The dark side of safety: A call for a more thorough consideration of racism and collective power motivations in the social psychology of firearms

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Abstract

This paper situates current social psychological research on the symbolic use of firearms (e.g., as a source of personal safety) in broader historical context to motivate a more thorough consideration of collective power motives. Historically, firearms have been used to dominate racial outgroup members (e.g., White Americans use of firearms and firearm laws to dispossess indigenous people of land or control free and enslaved Black people) or, at times, attempt to resist group-based oppression (e.g., Black Americans use of firearms to struggle against White Jim Crow terrorism). Given most gun owners report self-protection as their primary reason for firearm ownership and yet anti-Black attitudes are still a consistently important predictor of firearm ownership among dominant group members (e.g., White Americans), this paper examines how guns may function as a perceived source of personal safety and collective power. I use the persistent role of White supremacy and anti-Blackness in original U.S. firearm psychology and policy to illuminate the interrelatedness of personal safety and collective power perceptions, and how perceived threats to group power may motivate the use of guns and policies that selectively regulate gun access to mitigate associated safety concerns. Seeking to nudge social psychology to more thoroughly examine firearms' potential function as a symbolic source of collective power, I end by discussing how considering collective power can help us better understand how historically dominant and historically marginalized groups view firearms today while also illuminating some barriers to the pursuit of gun safety for all.

Keywords: History, group power, racism, safety, guns

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A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to

keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.

-The Second Amendment to the United States Constitution, Ratified in 1791

The Second Amendment isn't about guns. It is about anti-Blackness.

-Dr. Carol Anderson, Historian, 2021

In the U.S. today, 32% of individuals report owning a firearm and 42% of households

report having a firearm in the home (Nadeem, 2023). Since the 1960s, gun culture in the U.S. has

shifted increasingly toward personal firearms being owned more for self-protection (Yamane,

2017), and, today, over 70% of gun owners list self-protection as their primary reason for owning

a firearm (Nadeem, 2023). However, what motivates the perceived utility of guns as a source of

self-protection—and what self-protective gun ownership means and implicates for an individual

owner or prospective owner—extends far beyond the actual use of a gun and incorporates

broader social processes.

As a field, social psychology has begun to earnestly investigate motivations underlying

self-protective firearm ownership and culture in the United States. Often, the described

psychological motivations center the individual, such as the function of firearms to symbolically

quell individual safety concerns (e.g., from crime). These needs, and the perception that

possessing a gun can satiate these needs, have imbued guns with symbolic meaning (e.g., a

source of personal safety, Buttrick, 2020; Stroebe et al., 2017; Losee et al., 2020). However, less explored, is how concerns about personal safety can stem from group-level threats (e.g., concerns about the in-group's collective power and status). In particular, the historical role of gun access and ownership in attempting to resolve group-level threats to status and hierarchy may have imbued guns with symbolic meaning for the self as well as one's in-group.

Notably, the 2nd amendment clearly outlines a collective function of firearms rooted in the perceived threat of a more powerful collective (e.g., federal government). While commonly, concerns about government power are acknowledged as motivating the Second Amendment then (e.g., standing armies) and gun ownership today (e.g., concerns about the U.S. government restricting gun access during COVID-19 onset; Kerner et al., 2022), White Americans' fears of the collective empowerment of racial out-groups are often overlooked in shaping the origins of U.S. gun access and modern gun culture. Today, prejudicial attitudes toward racial out-group members consistently explain meaningful variance in pro-gun attitudes and behaviors, particularly among dominant groups in the U.S. (e.g., anti-Black attitudes among White Americans; Filindra & Kaplan, 2015, 2017, 2021; Higginbotham et al., 2023; O'Brien et al., 2013). Therefore, the symbolic function of guns may not only aid individuals in managing perceived threats to the self but also managing how the in-group is perceived in relation to out-groups (e.g., power or status).

In this paper, I utilize the history of racism in firearms to stimulate greater consideration of group power motivations underlying self-protective firearm attitudes, behaviors, and ownership in the U.S. To do so, I review recent social psychological insights on individual-level motivations for firearms and discuss how consideration of salient sociocultural identities (race) and group processes complicate and clarify understandings of individual-level firearm

motivations. Then, I situate our modern understanding of firearm psychology in the long history

of race and racism in firearm policies and behaviors (see Trawalter et al., 2022). To this end, I

review history and recent research that illuminates how understandings of one's in-group power

are shaped by dynamic, socioecological forces (Twali et al., 2023; see also, Trawalter & Bart-

Plange, 2020) that may qualitatively impact how guns are perceived as a source of collective

power and linked to concerns about personal safety. In short, the differential defining of

collective power and trajectory of historical gun access due to racial oppression are likely to have

distinctly shaped the collective symbolism guns may represent for Black people (firearms as

group empowerment) versus White people (firearms as group dominance) in the U.S. This paper

ends by discussing potential avenues of study that incorporate group power and personal safety

motivations and, in joining the calls of other scholars (Anderson, 2021; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2018;

Metzl, 2019), implicates the persistent role of racism as impeding gun safety in the U.S.

Considering Individual-Level Motivations for Firearms in the Context of Racism

In a key organizing paper on the psychological utility of firearms, Buttrick (2020)

outlines three central motivations that drive the symbolic use of guns among self-protective gun

owners: a personal need for safety, control and self-efficacy, and belongingness. Guns owned for

self-protective reasons function as a symbolic object that helps users maladaptively cope with

their perception that the world is a dangerous place from which societal institutions/systems

cannot offer protection (Buttrick, 2020; see also, Stroebe et al., 2017). These individual-level

motivations outlined are undeniably important factors motivating self-protective gun ownership

in the U.S. and the focus here on individual motivations makes sense. Social psychology, while

acknowledging social and contextual factors, at its heart centers an individual unit of analysis

(see Trawalter et al., 2022 for discussion). Yet, these individual-level motivations are also tied to

concerns about group power that are important to recognize and disentangle, particularly in the context of firearms.

The most directly studied of these three central symbolic functions of firearms in social psychological literature is the personal safety guns are perceived to provide (Buttrick & Mazen, 2022; Kerner et al., 2022; Losee et al., 2020; Shepperd et al., 2018; Stroebe et al., 2017). The extent to which an individual believes firearms are a source of personal safety and security (as opposed to a source of threat) is strongly predictive of their pro-gun beliefs and support for pro-gun policies (Losee et al., 2020; Shepperd et al., 2018), personal firearm ownership (Stroebe et al., 2017), and intent to purchase firearms and ammunition (Kerner et al., 2022). In that, the firearm serves as a symbolic tool that helps owners cope with safety concerns. However, perceiving that one's safety is at risk can also elicit group processes. Perceived threats to personal safety or significance can elicit negative attitudes and aggressive behaviors toward out-group members (i.e., terror management theory; Greenberg et al., 1986; Arndt et al., 1997) and more felt interdependence with in-group members (i.e., quest for personal significance; Kruglanski et al., 2013). Given that making one's collective identity salient (Kruglanski et al., 2013) or being led to feel personally powerful (Belmi & Pfeffer, 2016) bolsters a sense of personal security, it is reasonable that feeling one's in-group is powerful can be particularly helpful in addressing concerns about personal safety that may arise due to perceived threats.

Yet, social psychological research investigating personal safety motivations underlying firearm psychology has largely ignored the potential role of group power motivations. In an analysis of group power concerns in the context of racism and firearms, one might ask, what or who do people perceive guns to provide safety from? Or whose sense of safety is prioritized? And is this prioritization shaped by cultural stereotypes and myths that paint members of certain

racial groups as threatening? As noted previously, while protection from crime is the most frequently cited reason for gun ownership, the perceived risk of experiencing crime does not consistently predict gun safety perceptions—while for some owners (e.g., White Americans) attitudes toward racial out-group members consistently do (Filindra et al., 2021; O'Brien et al., 2013). Concerns about crime have long been racialized (Eberhardt et al., 2004), and often elicit a perceived need for firearms as protection from an abstract, violent "other"–typically racialized implicitly or explicitly as someone Black in the minds of White Americans (Buttrick, 2020; Stroud, 2012; Metzl, 2019). In contrast, recent increases in Black gun ownership stem from concerns about personal safety due to crime but also concerns linked to group power— particularly the need to protect themselves and potentially others in their community from potential racist violence perpetrated by someone White (Bowen et al., 2023). Therefore, embedded in the personal safety that guns symbolically provide are direct ties to concerns about personal safety that stem from issues of collective power—both among members of racially dominant groups and those who are members of racially oppressed groups.

