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INTRODUCTION

Gun marketers in the United States are increasingly targeting women. Women can be viewed as a vulnerable population due to the strong likelihood that they will be physically assaulted some time during their lives (Buchwald, Fletcher and Roth 1993). This vulnerability makes women easy prey for gun marketers, who use fear appeals to stimulate women's strong need for self-protection. They are being told by these marketers that purchasing a firearm is the best method of personal protection ("Petition" 1996). There is some evidence that women are buying into these messages and purchasing guns in order to feel safer (Blair and Hyatt 1995).

This interest in women as a new target market for guns was partially initiated because gun marketers in the 1980's saw that the primary market for guns (white males) was saturated (47% of men own a firearm, as compared to only 12% of women) (Sugarman and Rand 1994). According to a recent study by the Violence Policy Center ("Female Persuasion" 1994), handgun production reached an all-time high of 2.6 million units in 1982, but plunged downward to 1.4 million units by 1986. Gun manufacturers, deciding it was time to expand into niche marketing campaigns, redesigned and expanded their product lines to appeal to new markets, particularly women. "The firearms industry has mounted a marketing campaign based on a professed concern for women's safety from crime and violence. In this effort, safety is presented as solely a personal obligation best achieved through firearms ownership. To reject this obligation, it is argued, is tantamount to inviting victimization. Also, as a part of this approach, the firearms industry presents female handgun ownership as one more male bastion falling to women's equality....The primary marketing tactic, however, is not equality, but fear. The pitch to women is simple: You're a woman. Some stranger is going to try to rape you. You'd better buy a handgun" (1994:1). As manufacturers of guns and gun-related products increase their efforts to recruit women, there has also been a corresponding outcry concerning the ethics of targeting this vulnerable population (e.g., Neuborne 1994; Polter 1994).

Compared to most industrialized societies, the U.S. has a very large proportion of privately owned firearms (Bankston et al. 1990), and guns have played an important role in the historical development of America. Since guns have traditionally been associated with...
masculinity and independence, gun marketers must first convince women that guns are really appropriate for them. There are some similarities between this situation and the targeting of women by cigarette manufacturers in the 1950's and 1960's, whose marketing tactics resemble those used by gun marketers today. Once considered primarily a man's product, cigarettes were promoted to women by marketers like Virginia Slims, who associated their product with the freedoms usually reserved for men. In a recent Smith and Wesson LadySmith handgun advertisement, a young woman is shown practicing at a shooting range above the slogan "What Would Mom Think Now," possibly the "You've Come A Long Way, Baby" of the 1990's. Other gun marketers attempt to feminize guns by associating them with traditionally feminine symbols, like wedding rings, pearls, lace and pictures of children by picturing these items next to each other. For those women who are concerned about losing their femininity with a gun purchase, marketers of purses with gun pouches promise that the women can be safe, feminine and stylish all at once (Blair and Hyatt 1995).

The National Rifle Association (NRA), though not a marketer of guns, markets both memberships and self-defense courses to women under the slogan "Refuse to be a Victim." Since women are often accused of wanting to be victims, the NRA appears to be offering women protection not only from potential attackers, but also from a society that may accuse them of asking to be victims if they have not properly armed themselves. This attitude that women are asking to be victims is evident in the treatment of rape cases by the criminal justice system. What the female victim was wearing and whether she had been drinking often become central indicators of the accused rapists' guilt (French 1992).

Many studies indicate that gun ownership by women is no panacea for violence against them. Research by the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta found that when a gun is used in domestic violence, death is twelve times more likely than when no gun is used; and these deaths are overwhelmingly the woman's (Fishman 1993). A landmark study in King County, Washington, which includes Seattle, found that a gun kept in the home is forty-three times more likely to be used to kill its owner, a family member or a friend than an intruder (Kellerman and Reay 1986). Considering that domestic violence is usually man against woman and is the major cause of injury to women between the ages of 25 and 44, guns in the home are a particular threat to women. In addition, the sharp increase in the number of women committing suicide with handguns is particularly notable (Sugarman and Rand 1994). Hill (1994) associates the higher suicide rate over the last 25 years with an increase in household gun ownership. A Pittsburgh psychiatric hospital reported that the mere presence of a gun in the home more than doubles the odds that an adolescent member of the family will commit suicide (Brent et al. 1991), and another recent study found that having a gun in the house increases the risk that any member of the household would die in a homicide by 2.7 times, and by suicide by 4.8 times the rate of households without guns (Kellerman 1992, 1993).

