

**The Armory as Argument: Cultural Communication Practices and the (Dangerous)
Prospects for Civil Discourse about Gun Violence in the U.S.**

[They] arm themselves with pistols . . . under the pretense of protecting themselves against insult, when in fact being so armed they frequently insult others with impunity, or if resistance is made the pistol . . . is immediately resorted to.

—Jasper County, Georgia, Superior Court Grand Jury, 1834¹

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Articulation of Question

Can the U.S. sustain a reasoned and responsible conversation about the cause and consequences of violence with guns? Below, I examine how early weapons prohibitions in the U.S. responded to concerns that mirror antecedents of contemporary violence with guns; how those constants reflect cultural dispositions towards aggression in American culture and communication practices; and what those facts portended for civil discourse(s) about violence with guns in the U.S. In light of those discussions, the essay concludes by considering opportunities and challenges to fostering, focusing, and facilitating civil discourse(s) about everyday violence with guns.

Analysis

Debates about violence, guns, and weapons control are nothing new in the United States. Three years after the testimony quoted above, the Georgia State Legislature criminalized the concealed carry of weapons under, “An act to guard and protect the citizens of this state against the unwarrantable and too prevalent use of deadly weapons.”² Tennessee approved a similar ban in 1836, and Alabama followed in 1843, that state’s law declaring “no excuse shall be sufficient to authorize the carrying of an air gun, bowie knife, or knife of the like kind.”³ Early efforts at weapons control in the U.S. are rarely mentioned in modern debates about violence with guns, despite what I shall argue below are profound reasons to do so.

After “Columbine” in 1999, and “Virginia Tech” in 2007, the cry of “Never again” rang out against mass shootings in the U.S., particularly school shooting. In 2011, similar promises followed the attempted assassination of a member of the U.S. Congress at a shopping center in her district, followed in 2012 by two of the worst mass mass shootings in U.S. history. The first attack was in July 2012, when James Holmes killed 12 and injured 58 (all adults) in an Aurora, Colorado movie theater. The second shooting occurred five months latter at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, where Adam Lanza killed 20 first graders and 6 staff, injured 2, and then took his own life. As with previous shootings, the nation was “shocked,” and vowed renewed attention to the issues of violence, guns, and weapons control. Although it remains to be seen what responses might emerge to address the complex questions about violence, guns, and weapons control in the U.S., it is fairly certain that they will not stop the killing.⁴

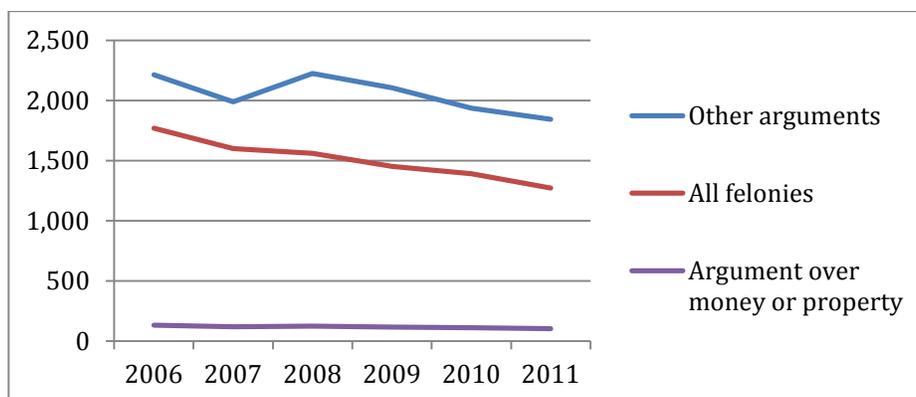
In the days following the Aurora and Newtown shootings, all manner of facts emerged about the events and the shooters, among them: both men used semi-automatic weapons equipped with large capacity magazines, obtained those weapons legally, were known to had suffered from mental illness, and attacked “soft-targets.” Predictable respondents, in turn, offered predicable responses. Some people blamed the weapons themselves, and forwarded resolutions to ban semi-automatic rifles, limit magazine capacity, and tighten background check laws. Others placed responsibility on the assailants, and suggested as appropriate responses better mental health services, more building security, and personal protection measures (e.g., concealed carry). All of those measures, and others, are perhaps ways of preventing or limiting