Racism, Guns, and Collective Power Concerns

Undeniably, centering racism in the understanding of firearms brings the issue of collective power to the forefront. Racism functions "as a systemic force embedded in the enduring structure of society," (Salter & Adams, 2013, p. 785), located in our social context and reflected in our psyche (Salter & Adams, 2013; see also, Salter et al., 2018). In the U.S., racism manifests along multiple dimensions, including the dynamic interplay between individual (e.g., beliefs, attitudes), interpersonal (e.g., discriminatory behaviors), institutional (e.g., differential application of laws based on race), and structural (e.g., racist cultural ideas) levels resulting in and reinforcing differential access to resources and positions of cultural influence dependent on

an individual's race/ethnicity (see, Haeny et al., 2021). Therefore, racism is not only an individual holding prejudice and/or actively discriminating against members of racial out-groups but implicates the ability of one racial group to determine a racial out-group's outcomes over time. Although social psychology often focuses on racism as an individual-level phenomenon, racism is also embedded culturally in the U.S., meaning that individual behaviors and attitudes shape—and are shaped by—U.S. institutions, laws, practices, and core ideas that persist over time (Salter et al., 2018; Trawalter et al., 2022). Given racist, anti-Black attitudes consistently and strongly predict attributions for gun violence (Lee et al., 2020), support for who can versus cannot purchase a gun (Hayes et al., 2020), pro-gun beliefs and policy support (Filindra & Kaplan, 2016; 2017; Higginbotham et al., 2023), and the presence of a gun in the home (O'Brien et al., 2013), understanding the role of collective power in U.S. firearm psychology is vital.

Conceptually, collective power can be defined and understood at the intragroup, intergroup, and structural levels (Keltner, 2003; Simon & Oakes, 2006; Turner, 2005; Twali et al., 2023). At the structural level, understandings of collective power emphasize group dominance in social exchanges and systems (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Bergh et al., 2020), whereby groups with higher rank, greater control of resources, and more influence in shaping societal structures are defined as having collective power while those groups that lack these capabilities are considered powerless (for review, see Twali, 2023). While social psychology typically conceptualizes collective power at the structural (Twali, 2023), members of historically marginalized and structurally oppressed groups (e.g., Black Americans, people from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds) perceive and emphasize collective power outside of typical dominance frameworks (prosocial; Belmi & Laurin, 2016; in-group resilience or building intergroup solidarity; Twali et al., 2023). Given collective power is defined and shaped by group

membership and relation to structural power (Twali, 2023), I attend to whether the qualitative

nature of collective power guns may symbolically offer is distinct by race.

The cultural embeddedness of racism and racism's collective power implications requires

an examination of key cultural institutions in the U.S., including historical policies that have

regulated access to firearms by race over time to clarify the role of collective power motivations

for firearm utilization. For example, how did race shape who could initially serve in the militias

that the Second Amendment explicitly authorizes? What role did firearm legislation play in how

White citizens grew, maintained, and reinforced collective power (e.g., group control of social,

political, and economic institutions), and how did this same legislation shape how racially

marginalized groups responded? Do policies and psychologies today mirror or challenge these

historical trends? Taking a critical lens to historical firearm policy and its effects can help

illuminate the firearm psychology of the past and more fully understand its traces in the present.

Of note, while racism is a relatively stronger predictor of firearm attitudes compared to

other salient forms of intergroup prejudice and oppression (e.g., sexism; Filindra & Kaplan,

2021), this does not preclude the continued need for further inquiry into the form and function of

firearms as a source of collective power along the lines of other identities and ideologies (e.g.,

gender and feminism; Kelley, 2022), at the intersections of identities, ideologies, and systems

(e.g., race, hegemonic masculinity, and capitalism; Cassino & Besen-Cassino, 2020; Carlson,

2015; McKevitt, 2023; O'Neill, 2007; Spraggins, 1999; Stroud, 2012; see also, hooks, 2004;

Fine et al., 1997), and in important gun violence contexts (firearm-related domestic gun violence;

e.g., Metzl, 2019; religious extremism; e.g., Leander, Kreienkamp, et al., 2020). Given this

complexity, collective power dynamics along other identity dimensions may hold similarities to

race and yet qualitative differences, particularly at their intersections (e.g., race, gender, and

class; see Bowen et al., 2023; Hayes et al., 2023; Metzl, 2019; Stroud, 2012; see also Combahee River Collective, 1977/1995; Crenshaw, 1989). As the central point of the present paper is to motivate the need to more thoroughly consider collective power in the social psychology of firearms, I focus here on racism and its relevant intersections given race's centrality in modern firearm attitudes and the long history of racism in foundational U.S. firearm policy (Anderson, 2021; Diamond & Cottrol, 1991; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2018; Winkler, 2011) while noting the need for further inquiry using additional lenses.

Finally, while the main thesis centers personal security, considering collective power is also applicable to understanding guns' symbolic representation as a source of self-efficacy/personal control and belongingness (Buttrick, 2020; Mencken & Froese, 2019). For example, the perceived power of a person's in-group contributes to their sense of personal control (Fiske & Dépret, 1996). Accordingly, gun violence perpetrated by an in-group member can restore a personal sense of control, particularly if the observer feels their in-group is disempowered and the victim is a hated out-group member (Leander et al., 2019; Leander, Kreienkamp, et al., 2020). An analysis that considers collective power, may question the extent to which marginalized group members would derive a sense of personal control from this form of intergroup gun violence that could increase the likelihood of being deindividuated and stereotyped (as violent), which functions instead to reduce a sense of personal agency (Siy & Cheryan, 2013). Noting the potentially broad applicability of considering collective power in the symbolic meaning of guns, I hone in on the interplay of racism, collective power concerns, and personal safety in U.S. firearm culture.

The Root of U.S. Gun Access Stems from White Safety Fears & Collective Power Concerns

The next sections outline a historical trajectory of often overlooked aspects of U.S. firearm policy that demonstrate the symbolic function of firearms as a source of personal safety and collective power. While there is much legal debate about the meanings and interpretations of the Second Amendment (Anderson, 2021; Cornell, 2006; Winkler, 2011), these sections do not intend to offer a legal interpretation of this core fundamental right in the U.S. nor intend to comprehensively cover every gun law passed in the history of the U.S. This section does employ an analysis of the racialized context that helped shape the Second Amendment's creation, the societal context that resulted from its ratification, and how both White and Black Americans responsively utilized firearms to foster collective power given different relations to power in the U.S. system. I detail this long history of guns and racism to clarify the dynamic and persistent role of racism and collective power in modern firearm psychologies and policies (see Figure 1) for multiple reasons. First, illuminating and fostering an understanding of historical racism can increase the perception and understanding of systemic racism in the present (Bonam et al., 2018; Fryberg & Eason, 2017; Nelson et al., 2012; Martin & Johnson, 2023). Second, given power is socially constrained and conferred (Turner, 2005), attending to group and societal dynamics over time can aid in illuminating the form and function of collective power in the context of U.S. racism. Finally, attending to this fuller history illuminates the perspectives and psychologies underlying marginalized groups' (e.g., Black Americans) orientation toward firearms in the U.S.

The use of firearms among White Americans and implementation of firearm policy in the colonial and antebellum era most closely aligns with the conception of group power as dominance; guns were employed to control material resources, shape the outcome of other out-groups, and promote and sustain White supremacy (see Bergh et al., 2020; Fiske & Berdahl, 2007; Fiske & Dépret, 1996; Keltner, 2003; Pratto et al., 2006). The origins of firearm access in

the U.S. provided White Americans actual collective power to maintain group dominance and mitigate concerns of personal safety arising from their subordination and dehumanization of racial out-groups.

