

# The Wild West Down Under: Comparing American and Australian Expressions of Gun Enthusiasm

Abigail Kohn

*This Article reports the results of a comparative ethnographic study of self-professed gun enthusiasts living in the San Francisco Bay area during 1997-1998, and in Sydney, Australia, during 2002-2003. Data consisted of participant observation at shooting ranges and shooting competitions, and semi-structured interviews with male and female sport shooters in both geographic areas. While shooters from both the U.S. and Australia professed a pleasure in guns and shooting, and engaged in similar types of shooting sports, the gun as a symbol of American freedom and individualism does not translate "Down Under." Whereas American shooters perceive gun ownership to be a firm part of their identities as Americans, symbolizing self-reliant individualism, Australian shooters perceive guns simply as sporting equipment. They do not overtly link guns to identity or Australian citizenship. While Australian shooters are skeptical of the efficacy of gun control measures, they are largely comfortable with the idea that guns should be tightly regulated by government. Implications for gun control in both nations are discussed.*

*Abigail Kohn has an A.B. in Folklore and Mythology from Harvard University, an M. Phil. in Criminology from Cambridge University, and a Ph.D. in Medical Anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley and San Francisco. For the last several years (2001-2004), she worked as a Postdoctoral Research Fellowship at the Institute of Criminology at the University of Sydney Law School, where she conducted qualitative research on Australian gun enthusiasm and police attitudes toward gun control. Her book Shooters: Myths and Realities of America's Gun Cultures was published by Oxford University Press in May 2004.*

In recent decades, America's "gun culture" has become infamous not only in the U.S., but internationally as well. A journalist in *The Scotsman* asserts in a piece entitled "American Gun Culture is an Export Nobody Wants" that "guns are the basis of much of Europe's fascination and loathing with the United States, from the Wild West to the mean streets."<sup>i</sup> Australia's National Coalition for Gun Control argues that the sport of practical shooting (sports governed by the International Practical Shooting Confederation) is only a "so-called sport" that epitomizes America's gun culture because it "glamorizes violence" and encourages men to engage in "violent fantasies."<sup>ii</sup> But as much attention as the notion of the gun culture has received in recent years, very few commentators have bothered to define what the term actually means. When Richard Hofstadter made use of the term in his seminal 1970 article in *American Heritage*, he traced the various historical and cultural uses for guns, arguing that the United States is a gun culture because of the ways that guns have become woven into the social, cultural, and political fabric of the United States. He concludes that because of the enduring strength and power of the gun (in symbol and in fact), enacting federal gun controls will continue to be exceedingly difficult (Hofstadter 1970).

Despite Hofstadter's relatively careful discussion of the concept of a gun culture, few commentators use the term with circumspection. Rather, a definition is presumed unnecessary; what defines the gun culture is seen as self-evident: It is the gun nuts, the National Rifle Association, the crazy person in some small Midwestern town who raves on about his gun rights and then shoots his wife, or the young, inner-city gang member who conducts urban warfare with military-style assault weapons.<sup>iii</sup> The term "gun culture" has been used predominantly by critics of the culture and by people for whom "guns in America" have become a huge source of international hostility.

Yet in the last several decades, the gun culture in America has come under enormous academic scrutiny. There have been huge leaps in knowledge and understanding about gun ownership in both a historic and a contemporary context. Specifically, academics have been investigating exactly who owns guns in the U.S. and why. Research in the last several years has refined this knowledge, examining gun ownership among more specific and concentrated social groups within American society. Examples include research on gun ownership among hunters (e.g., Dizard 1994, 2003; Stange 1997), women interested in shooting sports and

self defense (e.g., McCaughey 1997; Stange and Oyster 2000), predominantly white, middle-class urbanites who own guns for sport and self-defense (e.g., Kohn 2004), and young people living in highly urban settings (Fagan and Wilkinson 1996, 1998; Sheley and Wright 1995). Criminologists have demonstrated empirically that about 75 million Americans own guns, and that the civilian gun stock currently exceeds 250 million guns (Jacobs 2002). In a population of about 290 million people, a little over one quarter of the population owns a least one gun. And most gun owners own about four. Guns are found in a little under half of all American house-holds (Wright 1995).

The statistics suggest that what has typically been called America's gun culture, often characterized as unidimensional or monolithic, is actually a complex, multi-layered phenomenon made up of smaller, diverse gun subcultures. These smaller gun sub-cultures share what could be considered the defining essence of the gun culture—an *emphasis* on guns, both literal and symbolic, as an important and meaningful object. A gun culture places enormous social, historical, and political emphasis on guns not only in a positive sense, but also a negative one (as well as every shade of gray in-between). The culture has structural manifestations pertaining to gun ownership in a variety of geographic locales: gun clubs, shooting ranges, shooting competitions, and gun shows. So many people own guns and make use of these clubs, ranges, and shows that members of the gun culture are demographically indistinguishable from the wider population (except by virtue of their gun ownership). By this definition of the gun culture, it is easy to argue not only that America has a gun culture, but America *is* a gun culture.

