circumstances under which a gun can be exposed and fired. For example, consumers who display their guns to others may put themselves at risk of being arrested for brandishing a weapon.[3] Thus, consumers attempting to act responsibly must carefully consider laws and circumstances prior to drawing and firing in order to minimize their risk of being charged with illegal use (Hemenway, Azrael, and Miller 2000).

The possession and carry of guns for self-defense also poses risks to members of the public, as bystanders or persons mistaken for assailants may be injured or killed during acts of armed self-defense. Therefore, it is important to all Americans that these risks be effectively reduced. As a first step, this research examines how consumers attempt to mitigate risks posed by keeping, carrying, and using (i.e., drawing and firing) a handgun, the type of gun most often used for the purpose of self-defense (Cook and Goss 2014). Unlike previous work on gun owners, which has focused on the risk perceptions that motivate gun ownership (Kleck et al. 2011; Stroebe, Leander, and Kruglanski 2017), our research focuses on how gun owners manage risks posed *by* gun ownership for self-defense. Drawing on the concept of practices—routinized coordination of bodily activities, mental activities, materials, and background knowledge—as a means of understanding the social world (Reckwitz 2002), we ask: How do consumers use practices to mitigate risks they ascribe to keeping, carrying, and using a handgun for self-defense? In answering this question, we contribute a model of risk mitigation in risky consumption, illuminate the role of social norms and mental activities in routines which produce a sense of security from risks, and reveal the necessity of collaboration to the development of thorough understanding of how to mitigate risks in consumption experiences that include multiple people.

RISKY CONSUMPTION

We define risky consumption as consumption of products, services, or experiences that involve a nontrivial risk to consumers when used as intended. Risk can involve physical, psychological, legal, or moral harm. Examples of risky consumption include use of products such as automobiles, tobacco, alcohol, opioids, and firearms, as well as leisure activities such as rock climbing and skydiving. In any risky context that is experienced voluntarily, consumers typically seek to maintain some control over risks to themselves and others. Lyng (1990) refers to the work of maintaining control as *edgework* in that it allows an individual to walk the "edge" between desirable and undesirable states, such as life and death. Consumers attempt to limit risk in various ways, including by acquiring product information from experts and fellow consumers (O'Sullivan 2015) and mentally reviewing safety procedures prior to engaging in risky behaviors, such as skydiving (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993). Risk of injury or death can also be reduced by incorporating safety equipment, such as helmets, or training to use equipment in precise ways (Tetlow and Jenkins 2005). In the context of armed self-defense, we anticipate that equipment, training, and mental preparation likewise play a role in mitigating risks.

Consumers also mitigate risk by hiring expert risk managers. Much of the consumer behavior research on risky consumption investigates contexts in which the primary value provided to consumers is access to an expert, such as a mountaineering or rafting guide (Arnould and Price 1993; Tumbat and Belk 2011) or health-care professional (Thompson 2005; Wong and King 2008), who can identify and manage risk for the duration of the experience. This is not an option in armed self-defense and some other risky consumption contexts, such as driving a car. While consumers in such contexts can hire experts to provide training, ongoing product use typically does not occur within bounded times and spaces, which frame the market-managed, risky consumption experiences previously investigated. Rather, this form of risky consumption is likely to occur in a variety of times and spaces and in the absence of an expert risk manager, raising questions about how consumers manage risks independently across times and spaces.

Consumers may identify and attempt to mitigate risks that, according to objective measures, are unlikely, while ignoring risks with greater probability. Understandings of risk are shaped by ideology and culture more than by analysis of statistical probabilities (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982). Consumer research on health-care decision making and experiences has demonstrated that consumer communities culturally construct perceptions of risk (Thompson 2005), and these perceptions are shared in narratives that reflect American cultural values, such as personal agency, control, and survival (Wong and King 2008). Perceptions of risks that

3. Brandishing involves displaying a weapon in a threatening manner; "with reference to a dangerous weapon (including firearm) [brandished] means that all or part of the weapon was displayed, or the presence of the weapon was otherwise made known to another person, in order to intimidate that person, regardless of whether the weapon was directly visible to that person" (18 USCS Appx §1B1.1).

motivate gun ownership are also culturally constructed and share these cultural values. Ethnographic work has revealed ways that conceal-carry training instructors teach students to develop a mind-set of fear of being victimized by an assailant, and to offset that risk by carrying a handgun (Carlson 2015; Shapira 2017). In American culture more broadly, gun ownership by responsible individuals is generally regarded as a legally and morally acceptable response to risk of criminal victimization (Lott 2016; Light 2017). The notion of "responsible" ownership refers to taking steps to mitigate at least some associated risks, such as by taking training classes, obtaining permits, or securely storing firearms.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We conceptualize consumers' routine behaviors intended to mitigate risk as practices, and use theories of practice to organize our investigation of armed consumers' routines with their guns.

Practices

Theories of practice conceptualize social phenomena as a combination of practices—learned ways of understanding the world through routinized performance of activities that incorporate the body and configurations of material objects (Schatzki 1996; Warde 2005). Practices are physical and mental ways of knowing how to do something that entail practical, bodily maneuvering and discursive, mental operations (Reckwitz 2002). Developing a practice entails both physically learning to move the body in a particular way in relation to material objects and mentally ascribing meaning to, and justifications for, these movements by thinking and talking about how and why they are done. For instance, new drivers develop a practice of stopping a car at a red light both by talking with an instructor about what they should do and by becoming physically proficient at depressing the brake with appropriate force to smoothly bring the car to a stop.

Thus, knowing how and why to perform a practice entails two types of understanding—discursive and practical. We adopt the conceptualization of discursive understanding employed by Phipps and Ozanne (2017), who build on Giddens's notion of discursive consciousness (Giddens 1979) as the ability to rationally explain how and why something is done. Discursive understanding is reproduced in mental operations, talk, and text that are incorporated into or used to explain practices (Schatzki 2017). Practical understanding is embodied understanding that includes three components: "knowing how to X, knowing how to identify X-ings, and knowing how to prompt as well as respond to X-ings" (Schatzki 2002, 78). The first of these includes Polanyi's (1966) concept of tacit knowledge—embodied understanding of how to do something that is difficult or impossible to verbally explain, such as how to balance on a bicycle (Schatzki, Cetina, and von Savigny 2001), or in our example, how much pressure to apply to the brake pedal as you feel the car decelerating and the pedal's resistance against your foot. Tacit knowledge of how to perform a practice develops when a practitioner has repeated a practice enough to become competent and fluid at manipulating the body in ways required by the practice.

In this study, we investigate ways that consumers incorporate their bodies, guns, other material objects, other humans, and understandings into practices intended to mitigate risks of keeping, carrying, and using handguns for self-defense. We highlight consumers' discursive understanding of risks and their discursive and practical understandings of how to manipulate their bodies and guns in order to minimize these risks.

Consumer Practices and Risk

Researchers have yet to investigate the relationship between practices and risky consumption. However, consumer behavior research on practices provides relevant insights regarding feelings of stress and safety. Consumers can experience stress if practices are not coordinated properly in an activity (Woermann and Rokka 2015), and engaging in practices that reinforce the collaborative nature of consumption experiences can in some situations help consumers feel safe (Seregina and Weijo 2016). Further, when consumers' practices are shared, repetitive, and conventional, they can foster a sense of trust, security, and safety (Phipps and Ozanne 2017), indicating that such practices in armed self-defense might diminish consumers' sense of risk.