Firearm access as building White collective dominance in colonial America

In colonial-era America, firearms were used to establish and reinforce a budding racial hierarchy through the genocide and forced removal of indigenous communities from their unceded ancestral lands and the suppression and social control of free and enslaved Black people (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2018; see also, Bacon's Rebellion; Morgan, 1972; Rice, 2020). Formal and informal armed settler-militias consisting of White colonists violently disrupted and/or destroyed indigenous communities to assume control of unceded land (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2018). White men were required to keep guns in their homes and carry guns to public gatherings (e.g., church) out of concern of retaliation by indigenous communities (Winkler, 2011). Further, colonial laws prevented gun owners from selling firearms to indigenous people (Winkler, 2011, Cornell, 2006). For White colonists in this intergroup dynamic, the resource of interest to control was Indigenous land rather than Indigenous people, which led to the dehumanization, genocide, and centuries-long forced relocation of indigenous nations to increasingly smaller portions of their ancestral lands (e.g., reservations; Jardina & Piston; 2023; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2018). This power to control land, a coveted resource among White (often poor) colonists seeking personal gain and wealth (Metzl, 2019; Morgan, 1972; Immerwahr, 2019), relied on the actual power of firearms.

While the full truth of this violent history has long been omitted from or misrepresented in mainstream U.S. collective consciousness (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2018; Gellman, 2024; Greene 2020; Fryberg & Eason, 2017), attention to cultural narratives depicting firearm-related violence against indigenous communities point to the blurring of group dominance and personal safety

concerns. For example, in the Massacre of Wounded Knee,[1] at least 146 Lakota Sioux

(Miniconjou) men, women, and children were killed by U.S. Army soldiers in South Dakota

(Greene, 2020; History.com, 2023). Directly after the Massacre, mainstream media narratives

intentionally framed that the soldiers (of whom 25 were killed; Greene, 2020; see also, United

States Army Center of Military History, n.d.) were acting out of self-defense and furthered

narratives about the safety threat indigenous people pose (Greene, 2020). In reality, this Lakota

Sioux tribe was fleeing violence, had peaceably camped near the soldiers the night before the

Massacre at the Army's demand, and had surrendered their weapons, including firearms, at the

forceable request of the Army under the promise of future compensation—right before the

killing began. Unbeknownst to the tribe, and signaling group dominance motives, the soldiers

had intended to relocate them to Nebraska after disarming them (Greene, 2020). U.S. cultural

stereotypes stemming from this early period are still embedded in current media representations

(e.g., "cowboys vs. Indians"; see Fryberg & Eason, 2017) and still function to distort group

dominance as self-defense:

> "The best way to kill people is to dehumanize them, right? To make them into
>
> caricatures. Whether it is Peter Pan. Whether it's John Ford's The Searchers, which is
>
> considered not just the archetypes of Western movies, but one of the great American
>
> films. And this [cowboy vs. Indian trope] is a classic Hollywood trope that makes
>
> invasion look like self-defense. You know, we weren't obsessed with the United States
>
> the way that the United States was obsessed with us." –Nick Estes, Sicangu Lakota (The
>
> Lakota Nation vs. The United States, 2022).

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[1] The Massacre of Wounded Knee (1890) has been considered the last major U.S. military campaign of the American-Indian Wars (Greene, 2020; U.S. Army Center of Military History, n.d.), which began at the arrival of European colonists in 1607 (Wolfe, 2020) through the late 19th century (History.com, 2023). I include this history here given its link to colonial era firearm violence.

This history links early gun access in the U.S. to providing White Americans the ability to dominate indigenous nations and control land resources, even in the face of strong indigenous resistance (e.g., Battle of the Greasy Grass; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2015). Further, this early period likely developed an initial link among White American colonists among fears about personal safety, the threat of racial/ethnic out-groups, and the perception that increased in-group firearm access aids in the maintenance of group dominance and the mitigation of personal safety concerns.

In contrast to Indigenous land, the resource of interest to White colonists as it pertained to their intergroup dynamic with enslaved Africans was human labor. Therefore, instead of a strategy of genocide, physical relocation, or distancing of this racial out-group, the perceived need for enslaved labor required White Americans to adopt a strategy of dehumanization and continued and violent social control given needed proximity to the labor (e.g., farming White-owned land; Jardina & Piston, 2023; Melamed, 2015). This centuries-long proximity to subordinate, racial outgroups may have also contributed to White American colonists linking concerns about in-group power and personal safety–and, again, the role of firearms in protecting both. As such, White colonists engaged in legal, selective disarmament of "slaves, free blacks, and people of mixed race out of fear that these groups would use guns to revolt against slave masters" (Winkler, 2011, p. 116; see also Cornell, 2006). The implementation of selective disarmament of out-groups deemed as dangerous signals an early perception that racial out-group access to firearms may serve as a threat to White in-group power and position atop the racial hierarchy. This perception itself implicates early evidence that White colonists perceived firearm access as a potential source of power at a collective level, one source from which racial out-groups needed to be kept.

Firearm access as bolstering White collective dominance in post-colonial and antebellum

America

White colonists' concerns for personal safety and collective power intensified after the War of

Independence. The Second Amendment's ratification is argued to have intentionally provided

White citizens a mechanism to continue the genocidal dispossession of indigenous land while

cementing the racialized hierarchy that distinguished White populations and free and enslaved

Black populations in terms of power, status, and humanization (Anderson, 2021; Dunbar-Ortiz,

2018). For example, Anderson (2021) notes that the "security of the free state" clause in the

Second Amendment reflected in part White Americans' increasing concerns about controlling

enslaved people. From a White perspective, at the time of ratification, slave revolts were one of

the most salient threats to White Americans' perception of state security—only four months

prior, the Haitian Revolution had just begun. In the Haitian Revolution, enslaved Africans in

Haiti violently rebelled against their European enslavers, engaging in over a decade-long, brutal

struggle against their former slave masters and multiple waves of colonial militaries to secure

their freedom (Britannica, 2023; James, 1963). This racial struggle in the Caribbean was not lost

on White people in the U.S., as many White plantation owners, including Thomas Jefferson,

expressed fears that enslaved populations in the South would be inspired to revolt in a similar

violent fashion and throughout the struggle attempted to suppress the news about the Haitian

slave revolt (Anderson, 2021; Britannica, 2023).

   After the ratification of the Second Amendment, the U.S. quickly passed laws to clarify

and enforce aspects of the Second Amendment. Most notably, the Militia Acts of 1792 set

federal standards for militia conscription and preparedness requirements:

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of

America, in Congress assembled, That each and every free able-bodied white male

citizen of the respective States, resident therein, who is or shall be of age of eighteen

years, and under the age of forty-five years shall severally and respectively be enrolled in

the militia…That every citizen, so enrolled and notified, shall, within six months

thereafter, provide himself with a good musket or firelock…or with a good rifle….

(Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union, n.d.)

Effectively, this act immediately racialized (and gendered) citizens' individual right and duty to

bear arms in service of a collective purpose (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2018), specifically conscripting

White men to serve in state-sponsored militias and requiring personal firearm ownership by law.

State militias established by the Second Amendment were employed in various capacities, but

they were most effectively used within states as de facto slave patrols to reinforce the racial

hierarchy (Anderson, 2021; Cornell, 2006). These militias helped to violently quell revolts by

enslaved people and often assisted slave patrols to find and recapture enslaved people who had

escaped from plantations (Anderson, 2021; Winkler, 2011). The collective use of firearms

functioned to resolve perceived threats to White citizens' personal safety by controlling racial

out-groups, land, and the racial order—thereby firearms functioned as a source of collective

power by facilitating group dominance.