## I. RESEARCHING AMERICA'S GUN CULTURE

Despite the fact that social scientists now know a great deal about what kinds of people own guns in the United States, very little attention has been paid to *why* those people own their guns. So while researchers have a solid understanding of the demographics of gun ownership (Kleck 1997), they lack a broader understanding of what constitutes the basis of the American fascination with firearms.

This Article is part of an effort to correct that research gap. The author undertook an ethnographic study of gun enthusiasts living in the San Francisco Bay Area. The research was classically anthropological in the sense that the primary methodological approach was participant observation: the author visited gun ranges, gun shops, and gun shows, and participated in shooting competitions. Extensive interviews were conducted with 37 gun enthusiasts—26 men and 11 women who were predominantly white and middle class, thereby conforming to the general demographic portrait of gun owners across the United States.<sup>iv</sup>

However, as sociologists and criminologists have pointed out (Kleck 1997), regional differences in gun ownership are an important factors in relation to how guns are owned and perceived. Thus the fact that the study was restricted to gun owners in Northern California should be noted at the outset. Gun owners, and indeed gun enthusiasts, in Southern states such as Georgia and Alabama and Midwestern states such as Wisconsin and Michigan, may have different reasons for owning guns, and may articulate their pro-gun ideology differently than Northern Californian shooters.

The difference between gun ownership and gun enthusiasm should also be noted. Gun enthusiasts were defined as gun owners who met the following criteria:

- had an interest in owning and using guns of any type,
- legally owned at least one gun,
- took pleasure in talking about guns and shooting with other gun aficionados, and
- organized regular (weekly, or in some cases monthly) activities around gun interests.

By the time the study was completed in 2000, a number of unanswered questions had been generated by the data and analysis.<sup>v</sup> Two of the primary questions that arose were the extent to which gun enthusiasm is an *American* phenomenon, and whether or not gun enthusiasm has any cross-cultural relevance. Interestingly, there are very few academic contributions within the criminological literature (or any literature, for that matter) that explore these issues in depth. One of the most important is Dave Kopel's *The Samurai, The Mountie, and the Cnyboy: Should American Adopt the Gun Controls of Other Democracies*, which analyzes the political

history and efficacy of different gun control policies in a number of democracies across the globe. Another is Peter Squires' *Gun Culture or Gun Control: Firearms, Violence and Society*, which compares the United States to Great Britain in terms of beliefs and attitudes toward gun ownership and gun control.

While both works are important contributions to the gun debate, the questions and answers generated by a more anthropological approach were slightly different. For example, a brief glance at NRA publications, such as *America's First Freedom* and *The American Hunter*, will demonstrate that the primary arm of the gun lobby presents its beliefs and ideological assertions as universal truths, and asserts as truism the link between guns and freedom. But to what extent are these assertions culture-bound? That is, do gun owners from other cultures also subscribe to this formulation? Do peoples from other cultures accept or reject the notion that guns are valuable for self defense? These were the questions that the American data generated, and conducting a cross-cultural analysis was determined as the best way to pursue them.

## II. WHY RESEARCH GUN ENTHUSIASM IN AUSTRALIA?

Australia lends itself well to a cross-cultural comparison with the United States regarding the meaning of guns. Like the U.S., Australia is a former colony of Great Britain, and both countries experienced colonization and frontier periods that were important to their national development. In both nascent countries, colonizers dealt with indigenous populations harshly and punitively, resulting in long-term structural inequalities that are well-documented and continue into the modern register.<sup>vi</sup> Both Americans and Australians have greatly mythologized historical and modern-day ideologies about freedom and independence, egalitarianism, classlessness, and the right and ability to live well in their respective "lucky countries." And both the U.S. and Australia have a long history of civilian gun ownership (Kennett and Anderson 1975 and Harding 1981, respectively).

But the differences between the two nations are pronounced as well. The United States underwent a Revolutionary War, which broke ties with Great Britain and forged a new set of laws governing, amongst a great number of other things, civilian gun ownership (see Malcolm 1994). Early Americans needed guns to forge the frontier—constant confrontation with hostile Indian forces and dangerous wildlife necessitated firearms—and the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution provided Americans with the belief that they had and have an entirely legal basis to own these guns. Whether or not the Second Amendment does indeed provide an actual individual right to own guns (as opposed to collective, or militia, right) is still a matter of debate within legal and popular circles in the U.S. But the Second Amendment has functionally served to provide a legal basis to arm America.

Australia, despite its bloody history with indigenous peoples and its largely agrarian roots, has not witnessed as heavy civilian armament as the U.S. Australian firearms laws controlled the civilian gun stock far more tightly both historically and contemporarily. Handguns have been tightly regulated since the 1930s (Byrne 2004), and the lack of constitutional protection for gun owners generally has meant gun control measures can be passed quickly and easily given the requisite public and political attention and support.<sup>vii</sup>

The research in Australia was structured similarly to the American research: the author attended shooting ranges, gun clubs, and shooting competitions in the outer Sydney suburbs. All Australian gun laws were carefully followed; gun clubs were joined, safety classes taken and passed, a shooter's license obtained and two guns purchased and registered (one handgun and one shotgun). Fieldnotes were taken to document observations, activities, and conversations.