Other research indicates that practices may not facilitate actual safety. For instance, Epp, Schau, and Price (2014, 82) find that "people may morph practices in reaction to crises," suggesting that routines to minimize risk may unfold in unplanned ways in a stressful, self-defense situation. Further, practices are deeply embedded in everyday life and difficult to modify (Hargreaves 2011), indicating that individuals may be reluctant to adopt safe(r) practices if they have already established routines with their firearms.

In previously studied risky consumption experiences (e.g., Celsi et al. 1993; Tumbat and Belk 2011), risk-mitigating routines evolve within the temporal and spatial frames of

the experience. Once the activity is complete and the consumer is beyond its bounded time and space, they no longer face associated risks. The use of firearms for self-defense is not bounded in the same way. Thus, we give special consideration to how consumers of firearms for self-defense develop routines intended to mitigate risks across times and spaces.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Our study focuses on self-defense with a handgun, which is legally defined as a "firearm that has a short stock and is designed to be held and fired by the use of a single hand" (18 U.S. Code § 921a(29)(A)). Firearms, like automobiles and alcohol, are consumer products that are regulated by law (Kopel 2000). Federal law permits ownership of a handgun for self-defense (District of Columbia v. Heller, 554 U.S. 570 [2008]) and, in some instances, the use of lethal force against another person who poses a threat. However, state laws, which more specifically regulate gun ownership and usage, vary widely. Recent legislative changes expanding civilians' rights to carry a concealed handgun in public by obtaining a concealed handgun license (CHL) and to use lethal force (e.g., "stand your ground" laws) have been coupled with an increase in the number of Americans owning firearms for self-defense (Cook and Goss 2014; Light 2017).

Armed self-defense is a culturally sensitive issue, often constructed as a heated debate between "pro-gun" and "anti-gun" parties who seek to influence legislation and the ways Americans generally think about and use firearms (Rodengen 2002; Winkler 2011). The NRA and other organizations supporting gun ownership promote armed self-defense as both an individual right and a critical means of protecting one's self from a range of threats. Proponents maintain that undue restrictions on this right unfairly put law-abiding citizens at risk of being victimized by criminals (Lott 2016). Proponents of increased gun regulation argue that additional restrictions will enhance public safety (Huff et al. 2017).

The violent crime rate, including the rate of violent victimizations by strangers, has fallen in recent years as the number of Americans keeping and carrying guns for self-defense has increased, raising questions about motives for, and effects of, armed self-defense. Some insight is provided by studies showing that armed self-defense is motivated by a generalized belief that the world is a dangerous place (Stroebe et al. 2017), cultural conceptions of masculinity and independence (O'Neill 2007; Carlson 2015), and a perceived risk of being victimized (Kleck et al. 2011) rather than the statistical risk of being attacked (DeBrabander 2015; Stroebe et al. 2017). Armed self-defense training promotes fear of victimization, the need to have a gun, and the symbolism of a handgun and CHL as a "badge of integrity" and "exceptional responsibility" for law-abiding citizens (DeBrabander 2015; Shapira 2017). References to responsibility imply that these consumers work to reduce risks that their choice to engage in armed self-defense may pose. We explore how they use practices to mitigate these risks.

METHODS

The team consists of two authors who are current NRA members, one author who hunted regularly in her youth and has completed her state's CHL training requirement, and one author who has never owned or fired a gun. We conducted a multi-sited ethnography (Kjeldgaard, Csaba, and Ger 2006) over the course of 24 months to examine the complexities of armed self-defense in America using data from a variety of sites and sources (Corbin and Strauss 1990; Falzon 2016).

Participant Observation

We engaged in participant observation at places where handguns and users are present. Each author attended gun trade shows, which were sampled purposively for number of attendees. We attended one regional show, one statewide show, and the national NRA annual meeting and convention. At each, we interacted with attendees and vendors to ascertain their recommendations of defensive handguns and holsters; when, where, and how to store and carry a handgun; the appropriateness and usefulness of self-defense training; and when and how a gun should be used. Two authors also participated in target shooting at a range and engaged socially with range members. We observed safety practices and explicit safety rules of the shooting range. Brief as well as lengthy interactions with informants were valuable for gaining insights (Bradford and Sherry 2015) into how and why guns should be used. Our data set consists of 32 single-spaced pages of field notes, 184 photographs of vendors and products, 22 pages of CHL training course materials, and printed materials, including magazines and brochures. More details are provided in table 1.

Observation of Online Discussion Forums

We engaged in observation of online discussion forums dedicated to defensive handgun usage. Online consumer discussions can yield insights into consumer behavior in contexts that are culturally sensitive because informants

Table 1. Participant Observation Data

Site	Observations
Regional gun trade show (attended by 2 authors)	• approx. 150 consumers and 30 vendors for 2 hours • field interviews (informal interactions of 5 minutes or longer) with 5 attendees
Statewide gun trade show (attended by 3 authors)	• approx. 300 consumers and 140 vendors for 3 hours • field interviews with 6 attendees
NRA annual meeting (national convention; attended by 2 authors)	• approx. 500 consumers and 50 vendors for 17 hours over 2 days • threat assessment and preparation seminar
NRA membership (2 authors are current members)	• 13 months of e-mail and letter mail, including: marketing materials relating to self-defense insurance, life insurance, co-branded credit cards, magazine subscriptions, and continued NRA membership • magazines: *American Rifleman* and *America's 1st Freedom* • political mailers, including surveys, requests for donations, newsletters, advertisements for political events
Concealed handgun license (CHL) training (completed by 1 author)	• full curriculum necessary to obtain a license, including certification examination
Shooting range (attended by 2 authors)	• observed shooting range members Andy, Dan, and Tammy[a] shoot multiple types of firearms at targets for 90 minutes • 1 author participated

[a] Pseudonyms have been used for the names of informants.

may feel more comfortable sharing opinions on contentious topics through a medium that affords anonymity (Huff 2011). For 12 months, we monitored consumer discussion on four websites that we selected based on three criteria: national scope, a primary purpose of facilitating consumer-to-consumer discussion, and substantial daily activity on discussion boards. Under the guidance of one author, a research assistant cataloged posts from 88 discussions related to storing, carrying, drawing, or firing a handgun in self-defense. Refer to table 2 for details.

Consumer Interviews

To gain more detailed descriptions and explanations of risks and ways to address them than a cross section of online comments and participant observation at gun shows allowed, the first two authors conducted 11 interviews with handgun owners. These informants were sampled purposively for variation in gender, household composition, ethnic identity, and military and law enforcement experience. Table 3 presents profiles of our interview informants. We conducted most of these interviews in Texas, where gun ownership is common, and at a time when a controversial new law was taking effect (permitting licensed handgun carry on public university campuses). Thus, our informants' experiences, practices, and opinions about firearms were likely salient. Nine were in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in-person with two authors present. Three of these, along with two phenomenological interviews conducted by one author, were conducted in informants' homes, where informants showed their firearms and related items such as ammunition reloading equipment, self-defense-themed magazines, CHLs, and paper targets from the shooting range.

