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Unpacking Heat: Dueling Identities and Complex Views on Gun Control among Rural Police*

Rachael A. Woldoff
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
West Virginia University

Robert C. Litchfield
Department of Economics and Business
Washington & Jefferson College

Angela Sycamore Matthews
Federal Bureau of Investigation

ABSTRACT Using 20 semistructured interviews with police officers from a rural sheriff's department, we present what we believe is the first in-depth examination of U.S. rural officers' views on gun control. We find that officers possess complex views about gun control, reflecting their multiple identities as both gun-oriented rural citizens and police who seek to control the situations they encounter at work. Specifically, we observed that rural police officers: (1) embrace a rural identity that implies support of gun rights over gun control; (2) report that police work experiences have caused them to embrace their police identity and to distance themselves from some gun-related aspects of rural identity (e.g., they have lost interest in guns over time and have increasingly dissociated from gun-enthusiast peers); and (3) have learned to incorporate aspects of both identities into their views on gun control, universally advocating for some gun control measures in the name of community safety, but rejecting others as part of rural ideological views about personal freedom. We discuss research and policy implications and suggest that policymakers must better appreciate the nuances and culture of rural places in order to gain rural citizens' and rural police officers' support for gun control legislation.

Introduction

I would say that [rural upbringing] probably does have some influence on it [views of gun control], because I'm thinking, "Why would you have to take a weapon away from somebody that is well-versed in how it's to be used in the proper ways?" But on the flip side of that, being involved in law enforcement [for] so

* Direct correspondence to Rachael A. Woldoff, 319 Knapp Hall, P.O. Box 6326, Morgantown, WV 26506, e-mail: Rachael.woldoff@mail.wvu.edu.

long, I know that a lot of times weapons aren't used for what they are supposed to be used for. They're used as a destructive device against other human beings.

Kent,¹ police officer for almost 40 years

The controversial topic of gun control has been much debated among politicians, citizens, and activists in the United States in recent years. Though researchers have examined public opinion polls on gun control, little is known about police officers' views on the subject. Given that police play a pivotal role in society as the enforcers of gun laws and face a heightened risk of injury from gun violence, it is especially important for scholars to understand their perspectives on gun control. As former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg (2013) noted, "Their voices deserve to be heard." Unfortunately, many police officers are reluctant to speak openly about gun control laws, particularly in such a politically charged environment. Further, despite officers' strong professional identities, they must contend with the fact that they belong to other groups that can exert strong and conflicting pulls on their views.

Although a 2013 poll showed that 54 percent of the general public thinks that stricter gun laws would reduce the number of mass shooting deaths (Pew Research Center 2013b), research also shows that rural citizens in the United States are consistently more averse to gun regulations than their urban and suburban counterparts (Pew Research Center 2013a). This makes sense because gun ownership is part of rural identity (Ching and Creed 1997). At the same time, police work brings officers into contact with many individuals who violate police officers' strong traditional sense of morality (Loftus 2010). Officers' regular contact with citizens' illegal and unpredictable behavior combined with their desire to control situations they face may cause them to favor gun control even when it conflicts with other identities that are meaningful to them. Officers' reactions to these dueling aspects of identities—the celebration of guns in rural life and the real risks faced by officers in a gun-saturated environment—may provide insights about both limits and opportunities to connect citizens of all stripes in discussions about gun rights and gun control in the United States.

The subject of multiple and conflicting identities has long interested observers of the human condition. Scholars have defined the concept of identities in many ways, but the word generally refers to combinations of roles, group memberships, personal characteristics, or other knowledge and experiences that people view as partially self-defining

¹Names of study participants were changed in order to preserve confidentiality as per standard Institutional Review Board guidelines.

(see Brewer and Gardner 1996; Stryker and Burke 2000; Tajfel and Turner 1979). Identity theories in sociology (Stryker and Burke 2000) and social psychology (Tajfel and Turner 1979) generally acknowledge that people have multiple identities, and research is increasingly exploring the simultaneous relevance of more than one identity (for a review, see Ramarajan 2014). However, prior work has not considered how multiple identities coalesce to shape nuanced views on gun control. Relevant to this study, prior research provides evidence that both police identity (Loftus 2010) and rural identity (Hummon 1990) can override other salient identities, and their likely divergence on at least some aspects of gun control suggests a venue to explore dual identities. We examine how these allegedly strong identities fare when they come into contact with each other in light of a primarily sociology-based conception of identity wherein conflict between identities is relatively normal and expected to lead to accommodation between identities (Burke 2006).