Interviews with twenty-one shooters were completed. The number was less than what was originally planned, but several factors made the original number planned a practical impossibility. Although Australian shooters living in Sydney are a dedicated group, they are relatively small in terms of numbers, and their activities in relation to their gun enthusiasm more circumscribed than their American counterparts. The leading Australian firearms researcher at the Australian Institute of Criminology finds only about 4 percent of the total Australian population owns guns, which means just over 760,000 licensed gun owners throughout the whole of Australia (Mouzos 2002).<sup>viii</sup> Because more gun control laws were passed in 2002 and 2003, the number may shrink further. Australian shooters in urban areas do not tend to "hang out" at shooting ranges or gun clubs; most shooters attend ranges to practice or compete, meaning their time there is organized and

somewhat controlled. These factors made unplanned, relaxed conversation with shooters a rare event, as time spent at a competition was dedicated to competition.

Interviews were conducted at shooters' homes or in public venues, usually in the evenings after the work day finished. Of the twenty-one adults interviewed, almost all were between 40 and 65, white, and of middle to lower-middle class socioeconomic background. All of these shooters own guns for sporting purposes; no "strict collectors" or hunters were interviewed. All interviewees were self-described "sport shooters."

To balance the interviewees for the purposes of cross-cultural comparison, analysis of the American shooters was restricted to those who described themselves as sport shooters. Doing so meant that the number of American interviewees was also twenty one: men and women who are actively engaged in the same kinds of sporting events as Australian shooters. These sporting events include Sport Pistol or Olympic-style shooting matches, IPSC (International Practical Shooting Confederation), and "cowboy action shooting," which is largely governed in the U.S. by the Single Action Shooting Society (SASS).

All of these shooting sports are international and have standardized rules and regulations, which further ensured that the American and Australian samples were participating in relatively similar activities related to their respective gun enthusiasm. As it happened, the sport most popular with both the American and Australian shooters interviewed for this research was "cowboy action shooting" (called "western action shooting" in Australia).

### III. THE WILD WEST IN THE SUBURBS

Cowboy action shooting is a recreational shooting sport in which shooters don "Old West" cowboy costumes and engage in competitive target shooting using antique replica firearms, which shoot live ammunition. Cowboy action shooters use myths and narratives of "Wild West" America and images from Hollywood westerns to self-consciously create identities modeled on fictionalized and "real" characters of the Wild West. This shooting sport is very popular not only in the U.S. (the home of the mythic cowboy) but also in Australia, where Australian "cowboys" are as eager to pretend they are re-living the Wild West as much as American shooters are.

Referring to the same sport as "western action shooting," Australian cowboy shooters largely ignore Australia's own western frontier history in favor of mimicking America's mythologized western past. Thus, the Australian version of the sport is very similar to the American version. Australian shooters compete in the largest and most difficult of America's cowboy action shooting competitions, including End of Trail, the "Super Bowl" of cowboy action shoots. Australian shooters often do quite well at American events like End of Trail, to their great pride and pleasure. Again, because international rules and regulations govern the sport, shooters of all nationalities are required to maintain standard safety rules and behaviors regarding their gun usage.

But while the rules of shooting competitions may be standard, what guns and shooting *means* to shooters is not. What guns mean to their owners varies from culture to culture, and is linked to concepts and beliefs that have resonance in the wider culture in which gun ownership is situated and contextualized. Thus when researching gun enthusiasm in social and cultural context, the relevant questions to ask are, for example, "What do guns mean to Americans and Australians?"; "Do Americans and Australians like guns for the same reasons?"; and, "If guns mean different things in these two cultures and are used for different purposes, what are the implications for gun control in either culture?"

So while guns are in fact used for sporting purposes in both America and Australia, guns in symbol and fact have profoundly different meanings in these two different cultures. In both America and Australia, however, within wider cultural, social, and political arenas than those populated by gun enthusiasts, guns are powerfully linked symbolically and literally to chaos, violence, and killing.<sup>ix</sup>

What the link means is that in both the U.S. and Australia, shooters are confronted by another culture that finds their chosen interest in guns contentious, distasteful, even morally repugnant. Although gun enthusiasm is a relatively different phenomenon in America and Australia, and guns do mean different things in these two cultures, shooters in both the U.S. and Australia must rely on culturally-meaningful moral discourse to legitimate their interest of guns. The persuasiveness of this culturally-meaningful moral discourse

differs in both cultures, and this point is one of the reasons for the differing impact of the “gun lobbies” in either culture.

#### A. The New American Cowboys

Most of the American shooters owned guns for both sport and defensive purposes. They described their pleasure in shooting sports and gun ownership by emphasizing the skills needed and the challenge shooting presents. However, it is immediately apparent when speaking to American shooters that they find it impossible to separate their gun ownership, even their interest in sport shooting, from a particular moral discourse around self, home, family, and national identity. Several specific points can be highlighted that best summarize how these shooters think and feel about their guns.