MEDIA INFLUENCES

It is likely that Americans have acquired some of their gun knowledge from the media, which is notorious for perpetuating stereotypes about various racial, ethnic and gender groups (Pollay 1986). We argue that the media has a strong influence on American attitudes toward women who purchase firearms.
Women in the movies have traditionally been considered incapable of violence, particularly violence against men. The classic film beauty of the 1940's beat her little fists ineffectively against a strong man's chest before collapsing into tears. In the 1970's the ditzy female sidekick would trip and fall during the chase scene, and was likely to leave her safety catch on when it was time to shoot the bad guy. The only violence traditionally permitted to women is the sneaky kind: conspiracy, manipulation, deceit, poison or a stiletto in the back (Clarke 1993). One of the great myths perpetuated by the media is that a "real lady" can and should handle any difficulty and defuse any assault without ever raising her voice or losing her manners.

Mary Stange (1994) argues that the media (primarily television and movies) discourages women from owning guns and promotes the message that it is more appropriate for "good" women to be rescued by men than for women to arm themselves against violent attack. Stange adds that this message both "perpetuates a stereotype about women's relative lack of power that feminism has sought to overturn," and implies that because women cannot really defend themselves, they should remain in their place as society's passive objects (1994:41). To support her position that more women should buy guns and learn how to shoot them, Stange cites evidence that women who are exposed to one gun safety class report a decrease in fear and an increase in a sense of personal empowerment and control.

The news media also contributes to our society's perceptions of women and violence. When women do become violent, we perceive it as shocking and awful, far worse than the male violence that we take for granted (Clarke 1993). For example, when Susan Smith confessed to killing her two little sons in South Carolina, the entire country was shocked and outraged. Because it was such an unusual case, the media picked up on the story, and reports appeared daily in newspapers and tabloids. Smith was certainly the most hated woman in America. On the other hand, between 1967 and 1973, battering men killed 17,500 women and children in the United States (Jones 1994:23). A man who kills his wife or children is no longer likely to be a big story in the media, unless the man happens to be a big celebrity.

Recently, a few movies have featured tough women who totally defy traditional stereotypes. Only in the last twenty years have fictional females arrived who are ready with fists, karate kicks and guns. This new genre of "Amazon fantasy" has grown up in books, movies and television (Clarke 1993:398). Sometimes the characters start out as traditional women who become angry and set out to avenge their own rapes or a crime committed against their family. For example, the characters in the movie "Thelma and Louise" start out as traditional women who, after killing a rapist, cross over to become women warriors. As a part of this transformation they display more masculinized behavior; they curse, fight, smoke and shoot. These characters, who were too timid to touch a pistol at the beginning of the film, become adept at using guns to shoot a rapist, overwhelm policemen, rob convenience stores and blow up a truck by the end of the film (Hirschman 1993). Other fighting heroines and anti-heroines are beginning to surface, such as Sigourney Weaver in "Aliens," Anne Prillaud in "La Femme Nikita," Linda Hamilton in the "Terminator" films and Deborra-Lee Furness in "Shame." Even films with no pretense of social commentary, like "Conan the Destroyer" and "The Golden Child," are featuring warrior women who were...
previously restricted to the pages of Marvel Comics.