All interviews began with a grand tour question (McCracken 1988) about informants' first experiences with guns. As the interviews progressed, we incorporated probes about responsibilities associated with gun ownership and use for self-defense, how the informant uses guns, how guns should be used, and motivations associated with those behaviors. Follow-up questions requested further explanation of the risks that "responsible gun ownership/use" addresses. Interviews lasted about 90 minutes. During these interviews, informants showed the interviewer their guns, peripheral products, and home storage locations. Detailed, contemporaneous notes were taken after each of these interviews, and the nine semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded

Table 2. Online Discussion Forum Data

Forums	Observations
Forum 1: armed self-defense forum	Monitored 1,022 threads on self-defense tactics and weapons
Forum 2: conceal carry forum	Monitored 1,588 threads on concealed carry
Forum 3: armed self-defense forum	Monitored 143 threads on concealed carry, 277 threads on home defense, 146 threads on tactical training and scenarios
Forum 4: conceal carry forum	Monitored 4,126 threads on conceal carry

and transcribed. In sum, the interview data set comprises 296 pages of transcripts and notes.

Additionally, the data set includes published materials gathered at gun shows and from informants, including a concealed handgun focused magazine, books and pamphlets on laws related to concealed carry, promotional materials from gun vendors and political organizations, and 22 pages of text that constitute the state-required CHL training course completed by one of the authors.

Data Analysis

Analysis occurred throughout and subsequent to data collection. The first two authors read field notes, online discussions, and transcripts individually, and used open coding to identify themes in the data (Charmaz 2006). Themes included the bodily activities, mental activities, materials, and background knowledge that comprise practices (Epp et al. 2014). We discussed and agreed on codes and then tacked iteratively between the data and literature (Corbin and Strauss 1990) on risky consumption, firearms, and theories of practice. We then refined the analysis using axial codes and constant comparisons between codes (Corbin and Strauss 1990; Falzon 2016). These codes specified properties and dimensions of three different ways informants and online contributors use routines to mitigate risk. We then aggregated these codes and used selective coding to develop a model that encompassed the stable features of these routines (e.g., Woermann and Rokka 2015) and a more sophisticated interpretation (Charmaz 2006) of the bodily activities, practical understandings, and discursive understandings that are incorporated in each. Emergent findings were shared intermittently with the third and fourth authors, who facilitated and challenged the interpretation. The interpretation was further refined as we sought negative cases in online data and engaged in member checks (Bradford and Sherry 2015).

FINDINGS

We find that consumers who keep and carry handguns for self-defense (hereafter, *defenders*) attempt to mitigate risks in three routinized ways: *readiness practices*, *simulated self-defense scenario practices*, and *mentally rehearsed self-defense scenarios*. We depict these three ways of mitigating risk in figure 1 as concentric circles around a white center. Here we provide a brief overview of the figure before explaining our findings in more detail.

The three ways of mitigating risk are performed in routinized, consistent patterns, which we illustrate with clockwise-pointing arrowheads within each circle. Around the outside of the circles, we identify four elements of practices: bodily activities, practical understanding, discursive understanding of how to do a practice, and discursive understanding of why the practice is done, which we label discursive understanding of risks as appropriate for our study of risk mitigation. Defenders explain that they engage in these routines in order to address particular risks associated with armed self-defense. We characterize each of the four elements of practice for each way of mitigating risk within four large arrows. The arrows point toward the center of the circle to indicate that defenders anticipate that the activities and understandings of these routines will prepare them for an act of actual armed self-defense, their intended use of this consumer product.

The white center of the figure represents an absence of what we conceptualize as actual practices: those performed when repeatedly consuming the same experience or using a product for its intended use. For instance, we would classify practices performed during repeated skydiving experiences

or when driving a car repeatedly as actual practices. In the context of armed self-defense, actual practices would include routinized ways of incorporating one's body and gun when using it to defend against an actual assailant. Unlike specialized law enforcement, such as SWAT officers, defenders cannot develop actual practices of armed self-defense because they do not routinely encounter actual assailants.

Finally, we depict the development of practical understandings with solid, curved arrows from bodily activities to these understandings. These appear within the circles representing readiness and simulated scenario practices, because practical understanding, including tacit knowledge, is developed by repeatedly incorporating bodily activities with other materials and people in these practices. We include dotted arrows within the circles representing mental rehearsals and the absence of actual practices because their lack of bodily activities prohibits development of practical understanding.

Discursive Understanding of Risks

As shown in the top left arrow of figure 1, each of the ways of mitigating risks incorporates discursive understanding of the particular risks the routines are intended to mitigate. Consistent with research on perceptions of risks that motivate handgun ownership (Carlson 2015; Stroebe et al. 2017), we find that defenders conceptualize risks posed by keeping, carrying, and using a gun for self-defense as specific negative outcomes, irrespective of likelihood. Many provide explicit descriptions of negative outcomes that will occur if they fail to act appropriately. For instance, a contributor to an online forum describes the negative consequences of shooting someone you deem threatening, even if doing so is in accordance with the law:

> Realize that you will get taken into custody and you will go through the legal system. You better immediately spend some money on a lawyer (several thousand dollars) to protect yourself. . . . It will impact your personal life forever. You may lose a lot of money, your job, friends, family members, your mental health, and possibly your freedom. (Forum 2)

Risks described in the data vary widely and include: consequences of mentally or physically failing to operate the gun properly, firing inaccurately, a child or criminal gaining access to the firearm, and legal and financial consequences. Few defenders discuss likelihoods, with many describing outcomes as an inevitable result of failing to take action to avoid them. For instance, an online contributor warns that if you don't educate yourself about New York gun laws before you travel there with your gun, "you will get arrested . . . you will be charged with a felony and spend 3.5 years (mandatory minimum) in jail" (Forum 4). We find substantial discussion and consistency in understandings of the nature of some of these risks, indicating that some are socially constructed and reinforced. One discussion thread entitled "the official bathroom thread" contained over 400 posts related to specific risks associated with carrying in a public restroom, such as having your gun taken from you while your hands are otherwise occupied.

Discursive understanding of risks is incorporated into practices and mental rehearsals in that it both guides the routine and is developed and reinforced by performance of the routine. Many male contributors to the bathroom thread mentioned that they did not become aware of the associated risks until they actually used a public bathroom while carrying their gun. Several mentioned that their new understanding of risks led them to change their practices such that they now forgo the urinal and use stalls, with some also switching to a more secure holster or temporarily placing their guns in a difficult to access location within the stall.