In this article we report qualitative interviews unpacking rural police officers' gun control views. We employ Snow and Anderson's (1987) terminology of identity work to shed light on officers' embracement of and distancing from various aspects of rural and police identities related to gun rights and gun control as a way to articulate the change process that occurs when identities bump up against each other as individuals strive for verification of their identities. We find that officers' views are more nuanced than they first appear and that theory dealing with multiple identities facilitates our understanding of this complexity. Consistent with sociological theory on identity change (Burke 2006), our data suggest that officers have adjusted their identity standards to accommodate their complex experiences relevant to the issue of gun control. Our study makes two important contributions. First, we add to the extremely limited literature on police attitudes toward gun control by examining an almost completely unstudied group: rural police in the United States. The scant previous literature on this topic has included conceptual work (see, e.g., Carlson [2014] for a discussion of the militarization and privatization of criminal justice institutions), nonscientific surveys (e.g., PoliceOne.com, a website claiming to target law enforcement officers that has produced a self-selected Internet poll), and surveys of executives (i.e., police chiefs and sheriffs; see Thompson, Price, Dake, and Tatchell 2006; Thompson, Price, Khubchandani, and Dowling 2011). Our interviews complement existing literature by providing an in-depth exploration of the gun control views of *ordinary* rural officers (i.e., full-time, professional, nonexecutive). Second, we contribute to knowledge of multiple identities by

exploring how rural identity and police identity, each considered dominant in prior research (Ching and Creed 1997; Skolnick 1996), influence views on an issue relevant to each.

Background

Guns and Rural Identity

Much of the research on the power of place in shaping life outcomes and public opinion in the United States focuses on urban areas, with far less attention given to the experiences of rural residents (Gieryn 2000). Some have argued that scholars have systematically devalued rural places as a source of identity (Ching and Creed 1997), and rural life is sufficiently varied that it is doubtless impossible to define a monolithic “rural identity.” Indeed, the word “rural” itself resists easy definition in the United States (Weisheit, Falcone, and Wells 2006). Nevertheless, existing research on nonurban place identity shows that people from rural communities often hold an idealized view of rural places and small towns as quiet, slow, easygoing, friendly, and safe, where personal relations are highly valued and “everybody knows everybody” (Hummon 1990:55). This type of thinking frequently leads rural residents to disdain cities for being too crowded, unfriendly, and artificial (Hummon 1990).

Surveys examining gun control attitudes in the United States have shown that rural residents are generally less supportive of gun control than urban residents (see Semet and Ansolabehere 2011; Wolpert and Gimpel 1998). Gun ownership is consistently highest in rural places (G. Carter 2012), and rural residents tend to cherish their gun rights (Johnson 2013). According to the 2012 General Social Survey, 59 percent percent of rural households report gun ownership compared to 36 percent of suburban and 28 percent of urban households (Pew Research Center 2013b). Research on predictors of gun attitudes has been organized according to whether attitudes are driven mainly by instrumental concerns, meaning that gun owners will support gun rights because to do otherwise would threaten their gun ownership, or by cultural concerns such as the symbolic value of gun ownership to those who are concerned about government power or who otherwise embrace values associated with the early history of the United States (for a review, see Wozniak 2015). Surveys about gun control are necessarily limited to a small battery of questions that usually inquire about specific legislative proposals such as bans on handguns or assault weapons (e.g., four items in the Constitutional Attitude Survey used by Semet and Ansolabehere 2011; three items in the CBS–*New York Times* poll used by

Wolpert and Gimpel 1998). Though such surveys demonstrate that the vast majority of the public (rural and urban) “supports background checks” for gun purchases (Semet and Ansolabehere 2011), they do little to clarify whether that support is limited to the current system or whether and how it applies to efforts to strengthen such checks. Hence, qualitative research may provide crucial insights into the role of gun rights in rural life. Moreover, we suggest that a rural identity perspective might bridge instrumental and cultural views of gun attitudes because such residents have both instrumental concerns (i.e., they are much more likely to own guns) and cultural concerns, which we elaborate below.