COGNITIVE PROCESSES

It has been observed that women are often stereotyped in the media. A stereotype represents the average of all attributes relevant to belonging to a category, or a picture that comes to mind when a category is activated. Where do these stereotypes of women originate? Cognitive psychologists have determined that the formation of stereotypes is part of normal cognitive processes, due to limited human information processing capacities (Fiske and Taylor 1984). Since stereotypes are often based on visually prominent features such as age, race, sex, and ethnicity, perceptual processes are important to this type of schema (Fiske and Taylor 1984). Once a person is categorized as black or white, young or old, male or female, the stereotypic content of the schema is likely to apply regardless of how much or how little the person looks or acts like the typical category member (Fiske and Taylor 1984).

In the interest of cognitive efficiency, people first try to categorize others, using explicitly provided labels or using the individual's fit to the attributes of the category stereotype. People may be categorized on the basis of a set of stereotypical attributes, or on the basis of resemblance to a specific exemplar. Categorization attempts can be relatively successful or unsuccessful, because the target may show varying degrees of fit to the most applicable category. When categorization is successful, the category label is activated in memory, and the associated affect is quickly activated along with the label and traits relevant to category membership. For example, if a woman is categorized as a "typical" female, it would be inferred that she must possess other stereotypical female qualities that may or may not be apparent at the time of categorization. Someone with more traditional ideas might infer that a woman identified as a "wife" is also devoted, loving, and possibly a mother and might see a single woman as a sex object or a spinster, depending on her age.

Failure to categorize a person occurs when some attributes are dramatically inconsistent with one's stereotype. In this case, processing of the traits is expected to occur in a more piecemeal fashion, i.e., attribute by attribute (Fiske and Pavelchak 1986). For example, if a woman does not appear to fit into an established schema, more effort must be spent to try to understand where this woman fits in terms of one's perception of women. Since purchasing a firearm is, in itself, somewhat outside the traditional female gender role, perceptions must be adjusted to somehow reconcile this inconsistency.

Schemata of all kinds are usually difficult to change. Known as the perseverance effect, schemata often persist stubbornly even in the face of evidence to the contrary (Fiske and Taylor 1984). People faced with inconsistencies are likely to spend extra processing time to explain the situation so that it fits an existing schema-based impression. One way to do this is to attribute the inconsistent behavior to temporary situational causes, which then makes it irrelevant to the existing schema-based impression. For example, a traditional woman might be buying a gun because of situational pressures, like a recent mugging. On the other hand, if one is forced to attribute the inconsistency to the personality of the person, then one must fit it in with the existing schema-based impression of the person's characteristics. A further variant on the perseverance effect is that people sometimes perversely interpret the
exception as further proof of their schema. For example, someone might interpret a traditional woman owning a gun as protecting her kids (Fiske and Taylor 1984).

Another type of cognitive bias can occur when assessing the frequency of a class or the probability of an event. According to this "availability" heuristic (Tversky and Kahneman 1973), people overestimate the likelihood of events occurring when a number of supportive examples easily come to mind. The implication is that if people can think of a number of examples from the media or personal experience, they are likely to perceive their knowledge to represent the "population," rather than a biased sample. These biases are likely to depend on the recency of the information, as well as on the salience. For example, the amount of press coverage given to the Susan Smith murders will cause people to overestimate the frequency of such events. On the other hand, because comparable murders by men are usually not considered to be "big news," people are likely to underestimate the frequency of these events in the actual population.

Imaginability also plays an important role in the evaluation of probabilities in real life situations. The risk involved in an undertaking may be grossly underestimated if some possible dangers are either difficult to conceive of or simply do not come to mind (Tversky and Kahneman 1974). For example, it is probably difficult for a woman to conceive that she might be attacked by a friend, relative or acquaintance, as opposed to a stranger. Until recently, violence among friends and family members was considered to be a private matter and was not highly publicized. On the other hand, shocking attacks by strangers are much more likely to be reported in a sensational way by the media. Under these conditions, it is not surprising that women often speak as if they are much more likely to be attacked by a deranged stranger than by someone they know (Blair and Hyatt 1995).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the possible stereotypes that people have of women buying, owning, and using firearms. As discussed, past studies have looked at the reasons for and the dangers of female gun ownership, but none have attempted to understand the underlying stereotypes associated with such non-traditional behavior. This study also represents a novel attempt to use a projective technique to get at this sensitive political issue.