mass shootings, but mass shootings have little relevance to the issue of violence with guns in the U.S. If the goals of renewed attention to U.S. firearms policies are ideals and practices effective at curbing violence with guns, touchstones of that debate should not be the spectacular and the senseless, but the consistent causes and consequences of everyday violence with guns.

Consider the following statistics about violence with a gun in the U.S.: In 2012, 83 people were killed in mass shootings. During the same period, there were, on average, 87 deaths, and another 183 injuries *a day* due to gunshots.⁵ Since 2006, 934 people have been killed in mass shooting, while more than 56,000 have been killed by everyday violence with a gun in public, at work, and at home. In Chicago alone, children are killed with guns at an average rate of one “Newtown every four months;”⁶ between 2008 and 2012, gun shots killed nearly 2,400 Chicago youth before age 25.⁷ In the 3 months following the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School, approximately 2,300 people died at the end of a gun, an average of about one person, every hour, of every day.⁸ Between 2006 and 2013, less than 1 percent of all deaths by firearms in the U.S. were the result of gunshots fired during a mass shooting.⁹

If mass shootings are statistically insignificant contributions to deaths with a gun in the U.S., where should attention concerning this issue be focused? According to the Federal Bureau of Investigations,¹⁰ there were, in 2011, about 8,600 homicides resulting from a gunshot. Reflecting steady ratios (see Figure 1), of those murders, approximately 1,300 occurred while committing a felony crime (e.g., arson, burglary, or rape). The remaining shots were fired during activities classified as non-felony (3,700) or unknown (3,600). Focusing on identifiable non-felony reasons leading to murder with a gun, some of the leading causes were romantic trysts, brawls, and gang disputes. In addition, by a 3 to 1 margin over its nearest non-felony competitor (i.e., gang killings), more people who killed another person with a gun did so during “other arguments” than in any other single situation. Less than 5% of those arguments concerned money or property. In total, every year in the U.S., approximately 500 more people are killed with a gun as a result of an interpersonal disagreement than during acts of felony crime.

Figure 1. Select Data on U.S. Homicide by Firearms (2006–2011)



Today, as in the 1800s, the principal problems leading to violence with a gun in the U.S. are not mental illness, lack of protection, or “assault weapons” (most shootings occur with a handgun). The principle causes of so many deaths in the U.S. due to violence with a gun are disagreements, personal insult, and other relatively minor conflict situations. To respond to the issue of violence with guns, publics and policy makers need to understand and address why so many resort to the ready retort of bullets in difficult circumstances and conflict situations.

Although records are improving, little is known about the situations and experiences that lead people to kill other people with guns in everyday conflicts. Common rationalizations of everyday violence with guns include the prevalence of a gun culture, honor culture, and defensive responses among some communities.¹¹ Existing sociological explanations have some value for understanding the intersections of guns and conflict, but those reports tend to isolate subsets of the population, and overlook broader currents and conditions in U.S. culture that legitimate violent responses to personal injury and insult. Recently, efforts have been made to approach questions about everyday violence with guns as a health issue.¹² Epidemiology is a useful approach, but at present serves mainly to reframe the issue of violence with guns. Health-based perspectives provide different rationale for existing approaches to addressing issues of violence with guns; they do not necessarily offer new understandings about violence with guns.