Firearms are an important part of rural identity (Ching and Creed 1997; Whitney 2012). Rural citizens often purchase guns for hunting or sport (Bristow 1982) and are less likely to use a gun in the commission of a crime (Weisheit, Falcone, and Wells 1994). However, support for guns extends beyond recreation. Indeed, rural residents’ orientation toward individualism, self-protection, privacy, informal control, and distrust of the government and perceived outsiders is consistent with a desire for individual ownership of firearms (Oliver and Meier 2004). People who do not rely on law enforcement to provide protection often purchase guns to achieve the “individualistic” goals of protecting themselves and their families (Celinska 2007). In describing the ways in which guns are tied to rural identity, Ching and Creed (1997:29) asserted that it is “increasingly important to not just own guns, but to display them and aggressively defend their ownership; it is important to drive a truck as much for what it says about you as for the service and utility it provides, and it is important to listen to country music in which the cultural value of these symbols is reinforced.” Indeed, country music, especially in its more modern populist form, is an expression of regional rural romanticism that often explicitly values traditional rural socialization, including a love of guns; it draws heavily on southern male perspectives and expresses a rural identity that reaches even those in rural suburbia (MacKay 1993; N. Spitzer 1993). In sum, guns play a part in everything from food acquisition to property protection to outdoor sport, and are seen as a rite of passage into adulthood. Guns are signifiers of multiple dimensions of rural identity including self-sufficiency, intergenerational unity, and individualistic values.

Guns and Police Identity

Though police are not monolithic, some features of police culture are widespread. Research on police culture suggests that many classic

findings are enduring and hold across different countries and cultures (Loftus 2010). In general, police officers tend to have a strong professional identity that is resistant to transformation and is characterized by cynicism, suspiciousness (Rubinstein 1973), masculinity (Martin 1980), a need for respect (Sykes and Clark 1975), and an exaggerated sense of mission toward protecting “the weak against the predatory” (Reiner 2000:89). Further influences on the strength of police identity include the tradition of a “twenty-four-hour cop” in the United States (Fyfe 1980:73) and the tendency for police work to isolate officers from the outside world (Loftus 2010; Reiner 2000). Police identity is so salient that many officers struggle with abandoning it even for a short time (Oberweis and Musheno 1999). For instance, many officers carry their guns when off duty, either because they are required to or out of a general awareness of their role as law enforcement officers and their sensitivity to risky situations and suspicious people who surround them (Oberweis and Musheno 1999). Indeed, police generally believe their role necessitates that they be “always prepared” and “armed and ready to actively intervene in situations threatening to life, property, and order” (Fyfe 1980:72). Hence, police identity, once adopted, is not easily subsumed under other social identities.

Gun control does not play the same role in police identity that supporting gun rights plays in rural identity. Indeed, in contrast to the significant role that some have posited for gun rights in rural identity, we know of no evidence that gun control per se is a significant factor in police identity. However, the literature on police culture and identity suggests that the ability to control situations and people is a significant part of police identity that leads police to hold attitudes and engage in behaviors that enable them to self-verify the experience of control (Loftus 2010; Martin 1980; Oberweis and Musheno 1999; Sykes and Clark 1975). This value of control is relevant both to officers’ personal safety and to their job performance. For instance, Oberweis and Musheno (1999) noted the story of an officer who felt a need to sit in only specific seats in a restaurant, whether on or off duty, in order to feel safe. Loftus (2010) describes a consistent tendency of police officers to remove the keys from cars during encounters with the public in order to maintain control in the face of a situational risk factor (i.e., an individual’s unpredictable and possibly dangerous behavior with a car). Research also suggests that safety concerns may be even higher among rural officers (Oliver and Meier 2004). While these safety and performance concerns do not equate to calling support for gun control an aspect of police identity, greater presence of uncontrolled firearms does at some level affect control values that partially define how police

view themselves. For example, a recent qualitative study of policing in Baltimore found many officers who police gun-saturated urban neighborhoods know that “police officers make attractive targets” and recognize the “need for and futility of gun control laws” (Moskos 2008:150). Such concerns can lead some officers’ representatives to speak out against unlimited access to guns, as was the case when the national president of the Fraternal Order of Police (Canterbury 2013) wrote a letter on behalf of the organization strongly recommending gun control.

As with rural identity, considering gun control views in terms of police identity might bring together instrumental and cultural factors. With regard to instrumental perspectives, police are likely to feel safety concerns from uncontrolled guns. With regard to cultural issues, shared threats to safety among police might combine with police officers’ value of controlling situations, encouraging police to view themselves as uniquely qualified to possess certain kinds of guns and to have better weapons than citizens (e.g., to believe that citizens should not have assault weapons and high-capacity magazines).