- *For shooters in Northern California, gun ownership is linked to individual and national identity. Guns signify core American values such as freedom and individualism.*

Jonathan, a white university administrator in his mid 40s who emigrated to the US as a young child, is fairly typical of the American gun enthusiasts interviewed for the study. He describes his gun enthusiasm this way:

Jonathan: Why do I like guns? To me it's just like—because I can shoot really well with them, I just have this affinity for them. I love to read about them. I like the history that goes with guns, like all the history of just—when I go out and shoot it relaxes me, very meditative and such. Owning a gun, it kind of means that you are determining your own fate, like those stupid—I don't call 911. It really is true. You aren't dialing 911, you handle it yourself. And besides, if you're gonna wait for those police to show up, they never show up in time anyway. So it's like, you don't have to rely on the police, you know what I mean? You have to know when to use them and what you're gonna use them for and such, and since so many people out there have them already, you kind of feel like—like when I do security work and stuff, it's like I feel better having one.

AK: [You] feel safer?

Jonathan: It just makes me feel like we don't have to have anyone get hurt or anything by people that are showing off and just taking it out and everything. It's just like, if someone comes in to hold up the place, it's one thing, you let them have what they want. But if they hold up and it looks like they're gonna kill everyone in the place, at least you can do something....

Note that even as Jonathan describes his pleasure in shooting and his enjoyment in learning about guns on an intellectual level, he also moves directly into describing how guns confer self-protection. He feels guns provide their owners with the ability to take care of themselves. American shooters spoke often of literal and symbolic independence.

American shooters also spoke of how they are drawn to guns because guns are powerful, exciting, dangerous, and deadly. But conversely, guns are also about safety, comfort, and the knowledge of how to keep safe by mastering something deadly. Recognizing that paradox is an important part of being a shooter; shooters are very conscious that context is what usually determines what guns can mean.

But one of the most important aspects of being an American shooter, particularly in an geographic area that frowns on such activity (San Francisco is notoriously anti-gun), is working to preserve a particular vision of American mythic history, a history that recognizes the extent to which guns helped colonial and frontier Americans forge a nation and maintain social and economic (and thus moral) order. Paula, a white shooting range manager and former police officer in her 40s, put it this way:

Why did Independence Day come about? What caused the Independence Day? I think it may have had something to do with guns. I just go back to—that's what made America. America stands for one thing, it's supposed to be freedom, but that's fallin' apart because people aren't going back into

history and they're just being blinded. They figure, well, that's old stuff. It carries on all through, and they're not doin' that [respecting history].

Bob, a white shooting instructor in his late 40s, weaves into this vision the numerous pop culture icons that have helped solidify guns with mythic history and moral order in historic and contemporary American culture.

Why do...[I] like guns? I think we all choose an endeavor. We want to endeavor to do something, to be something, be...[great] in a field, whatever that field may be....Some people, when they grow up, they grow up watching Roy and Gene and Hoppy and all the cowboys, they want to emulate their heroes. Roy Rogers was our hero for many years. So was Hopalong Cassidy and Gene Autrey, and many others. And we watched these heroes do good deeds. But they're wearin' the gun. And many times, the bad guy's coming out, they pull the gun, they don't have to shoot it, they pull it, and the bad guy stops. Our heroes use the gun to defend themselves. Or to stop the bad guy....We wanted to be Roy and Gene and Hoppy and those guys. It's something that's come through our culture. The gun has been with us, well, forever. It's our culture.

Thus being a shooter is about subscribing to a particular vision of American history, and subscribing to a particular set of contemporary ideological positions revolving around citizenship, public safety, and moral order in American society. In short, gun ownership signifies being a "good American." Thus it is not surprising that these shooters feel so frustrated and distrustful about gun control legislation, which they feel attacks their sense of patriotism and civic pride as law-abiding Americans. This concept leads to the second point about the American shooters interviewed:

- *American shooters are hostile to gun control because just as guns represent freedom, independence—the best of American core values—gun control represents trampling on those core values. Gun control presents political oppression and the disintegration of moral order in American society.*

American shooters spoke often about the extent to which gun control measures are often a way for the government to penalize or even criminalize certain populations, often the poor or already disenfranchised. Jonathan, who I mentioned earlier, believes that banning guns is a way for the government to deny rights to the poor, particularly the right to self-defense. He stated:

...Owning a gun means... autonomy, self-determination .... It always worries me when the elitist power structure, all the rich people, don't like you to have guns, because they want their military to have them, and they want their police to have them. The people that buy and own the police, like in...[wealthy neighborhoods], ...I've seen what it's like to be on the side that doesn't have the guns, and what [the elite] can get away with....No. I think anyone...[should be able to own guns]....

Because shooters view guns to have been an integral part of securing a political and moral victory against political oppression historically, continuing this practice today is understood a constant reminder of how early Americans were willing to defend themselves and their country. Some shooters asserted that the anti-gun stance is part and parcel with a lack of patriotism, a lack of respect for America as a nation. Harold, a white gun store owner in his late 50s, touched on this point when he discusses his willingness to serve in the military.

...But it is, generation after generation we lose more and more freedoms. And nobody today knows what America means. I mean, I'd go to war again today as old as I am if they asked me. For the country, I'd do it in a heartbeat. I'll bet you could take ten people out there and you'd only find maybe two or three that would be willing to go. And this is what's hurting the country.