To get a fresh perspective on the causes and consequences of everyday interpersonal violence, contemporary theory and research have increasingly employed the concept of “aggression.”¹³ In the majority of literatures, *aggression* is described as a behavioral or social psychological construct, existing on a spectrum from childhood teasing to self and/or other-destructive acts; violence is an extreme form of aggression.¹⁴ The value of aggression theory versus much of the existing discourse on violence is that the former better accounts for psychological attacks, interpersonal relations, and social contexts. Combined with health-based approaches to understanding causes and consequences of violence with guns, attention to aggression and aggressive behavior have proved to be fertile ground for new policy ideals and proposals.

The most widely promoted and studied new approaches concerning violence and guns center on schools.¹⁵ Some of the most interesting conclusions from the small body of extant research at the intersection of health and aggression in schools are that overt security measures (e.g., metal detectors) foster student distrust and resistance, that relationally attentive and available teachers and administrators are critical, and that peer relationships significantly influence students’ choices and options, for good and ill. To address the problem of violence and aggression in schools, the existing literature agrees that social skills training, conflict resolution education, and caring institutional environments are essential. Finally, this literature always notes the role of the family and community in school and youth violence and aggression prevention, but reports offer different, sometimes contradictory, conclusions about each.

Evidence-based health and aggression approaches to understanding and responding to violence are better and more relevant than ever, but their conclusions concerning trust, caring, and community often go unheard in the public sphere. Failure to take seriously the emerging

consensus that violence with guns is a health concern preceded by lower-level aggressive behavior best addressed through changes in social structures occurs for many intersecting reasons. Among the most important reasons for the lack of public discussions about emerging ideals and practices for understanding and responding to violence with guns is the issue of culture, particularly cultural norms in the U.S. that celebrate aggression.

Culture is a complex and variously idealized construct,¹⁶ only one dimension of which, from one perspective, is here considered. From a social constructionist approach, culture is the background against which meanings of self and others in relation are organized and interpreted.¹⁷ Culture does not determine who a person is, or how he or she understands others, but culture exerts tremendous influence on a person's life and relations. From a constructivist perspective, it is widely accepted that cultural norms structure and are structured by, practices of communication. In other words, culture and the norms for interaction embedded therein are created and recreated in everyday talk. To change a culture, it is necessary to change norms of communication.

Any society that desires and/or requires cultural change has only the *possibility* of success through longitudinal and multi-pronged endeavors. With respect to the issue of violence with guns in the U.S., efforts at cultural change face additional difficulties. Successful movements towards new ways of thinking about and responding to violence with guns in the U.S. are constrained, at least, by the following facts. First, U.S. cultural communication practices are saturated with reference to guns. Second, ideals about public discourse in the U.S. view aggression positively. Finally, messages received from all levels of U.S. society present symbolic (and physical) violence is an appropriate response to difficult situations and conflicts. From the classroom to the street corner, and the board room to the halls of government, it is nearly impossible to escape symbols and discourses of aggression in the U.S.

The prominent place of violence and guns in U.S. culture are well documented.¹⁸ What often gets overlooked is the role of communication in reproducing cultural norms that promote violence with guns. Metaphors such as "holding a gun to my head," "shooting the messenger," "hired gun," and "explosive news" are so pervasive in U.S. discourses that they are hardly noticed.¹⁹ In fact, even when an argument against aggression and/or violence is forwarded, the language used often draws on the cultural symbolism of guns. For example, following the Newtown shooting, when Vice President Biden introduced policy responses to reduce violence with guns, he said, "There's no silver bullet."²⁰ In an excellent survey of violence in the U.S., Strain implied that the nation should declare a "War on Violence."²¹ Tannen, in her seminal volume directed at highlighting and reducing aggression in U.S. communication practices, explained that, "Language is like a loaded gun" (p. 14).²²