METHOD

The method chosen to examine people's stereotypes and fantasies about women purchasing guns is the TAT (Thematic Apperception Test). The use of this technique allows the respondents to project their own beliefs about women and guns while interpreting the behavior of the characters portrayed in the picture. Since gun ownership and gender are widespread social and political issues affecting all U.S. residents, a student sample was used. Respondents were undergraduate students at a medium-sized state university. They were shown four different sketches portraying scenes involving women and guns, and were asked to write a story about each picture. Specifically, they were asked to indicate: who the characters are, what they're thinking, why they're doing what they're doing, and what will happen next. Stories were typically between fifty and ninety words, and sixty-five respondents completed stories about the four pictures. No systematic differences between stories written by male versus female respondents were found, so all responses were analyzed together. Both authors read all the
stories and attempted to list common themes separately. Initially there was strong agreement between both authors' lists of themes. After much discussion between authors and agreement on common emergent themes, one author summarized quotes from the stories into common themes. Only the results from the first picture will be discussed here. In this sketch (see Appendix), a woman in a skirt with a small purse over her shoulder is being shown a rifle or shotgun by a gun salesman who has a beard (to positively identify him as male). The salesman is behind a counter in a gun store, and behind the salesman is a poster advertising ammunition and stun guns.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Respondents' stories indicate that their knowledge about gun purchasing by women is strongly influenced by female gender stereotypes. It is important to consider the implications that these findings have for both marketers and consumers of firearms. First, most respondents assume that the woman is buying the gun because of fears of being attacked (37 out of 65), as opposed to buying the gun for sport, despite the fact that the gun appears to be a rifle or shotgun. In the following representative quotation, the woman is desperate for protection but is apprehensive about actually using the gun:

"Woman is thinking that she can't believe she's about to buy a gun, but she feels desperate for some reason, so she's getting one for protection. She will buy the gun, take it home, and look at it." (Female)

This female respondent assumes that the woman in the sketch fits the traditional mold, and is only driven to buy a gun out of desperation. Like a "good" woman, she is not prepared to actually use the gun.

The woman in the picture is often characterized by respondents as living in the city and/or living alone. According to one respondent, simply having a gun in one's possession is expected to provide a certain amount of emotional security.

"Jane is thinking she needs to purchase a gun for protection. She lives by herself and she would feel a lot better with a gun around." (Male)

This emphasis on women who live alone or in the city may reflect a media stereotype in which a single woman is more vulnerable, especially to attacks by violent strangers.

Another stereotypical perception found in the stories is that the woman in the sketch is afraid of the gun (11 out of 65). If she's not totally afraid of the gun, she's at least indecisive about whether or not to purchase it.

"Irene is doing this because she thinks she wants one but after seeing it and being shocked how large it is she's having second thoughts...Irene will decide she doesn't need the gun and leave the store." (Gender unknown)

"The woman look kind of nervous being around all those guns in a gun store...The woman will probably leave the store pretty quickly and really contemplate on whether she wants to buy a gun. (Female)

Women are also expected by respondents to be unknowledgeable about and less experienced with guns.

"The man is a salesman for the store. When the woman asks him for his suggestion of an adequate
firearm, he immediately picks up a large shotgun. Because she knows little about guns she takes his advice." (Gender unknown)

Because of this stereotype of being technically uninformed, women are often perceived as easily being taken advantage of by male salespeople. Comments by respondents reflecting this perception seem also to be related to the idea that "good" women do not own guns, but depend on a man to protect them. A "good" woman is not expected to know about such things and will naturally shy away from any association with guns. The fact is that many women are not prepared or willing to use physical force, especially against someone they know (Blair and Hyatt 1995). Women are not encouraged to participate in contact sports and are almost never trained in boxing, wrestling or shooting, as boys often are. From childhood, females are not taught the emotional and physical skills that would be required to fight back (Clarke 1993). Moreover, some women have been taught that they should flatter men by acting weak and denying their own sense of strength and power. The only truly acceptable use of physical force by women is in self-defense. The following quotation paints a neat picture of such a situation:

"She will purchase the gun and use it for protection when her house gets broken into the next week. The gun was used in self-defense. The guy who sold her the gun reads the paper and hears of the break-in and is glad no one was hurt badly." (Male)

This story also illustrates that, as predicted by schema theory, subjects are likely to attribute the woman's gun purchase to situational pressures such as an unsafe neighborhood. Despite the high frequency that the attack-by-stranger episodes occurred in the respondents' stories, most empirical evidence indicates that women are more than twice as likely to be attacked by someone they know. Every year, according to FBI statistics, roughly three thousand men murder their current or former wives and girlfriends (Jones 1994:42). The fact that so many subjects expect the woman to need the gun because of a "stranger attack" is an indication that they may be getting much of their gun knowledge from the media, as opposed to more objective sources such as scholarly and government studies on domestic violence and rising gun-related deaths in the U.S.

A less traditional view of women as rebels is inferred by a few respondents who assume that the woman is buying a gun because of acquaintance or domestic violence:

"She is thinking that she needs protection from her husband since she stole all his money during the divorce." (Male)

"The guy is going to stay away from the girl because she is more powerful." (Female)

"The girl is going to buy the gun to protect herself or to blow up some guy that treated her bad (just kidding). She will buy the gun from the salesman and feel more safe and secure in her home now." (Male)

In these quotes, the respondents are trying to make the stories fit their gender schemas about women and guns. Because they did not attribute the inconsistency with their traditional gender stereotypes to a situational factor, they are forced to make the behavior fit their existing schema-based impression of the woman's personality type.
There is one piece of information in the picture that is apparently inconsistent with the respondents' stereotypes about women who purchase firearms. Many respondents indicate that the size and/or strength of the gun is not appropriate for the woman. Twenty-six out of the sixty-five respondents mention something about this. The size of the gun is assumed to make it more powerful and expensive than a handgun, and more gun than is appropriate for the woman in the picture:

"The lady is confused and just wants to buy a stun gun that she will be able to carry with her so she can feel safe walking alone. Next, the lady is confusingly going to try and tell the man that she is looking for something a little less expensive and smaller so she can carry it around with her. The next step for the man is to try to sell her a handgun." (Male)

Even though there was an advertisement for a stun gun in the picture, it is interesting that subjects mentioned it as an option that was more appropriate than a "real" gun. According to Paxton Quigley (1989), self-defense instructor to the female stars, a stun gun is only effective under certain highly unusual conditions. A stun gun will only work if the victim can apply three seconds of constant application into a major muscle group or nerve center. Moreover, a victim must be able to wrap her arm around the assailant, dig the small electrodes into him, and hold that position for at least three seconds. If a woman can do this, she is probably strong enough to stop the assailant without the stun gun. In the following quote, size again equates to power. This quote is unusual in that the salesman is more interested in "putting the woman in her place" than in making the sale.

"She asks the man to show her the easiest, most powerful gun he has. The clerk, almost making fun of her brings out a huge rifle to show her. She proceeds to tell him that she has something a little smaller in mind. It is apparent to her after a few minutes that he is mocking her so she leaves very discouraged about gun purchase and also angry that men think women can't operate guns, so she goes elsewhere, determined to get a gun." (Female)

For some reason, respondents expect that a women will be more comfortable with and less scared of a smaller gun.