At its most basic, gun enthusiasm is a way for these individuals to articulate what are more widely considered core American values—rugged individualism, self-reliance, freedom, and equality. Guns both embody and maintain these traditional American values. Shooters subscribed to a combination of beliefs that are sometimes characterized as “pro-gun ideology,” which along with gun enthusiasm can indicate a very particular vision of social and moral order in American society. Because shooters perceive of themselves as “the good guys” (that is, they care about maintaining law and order, and they believe in respecting the law, as well as, what they believe it means to be American), they believe in their right to arm themselves to maintain the sanctity of their lives and their homes. Thus by situating the currently stigmatized activity of recreational shooting in a mythologized and glorified American past, shooters work to legitimate their modern day interest in, and enthusiasm for, firearms.

#### B. The Wild West Down Under

Interestingly, historically Americans and Australians may have originally owned and used guns for fairly similar reasons, at least insofar as guns are useful tools for settling a vast and rough frontier, and eventually ensuring its agricultural richness. As Richard Harding (1981) has pointed out in his seminal work on Australian gun ownership, many Australians have owned guns because they were/are primary producers, and they have needed guns to cull wildlife and maintain control of their stock, as well as protect themselves from snakes and other dangerous vermin.

As the gun debate that raged in Australia subsequent to the Port Arthur shooting in 1996 demonstrates, Australian sport shooters can be a vocal and articulate minority (Chapman 1998). Australian shooters’ argument that they should be allowed own the guns they want because they should not be held accountable for Australia’s gun crime problem, those claims are met with skepticism and even disapproval by wider Australian society. For many non-gun owning Australians, like non-gun owning Americans, the gun is a contentious object and symbol, denoting danger, violence, and the breakdown of community safety and communitarian values. How do Australian shooters counter that? What do they think about their own gun ownership?

- *For Australian gun owners living in Sydney, gun ownership means being invested in sport shooting. A gun enthusiast is a shooting sports enthusiast.*

All of the Australians interviewed, as well as those who were willing to participate in the ethnographic study (to speak with the author informally during matches and at shooting ranges), described their interest in guns as an interest in shooting sports. For these Australians, at the most basic level, guns are pieces of sporting equipment. When Australian sport shooters were asked if they were “gun enthusiasts,” a number of them said rather forcefully, “No.” They clarified that they were shooting enthusiasts, and would thus concede to an interview, but in terms of the guns themselves, they had little interest in that kind of hardware. For example, Ann, a white office administrator in her 40’s, opened the interview in the following way:

AK: Do you consider yourself a gun enthusiast?

Ann: No.

AK:No, ... but how about a shooting enthusiast?...

Ann: Yes, I like the challenge of shooting. ... [But] I’m not really interested in the guns, as such.

AK:OK, but would you consider yourself a shooting enthusiast?

Ann: Yes.

AK:OK, and so how would you define a shooting enthusiast?

Ann: Someone who enjoys shooting.

Jerry, an barrister in his early 60’s who enjoys western action shooting, was willing to concede that he was a gun enthusiast, one who had several handguns, rifles, and shotguns. He defined a gun enthusiast as

“someone who uses guns for sporting purposes, primarily.” When he was asked about the secondary purpose for his gun ownership, he answered:

I have some fascination in them as pieces of machinery and how they work. I also have some interest in them as artworks because ...because some guns are in fact art—particularly older ones and my interest probably today lies mostly with those that come from the 19th century.

Jerry went on to say that he learned about guns from his father, who was an antiques dealer. And when Jerry's own son was about 12 and was showing an interest in guns, Jerry introduced him to guns by taking him down to the local gun club. He described the scenario this way:

So I said to [my son], ‘Well if you're interested in guns we'll get you taught to use guns properly,’ and then...it was necessary for both of us to join the pistol club. He was taught to use pistols and so was I and at the end of 12 months he had lost all interest in the things and I was more or less hooked.

Australian shooters talked extensively about why shooting sports are enjoyable. Gayle, a white office worker in her 40s whose whole family (her husband and two teenaged daughters) are involved in shooting sports, put it this way:

Ah I just like guns...as a pleasure, really. Get on a range, you're totally focused on what you're doing, block everything else out and hit a target, or attempt to hit a target...It challenges—it's challenging yourself too.

It is initially tempting simply to take Australian shooters at face value. After all, many forms of shooting are sports; shooting is a recognized Olympic competition, and IPSC and even western action shooting have international rules and standards; and national and international matches in these shooting sports draw shooters from all around the world. Shooters from Australia are a particularly competitive group, many of them ranking as some of the top achievers in the world in their chosen sporting sport. And basically, when Australians talk sport, *any* sport, they take themselves and that sport very seriously.

Indeed, as social commentators and academics have long pointed out, sport has an enormously important place in Australian society (see Adair and Vamplew 1997, and Cashman 1995 for but two examples). Australians watch sport, talk about it, participate in sport in amateur and professional capacities, and continually hold up sport and sporting heroes as glorious and heroic examples of the best that Australian society has to offer. Sport is an institution within Australian society that has been both historically and contemporarily an arena in which particular core cultural values in Australian society are articulated and celebrated, and Australian athletes are believed to embody social and cultural ideals of Australian society (Adair and Vamplew 1997).