Readiness Practices

The outer circle of the figure represents practices that defenders enact with their guns to enhance their readiness for armed self-defense, but which occur in contexts that do not include defensive actions against a real, simulated, or imagined assailant. We label such practices *readiness practices*. Examples include cleaning or storing one's gun at home and target shooting at a gun range. As shown within the arrow of bodily activities in the figure, readiness practices incorporate bodily activities and one's gun, but not in relation to an assailant. Defenders engage in various readiness practices in an effort to avoid a variety of risks associated with keeping, manipulating, or firing a handgun. For instance, an online contributor with small children describes how he mitigates the risk of child access without hindering his readiness to defend his family by routinizing the way he stores his guns. Each night, when sleeping, he keeps guns close to his bed. In the morning, he returns them to locations he deems inaccessible to children:

> Personally, I put my pistol on my nightstand and my shotgun next to the bed EVERY night as I get in bed. All the other guns are locked in safes. In the morning, I lock the shotgun back in the safe, the handgun goes

Table 3. Interview Informant Profiles

Informant pseudonym	Age and family status	Gender and ethnic identity	Education and occupation	Geographic profile	Political affiliation	Handgun ownership and CHL status	Experience with guns	Current self-defense behaviors
Antonio	38 yrs, married, no children	Identifies as Turkish-American male	Bachelor degree; engineer	Grew up in suburban California; lives in urban Texas	Democrat	Owns three handguns; has CHL	Began using guns as a young adult; has taken group armed self-defense training classes	Carries occasionally
Arman	36 yrs, married with two small children	Identifies as Iranian-American male	Bachelor degree; information technology analyst	Grew up in urban Texas; lives in suburban Texas	Republican	Owns two handguns; has CHL	Began using guns as a young adult; has taken group and private armed self-defense training classes	Carries regularly; trains at shooting range; active in online discussion forums; NRA member
Carl	71 yrs, married with grown children	Identifies as white male	Bachelor degree; retired Marine	Grew up in small town Oregon; lives in suburban Texas	Republican	Owns several handguns; has CHL	Began using guns in childhood; extensive firearms training in armed forces career	Does not carry handgun regularly; regularly practices at shooting range; subscribes to handgun and gun owner magazines
Carol[a]	67 yrs, married, grown children	Identifies as white female	Bachelor degree; retired flight attendant	Grew up in suburban Texas; lives in suburban Texas	Independent	Owns a handgun; has CHL	Began using guns as an adult	Does not carry
Chuck	62 yrs, married, grown children	Identifies as white male	Some college; plant manager	Grew up in suburban Kansas; lives in suburban Kansas	Republican	Owns multiple handguns; has CHL	Began using guns in childhood; collector of various types of gun	Carries occasionally; NRA member

Dave	46 yrs, married, three children	Identifies as white male	Bachelor degree; police officer	Grew up in suburban Texas; lives in urban Texas	None	Owns several handguns; does not need CHL due to status as police officer	Began using guns in childhood; extensive firearms training in law enforcement career	Carries regularly; trains regularly with police department
James[a]	81 yrs, married, grown children	Identifies as white male	Bachelor degree; retired Air Force	Grew up in rural Illinois; lives in suburban Texas	Republican	Owns 2 handguns; has CHL	Began using guns as a young adult; did extensive firearms training in military career	Carries regularly
Joe	45 yrs, divorced, no children	Identifies as white male	Some college; unemployed	Grew up in rural California; lives in urban Texas	None	Owns one handgun; does not have CHL	Began using guns in childhood; has been shot with handgun by neighbor	Does not carry; does not train
Rodrigo	42 yrs, married, two small children	Identifies as Hispanic male	Associate degree; police officer	Grew up in suburban Texas; lives in urban Texas	None	Owns several handguns; does not need CHL due to status as police officer	Began using guns in childhood; extensive firearms training in law enforcement career	Carries regularly; trains regularly with police department
Shelly	40 yrs, married with two small children	Identifies as white female	Medical degree; physician	Grew up in urban New York, lives in urban Texas	Democrat	Owns one handgun; does not have CHL	Began using guns after children were born	Does not carry; does not train regularly
Tamara	49 yrs, married, no children	Identifies as African American female	Bachelor degree; retired from law enforcement; manager	Grew up in suburban Texas; lives in urban Texas	Democrat	Owns one handgun; has CHL	Began using guns as a young adult; did extensive firearms training in law enforcement	Carries regularly; trains regularly at shooting range

Note.—Some profile characteristics have been modified to conceal informant identity.

[a] Phenomenological interview informant.

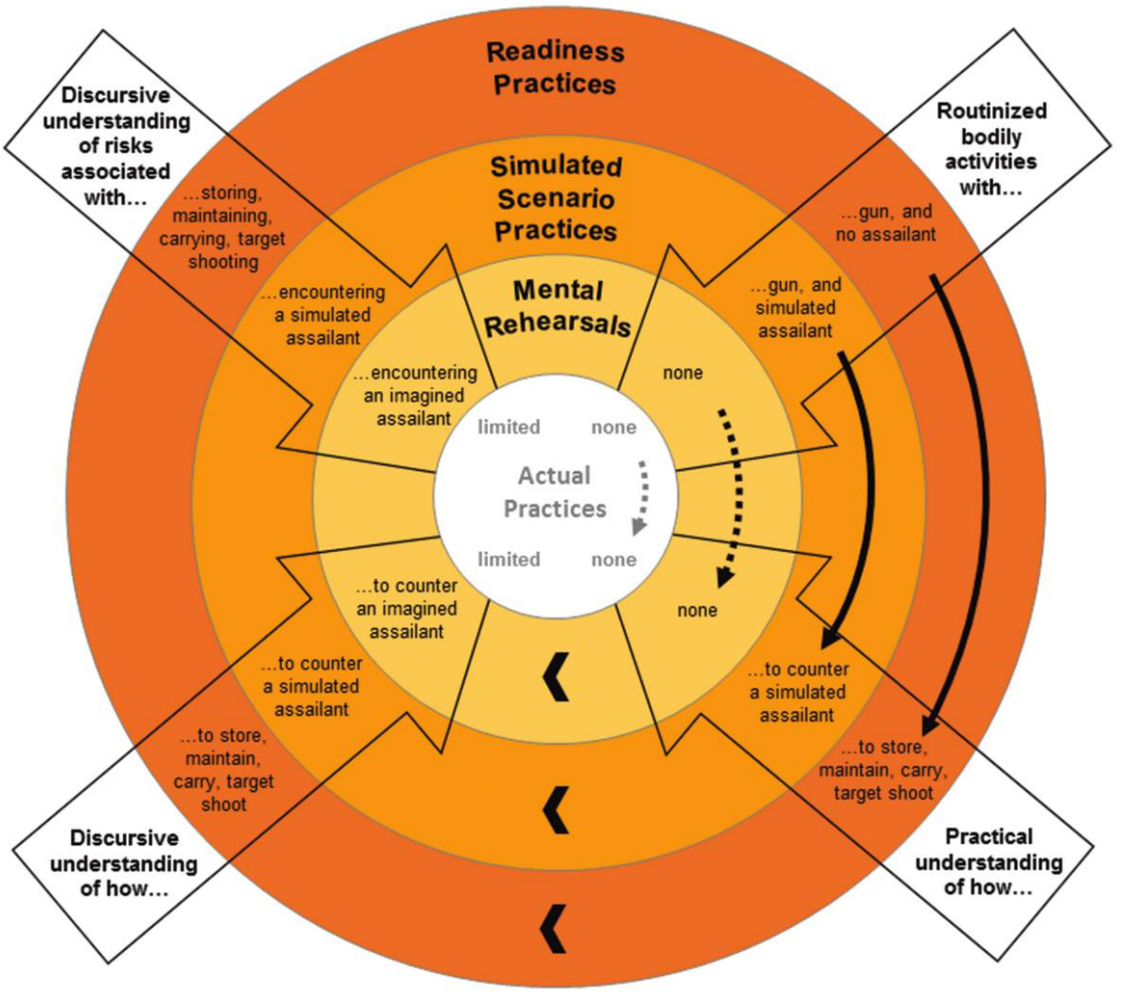

Figure 1. Routinized ways of mitigating risk in armed self-defense.