As in the colonial era, selective disarmament by race continued in this period. Many

states enacted laws that criminalized free or enslaved Black people from carrying or possessing a

gun without the explicit written permission of a White citizen (Cottrol & Diamond, 1991;

Anderson, 2021). Further, restrictive gun laws dynamically responded to perceived threats of

Black resistance to White group power and the racial hierarchy (Diamond & Cottrol, 1991). For example, the 1825 Acts of Florida granted white citizen patrols in Florida the ability to "enter into all negro houses and suspected places, and search for arms and other offensive and improper weapons, and may lawfully seize and take away all such arms, weapons, and ammunition" (cited in Cottrol & Diamond, 1991, p. 337). However, after Nat Turner's slave revolt of 1831, which resulted in over 50 White American deaths, Southern states increased their targeting of Black rights and lives, including Black rights to firearms. For example, six months after the revolt, Florida repealed all firearm rights for free Black people, and by 1833 had empowered its citizen patrols to not only seize Black firearms but also granted the ability to administer punishment to free and enslaved blacks without "a proper explanation for the presence of the firearms" (Cottrol & Diamond, 1991, p. 338).

In all, among White American colonists and citizens from 1619 to the Civil War, expanding firearm access for racial in-group members and restricting firearm access for racial out-group members occurred in response to concerns about personal safety (e.g., from retaliation from indigenous populations or revolts by enslaved Black populations) and concerns about in-group power over resources (e.g., indigenous lands, enslaved people as property) and status in the racial hierarchy (e.g., White supremacy). This historical perspective on pre-antebellum firearm policy and behaviors provides several implications about the dynamics of how firearms may operate as a source of collective power and its relation to concerns about personal safety. First, White colonists' and Americans' focus on controlling both resources and the outcomes of out-groups aligns with a conceptualization of group power as rooted in dominance. And, the symbolic nature of firearms as a perceived source of collective power is evident in the use of firearms to promote and sustain group dominance but is arguably most exemplified by the

explicit restriction of out-group members' access to guns given the fear of out-group empowerment. Critically, this history illuminates that concerns about personal safety stemmed from concerns about in-group power and the maintenance of the racial status quo, while efforts to restore a sense of collective power were pursued to quell these personal safety concerns. Understanding that concerns about collective power and personal safety were present and intertwined in the historical origins of U.S. firearm access, helps us attend to the potential relevance of both motivations during the period where the multiracial self-protective gun ownership culture we know today is shown to originate from—the Reconstruction and Jim Crow periods (Buttrick & Mazen, 2022).

Tracing Roots of Guns as a Source of Symbolic Collective Power from the Civil War

Recent scholarship has linked the prevalence of self-protective gun ownership today to historical enslavement before the Civil War (1861-1865). Using archival, survey, and social media data, Buttrick & Mazen (2022) investigated whether the period of violent unrest after the Civil War—and the broad availability of guns to civilians due to the Civil War—set the U.S. on its path of self-protective gun ownership, rooted in concerns about personal safety. They find that, in the South, counties with a greater proportion of enslaved Black people in 1860 have greater levels of gun ownership today; outside the South, a county's level of modern gun ownership can be reliably predicted by its residents' level of social connection (e.g., friendship) to people in Southern counties that had a higher proportion of enslaved populations in 1860. In their analysis, they investigated how this link between past and present may be mediated through concerns about personal safety. And, they find evidence of partial mediation. Residents in southern counties with greater intensity of historical enslavement (or in non-Southern counties with greater social connections in these Southern counties) report feeling less safe today, and this

in turn predicts greater levels of gun ownership today (Buttrick & Mazen, 2022). Therefore, they

show robust evidence that the modern use of firearms to cope with personal safety needs has

roots in conditions stemming from the post-Civil War social context.

In their broader argument, the authors show that this historical period led to the

crystallization of guns as a source of personal safety for all Americans including both Black and

White people today. Of note however, in motivating their hypotheses, Buttrick & Mazen identify

that, after the Civil War during the Reconstruction period, White Americans also used guns to

address concerns about changes in the racial status quo and perceived threats to White collective

power:

> Northern observers at the time noted the importance of privately held arms in the White
>
> supremacist attempt to suppress Black political power and restore the antebellum status
>
> quo, reporting on institutions such as "rifle clubs," which were aimed at "while avoiding
>
> actual bloodshed as much as possible, to so impress the blacks that they, or a number of
>
> them, will feel impelled to vote with the whites out of actual fear." Southern elites saw, in
>
> their guns, a means of protecting themselves and their interests from the social upheaval
>
> of Reconstruction, and they transmitted their beliefs to their Southern White brethren. We
>
> argue then that thanks to the sudden prevalence of firearms, which likely increased their
>
> salience, and the importance placed upon firearms by Southern leaders, White
>
> Southerners came to believe that a firearm was the sort of thing that kept one safe.
>
> (Buttrick & Mazen, 2022, p. 2)

Here, Buttrick and Mazen note that Black political empowerment during Reconstruction (where

Black men could vote and hold political office) was also explicitly perceived as a threat to White

in-group power, which elicited southern White citizens to feel unsafe (see also, Anderson, 2021;

Cottrol & Diamond, 1991; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2018; Winkler, 2011). Therefore, White citizens'

concerns about collective power and the status of their racial in-group in the post-Civil War

period continued to implicate felt safety just as it did before the war—and guns continued to be

perceived as a way to mitigate both these concerns.

Importantly, the function of guns to potentially assuage concerns about safety and group

power was not lost on Black people during the post-Civil War period, as concerns about White

backlash to Black freedom and empowerment also elicited Black Americans to feel unsafe.

Following the norms of the broader society and spurred by their participation in the war for their

own freedom, many Black Americans took up arms to protect themselves and their community

(Winkler, 2011). As Buttrick and Mazen do, tracing the symbolism of guns from this period to

the present is vital, as it helps illuminate the potential unique ways that Black Americans have

come to view the purpose and symbolism of firearms.

Understanding firearms as a symbolic source of collective power among Black

Americans requires understanding how individuals who belong to historically marginalized and

oppressed groups define and perceive their in-group's collective power (e.g., Belmi & Laurin,

2016; Twali et al., 2023). Twali & colleagues (2023) demonstrate that Black American's lay

theories of collective power expand beyond dominant/subordinate relationships (see also,

Combahee River Collective, 1977/1995; Ture & Hamilton, 1967). In their study, Black

Americans who perceived their in-group as powerful conceptualized group power as originating

at the intragroup level, or from within the Black community (e.g., Black resilience to and

continued resistance against racial oppression, increasing in-group solidarity). Black Americans

perceived collective power derived at the intragroup level to be fungible and able to help

increase collective power at the intergroup (e.g., mobilizing out-group solidarity, being respected

as a group; see, Simon & Oakes, 2006; Maner, 2017; Turner, 2005) and structural levels (e.g.,

Civil Rights, self-determination through voting; Twali et al., 2023). Therefore, for some Black

Americans, firearms may symbolize collective power, yet the perceived form of collective power

may be distinct due to Black American's experience and continual resistance of racial oppression

throughout U.S. history. Firearms then may function as a perceived source of collective power,

but unlike White Americans, the symbolic collective power guns represent may be less rooted in

group dominance, but instead rooted in group empowerment—building in-group cohesion,

resisting oppression, and obtaining out-group respect in pursuit of a racially egalitarian society

(Twali et al., 2023).