Not surprisingly, Australian sport shooters are no different in this regard. They articulated during interviews that shooting sports promote skill and focus, and provide a healthy relaxation for gun club members. Shooters enjoy spending relaxation time with other like-minded athletes. Many Australian shooters spoke of how much they enjoying hanging out with their mates at the shooting ranges, asserting that shooting sports attract “good, like-minded people” who share their enthusiasm for these sports.

Therefore, if one understands Australian gun enthusiasm as shooting sports enthusiasm, and an Australian gun enthusiast as a sport shooting enthusiast, one could argue that Australian gun enthusiasts are in fact harking to a particular moral discourse that legitimizes their interest in guns. But unlike American gun enthusiasts, who directly link gun ownership to American mythic history, their identity as Americans, and a vision of freedom, individualism, and self defense, Australian gun enthusiasts draw linkages that are less direct and concrete. For example, Barry, a book-binder in his early 50s who in very involved in western action shooting, put this interest this way:

A gun enthusiast [is]...someone who's read about guns, someone who's ... participated in the—in the gun sport, has a respect for them, treats them with safety, goes through all the proper channels to



have the guns properly stored, ammunition so forth, and just upholds the...code of the gun law.

What Barry in effect suggests is that a gun enthusiast is the epitome of a good sportsman—interested in the sport, invested in the sporting community—and he excels at his sport while showing respect for the equipment. Ian, a local gun club official and high-ranking competitor in his 30's put it this way:

I like to use them [guns] and use them properly in the sport. I look after and maintain them, and pretty much that's about it. That's what I class as an enthusiast. Looks after them, keeps them running properly...to be an enthusiast it's not just a case of going out to the range and shooting, we're involved in the sport in a whole as far as junior development, teaching other shooters to shoot, teaching them the safety side of firearms. Enthusiasm's not just about shooting the gun; it's the whole sport, really. It's being involved; it's being involved in everything from the administration side of holding competitions to—to developing the mind of everybody who wants to be involved in it.

One of the most important differences between American and Australian shooters relates to the issue of defensive gun use. Whereas all but one of the American shooters said yes, they kept a gun for self or home protection, *none* of the Australian shooters said they kept a gun for self or home protection.<sup>x</sup> While some of the Australians may in fact keep a gun for self defense (and were therefore being untruthful in the interview), all interviewees articulated an awareness that keeping a gun for self defense is illegal in New South Wales.<sup>xi</sup> Most of these shooters, however, were apparently very comfortable with that fact.

In fact, several shooters mentioned that they would be concerned if they themselves felt the need to keep a gun for self defense, or if other people around them did. Far from thinking that the U.S. was a utopia of gun rights where the fact that gun control does little to prevent most law-abiding people from owning guns quickly and easily, the Australians interviewed thought the U.S. situation was dangerous and problematic. They were *not* interested in seeing Australia become more like America in terms of widespread gun ownership for defensive purposes. Some also believed that widespread gun ownership (presumably by virtue of “lax” gun control laws) meant that controlling and/or reducing the gun stock at this point would be a practical impossibility. In response to the question about what he thought about the gun situation in the U.S., Ian answered:

What can you say? It's pretty much [expletive]...There's so many guns out there and there's nothing they can do about it, and to try and regulate something like that now, well, is just...you know, stupid.

Ian also expressed attitudes that were very typical of the Australian shooters interviewed when the issue of gun control was discussed. He agreed that some gun control laws are ineffectual, even nonsensical, but in general, gun control is a legitimate (and, in fact, important) way to maintain control over the gun stock in Australia. This leads to the next point about Australian shooters. In general,

- *Australian shooters indicated that while some gun control policies are useless and stupid, gun control on the whole is a legitimate means by which the government can control the potential violence that guns can do.*

A typical response to the question about the status of current gun laws came from Andrew, a long-time shooter and gun dealer in his late 50's who said initially that the gun laws are “pretty good.” He mentioned that anyone who joins a gun club gets checked out, and the restrictions and the paperwork are good in the sense they make sure shooters really want to go through the hassle to obtain a gun. He said, “I stick to the rules and the more you do it, the easier it becomes.” But upon further reflection, he actually corrected himself, saying,

But the gun laws and the ownership laws ... actually I'll add to that, the laws are a crock...because people that commit violent crimes with firearms do not get the penalties that they warrant. That's—that's where the laws are wrong. And so many times they let murderers out and they do the same

thing again.

Other shooters echoed these sentiments in a milder way, stating that gun laws are for “honest people only.” But even while they were arguing that gun laws are for the law-abiding, and many of the current laws are simply silly, *none* of the shooters interviewed took the position that guns should not be controlled, or the government had no authority to restrict the Australian populace from owning guns.

They did not question the basic premise that gun control is a legitimate way for government to ensure that shooters are actively engaged in a legitimate, high-regulated, and well-structured sport. In fact, the gun controls that shooters are forced to contend with are ostensibly designed to do just that: for example, keeping guns registered and shooters licensed, being forced to join a gun club and complete a requisite amount of shoots each year, and waiting a certain length of time before purchasing a first gun after being granted a shooting license. None of the shooters interviewed seemed to believe that these laws were not legitimate means to curbing who owns guns and ensuring that the interest in guns was a sporting one.