> on my belt when I get dressed . . . [the guns] I will use to protect [the] kids if necessary have to be accessible. My habits assure this. (Forum 1)

Other readiness practices, such as target shooting, enable defenders to mitigate risks associated with lack of proficiency with their guns. Our data include multiple references to the importance of repetitive practice and training to develop excellent technical skills with firearms. Most informants mentioned practicing at a firing range to mitigate risks of firing inaccurately and of their gun malfunctioning because they have not ensured it is in good working order.

Readiness practices may include other people, such as fellow target shooters at a gun range, and additional material objects, such as safes or ammunition. By repeatedly incorporating their bodies, understandings, and the gun and peripheral objects into an embodied, routinized practice, defenders develop practical understanding of how to perform the practice in ways that reduce risks. We depict the development of practical understanding of readiness practices through repeated performance of bodily activities as a solid, curved arrow in the figure. In talking and thinking about possible risks and how to avoid them, defenders also develop and reproduce discursive understanding of risks and how to perform risk-mitigating practices. These discursive understandings in readiness practices are shown in the figure in the top and bottom left of the circle representing these practices. Both discursive and practical understandings inform the continuation of the practice. Additional examples form the data describing readiness practices, as well

as simulated scenario practices, mental rehearsals, and the risks each are intended to prevent, are shown in table 4.

We find that some readiness practices performed with others are governed by strong social norms. For example, shooters at a range engage in highly normative bodily behaviors and vocalizations to coordinate inanimate targets, guns, ammunition, and other people. During our observation at a range, Andy announced that he was "going down range" to place targets, an expression which other shooters understand as a directive to set their guns down with muzzles pointing away from other people. The guns were not touched again until Andy verbally announced "all-clear." Such normative practices are fostered by posted rules of the range and expectations of other shooters. Further, they provide human actors authority in correcting those who behave in alternative, less safe ways. For instance, later during our observation, Dan said that he was "going down range." Andy, who was holding his gun at the firing line and explaining some of its features to one of the authors, did not immediately put his gun down, continuing his explanation. After a few seconds, Dan repeated in a more emphatic, slightly irritated voice, "going down range!" Andy quickly concluded his explanation and lay the gun down. The 65-year-old site of our participant observation maintained a perfect record of avoiding accidental shootings, providing evidence of the effectiveness of these socially normative practices in reducing risk.

Other readiness practices, such as storing one's handgun in a locked safe, are advocated by some experts but are not normal across informants, even as some acknowledge them as appropriate. The CHL training materials in our data remind trainees that they "could be held criminally responsible and/or civilly liable for any damage or injury that occurs as a result of the misuse or abuse of your firearm. The most secure way to store your firearm is in a quality constructed gun safe" (http://oregonchl.org). Safes designed for quick access in self-defense situations are readily available in the marketplace. However, we find wide variation in defenders' storage practices, with some consistently storing handguns unloaded in a quick access safe with ammunition stored in a separate location, some occasionally locking them in a safe but typically storing loaded handguns in a bedside table, and still others forgoing a safe altogether. Some who did the latter acknowledged their "embarrassment" (Antonio) at not consistently storing in a safe, indicating at least moderate social normativity of doing so even as the private nature of the practice allows defenders to challenge the norm without regular reproach.

Further, we observe little normativity and wide variation in carrying practices among defenders. Choice of where to place one's gun when carrying varied from pants pocket, to purses, backpacks, and a range of holsters. Observations at gun shows revealed a multiplicity of holsters including: under a vehicle's steering wheel, concealed under shirts or pant legs, and in a garter or bra. The very few carrying behaviors we find to be consistent, such as carry without imprinting (showing the outline of one's concealed gun on a garment), are sometimes required by law, and even some legally regulated behaviors vary between informants. For example, while most purported a good understanding of their state's prohibition on consuming alcohol when carrying a concealed weapon, James, who carries regularly, mentions that, in spite of the law, he does not hesitate to have a glass of wine when dining at a restaurant.

In sum, readiness practices incorporate bodily activities, practical understanding, discursive understanding of how to do them, and discursive understanding of the risks the practices are intended to mitigate. Some are governed by strong social norms, and we find evidence that highly normative practices effectively mitigate associated risks. We find that readiness practices that are not performed with others, such as storing and carrying, are not governed by strong norms.

Simulated Scenario Practices

Defenders develop and enact simulated self-defense scenario practices in order to mitigate risks associated with having and using a gun in an encounter with an assailant. Risks described by defenders include drawing the assailant's fire by prematurely revealing or clumsily drawing one's gun, inadvertently shooting oneself or a bystander, an unarmed assailant taking your own gun from you, and shooting someone after unnecessarily escalating a situation, among others. Like readiness practices, scenario practices involve routinized physical and mental coordination. Unlike an actual act of self-defense, which could occur anywhere at anytime, simulated scenario practices occur in temporally and spatially defined contexts—usually in training classes—where scripted self-defensive situations are presented. These scenario practices involve physical manipulation of the defender's gun and body in defensive response to simulated assailants in the form of actors, digital images on a screen, or inanimate targets. Many defenders describe taking elective armed self-defense training courses, where scenarios vary in the legality and appropriateness of the defender drawing and firing, inclusion of stress-inducing factors (e.g., limited visibility), and complexity

Table 4. Supporting Examples of Discursive Understandings of Risks and How to Mitigate Them

Risk	How to mitigate risk	Supporting examples from data
Readiness practices:		
Being arrested for breaking regulations or laws when traveling with a firearm	Become and remain informed about regulations and laws in locations, cities, states; avoid states with strict gun laws	In a discussion about the importance of knowing specific state laws and air travel regulations when traveling with a firearm: "Understand the complexities involved and protect yourself from unintentional consequences. Understand that you cannot take possession of a handgun in a state that requires a license for *possession*, such as New York. This means if you have a connection at JFK, for example, and miss your flight and are forced to stay overnight, you cannot pick up your checked luggage with the firearm. You will get arrested the next morning while trying to check-in your firearm. You will be charged with a felony and spend 3.5 years (mandatory minimum) in jail. Avoid traveling through states with such gun laws." (Forum 4)
Unintentionally shooting a proximal other	Keep finger off trigger until ready to fire	"If you keep your booger hook off the bang switch [keep finger off trigger], you will be somewhat safe. . . . We see it all the time with people (including a lot of cops) having negligent discharges [pulling trigger when it should not be pulled]." (Forum 2)
Being held accountable for another person's criminal actions if firearm is stolen	Lock firearm in a safe	"I keep these [pistols] locked up in a safe because, I don't know whether this is national, but in Texas, if someone breaks into your house and takes your weapon and uses it in a crime, then you're as guilty as they are." (Carl)
Inciting fear or anger in others	Ensure firearm is not visible when carrying in public	"As I was [in the public] restroom, I looked at my weapon in [its] holster, laying on my pants, and wondered, if the anti-gun nut the next stall over sees [my gun], what problems could it cause me? What things could I do to mitigate them or even prevent them? . . . What I have decided to do is 1) always use the handicapped stall because it has a rail above the tissue dispenser. 2) After securing the door, I withdraw the weapon from the holster and lay it upside down on the paper dispenser. . . . In this day and age, I can even see someone in the next stall to me seeing this weapon and trying to snag it from me, having caught me with my pants down." (Forum 2)
Simulated scenario practices:		
Giving an assailant reason and time to inflict harm	Train to draw from any position and discreetly if needed	"A concealed carry holster has to be accessible under as many different possibilities as you find in your daily life. It should not announce that you are carrying under any circumstance. . . . I have practiced with a number of holsters in every position I can get into and the shoulder holster is the best for me. I can access it in any position other than laying on it and I can make the draw look like I am going for a cigarette." (Forum 1)
Being targeted by a criminal because one is armed	Carry discreetly	"I've seen a good number of people carry open, other than police or armored car guards. They immediately attract my attention! If I'm carrying for defense, I sure don't want to let a real bad guy know I have a gun until it's too late for him!" (Forum 1)
Mental rehearsals:		
Unnecessarily escalating an encounter with potential assailant	Walk away from potential assailant, even when angered or provoked	"As a confrontation develops, you always should try to de-escalate it IF POSSIBLE. The first de-escalation step is to STOP TALKING. Let the other person talk. When he/she is finished talking, as long as they are just talking, I would apologize. It is a lot easier apologizing even when you don't mean it than it is to fill out the paperwork at the police station explaining why you shot somebody." (Forum 4)