Firearms as a source of Black collective empowerment to resist Jim Crow oppression

The withdrawal of federal troops from the South and the end of Reconstruction-era

policies set the stage for nearly a century of Jim Crow terrorism to commence, which saw violent

attempts to intimidate and restrict Black political participation (e.g., lynchings) while also

restricting Black access to firearms (Equal Justice Initiative, 2020). During the Jim Crow period,

Black firearm access was restricted through legislation (e.g., Black codes often restricted Black

firearm access), and extrajudicially by White citizens (Anderson, 2021; Diamond & Cottrol,

1991 Winkler, 2011). White supremacist groups founded after the end of the Civil War, such as

the Ku Klux Klan, terrorized Black people and communities generally but originally functioned

as "disarmament posses" that targeted Black households who were suspected of possessing

firearms to confiscate their arms (Winkler, 2011; see also Metzl, 2019). In her 1892 pamphlet

"Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases," anti-lynching activist, suffragist, and journalist

Ida B. Wells-Barnett used her platform to plainly describe the realities of racist lynchings in the

U.S. In her writing, Wells-Barnett invokes that a collective resistance to this specific form of

oppression and the pursuit of justice generally requires Black collective power and that she

perceived guns as a ready source of it:

> By the right exercise of his power as the industrial factor of the South, the Afro-American
>
> can demand and secure his rights, the punishment of lynchers, and a fair trial for accused
>
> rapists.

> Of the many inhuman outrages of this present year, the only case where the proposed
>
> lynching did *not* occur, was where the men armed themselves in Jacksonville, Fla., and
>
> Paducah, Ky, and prevented it. The only times an Afro-American who was assaulted got
>
> away has been when he had a gun and used it in self-defense.

> The lesson this teaches and which every Afro-American should ponder well, is that a
>
> Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used
>
> for that protection which the law refuses to give. When the white man who is always the
>
> aggressor knows he runs as great risk of biting the dust every time his Afro-American
>
> victim does, he will have greater respect for Afro-American life. (Wells-Barnett, 1892)

Here, Wells-Barnett connects firearms with collective power ("where the men armed

themselves…and prevented it") and individual safety ("when he had a gun and used it in self-

defense"). Further, derived from her experience documenting racist lynchings, Wells-Barnett

calls guns to have a "place of honor" in Black households, as she not only perceives guns as a

source of protection from racial oppression but as a way for Black citizens to garner the respect

of White citizens through normative use of gun ownership as self-protection. Distinct from the

collective power goals of White firearm use in this period however, Black firearm use functioned

as a means to attain group respect and resist race-based oppression from "the white man who is

always the aggressor" (Wells-Barnett, 1892). This form of collective power is mirrored by Black Americans' lay conceptualizations of power today (Twali et al., 2023).

While Black Americans' attempted use of guns for personal safety may have increased the risk of encountering racist interpersonal and structural violence (e.g., from White disarmament posses), Black access to firearms at a collective level did allow greater resistance of racial oppression. Under threats of interracial violence, Black communities would at times take up arms and organize ad hoc militias (Cottrol & Diamond, 1991) to attempt to ward off White aggression. Frequently, those who took up arms included Black U.S. war veterans (e.g., Civil War, WWI) who wanted to protect their communities from violence.

One salient example is during the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921. On May 31, 1921, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a mob of over 1,000 White Tulsans descended on a jailhouse to lynch a young Black boy who was unfoundedly accused by a White-owned newspaper of harassing a young White girl in an elevator (Parrish, 1923; Tulsa Historical Society & Museum, 2024). In response, a group of Black Tulsans, including Black WWI veterans took up arms and traveled to the jailhouse to protect the young Black boy. These Black Tulsans lived in the racially segregated but economically prosperous and self-sustaining Greenwood District. And these Black Tulsans owned guns. This Black collective resistance to White collective aggression interfused with lingering White Tulsan resentment at the economic success of these Black Tulsans, sparked what is now known as the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921. White citizens with the support of local and state institutions (i.e., public officials providing firearms and ammunition to White looters, Oklahoma National Guard mass arresting Black Greenwood residents; Tulsa Historical Society & Museum, 2024) murdered at least 300 Black Tulsans while looting the Greenwood Districts' businesses and homes before burning and bombing it, resulting in the displacement of thousands

of Black Tulsan residents with no meaningful compensation for their losses (Boxley II, T., & E.

W. Coasts, Inc, 1996; Crowe & Lewis, 2021; Parrish, 1923). However, what is lesser known is

that the Black armed citizens successfully held back the encroaching White mob overnight,

delaying the burning of Black businesses and homes in the district, and allowing thousands of

Black residents to flee the more immediate danger (Parrish, 1923; Crowe & Lewis, 2021). While

not fully providing an ability to stop the onslaught of White citizen violence, particularly when it

was backed by structural power (e.g., local/state government), guns provided an actual source of

collective safety and group power among Black Americans, rooted in an increased sense of in-

group solidarity and ability to resist White intergroup and structural violence.

Along with stories of Black armed resistance, research supports that Black access to

firearms played a significant role in reducing lynchings, which were violent acts carried out to

end Black life and disempower Black Americans through political intimidation (Dawson, 2013;

see also Henderson et al., 2021). Between WWI and WWII, Black Americans' access to guns

directly related to the number of lynchings in the Jim Crow South. Looking at the state-level data

between 1913 and 1950, Makowsky and Warren (2022) find that in years and states with lower

levels of Black gun access, there are greater numbers of reported lynchings of Black people.

Overall, Black gun access in this period declined steadily due to race-based disarmament policies

(e.g., state handgun bans) and differential enforcement of these laws by police (Makowsky &

Warren, 2022). Yet, even amidst race-based disarmament strategies and the continued threat of

state-sponsored and White vigilante terrorism, Black access to firearms served as an actual

deterrence against White intergroup violence (Makowsky & Warren, 2022). Accordingly,

throughout the fight for Civil Rights and the end of Jim Crow segregation and terrorism, Black

individuals and Black organizations (e.g., Deacons for Defense and Truth)–including those

organizations committed to non-violence (e.g., Student Non-violence Coordinating Committee)–perceived and utilized firearms as a source of safety and collective power to resist oppression and pursue equality (Cobb Jr., 2014).

Legacy of group power concerns in firearm policy and behavior in the post-Civil Rights era

The passing of key Civil Rights legislation in the 1960s (e.g., the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Voting Rights Act of 1965) permitted the U.S. the ability to begin moving toward an inclusive, multiracial democracy. Due to the Civil Rights movement and Cold War geopolitical pressures (Bell, 1980), the post-Civil Rights era ushered in a norm of racial egalitarianism (see, (Kinder & Sears, 1981). Therefore, ideas about who guns were for, how to regulate access to guns, and what role institutions may play in providing "safety" could not be tied to overt racism expression. After the Jim Crow period, laws and policies became less explicitly racist, but more systemic forms of racism persisted in the differential enforcement of "race-neutral" laws (Siegel, 1997), including gun laws.

For example, in the late 1960s, conservatives in the California state legislature with the support of the NRA passed the Mulford Act of 1967–a gun control law that prohibited the legal open-carrying of loaded firearms. While restricting gun rights generally across citizens of the state of California, the general motivation for the law's passage was to target and make illegal the specific gun right commonly utilized by members of The Black Panther Party (BPP; Anderson, 2021; Winkler, 2011). The BPP was pro-Second Amendment and saw the legal use of firearms as a way to hold societal institutions (e.g., police) accountable and prevent their brutalizing of Black citizens. In this manner, leaders of the BPP, such as co-found Bobby Seale explicitly connected gun control laws, such as the Mulford Act of 1967 that targeted the gun rights they employed as structural mechanisms "aimed at keeping the Black people disarmed and

powerless" (Caraccio, 2017; see also, Higginbotham et al., 2023). Police brutality against Black

Americans in the 1960s generally, played a significant role in social unrest. For example, in

1967, 158 riots occurred across the U.S., most sparked by instances of disputes between White

police officers and Black citizens (Evans, 2023). This salience of race, racism, and violence

played a role in how Black and White Americans viewed institutions but also firearms as a

means of self-protection and collective power.

In this particular racial context of the late 1960s, Feagin (1970) examined whether Black

and White Americans would either prefer to rely on police to protect their homes from crime or

prefer to rely on themselves to defend their home. Both a majority of Black and White

Americans preferred self-defense of their homes, with Black people showing the most distrust of

police to defend their homes. However further investigation painted a divergent picture of how

Black and White Americans sought to defend the home and what institutional (i.e., police)

actions would make them feel safer. Regardless of self-defense or police-defense orientation,

Black Americans reported similar levels of guns in households (33% and 27% respectively).