So is this tactic of legitimating gun enthusiasm through a vision of good sportsmanship effective? In one sense, yes—Australian shooters are able to argue in public arenas that they should be allowed to engage in their chosen sport, and as long as they follow the law, their sporting interest should not be jeopardized. The argument does have sway with politicians and segments of the public.<sup>xii</sup>

However, Prime Minister John Howard’s efforts to promote tougher federal gun control laws in the wake of a high-profile shooting at Monash University (near Melbourne) in 2002 has meant that Australian shooters are forced to contend with increasingly stringent laws governing what kinds of sporting guns are available, and increasing costs for maintaining their sport—such as increased licensing and registration fees, new kinds of registration fees.<sup>xiii</sup> Australian shooters disparaged the new firearms laws as relatively useless and problematic,<sup>xiv</sup> but the public seems increasingly unsympathetic.

What so many sport shooters in Australia find disturbing and disheartening is that their sporting interest (which they consider such a social, positive, and enriching aspect of their lives) is constantly conflated with gun violence—as if gun violence and killing were “natural” extensions of being an exceptionally talented sport shooter. This is in part because some of Australia’s killers have been licensed sport shooters (as in the case with the Monash shooting). But it is also because making the direct link between sport shooters and gun enthusiasts and gun massacres has been a tactic used by gun control advocates in Australia to advocate stronger gun controls.<sup>xv</sup>

Thus there are defensive and angry reactions by shooters. But it is important to emphasize that while shooters believe some laws stupid and do little to curb gun crime, most actually subscribe to the notion that gun control as a concept can be effective in preventing the proliferation of guns (and presumably, therefore, gun violence) throughout society.

However, Australian shooters’ inability to rely on a moral discourse around saving lives with guns (as so often employed by American shooters) has meant that Australian shooters are arguing that they are good sportsmen who find their sporting equipment used in dangerous crimes or violent killings. While shooting sports may signify core values for Australians—that is, egalitarianism, skill and professionalism, physical prowess, community cohesion and mateship—relying on the moral discourse of sport has not fully legitimated the status of guns, or shooting sports for that matter, in Australian society.

## CONCLUSIONS

Clearly guns have different meanings in the U.S. and Australia. For the Americans interviewed, guns signify the American Creed: freedom, independence, and the American way. Guns are an integral part of American mythic history and popular culture, and thus American gun enthusiasts are preserving a particular vision of the American past, one in which good guys used their guns to defeat the British and forge a nation, protecting their families and communities against hostile forces and a harsh wilderness. American shooters believe that throughout America’s history, guns have been owned by American heroes and patriots, and thus gun ownership is integral to maintaining an identity as “good Americans.” Being a gun enthusiast signifies upholding the American Creed. Even when these shooters are describing guns used for sport shooting, they

link guns to protection and defense. Defensive gun ownership is an inherent part of pro-gun ideology for these American shooters.

In contrast, the Australians interviewed view guns as inseparable from shooting sports. Shooting is a sport that promotes the values that all healthy sport in Australian society promotes: relaxation, focus, skill and professionalism, community togetherness, and raising the profile of Australia for the good of all Australians. But perhaps most importantly, Australian shooters believe that attending to gun laws, *respecting* the concept of gun laws, is a crucial part of being a good shooter; this is the essence of civic duty that Australian shooters conflate with being a good Australian. A good shooter is one who gets involved in safety, in teaching, in making sure that people treat the sport with the respect it deserves.

In an article entitled “Conserving Our Sport” in *Australian Shooter* magazine, shooter Geoff Smith (2003) puts it well. He writes that a good shooter is one who contributes to the community of “like-minded” persons, and engages in friendly competition, emphasizing safety, plus “special skills and knowledge” (p. 16). But perhaps most importantly, good shooters “should appreciate that no private citizen in this country is permitted to own weapons, including firearms, specifically for personal protection...Whether we agree with this or not is irrelevant; it is the law” (p. 16).

Finally, while the gun lobby in the United States has worked tirelessly to promote the ideas that gun rights are human rights, and that the gun can be a universal symbol of freedom, national identity and national pride, in fact guns *do not* symbolize these things for everyone. Australian shooters make this point clear. In Australia, gun enthusiasm is a social practice is circumscribed by a discourse of good sportsmanship, a discourse that is highly socially scripted. Guns do not directly signify identity for Australian shooters, except insofar as shooting is their chosen sport and sport is important to them, as it is to many Australians. What that means for Australian shooters is that this discourse has in effect served to *bind* gun enthusiasm, both literally and figuratively, restricting its usefulness in the public, political arena. There is a limit to how far Australian shooters can push the discourse of shooting sports as indicative of good Australian character, and how effectively it can really serve their lobbying effort to preserve their sport.

So while Australian shooters here may feel frustration and even anger over how they have to “take it on the chin” when the government bows to pressure groups and further restricts sporting endeavors under the guise of public safety and crime control, Australian shooters view the restrictions as a ridiculous, even foolish, burden they must endure in order to continue with their sport. And it means they will have to figure out how to pursue their sport under these new restrictions, or take on another sport. They will, however, follow the law.