Rural Police and Gun Control: Identity Conflict or Integration?

Given that rural and police identities embody strong and possibly conflicting tendencies toward views of gun control, how will rural officers reconcile them? In general, people strive for consistency in their identities and seek to reduce conflicts among them because such conflicts can be stress inducing (Burke 1991). However, having multiple, strong identities can also be a buffer against stress (Thoits 1983). Some amount of conflict is to be expected as a natural consequence of the functioning of individuals’ systems of multiple identities, and individuals can resolve these conflicts in several ways—any of which might be labeled “identity change” (Burke 2006). What is ultimately important is that individuals manage the tension over time by altering their identities in ways that allow them to verify their own identities and behavior as consistent in order to preserve self-esteem (Cast and Burke 2002).

One possibility is that either rural or police identity will come to dominate. For instance, research on women in policing has found that female officers may identify as either *policewomen* or *policewomen*—emphasizing aspects of one identity or the other within the police role (Martin 1980). Some research seems to indicate a likely dominance of rural identity (i.e., *rural* police). For instance, rural officers are more likely than their urban counterparts to live within the communities that they police because of geographic isolation and because rural departments pride themselves on hiring local citizens who share their values

and are involved in local activities (Decker 1979; Sims 1988; Weisheit et al. 2006). Rural police tend to have “biographies that are not uncommon to those of the community” (Decker 1979:105) and they avoid acting “overly high and mighty” (Weisheit 1993:225). Other research seems to reinforce police identity (i.e., rural *police*). For instance, even though rural officers serve in locations where crime rates are relatively low and where residents are reluctant to call the police (Oliver and Meier 2004), they are often alone on patrol in geographically isolated places where backup may take a long time to arrive (Weisheit et al. 1994). Together with budget-related constraints such as low pay and inadequate equipment and place-based social factors such as the “fishbowl” effect that occurs in regions where citizens personally know and scrutinize local officers (Bristow 1982), rural police may feel even more isolated than their urban counterparts.

Yet these same factors that produce conflict might also produce integration of rural and police identities. In their classic study of identity work, Snow and Anderson (1987:1356) found that homeless individuals embraced some aspects of association with homeless identity (e.g., as one who “willingly shares limited resources”) while dissociating themselves from other aspects (e.g., longer-term homeless distancing themselves from the idea of dependence on shelters or social services). Research on identity change suggests that people are especially likely to modify their identities in situations where multiple identities are activated and when the behaviors that would verify them are opposed to one another; it is in these situations that changing the meaning of identities may allow them to be simultaneously verified (Burke 2006). For instance, Burke’s (2006) study of change in spousal and gender identities in married couples found that these identities changed over time toward each other on dimensions of shared meaning. Thus, multiple strands of identity theories argue that people can and do change their identities over time. We wondered if rural police officers faced analogous dilemmas as they struggled to reconcile attitudes on gun control, where rural identity and police identity suggest views that may be in opposition to each other and where rural identity even suggests some suspiciousness toward the police (Oliver and Meier 2004). Rural officers must be especially vigilant about their words and behaviors because casual activities and statements can quickly become public knowledge and reduce their policing effectiveness in the jurisdiction (Bristow 1982). However, unlike the “outsider” status of female or ethnic minority officers, police in rural departments are largely or even exclusively from rural backgrounds (Decker 1979). Hence, rural officers have a social basis for developing common views that take aspects of both rural and police identities into account.

Reconciling identities for rural police may be helped by the fact that police identity does not equate directly to a specific set of gun control views, but rather may link to them indirectly through police identity as the ability to control situations police officers encounter. That is, guns are a threat to police identity by virtue of the fact that they are a threat to officers' ability to control the situations they encounter; yet it is unclear to what extent police will *view* gun control as a way to address such feelings of threat. This confusion is highlighted in this study because rural identity includes many positive ideas about guns. Some evidence for integration of rural and police identities is found in studies of police executives. For instance, views differ between the Major County Sheriffs' Association and those of the more urban Major Cities Chiefs Association, with sheriffs against proposed bans on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines (Stanek 2013). Although rural sheriffs are powerful in some ways (Walker and Katz 2011:69), their position as elected officials in almost all states puts them under pressure to conform to rural constituents' gun control views. Given that their job security depends on relationships with community members, they are far less insulated from the surrounding community than urban police chiefs (Weisheit et al. 1994). Hence, although research on the views of police executives shows that sheriffs are less supportive of a variety of gun controls than police chiefs (see Thompson et al. 2006, 2011), conclusions from such studies are tenuous because the urban–rural divide is heavily confounded with an appointed–elected divide. In contrast, we studied regular officers and asked the basic research question, “What do rural police in the United States think about gun control?” The complexity of these identity concerns suggests that the answer might be difficult to unpack using quantitative survey techniques, and thus, we chose individual, in-person interviews as a logical technique to probe for details on this essentially unstudied topic.