However, a greater proportion of White Americans who preferred self-defense reported having

guns in the household (60%) than White Americans who preferred police-defense (35%). When

asked about police treatment of Black people and protestors, Black Americans largely agreed

that the police were too violent toward Black protesters and advocated for police to go easier in

handling the riots. White Americans who preferred self-defense adamantly disagreed, with the

large majority saying that the police treatment of Black people was fair or too soft, and supported

police being tougher on protestors, with nearly half saying that the police shooting one to two

Black protestors to make a point would be a good idea (Feagin, 1970).

In the 1970s, several important patterns relating to firearms and politics also began to emerge. First, Democrat and Republican party elites' positions on gun policy, which traditionally had expressed high levels of agreement, started to polarize in ways that are now recognizably partisan today (Conley, 2019; see Burton et al., 2021 for evidence of partisan effects within gun owners today). Second, the National Rifle Association (NRA) began cultivating a salient gun owner identity around self-protection and concealed carry (rather than sports and hunting; Yamane et al., 2018). Further, the NRA began to frame the right to gun ownership—and therefore the ability to identify as a gun owner—as constantly under threat from the U.S. government and groups of individuals who want to take away their guns (Bhatia, 2019; Lacombe, 2019, 2023). Alongside this continued salience, the NRA intentionally cultivated a narrative of legal gun ownership as being for "moral Americans" who value freedom and other core American values. This language not only sought to explicitly frame gun ownership as a culturally normative identity but also implicitly linked to Whiteness (see Filindra & Kaplan, 2016; Stroud, 2012). In contrast, policies including the war on drugs, mass incarceration, and use of racial dog-whistles by political elites targeted Black people and modernized perceptions of Black criminality (Alexander, 2010; Lassiter, 2015), and therefore perceived unworthiness of Black people being legal gun owners. This period early in the post-Civil Rights era, echoed the eras prior, and continued to reinforce the ideas that Black access to guns be monitored or restricted and that White access to firearms be permitted. Further, this period illuminated how ideas about what makes the world dangerous (e.g., Black people vs. institutional violence such as police brutality) and what institutions should do to make U.S. citizens feel protected can diverge drastically by race.

Connecting Guns as Historical Source of Group Dominance and Empowerment to Modern

Firearm Attitudes

Since 2020, the number of new guns owned by U.S. civilians has increased sharply. During April and May 2020—the onset of U.S. COVID-19 pandemic restrictions—3.4 million firearms were sold, a 75% average increase from the same period in 2019 (Small Arms Analytics, 2020ab). During this period, both perceiving guns as a source of safety and concerns about government overreach were significant drivers of firearm purchase interest (Kerner et al., 2022). However, in the next two-month period, the rate of increase in firearms sold nearly doubled. In June and July 2020—the onset of nationwide, multiracial protests against systemic racism in U.S. policing—4.5 million firearms were sold, a 140% average increase from the same period in 2019 (Small Arms Analytics, 2020cd). While typical concerns about government overreach did lead to a large increase in firearm purchase interest at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, gun purchase behavior showed even higher increases during the months when the racial status quo was threatened and group power conflict was made highly salient (see Kerner et al., 2022 for discussion).

Tracing the historical trajectory of firearm access and policy sheds light on how firearms attitudes and behaviors are still tied to both concerns about personal safety and collective power. Stemming from desires to establish and maintain group dominance, early colonial U.S. laws and policies established by White colonists and citizens sought to reinforce the collective power and personal safety of their racial/ethnic in-group through gun access while limiting the potential collective power of indigenous and Black populations by restricting gun access. While many Americans today across racial/ethnic groups may perceive guns as a source of personal safety (Nadeem, 2023), the differential trajectory of historical gun access due to racial oppression likely

facilitates a divergence on whether and how guns are regarded as a symbol of collective power —as a potential source of group dominance among some groups (e.g., White Americans) versus a source of community empowerment and resilience among others (e.g., Black Americans).

As social psychologists, our primary role and training is to make sense of how more immediate social contexts shape human behavior and attitudes. We recognize individuals have personal needs, but individuals also are a part of social groups and have group-level motivations that they need to satisfy (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Turner, 2005). Building an understanding of how individual-level motivations shape firearm attitudes and behaviors (Buttrick, 2020) in the context of group- and system-level processes is a task that we as social psychologists must continue to pursue. Taking a long view and trajectory of psychology over time can help further our understanding of psychology in context today (Lewin, 1939; Oishi & Graham, 2010), particularly as it relates to understanding racism and addressing its persistent and insidious effects (Trawalter & Bart-Plange, 2020; Trawalter et al., 2022).

In the next section, I highlight four areas where understanding this history of racism and considering group power concerns in the context of present-day racism may help in the social psychological study of firearms: the interrelatedness of collective power and individual safety concerns, the unique predictive effects of collective power motivations, the interplay of in-group and out-group beliefs on collective power perceptions and consequences, and how group power concerns complicate efforts to intervene on the belief that the world is dangerous (see Table 1). **Investigating the interrelatedness of firearms as a symbolic source of safety and collective power in the context of structural racism.**

The extent to which the perceived collective power of firearm access is interrelated with individual safety concerns is likely dependent on one's in-group position in relation to structural

power in society. While gun purchases dramatically spiked in 2020, particularly during the

period of COVID-19 and protests for racial justice, unease about political and social realities pre-

COVID had already begun to spark increases in gun ownership, particularly among members of

groups who have been historically marginalized in U.S. society (Carlson, 2023). With the return

of more explicit forms of prejudice expression due to the sociopolitical climate (Schaffner, 2019)

and increased attention to and uncertainties about racialized violence from civilians and state

actors (e.g., police killings; Bor et al., 2018), Black Americans showed large increases in legal

gun ownership. This shift included rapid increases in purchasing firearms and gun rights

utilization (e.g., obtaining concealed carry permits; Aning, 2022; Fox News, 2017), and a

significant increase in membership in Black gun organizations, particularly after the election of

Donald Trump to the U.S. Presidency in 2016 (Young, 2017).

However, for Black Americans, the personal safety and collective power legal gun

ownership may be perceived to provide is likely complicated due to owning a gun increasing the

threat of one's Blackness. For example, a qualitative study with Black women sought to

understand the motivations behind their decision to purchase a firearm for the first time (Bowen

et al., 2023). The primary motivation the Black women described centered their personal

safety—buying a gun to protect their home. However, nearly all the Black women expressed

purchasing a firearm to also combat what they perceived as increasing vulnerability to

experiencing racialized violence outside the home (e.g., from racially motivated gun attacks,

public racial confrontations, and harassment by White people and White men in particular).

While perceiving that carrying a gun may help manage these concerns, the Black women owners

noted that their gun possession could create new threats. In particular, they worried that their

public possession of a gun would also increase the likelihood that they would be perceived as a

threat to White people and structures (e.g., police), which could also endanger their lives. This fear led them to take additional precautions that contradicted their original personal safety intentions of carrying, such as keeping their gun in the trunk of their car rather than in the glove compartment in case they were pulled over by police (Bowen et al., 2023). This finding implicates that regardless of the extent to which a Black person identifies with their racial in-group, structural forces may incur a forced interdependence (Brannon et al., 2015; Markus, 2017) and awareness of how one's race can play a role in one's identification as a gun owner. Therefore, given the positionality of one's racial in-group within the U.S. hierarchy, possessing a firearm as a Black person may increase the extent to which White people and institutions perceive a Black person, now with a gun, as a threat—which can detract from the sense of personal safety a firearm is perceived to provide (Bowen et al., 2023; Shapira, 2017).