They do not feel like they have lost their gun rights because they largely recognize that they never had any gun rights. Gun ownership in Australia is a privilege, not a right. Shooters do not feel like they can take on the government over the issue (though they may have felt that way before the Port Arthur shooting), not only because they know they will lose, but because largely think that working with the government, and asking the government to consider their thoughts and feelings on the issue, is the most effective political route for them to take. While this may be a thoughtful stance arrived at after considering their politically disempowered status, the stance also reflects the largely polite and civic-minded Australian way. Whether or not the attitude will allow for the continuance of Australian sport shooting is a matter only time will tell.

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## ENDNOTES

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i. Tim Cornwell, "American Gun Culture is an Export Nobody Wants," *The Scotsman*, January 3, 2003, p. 12.

ii. Penny Thow, "Call for ban on combat shooting," *Hobart-Mercury* (Australia), November 4, 2002, p. 15.

iii. Editorials and opinion pieces employing hostile descriptions of gun owners and members of the gun culture are numerous. See, for examples, Denis Horgan, "Forget Gun Control: Ban Them Altogether," *Hartford Courant* (May 14, 1999): A2; Editorial, "NRA Shoots Itself in Both Feet," *New York Daily News* (May 1, 1999), 20; Robert Scheer, "Pete Wilson's Twisted Logic on Handguns," *Los Angeles Times* (September 30, 1997), B7; Editorial, "Mothers Know Best," *New York Daily News* (May 13, 2000), 16; Michael Kramer, "Pataki and Guns: The DNA Solution," *New York Daily News* (March 19, 2000), 49; Amy Pagnozzi, "Gun-Control Plan is an Empty Shell," *Hartford Courant* (April 28, 1999), A12.

iv. To protect the confidentiality of the individuals I met and interviewed, I use pseudonyms for all of the people and places I describe.

v. This project began as a dissertation project. See Kohn 2000.

vi. There is a vast literature documenting the histories of both the United States and Australia. Some of the best works on American history and culture are Daniel J. Boorstein, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience*, New York: Vintage Books, 1958; Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*, New York: Norton, 1987;

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and Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991. Two well-regarded works on Australian history and culture include Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: The epic of Australia's founding*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987; and Stuart Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. A book that explicitly compares these two nations in terms of experience of history and identity is Lynette P. Spillman, *Nation and Commemoration: Creating National Identities in the United States and Australia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

vii. For a discussion (albeit a thoroughly ideological one) of the passing of the 1997 gun control legislation in Australia in the wake of the Port Arthur shooting in Tasmania, see Simon Chapman's *Over Our Dead Bodies*.

viii. These are official statistics that are produced in conjunction with the Firearms Registry, the government body that oversees the licensing and registration of guns in each state. The total numbers of both guns and gun owners may be vastly underestimated, however, because it is highly likely that there are Australian gun owners who have not licensed themselves or registered their guns, particularly as the gun laws become more and more restrictive in Australia.

ix. The Australian media has promoted the idea that gun ownership is a dangerous pastime, and Australians have much to fear from their own gun stock. See Mark Buttler, "Guns Rush," *Herald-Sun*, 8 January 2003, pp. 1, 4; and Peter Lalor and Vanessa McCausland, "High caliber society," *Daily Telegraph*, 11 January 2003, p. 21. For an example of the extent to which any form of gun ownership is equated with violence, see the newspaper opinion piece, "States deserve blast," *The Sun-Herald*, 1 December 2002, p. 20, and the website for Gun Control Australia at <<http://www.guncontrol.org.au/>>. Website viewed 14 April 2004.

x. However, while she answered "No," to the question as to whether she kept a gun for self or home defense, one female shooter did show me that she kept a shotgun near her bed, which she admitted off tape was for home protection. Her answer and the subsequent information she gave me that belied her answer does cast doubt over the veracity of other shooters' answers.

xi. The New South Wales legislation as it currently stands (as of 2004) prohibits the keeping of a firearm solely for the purposes of self defense. According to state law, potential gun owners must be able to demonstrate a "genuine need" for owning a firearm, and while being a sport shooter does suffice, needing a firearm for self defense does not.

xii. See Phillip Hudson, "Bracks, PM do gun deal," *The Age*, 7 December 2002, p. 1.

xiii. See Emma McDonald, "Handgun ban enforced with jail term," *Canberra Times*, 7 December 2002, p. 1; and Rick Wallace, "Guns plan fires up," *Herald-Sun*, 7 December 2002, p. 2. These articles do not address the increased fees for gun owners, but the author is familiar with them because she surrendered one of her firearms during the buyback and received literature describing the increased fees for maintaining the registration for certain types of firearms.

xiv. See Amanda Banks, "Lobby aims at gun curbs," *The West Australian*, 3 February 2003; and Sebastian Ziccone, "Ban puts governments in our sights," *Herald-Sun*, 11 December 2002, p. 21.

xv. See the website for Gun Control Australia at <<http://www.guncontrol.org.au/>>. Website viewed 14 April 2004.