"The woman will reject the gun because of its size, she will then look at a smaller handgun that she will feel more comfortable with. She will eventually purchase a small handgun." (Gender unknown)

Maybe some kind of Freudian interpretation is relevant here (i.e., gun as phallic symbol). The woman in the sketch is definitely perceived to be uncomfortable with the "power" of a "big gun." Despite these sentiments expressed by the respondents, empirical evidence shows that handguns are more "powerful" than long guns with respect to the fact that they are more likely to be used in violent crimes. Franklin E. Zimring, a law professor, found that handguns account for only about a third of the guns owned in America, but are used in more than 75 percent of gunshot homicides and 80 percent of firearm-related robberies (Zimring 1991). It is worrisome that many respondents perceive that a small handgun, carried in the woman's purse, would be a less serious threat to the woman.

Another way that subjects attempt to make the long gun fit their gender schema is to assume that the woman must be buying a gun for her husband, because of their expectation that a rifle...
or shotgun would not be appropriate for the woman.

"Woman concerned for husband's present looks at rifle for present. While she looks at rifle she notices poster about stun guns and will ask to see the product. If she identifies with the need and the product is small enough for her to handle, she will buy for protection." (Male)

Respondents also attempt to make sense of the shotgun/rifle by incorporating it into their interpretation of the salesperson, who they assume is naturally trying to sell the woman something that she does not need. Many indicate that the salesman is trying to cheat the woman and is very greedy about making money. It could be said that these respondents expect the woman to be a "victim" of the salesman before she even purchases a gun. At least twelve out of sixty-five respondents mention something along these lines.

"She needs a gun and he is trying to sell her a long gun which she doesn't need but he will make more profit on...He is a gun dealer who is going to charge her twice what he should because he can." (Gender unknown)

Because the female customer is perceived to be vulnerable and desperate as well as inexperienced, she is depicted by respondents as particularly easy to take advantage of.

"He is thinking this will be an easy sell to a woman, who has probably been scared about something and wants to buy a gun." (Male)

A few respondents said that, although the salesman is trying to cheat the woman, she is secretly aware of this and is trying to outsmart him or get revenge, as evidenced by the following quotation:

"Once this woman finally purchases the gun most likely she will blow his head off for trying to rip her off. The man thinks he will be walking to the bank slowly to deposit a large check from the sale of this rifle but what he doesn't realize is, he is dead wrong." (Female)

Another way that respondents handle the role-inconsistency of the big gun is to assume that the woman must be crazy, confused or unstable for wanting to buy a firearm. Again, because she is doing something outside her stereotyped gender role, she must not be behaving rationally.

"The man thinks this woman is crazy..." (Female)

"The lady has a phobia that if she doesn't get the largest gun then it won't intimidate the intruder." (Female)

Some of the respondents' stories appear to be more heavily influenced by the media than others. These stories are more dramatic, and are either based on actual television/movie themes, or sound like they could be. Sometimes, the woman is depicted as having purchased the gun and as eventually shooting someone with it. Another theme that recurs is the portrayal of guns and violence as sexually stimulating, or at least leading to romance. Other times, guns are associated with rape or quarrels between lovers. It is in these stories that the tough warrior woman is likely to appear and avenge the wrongs that have been committed against her and the rest of womankind. Here is an example:

"Jane is a woman who is scared. All the media coverage about sexual harassment and rape has turned her
into a person who is paranoid about everything. In this picture Jane is buying an assault rifle to protect herself against the army of males that is out to get her and make her feel unsafe. As the guy hands her the gun, he comments on how good her perfume smells, so she shoots him with the gun. She notices the stun gun poster in the window and snickers to herself and mumbles 'Stunning, if I do say so myself.'

This story has almost a "Thelma and Louise" plot in that the woman starts the story being scared (a traditional female quality), but by the end she has been transformed.