Culture and communication are inextricably entwined; culture is constituted, in part, through communication, and communication is possible and meaningful only against a socio-cultural background. In the context of violence with guns in the U.S., the culture/communication nexus is highly paradoxical. Reducing acts of violence with guns in the U.S. requires changing the nation's cultural relationship with guns and violence, but because guns and violence are so

deeply embedded in U.S. communication practices, new reasons and responses to the issue of violence with guns have difficulty being received and/or recognized. Furthermore, even when a speaker or writer seeks to take a strong stance against violence with guns, cultural communication practices drawing on tropes related to guns and violence can lead to mixed messages.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to consider whether there are ways out of the paradoxical practices of communication constituting cultural discourses of violence and guns in the U.S. However, the statistics reported above about violence with guns, and the shattered and extinguished lives that those numbers fail to adequately represent, demand action. Since communication is at the root of acts of violence with guns in the U.S., as well as cultural norms of aggression legitimating such violence, the starting point to reduce causes and consequences of violence with guns should be the cultivation of socially responsible institutional and interpersonal relations and the communication skills necessary to manage those relations. In closing this essay, suggestions are offered that policy makers, publics, activists, and researchers can take in the search for new ways of communicating about violence with guns, and the socio-cultural foundations of aggression that perpetuate such violence.

Recommendations

The first necessary step in any attempt at changing cultural norms leading to violence with guns is to define aggression as a communicative practice, and to offer alternative ways of interacting with others in difficult/conflict situations. As a form of communication, *aggressiveness* is a verbal attack on the self-worth of an individual, and is contrasted with *argumentativeness*, which engages the other's ideas. A robust body of verbal aggressiveness investigations have reached "the rather unequivocal conclusion that the effects of argumentativeness are constructive and those of verbal aggression are destructive."²³ As concepts and practices, argumentativeness and aggressiveness have many articulations with immediate and long term implications for debates and discussions about violence with guns. Normatively, aggressive communication can be demonstrated, observed, and corrected.²⁴ As an ethic, argumentativeness can be idealized, modeled, and taught as alternative to aggression.²⁵ Interpretively, argument and aggression can be located among local and global discourses, allowing for understanding of immediate situations/contexts and broader cultural influences.²⁶

Having defined communicative aggression and at least one alternative,²⁷ the second task is to identify contexts where aggressive communication is the norm in everyday interaction. The list of situations where aggressive communication is valued in U.S. culture is perhaps endless; from "trash talk" on the field to slanders outside the women's health clinic, words that devalue other people are all too common within institutions and systems in which individuals are organized and related. Perhaps the most important contexts in which aggressive communication is today celebrated is the political and/or governmental sphere (including reporting thereof). U.S. politics has never been a civil sport, but over the last 20 years or so, it appears to have increasingly little room for reasoned, responsible, and respectful argument. The media

personality Tucker Carlson has best evidenced the perceived value of aggression in U.S. politics, declaring in 2007 that then Senator Obama “sound[ed] like a pothead” when the presidential candidate opined that “we have lost the capacity to recognize ourselves in each other . . . [producing] an empathy deficit.”²⁸

Finally, the question arises as to how people might seek to reduce aggressive communication and promote argumentiveness (and other non-violent communication) in U.S. politics, and everyday interactions. Advocates for practices of deliberation, dialogue, and collaboration have long made the case for transforming how people understand themselves and others through reasoned and responsible communication about public issues and policy. Those ideals remain the best available means for cultural change. Research, for example, suggests that with instruction and practice, “policy debating increases argumentativeness and value debating reduces verbal aggression” (Colbert, 1993, p. 213).²⁹ Cultural change must start with youth in school, and be a constant theme throughout the curriculum and institutional relations (e.g., student and teacher interactions),³⁰ but cultivating a less aggressive culture will be impossible if adults do not support such efforts, and model non-aggression in their communication practices with children and each other. With respect to transforming aggressive communication practices among U.S. adults, violence with guns is perhaps the best issue with which to begin the conversation. The danger, however, is that we will continue to talk about marginal gun related issues (e.g., mass shootings and assault weapons) in aggressive ways, and in doing so reproduce cultural norms leading to everyday violence with guns.

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