Unnecessarily escalating an encounter with potential assailant	Carefully consider the context before reacting	"[In the military] the concept of engagement was the utmost . . . really very detailed . . . I was trained in such a way in the service, and I take it into my daily life, that you don't just react . . . there are conversation points and things that you do to assess the situation . . . take in the whole scenario before you react." (Tamara)
Emotional and psychological trauma from taking someone's life	Carefully consider your moral stance and responsibilities before deciding to carry	"Everything is a step that needs to come before a gun comes out of its holster. There is practically zero reason to be drawing a gun, ever. That is a responsible gun owner talking. That is someone who has gone through training talking. . . . This is a thinking person that knows, or at least I would like to think I know the implications about what this actually is. This is a deadly weapon, period. . . . You pull that gun out, it is to stop that individual's heart from beating. That's a terrifying thought. This is ending a person." (Antonio)
Not being mentally prepared to take a life if necessary	Visualize situations that warrant use of deadly force	In a discussion about tactical scenarios for "when the SHTF" [shit hits the fan] in a concert venue: "You have to put distance between yourself and the potential source or target of the attack . . . [I would] move away from the center of the crowd, find the closest exit and keep moving. If there is gunfire outside, move at right angles to the source of it and seek cover. If possible, find cover that gives you the option of quickly running further away to put more distance between you and the BG [bad guy]. Do not enter another building or cover where you are boxed in. Only enter your car if you are a safe distance from the gun fire and no one is chasing you. If you are being chased, become the aggressor as soon as possible. Find cover and return fire, and remember, 'when in danger or in doubt, shoot down all who move about' LOL!" (Forum 3)
Killing someone, or being killed, because you unnecessarily escalated a situation	Visualize circumstances in which one shouldn't use a gun	On a discussion thread where original poster asked if he should use deadly force if he caught someone in the act of stealing his GPS from his car: "I'd really think twice about that line of reasoning [using deadly force] if I were you. You haven't any idea who that person is and how desperate they are to take your stuff. At the low end, they may run away as soon as you turn on the bedroom light. At the high end, they just might open fire as soon as you walk out the door. Do you want to bleed out on your front lawn over a GPS? . . . Nothing I own is worth killing another human being over." (Forum 4)
Making police feel threatened after shooting an assailant	Calm yourself, remove gun from hand	After calling 911, you need to "learn how to 'settle down' real fast. . . . You'll probably be so nervous that you couldn't pick your nose if you had to . . . either re-holster your pistol or lay it down (if in your home), and don't have your hands anywhere near it when the cops arrive. Remember, they are responding to an active shooter call. Anyone with a gun is a potential target!" (Forum 1)
Being convicted of a crime after shooting an assailant	Remain silent until your lawyer arrives, even if shooting was justified	"Just a friendly reminder . . . if, God forbid, you're ever involved in a self-defense shooting, do NOT answer any questions the [police] may be asking you until your lawyer is sitting next to you. You may think you're helping in the investigation, but . . . don't chance it. Most likely you'll go downtown [to police station] anyways, so just wait a while longer for your lawyer to get there. It could mean the difference between being a free man and 30 to life." (Forum 1)

Note.—In our presentation of online data, minor spelling and grammatical corrections have been made to improve readability.

(Carlson 2015; Shapira 2017). Some engage in simulated scenarios in other settings, such as at a range or at home. An online contributor describes a practice of "creating space" between himself and a simulated assailant, noting the risk of an assailant forcibly taking his gun as one justification for the practice. He performs this practice at home, where he can combine material objects into a heavier, more "realistic" simulated assailant than is available at the range:

> Some of us are lucky enough to have a range that allows us to shoot from retention [close quarters with assailant] and move around, but can you REALISTICALLY snap a strike out to your target that is likely just a piece of paper with possibly a thin piece of plywood or cardboard backer? The reason I emphasize REALISTICALLY is because I'm guessing most students that have done some force-on-force training understand the type of force it can take to create space between you and a realistic attacker trying to hurt you or get your gun. Believe it or not, if you haven't experienced this, it's not always easy to clear your garment, and draw a weapon with a positive grip from concealment while simultaneously trying to make a strong strike to create space. Personally, some of my most valuable close quarter and retention practice/training comes from inside my home. My materials (outside of my standard carry gear and snap caps) include a heavy bag, an old long sleeve shirt filled with some old clothes hung up on a hanger, and some gloves attached to the end of the sleeves. (Forum 2)

When explaining why they engage in simulations, defenders stress the need to develop muscle memory for the sequence of bodily behaviors involved in drawing and firing so that they can rely on "instinct" when they encounter an assailant in real life. Arman, who trains in a mock bedroom to rapidly access, load, draw, and fire at a home intruder, explains: "When the shit hits the fan, you rely on instincts; I don't think you can train for every situation. What you do is train a lot until handling your weapon is akin to instinct, you practice and practice until your tool is like an extension of you." An online contributor warns, "in an emergency, individuals do not rise to the occasion, they fall to the level of their mastered training" (Forum 4). Explanations and warnings such as these emphasize the importance that defenders place on possessing the tacit, embodied knowledge required for practical understanding in these practices. We note that the simulated scenarios described in our data devote little attention to how to determine if someone poses a threat. Unlike actual assailants, simulated assailants tend to present unambiguously (Carlson 2015). Instead, these scenarios focus on the defender's response to a readily identified assailant presenting himself, and defenders develop practices to respond rapidly and adeptly to that assailant.

We find striking consistency in forms and contexts of assailants in simulated scenarios. Specific scenarios frequently recur across data from online discussion participants, gun show vendors, and interview informants. Defenders often mentioned being introduced to scenarios in training courses or videos, which we contend contribute substantially to the social construction of assailants. Examples include two home invaders who come in the middle of the night, a suspicious person approaching in a dark parking lot, and a mentally disturbed mass shooter in a public place. Despite this consistency, we observe considerable variety in defenders' rehearsed and recommended responses.