Methods

Setting: A Rural Sheriff's Department

Sheriffs' offices are a typical type of rural police agency, and are usually responsible for the local jail, court security, prisoner transport, process serving (i.e., delivery of legal papers), issuing permits to carry concealed weapons, and patrolling the county. Given that 48 percent of U.S. police departments have less than 10 sworn officers and 88.3 percent have less than 50 (Reaves 2015), smaller policing organizations represent a meaningful class. The sheriff's department we studied handles concealed carry permits for the county, making officers especially

knowledgeable about guns. Sheriff's departments are responsible for all three components of the criminal justice system (i.e., law enforcement, courts, and corrections), making them more broadly informed than those who work in more specialized departments.

The sheriff's department in this study is located in a state with one of the highest rates of gun ownership in the United States and the state is in the top 10 of states in the percentage of the population holding an active concealed carry weapons permit for the five-year period ending in 2014. The department patrols over 300 square miles of territory, has approximately 40 police officers, and is active 24 hours a day, seven days a week. According to one officer, its jurisdiction went from issuing approximately 40 concealed carry permits a month to over 300 a month following politicians' calls to strengthen gun control laws after the Sandy Hook shootings.² Researchers and officials acknowledge the existence of an urban-rural continuum, debate the many methods to classify rural areas, and tend to argue that the definition must fit the subject being studied. In this case, the state has one of the smallest percentages of total population living in urban areas, with almost three-quarters living outside a city, town, or village. In regard to density, the county's population per square mile is less than 90 and it contained less than 100,000 inhabitants in 2010, more than 90 percent of whom were white. Furthermore, two-thirds resided in a remote rural section of the county where many residents are geographically isolated.³

Data Collection and Analysis

In studying rural police officers' views about gun control, we utilized the qualitative case study approach, relying on interview narratives (Strauss 1987) to analyze the experiences, interactions, meanings, and interpretations that subjects attached to their views (Weiss 1994). As part of the initial recruitment process, we conducted several pilot interviews while participating in the sheriff's department's ride-along program, in which citizens accompany officers on patrol in order to observe and learn about the profession of policing. We then used snowball sampling, ultimately conducting 20 one-on-one interviews

²Thousands of new members have joined the state's branch of the National Rifle Association since the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings.

³The state in which the department is located is mainly white, has a low population density, has limited access to public transportation, and has lower amounts of crime than the national average. In addition, it is a state with lenient laws regarding guns (e.g., it does not require background checks on private sales, allows open carry of guns in public, and does not require mental health reporting for use in background checks).

(52.6 percent of the department) in interview rooms within the department or while on ride-alongs.⁴ We informed officers about the study's general purpose, gained their approval to use an audio recorder, and notified them that we would change all interviewees' names and conceal identifying department information.

We transcribed the data verbatim, checked transcripts against the recordings for accuracy, and performed a three-stage analysis. First, we used open coding to create codes based on the interview guide, past literature, and the pilot interviews in order to form tentative organizing concepts that seemed to fit with the data (Strauss 1987). Second, we created preliminary theme categories based on the codes from the initial interviews. Third, we read the transcriptions and sorted and categorized data that illustrated each theme. Once we triangulated and established overarching themes, we found that some quotes fit multiple themes, so we reorganized as needed.

Participant Characteristics

The two criteria for inclusion in the study were that participants identified as sworn law enforcement officials and worked at the sheriff's department. Most officers were from the county that they patrol ($N=12$), six were from surrounding counties, and two were from a nearby state. Nineteen were male, one was female,⁵ and all had some level of education beyond a high school degree (e.g., trade school certifications or several years of college), including six with bachelor's degrees. Twelve were married, twelve had children, and six had military experience. All of them said that they had either been attacked with a gun, had been on a gun-related call for service, or had been threatened with a gun while they were on or off duty.⁶

Findings

We observed three major themes regarding rural police officers' views on gun control and their negotiation of dual identities. First, officers symbolically rejected the concept of gun control and instead voiced support for individuals' gun rights. Most officers grounded their views

⁴Interviews were conducted in 2013 and 2014.