CONCLUSION AND PUBLIC POLICY IMPLICATIONS

It is disturbing that this search for new gun markets continues, despite the threat it poses to public safety. There is a positive correlation between the number of guns owned and the number of gunshot injuries. As of 1989, according to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF), there were 66.7 million handguns and 200 million firearms of all kinds in circulation in the United States (Larson 1995). Dr. Garen Wintemute, a researcher with the University of California at Davis Medical Center, plotted the annual firearm homicide rate per 100,000 people for the years 1946 through 1982. On the same graph, he plotted BATF's estimates of the number of new firearms made available for sale each year. The two lines are highly correlated, both peaking in 1974, dipping in 1976, and rising and falling in unison several times since (Wintemute 1987). In 1985, stray bullets killed four New Yorkers as opposed to forty in 1990. In 1987, America's civilian guns were used to murder 3,187 young men aged fifteen to twenty-four, as compared to eight in Japan (Fingerhut 1990). Eight is approximately the number of killings experienced by New York City police on a single weekend (Larson 1995).

As evidenced by these statistics, guns can be viewed as one of the most dangerous consumer products, and yet there is amazingly little useful educational information about the costs and benefits of this product for consumers. For example, no one knows how many people incur nonfatal gunshot wounds each year, because no federal entity keeps track (Larson 1995). The Consumer Product Safety Commission, which protects consumers from most dangerous products, excludes guns from their mission because they fear a battle with the National Rifle Association. Their fear of a confrontation with the NRA is a realistic one, given the fact that accurate statistics would be invaluable to bereaved families seeking to win negligence suits against gun dealers, distributors and manufacturers. A true tally of nonfatal injuries would provide a more realistic picture of how dangerous guns are (Larson 1995), but most likely would hurt sales of the product.

Women in particular can get their information about guns from a number of potential sources, including childhood socialization, word-of-mouth from family and friends, personal experience, private organizations (e.g., the NRA or Gun Control, Inc.), government organizations (e.g. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms or the Violence Policy Center), advertisements and other forms of media. Through interviews with female gun owners, Blair and Hyatt (1995) concluded that childhood socialization (i.e., the presence or absence of a gun in the home) is a strong determinant of women's attitudes toward guns. It
appears that having guns in the childhood home predisposes women to perceive that owning a gun is a normal and accepted part of living. This personal experience does not, however, provide adequate education about the societal costs and benefits associated with gun use. Such a societal overview of the magnitude and consequences of gun use is only partially provided by private organizations, government organizations and the media. Due to special interests, these reports are usually one-sided and biased.

This study indicates that subjects' knowledge about guns appears to be based more on impressions from the media and/or gun-related gender stereotypes than on factual, empirical evidence. Since the media often presents stereotypical and eroticized views of women and violence, it is disturbing that such information is likely to be affecting decisions about whether or not to purchase a firearm, even if only by providing available stories. For example, a woman who is expecting to live alone in a big city may believe that she should have a gun for self-protection. She may overestimate the likelihood of being attacked by a stranger, and be overly trusting of men that she is acquainted with. She may feel like she is safer by simply having a handgun to keep in her purse. This would not be surprising, given that men, women and children are increasingly taking up arms in an attempt to cope with our increasingly violent and gun-saturated society.

However, even Paxton Quigley, a pro-gun women's self-defense expert, does not encourage women to carry a concealed weapon. First of all, there are complex state and local laws restricting the carrying of concealed weapons. Secondly, the skill necessary to use a gun in public requires extensive training, and the penalties for displaying or using a gun in public can ruin a person's life. Even a "justified" shooting in public will result in an elaborate police investigation followed by a criminal-court trial (Quigley 1989). Again, gun marketers are not going to publicize these complications.

Because the marketing of guns is a highly politicized issue, clear facts regarding the true benefits and problems related to this product category are hard to find. This, coupled with the fact that gun marketers targeting women commonly use fear appeals which play into gender stereotypes, lead us to conclude that many potential female (as well as male) gun buyers may be misinformed on the topic of firearms. Possible solutions to this problem include holding gun marketers more responsible for the accurate dissemination of consumer safety information as well as for the safe and legal use of their products (kind of like the current crackdown on the tobacco industry). Also, guns could be treated like other dangerous products that are regulated by the Consumer Product Safety Commission. Alternatively, citizens and public interest groups can call for an end to potentially deceptive marketing tactics (e.g., "Petition" 1996) as well. The key, in any case, to a solution to this growing problem is education.

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