While defenders explain that they engage in simulated scenario practices in order to mitigate risks of having and using a gun in an encounter with an actual assailant, their discursive understanding of these risks is limited to those they simulate in encounters with socially constructed, relatively unambiguous and predictable assailants in their respective contexts. Further, these simulations occur in bounded times and spaces in which consumers are expecting an encounter. In repeatedly coordinating bodily activities and their guns into these practices, consumers develop discursive and practical understandings of how to mitigate risks when encountering an obvious, predictable assailant in a bounded time and space. The bodily activities, practical understandings, and discursive understandings incorporated in simulated scenario practices are shown in the respective circle in the figure. The limited discursive understandings of risks and ways to mitigate them in actual self-defense situations are indicated in the white center.

Mentally Rehearsed Scenarios

Mentally rehearsed scenarios are routine mental operations that, like simulated scenario practices, are intended to mitigate risks associated with having and using a gun against an assailant. However, mentally rehearsed scenarios are not practices in that they do not include bodily activities. While our research question focuses on practices, we include these mental rehearsals in our findings because they emerged from the data as important, routinized ways that

defenders attempt to mitigate risk. In mentally rehearsed scenarios, defenders construct imagined self-defense situations and develop mental routines for responding to them. The CHL training materials in our data include several written scenarios for students to consider, and interview informants describe the inclusion of imagining scenarios in their own CHL training, indicating that imagining scenarios is common in defenders' socialization to armed self-defense. It is impossible for defenders to train for every situation; the places, times, contextual factors, and variety of actors involved are too numerous and varied for training courses to cover. Thus, they use mental rehearsals in an effort to reduce their risks in a greater variety of situations.

Chuck describes mentally rehearsing how he would minimize his risk of drawing the fire of an assailant who starts shooting in a retail outlet. Based on guidance from his self-defense instructor, he would "probably hide in the dressing room like everybody else. Unless I could come up behind him and shoot him in the back. I'm not going to stand out there at high noon and have a contest. . . . The only way I would get involved [draw and fire at shooter] is if I was pretty sure I was going to come out the victor." Importantly, these are not instances of defenders extemporaneously explaining how they would respond. These are descriptions of the routine mental activities they perform in order to manage risks associated with armed self-defense. Informants regularly emphasize the importance of such routinized mental preparation, including staying mentally prepared to take a human life. One defender posts, "no matter where you are, it's good practice to visualize a threat or emergency, and figure out what you would do—right then. The more scenarios you practice, the more mentally prepared you will be for the 'real deal'" (Forum 4).

Some informants couple readiness practices with mental rehearsals prior to entering times or spaces in which they feel particularly vulnerable to attack. At the behest of her husband, Shelly keeps a handgun in a safe beside her bed to protect herself and her children when he is away. She has developed a readiness practice of fluidly opening the safe, which she performs repeatedly before he leaves. She couples this practice with mental rehearsals of how she would scare an intruder rather than shoot them, thus minimizing her risk of emotional trauma: "It would be really hard to shoot somebody, but. . . . If somebody's coming up the stairs, I would shoot at them. I probably wouldn't shoot them, but I'd just shoot until they were terrified. I honestly think if you charge a Glock, that sound is pretty [distinct and] I hope that would be enough of a deterrent.

As defenders mentally rehearse scenarios, they develop and reproduce discursive understandings of risks of having and using a gun against an assailant. Because these mental rehearsals involve no bodily activities, defenders do not develop practical understanding of the actions they imagine. Defenders assume comfort and proficiency with their firearm, expecting to depend on muscle memory or "instinct" in the stressful situations they imagine. We note that like simulated scenario practices, mental rehearsals center around a contrived, obvious assailant who is predictable by nature, as his form and behavior are limited by the defender's imagination.

Despite consistency in forms and contexts of assailants in mental rehearsals, we find little normativity in imagined responses to these assailants. Some defenders imagine engaging in extensive efforts to de-escalate a situation before drawing their guns. Others visualize drawing as a means of intimidation as soon as they feel threatened. Still others envision an immediate, lethal response to anyone deemed overtly threatening.

Lack of Normativity in Responses to Actual Assailants

We find a similar lack of normativity in how to respond to actual assailants. While defenders in our data set, like the vast majority of Americans, do not encounter actual assailants regularly enough to develop actual armed self-defense practices, a few had done so once or more. When these encounters are relayed in online forums, discussion reveals wide variation in understandings of how the defender should respond. In a notable example, an online contributor shares video footage of a road-rage incident in which an angry driver approaches the vehicle of a "good guy," who exits his vehicle and is physically assaulted by the "bad guy." The poster asks, should the good guy have drawn his firearm to protect himself? Discussion includes 151 comments in a heated debate over what the good guy should have done. Suggestions include support for his decisions, "[getting out of the car and beaten] was for the sake of his family in the car. . . . Rambo movies are great but in real life it does not work like that. . . . There are times when having a gun won't help you" (Forum 4). Others suggest de-escalation: "this is a case where your cell phone [to call police] is going to be more valuable than your gun." Some advise "the best option was to show the gun while the assailant was walking up," which was countered by others citing legal and physical risks of that response: "once you show your gun, you applied lethal force without justification," a sarcastic "good luck with that jury," and "once

you show your gun . . . the [bad guy] has a right to self-defense."

We find that even some defensive behaviors regulated by law lack strong social normativity, as defenders at times proudly report using their firearms in unlawful ways. A gun show vendor recommended a handgun with a red laser sight and shared her story of persuading an aggressive salesman to leave her property by pointing her gun, with laser on, at his torso, so he understood "[I] mean business because that's exactly where this bullet is going to go." Police officer Rodrigo shared that, while off duty, he drew his handgun on a panhandler who approached his car. Given the circumstances described and their respective state laws, these informants' actions were illegal. However, their tone in relaying their accounts suggests a lack of social stigma for these unlawful behaviors.

DISCUSSION

Our study of consumers' ways of mitigating risks posed by keeping and using a handgun for self-defense delivers three contributions. First, in mapping the ways they attempt to mitigate risks, and the understandings and activities that correspond with those ways, we contribute a model of risk mitigation to literature on risky consumption. We identify three routinized ways defenders attempt to mitigate risks—readiness practices, simulated scenario practices, and mentally rehearsed scenarios—and we conceptualize a fourth way that is absent in this context, actual practices. We define actual practices as those developed when repeatedly consuming the same experience or using a product for its intended use, and we argue that actual practices cannot be developed in armed self-defense. Our model provides insight into how consumers can mitigate risks in other risky consumption contexts. Skydivers, for example, are able to reduce risks by developing readiness practices (e.g., properly maintaining equipment), simulated scenario practices (e.g., classroom training), and mental rehearsals (e.g., repeatedly envisioning a response to unpredicted wind gusts). Further, unlike defenders, skydivers can develop actual practices during repeated skydives.

Second, building on Phipps and Ozanne's (2017) work on the importance of materiality in routines that produce ontological security, we illuminate the roles of social norms and mental activities in routines that promote a sense of security from specific risks. Social norms foster security in contexts that allow for the development of practices with collaborative others, such as friends target shooting at a range. Strong social norms dictate that participants behave in ways that keep all participants safe and provide participants authority in correcting those who behave in less safe ways, as we see with Dan's insistence that Andy put down his gun when prompted. In such contexts, social norms act in ways similar to expert risk managers in singular or infrequent consumption experiences, such as climbing Everest (Tumbat and Belk 2011) or river rafting (Arnould and Price 1993).