However, this consideration may be less impactful on the perceived collective power of firearms to aid in resisting intergroup and structural oppression. For example, the increasing number of Black Americans who are legally buying guns and joining Black-led gun organizations, such as the National African American Gun Association (NAAGA) may reflect this notion. NAAGA is a Black-led collective of gun owners that aims to increase Black gun familiarity and ownership, teach the history of Black arms, and whose official stance is that it is "a pro 2nd Amendment organization focused on the preservation of our community through armed protection and community building" (National African American Gun Association, 2023). The collective purpose of this gun organization reflects Black lay conceptions of collective power: emphasizing community and intra-group cohesion and solidarity, with less emphasis on group dominance but the persisting of Black communities (Twali et al., 2023). While carrying a weapon may mitigate some personal safety concerns while exacerbating others for Black

Americans, the collective empowerment that Black firearm access is perceived to provide may

be less impacted by structural forms of racism and oppression, and instead, motivated by it.

While rates of increase in White firearm ownership were outpaced by several non-White

groups in the lead-up to the COVID-19 pandemic, White American's firearm attitudes and

behaviors were also linked to the salient issues of race and police brutality in this period (see

Shapira, 2017). In an interview with rural White Missourians, Metzl (2019) described how St.

Louis-based protests for justice for Mike Brown in 2014—an unarmed Black teenager shot and

killed by police in St. Louis—threatened White Americans who lived far from where the protests

occurred. One White father turned to guns to protect his family in response to the broader Black

Lives Matter protests against police brutality, motivated by the belief that the world was

changing for the worse and that "this is what we have to do as white Americans" (Metzl, 2019,

pg. 80).

White Americans, particularly White men, view their firearm possession as providing

them safety but also granting them the moral responsibility and the equalizing ability to serve as

a protector of their (White) family and broader (White) community from Black men; carrying

their weapon reinforces the importance of this identity as well as vigilance toward racial out-

group members (Stroud, 2012). Reflecting the aforementioned importance of attending to the

layered intersections of identity, ideologies, and systems, White men's adherence to hegemonic

notions of masculinity in the context of gun ownership (e.g., citizen protector), is considered to

reflect and reinforce perceived threats "from above" (i.e., perceived government intent to control

them but not protect them) and perceived threats "from below" (i.e., Black criminals; see

Carlson, 2023); these ideas are often propagated by common narratives found in mainstream

conservative media (Carlson, 2015; Cassino, 2016) and gun communities (e.g., NRA; Lacomb, 2023; Stroud, 2012; gun shows, shops, and classes; Carlson, 2023; Shapira, 2017).

Ironically however, for White Americans (unlike Black Americans), the personal safety that guns are felt to provide and the use of guns to protect and empower one's racial in-group may not feel at tension or under threat, as engaging in actions to enhance in-group power (patrolling communities) is consistent with culturally normative assumptions about who is a criminal and who is not (Eberhardt et al., 2004; Dixon, 2008; Welch, 2007). Further, given U.S. systems and structures privilege Whiteness (Remedios, 2022), whether a White person strongly identifies with their racial in-group or not, this structural privilege is conferred (Knowles et al., 2014; Phillips & Lowery, 2018) even in the cases where one has committed severe gun violence (Leander, Kreienkamp et al., 2020; NAACP, 2021; Mystal, 2021). In short, there may be greater asymmetry in the personal safety that guns could symbolically provide Black and White Americans, but less asymmetry in the collective power guns symbolically represent for one's in-group.

Testing the unique predictive effect of perceiving firearms as a source of collective power on firearm attitudes and behaviors

From a social psychological perspective, using the experimental method to shift concerns about group status (e.g., priming the numerical decline of White Americans, or the shifting prototype of who is American; Craig & Richeson, 2014; Danbold & Huo, 2015) might illuminate the unique effect of group power concerns on firearm behaviors to distinguish these effects from concerns about individual safety (e.g., perceiving an increase in crime victimization). Does priming concerns about collective power shape all gun attitudes and behaviors in the same manner, or are their specific firearm attitudes unique to the perception of guns as a source of

collective power? For example, evoking group status threat might shape gun type preferences

(e.g., handgun versus military-style rifle; Sola, 2021), the desired quantity of guns personally

owned, or policy preferences for the form of carrying one's weapon in public (e.g., preference

for concealed carry versus open-carry). Understanding and distinguishing firearm attitudes,

behaviors, and policy preferences can help distill gun practices originating out of a concern for

group power rather than a concern for personal safety and security.

Further, and maybe most distinct in how perceiving guns as a source of collective power

differs from perceiving guns as a source of safety, is that collective power motivations may

implicate more consideration of group, rather than personal, access to firearms. Unlike personal

safety, the symbolic collective power of a firearm may not be singularly tied to personal firearm

access but questions about broader firearm access of one's in-group and the restriction of firearm

access among threatening out-group members. This understanding may help clarify recently

published work on how White Americans who hold strong anti-Black attitudes are more

supportive of gun rights, but whose support is tempered when Black Americans are shown as

accessing firearms legally at a faster rate than the White in-group.

In Higginbotham et al. (2023), a novel race-guns implicit association task demonstrated

that White participants more strongly associate White Americans with gun rights and Black

Americans with gun control. This association was driven by White Americans who held higher

levels of racial resentment (i.e., anti-Black attitudes). This association was not related to personal

gun ownership, signaling that this bias was driven not by self-interest, but more by symbolic

attitudes about who should have access to guns (i.e., my racial in-group, but not racial out-group

members). In this vein, we also found that participants' perceptions of legal gun owners as a

social group were driven by this racial bias and anti-Black attitudes generally. Participants who

held a stronger association of gun rights with White Americans (and gun control with Black Americans) felt the most warmth toward legal gun owners.

However, when exposed to information suggesting that Black people are legally utilizing specific gun rights (e.g., concealed carry) at a faster rate than White Americans (compared to the opposite), White Americans who held strong anti-Black attitudes showed less support for the specific gun right Black people were using and reported less positive evaluations of legal gun owners more broadly (Higginbotham et al., 2023). Therefore, White Americans who held stronger anti-Black attitudes (but not those who did not) perceived gun rights and legal gun ownership as for White people, gun control as for Black people, and were less supportive of the gun rights Black people were described as utilizing at a faster rate than White people. This present-day psychology of White Americans mirrors the historical trajectory and symbolism of White-centric firearm access, which was employed to maintain group power and dominance by focusing on who can and who cannot access firearms at a group level rather than an individual level.

Identifying how beliefs about in-groups, out-groups, and systems influence firearm collective power perceptions and consequences

Acknowledging within-group variation in factors predicting the symbolic perception of firearms protects from essentializing race in the context of group-relevant behavior and instead points to sociocultural and structural forces as shaping these psychological processes. Further inquiry into how one perceives and what one believes about the in-group (e.g., group identification, collective orientation), out-group (e.g., racial resentment, cultural stereotypes/norms), and system (e.g., social dominance orientation, zero-sum beliefs) should

further illuminate the social antecedents and consequences of perceiving firearms as a source of collective power in the context of intergroup relations.

Take for instance, one might seek to investigate whether concerns about group-level firearm access are tied more to in-group or out-group consideration (see, Jardina, 2021; Lowery et al., 2006). Understanding how an individual thinks about the self in relation to their in-group (e.g., do I identify strongly as a member of my racial/ethnic in-group?), thinks about the relation of their in-group in comparison to other out-groups (e.g., it is important that I feel my racial/ethnic in-group is perceived as equal in status and respect to other out-groups?), and thinks about the nature of the system they are involved in (e.g., am I likely to be categorized as a member of my racial in-group and what stereotypes does the categorization elicit?) can help illuminate if, when, and how in-group versus out-group distinctions might matter in this particular firearm context.

For example, imagine an individual belonging to a historically dominant group who believes it is natural for some groups to dominate and be elevated over other more subordinate groups (e.g., high in social dominance orientation; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Ho et al., 2015) and feels the resources in their environment, such as jobs, are scarce (e.g., zero-sum realistic threat; Stephan et al., 2002; Wilkins et al., 2015). For this individual holding this set of particular beliefs, perceiving firearms as a source of collective power may elicit out-group members' access to firearms as a threat to in-group dominance and resource control. In this case, the perception of firearm access as a source of collective power may be tied to perceived benefits for the in-group, and also tied to negative attitudes toward (i.e., prejudice) or beliefs about out-group members (e.g., social projection of lay collective power beliefs onto out-group members; see Krueger, 2007).