When security-enhancing practices cannot be developed because risky consumption includes noncollaborative participants, such as an actual assailant, mental activities play a critical role in fostering a sense of security. Prior work has examined how small groups collaboratively develop practices (Epp et al. 2014), how individual consumers engage in practices collectively (Woermann and Rokka 2015), and how consumers and service providers need to collaboratively orchestrate their mental and physical routines in order for a service encounter to be successful (Huff 2011). Missing from this literature are explanations of how consumers integrate noncollaborative human actors into routines. We show that when desired routines require the incorporation of noncollaborative actors, such as assailants or bystanders, defenders engage in mental activities to conjure assailants that they can incorporate into simulated practices and mental rehearsals.

Further, routines that incorporate these imaginative mental activities foster a sense of security from risks that vary across the multiple times and spaces in which defenders might engage in armed self-defense. In consumption experiences contained within bounded times and spaces, such as skydiving or river rafting, consumers can develop actual practices or hire an expert risk manager to mitigate associated risks. The unbounded nature of armed self-defense precludes these forms of risk mitigation. Instead, defenders engage in mental activities, imagining the risks posed in a wide variety of temporal and spatial contexts, and then enacting or imagining how they will avoid them. While simulated scenario practices and mental rehearsals produce only limited understandings of how to mitigate risks in an encounter with an actual assailant, they nonetheless increase defenders' sense of security from these risks. All interview informants expressed that "thinking through" how and when they would fire a gun at an assailant made them much more secure from associated risks than those who had given it little consideration. The appropriateness of their sense of security has yet to be tested. Phipps and Ozanne (2017) find that when a material actor fails to perform in ways that have become predictable, consumers' practices become unstable

and their sense of security is damaged. This finding indicates that defenders who encounter an actual assailant, a largely unpredictable actor, may find their sense of security unwarranted.

Third, we identify collaboration as a requirement for the development of practical understanding of risk-mitigating routines in consumption experiences that incorporate other human actors. When noncollaborative actors, such as an assailant, are necessary for a consumption experience, practical understanding of how to reduce risks specific to the incorporation of that actor cannot be developed. Unlike previous research into risky consumption contexts such as skydiving and mountaineering, which include consumers who collaborate to enact practices, the context of self-defense involves assailants and perhaps bystanders who are unwilling and unavailable to repeatedly enact practices with defenders. Defenders can and do develop practical understanding of risk-mitigating practices that do not require these noncollaborative others, such as smoothly drawing from a holster at a range, but they cannot develop practical understanding of how to mitigate risks posed only in the presence of noncollaborative others, such as how to do so when one's heart is racing in response to an actual assailant encountered unexpectedly. Our findings highlight both the relative straightforwardness of developing practical understandings when incorporating only a consumer and inanimate materials (Phipps and Ozanne 2017) and the challenges of developing practical understandings in contexts that include other humans.

Armed Self-Defense: Challenges and Implications

We identify four key challenges to mitigation of risks posed by armed self-defense. First, this consumption domain entails varied risks, some of which are paradoxical. For example, defenders perceive themselves to be at risk of victimization if they are not armed (Carlson 2015), but also perceive themselves to be at risk if an assailant becomes aware they are armed. Many defenders mention the risk of being targeted by criminals specifically because they are armed (see table 4 for examples). When facing such paradoxical risks, defenders cannot mitigate one without increasing the other. Second, the context precludes consumers developing practical understanding of many risk-mitigating behaviors because they cannot regularly draw and fire on an actual assailant. Third, many aspects of armed self-defense lack social norms, making it difficult for defenders to become aware of, and develop, practices consistently shown to effectively reduce risk. Fourth, the time and space in which an actual self-defense event may occur and the way in which an assailant may present himself are unpredictable, making accurate identification of an actual threat difficult. The ability to do so is critical to enacting self-defense practices that reduce legal, physical, and moral risks to the consumer and proximal others, and previous research has found that acting inappropriately or ineffectively often results from misidentification of a threatening person, or the attacker not behaving in an anticipated way (Carlson 2015; Light 2017).

Further, our data indicate that the risks consumers identify and attempt to mitigate do not necessarily align with objective risks. For example, more than two-thirds of the 36,252 firearm-related deaths in 2015 were suicides, and the rate of firearm-related suicides has increased 17% over the past decade (US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2017). Some research has shown clear links between access to a firearm and completed suicide (Weinberger et al. 2015), yet we observed no mention of suicide from our interview informants or participant observation, and only a handful of comments online.

We see opportunities for armed self-defense to be safer. One avenue may be increasing education or training requirements to foster development of risk-mitigating readiness and simulated scenario practices. We observe tremendous variation in education and training across defenders in our data set. Some had participated in extensive, elective self-defense training; others had completed only the minimum training required in their state to obtain a CHL,[4] and those who do not have a CHL but keep a handgun for home defense had received no formal training or education about associated risks, as none is required. Government, cultural, and market institutions could encourage safer practices by providing all defenders with education about the risks associated with gun ownership, including completed suicide, shootings in domestic violence situations, and unintentional child access. Our online data suggest that recent CHL training courses mention the gun owner's responsibility to ensure family members at risk of suicide do not have access to the firearm, but more could be done in this regard. At a minimum, governments could require provision of a fact sheet about risks and ways to reduce them to handgun purchasers. More stringent requirements could include mandatory training for home defenders as well as CHL holders.

4. Several states do not require individuals to participate in training or demonstrate knowledge or technical skill to lawfully carry a concealed firearm. See, for example, Arizona's concealed weapon law (Ariz. Rev. Stat. §13-3102[A]).

Gun dealers could also encourage safe practices. Risk-reducing peripheral products, such as trigger locks and gun safes, were not prominent at the gun shows we attended, and interview participants reported that dealers who had sold them guns had not asked if they owned a safe. Dealers could voluntarily provide more information about risks and more actively promote products that can be incorporated in risk-mitigating practices.

Further, we encourage the inclusion of simulations in armed self-defense training, with greater attention to discerning whether someone who presents ambiguously is actually an assailant and de-escalating situations when possible. While simulated scenario practices are not a replacement for actual practices, we assert that they can help to reduce some risks, such as unnecessarily introducing a firearm to an encounter.

Limitations and Future Research

This study maps ways consumers mitigate risks, and future research could extend our work by exploring ways that assuming risks of, and engaging in edgework with (Lyng 1990), firearms is enticing to defenders and provides possibilities for identity work through heroic action and narrative (Tumbat and Belk 2011). There is need for more research on cultural institutions and other agents that (re)produce risks, how those risks are conceptualized and communicated, and how consumers interpret that institutional work. Activist groups, laws, mainstream media, CHL training programs and trainers, and friends and family who denounce armed self-defense are implicated in our data but left unexamined.

Our approach provides insight into risks and practices in armed self-defense but does not produce generalizable findings. Additional research should employ representative sampling to ascertain motivations in defensive firearm consumption, levels of training and preparation of various groups of defenders, and differences in actual and intended defensive actions. Further, we see a need for methodologically sound studies on the risks that motivate and accompany armed self-defense, and for research into frequency and valence of mainstream media coverage of gun rights and gun restrictions related to armed self-defense. Finally, prior work on gun owners indicates that gender, race, and socioeconomic status are intertwined with defensive behaviors and normative acceptance of those behaviors (Finucane et al. 2000; Cook and Goss 2014; DeBrabander 2015; Light 2017). Better understanding of how risks and norms vary across demographic groups would provide needed insight into how to increase social justice in American armed self-defense.

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