On the other hand, a member of a historically marginalized group could identify strongly with their in-group and acknowledge group dominance as normative of the broader mainstream culture while personally ascribing to more prosocial and intragroup understandings of group power due to in-group norms (e.g., group power as originating from in-group solidarity, resilience; Twali et al., 2023). And, the collective power firearm access is perceived to provide may be particularly tied to in-group considerations (e.g., increasing in-group solidarity, protecting in-group members from out-group or structural intimidation), rather than out-group prejudice. Given their focus on intragroup-derived power, for this individual, perceiving that guns are a source of collective power may not automatically elicit out-group firearm access to be threatening to in-group power. Rather the extent to which an out-group is perceived as generally hostile to the in-group or the in-group's expressed societal goals (e.g., egalitarianism; Twali et al., 2023) should predict perceived threat. Understanding the nature and ramifications of group and system beliefs underlying the association of firearms with collective power can illuminate socioecological and cultural points of contention and intervention in maladaptive gun attitudes and behavior.

Reckoning with how racism and collective power concerns complicate efforts to address worldviews underlying protective gun ownership.

As outlined previously, the belief that the world is a dangerous place and that societal institutions will not offer protection from this danger are two key worldviews that motivate self-protective gun ownership (Buttrick, 2020). As posed in the historical review of the Post Civil Rights Era (see also, Trawalter et al., 2022), what one perceives as making the world dangerous and what societal institutions should do to protect its citizens from that danger is partly shaped by one's individual and group positionality within broader social systems (Cole, 2009). The

potential to positively impact this worldview (e.g., interventions, policy) then requires the

consideration of group power concerns. For example, if a primary salient threat that elicits the

world to feel dangerous for a White self-protective gun owner is Black people, what institutional

actions would make this gun owner feel less threatened by the world? Relatedly, what actions

could societal institutions take to make a Black self-protective gun owner, worried about both

crime and racialized violence due to their racial in-group membership, feel safe? When

approaching these questions with honesty, at present and historically (Feagin, 1970), system-

level solutions to these concerns may feel presently at odds. Given the historical prioritization

and privileging of the concerns of White Americans in U.S. society (Mills, 1997), critical

attention must be paid to ensure that proposed solutions don't further the harm to those most

marginalized in society and instead can elicit a sense of shared purpose—particularly as it relates

to the pursual of gun safety.

For example, Black Americans are disproportionately more likely to be the victims of or

experience firearm-related homicides (National Vital Statistics System, 2021a; see also Losee et

al., 2023). This disproportionate likelihood can be traced to past racist policies such as redlining

that led to racially segregated, economically impoverished neighborhoods (Poulson, et al., 2021;

see also Carlson, 2015). In part due to this reality, Black Americans support most forms of gun

control at higher rates than White Americans, particularly those that do not require the

involvement of law enforcement (Crifasi et al., 2021). Speaking to the strength of this position,

some Black Americans who feel like they need to own guns for threats they perceive in the

world, express regret for feeling the need to own a gun (Bowen et al., 2023). However, Black

Americans' calls for broader gun control, even in predominately Black cities often go unheard

and unacknowledged (Anderson, 2021). It seems clear that passing legislation that targets gun

safety upstream or addresses underlying causes of firearm-related homicide (poverty, wealth) are institutional actions that would address gun violence that disproportionately impacts Black communities (Poulson et al., 2021)–helping reduce the perception that the world is dangerous and increasing the sense that societal systems and institutions can helpfully intervene among Black Americans.

Sadly, it is these same policies that may draw the most resistance from White political elites and parts of the White citizenry, in part because these policies are also perceived to negatively impact the in-group (e.g., White gun owners; Lowery et al., 2018) or perceived to disproportionately benefit non-White people (e.g., social safety net programs; Cooley et al., 2019; Telser, 2012). Because of this group-based perception, policies that pursue greater gun regulation or strengthen the social safety net may elicit some White Americans to perceive that societal institutions do not have their in-group's interest or protection in mind, which in turn may elicit further concerns about in-group power and safety in society.

Reckoning with racism and group power concerns in the context of firearm motivations pose a difficult task for people interested in pursuing gun safety given ongoing shifts in the racial demography of the U.S. If the changing racial makeup of the U.S. (e.g., increasing immigration, secularism) elicits the world to feel less safe and threatens some Americans' perceived in-group power, the question that must be asked is what policies and institutions will make them feel safer and what impacts these kinds of policies would have on the lives of the broader U.S. citizenry. Without addressing the underlying motivation of perceived threats to in-group power, the authentic pursuit of progress (e.g., a multiracial democracy) may continue to elicit a sense of group disempowerment among those most threatened by demographic change (e.g., White Americans; Craig & Richeson, 2014), which can result in support or perpetuation of gun

violence as a culturally normative way to bolster one's in-group status and personal sense of significance (Leander, Agostini et al., 2020; Leander, Kreienkamp et al., 2020; Mencken & Frose, 2019). Yet, the tragedy of gun violence spurred by group power concerns is not limited to just the potential for increases in intergroup violence, and the potential spiraling of armament in response (Depew & Swenson, 2018); it is also that with increased gun ownership comes increased risk for the most prevalent form of gun-related death—firearm-related suicide, which disproportionately impacts poor and working-class White men (Metzl, 2019; National Vital Statistics System, 2021b). Therefore, if left unaddressed, White racism and group power concerns offer a cyclical prediction: (a) fostering the conditions for high rates of gun violence in lower-income neighborhoods, (b) promoting White resistance to social welfare policies that could mitigate firearm-related crime and make U.S. society tangibly safer while instead (c) perceiving these policies as a threat to in-group status, which can (d) motivate more White gun ownership and increase the risk of firearm-related self-harm to self and family members. This consideration of collective power adds further group-level support for the perspective that guns and gun culture can serve as a maladaptive coping mechanism (Buttrick, 2020).

       While advocates for gun control and gun rights (and those in between) may perceive different routes to achieving gun safety, understanding collective power motivations in the context of racism and firearms, can help better inform efforts—policy and action—and promote worldviews that bring us closer to gun safety that preserves all persons' rights, dignity, and well-being. Although centering social psychology, greater consideration of collective power concerns has relevance for the study of firearms across multiple specializations within psychology, including but not limited to developmental psychology (e.g., exploring socialization of firearm collective power symbolism across generations) and political psychology (e.g., examining

attitudes toward state firearm violence against Indigenous peoples at Land Back protests, legal Black gun owners during police interactions, and armed/unarmed White insurrectionists at the U.S. Capitol on January 6th).

Conclusion

Current research on the social psychology of firearms in the U.S. context demonstrates that the embeddedness of firearms cannot be divorced from an understanding of their symbolic meaning in U.S. culture. As shared in the opening epitaph, Historian Dr. Carol Anderson places the origins of U.S. rights to gun access in the long history and ongoing struggle against prejudice and oppression. In this view, an understanding of firearms in the present cannot be divorced from an understanding of the potential for guns to serve as a source of collective power. As social psychologists, an understanding of this history can help better inform our research, theory, and study designs as we seek to continue unearthing the modern psychology behind U.S. firearm attitudes. This understanding can help us recognize what we do know and be a little more open to saying, "I don't know" and intentionally working in community with people who have more direct and diverse experiences with both guns and gun violence. It can help us recognize nuances in behaviors and make sense of meaningful differences between people who hold distinct identities or experiences (e.g., military service) rooted in distinct cultural understandings. But most importantly, while getting to a point of gun safety will undoubtedly be a difficult and sobering task, a reckoning with this history should provide some uncomfortable comfort in that the origin and one continuing driver of various aspects of gun violence in the U.S. is not unique, but a shared root cause of issues across multiple, key societal domains—healthcare, employment, housing, environmental sustainability, voting access, education—and that is the continuing impact of racism in U.S. society.

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