⁵The department has only two female officers.

⁶Of the total number of sworn law enforcement officials at the department it is important to note that some of the officers were unavailable to be interviewed. For example, two deputies were in the police academy, two other deputies were on military leave, three officers did not want to be interviewed or said they could not be interviewed, and one officer never responded to requests for an interview.

in positive aspects of rural identity. Second, most officers distanced themselves from gun-related aspects of rural identity, explaining that their on-the-job socialization and experiences as police officers has translated into a low interest in guns at this point in their lives compared to their nonpolice peers. Third, and perhaps most importantly, officers admitted that that they support specific gun control measures, including some that are very stringent by U.S. standards and that are clearly inconsistent with the view of guns espoused within rural identity. The high similarity across officers suggests integration of rural and police identities with regard to gun control. Below, we elaborate on these three themes using the officers' narratives to describe their views on gun control and the role of their competing identities in forming and communicating these views.

Theme 1: Rural Identity and Symbolic Rejection of Gun Control

Identities motivate behavior that is perceived as consistent with maintaining them (Stryker and Burke 2000). Consistent with the idea that firearms are important to rural identity, many rural families socialize their children from a young age to be comfortable around guns (Raasch 2013), engaging in target shooting, play with pellet and BB guns, and hunting with male relatives and neighbors. In fact, some officers were surprised by interview questions about their childhood and adolescent exposure to guns because they take it for granted that guns are part of a rural socialization. Officers commented that "everyone" has guns in their community and that early exposure to guns is an essential characteristic of a rural upbringing.

Identities are also defined by their boundaries (Brewer and Gardner 1996; Tajfel and Turner 1979), and officers were keen to distinguish their rural identities by contrasting them to suburban and particularly urban identities. In that vein, they asserted that rural children receive a superior socialization to urban and suburban children because they learn about guns in a holistic, honest way, free of scare tactics. Further, officers said that rural residents learn to identify as progun because the act of publicly demonstrating gun knowledge is a way of demonstrating one's honorable and authentic rural upbringing (i.e., familiarity, firsthand knowledge, competence, and respect for firearms). Lee, an officer in his 20s, elaborated:

My views are shaped [by rural life] because that's how I was raised—around guns. I was familiar with guns [and] trained on guns, so I don't see them as that big of an issue as somebody who has [had] no contact with a weapon. I could see how they

are intimidating for people that don't have weapons or have never used a weapon. I think my upbringing had a really big effect on it, 'cause I was raised *properly*. [I was] taught how to shoot them and how to take them apart, and I'm real familiar with them.

Officers often described a “proper” rural upbringing as one in which parents teach children about gun safety, and officers believe that the correct and honorable way to raise a child is to socialize the child into the world of responsible gun use. They believe that bringing up children without knowledge of guns, or with a fear of guns, is antithetical to rural childrearing and is a less respectable parenting practice. Further, the officers consider people who are improperly socialized into gun culture as similar to the “lower” class of people whom officers encounter in the line of duty, some of whom shoot themselves or others accidentally. Some claimed that people with limited knowledge of guns tend to passively accept biased and entertainment-driven antigun messages from television, with one police officer saying that “those who see the violence on TV might have different opinions” on guns than informed people, such as rural residents who grew up around guns.

Vic, a senior officer, described the childhood culture of hunting in his poor rural community, where neighbors needed to hunt in order to secure meat in the winter and where people took pride in their ability to fend for themselves and feed their families. For him, guns represent a rustic family ritual and serve as a symbol of rural residents' modest social class standing, resourcefulness, and independence:

I grew up in a rural county, so *everyone* hunted. I've been around guns since I was a kid. I remember going to shooting matches with my dad when I was six years old, so guns are something that I'm familiar with and used to. There were always guns in our house. I use them for hunting. I have been around guns all my life, and we weren't “hoity” people. Guns were for procurement of food, and just everyone had rifles mostly. No one had handguns.⁷

Rural residents are often sentimental about guns and gun culture. This emotional attachment to guns can lead them to downplay

⁷Hunting rifles are the most commonly owned guns in rural areas, but a higher percentage of rural citizens than urban citizens owns handguns (23 percent versus 15 percent) (Weisheit et al. 1994).

potential dangers that guns present. Patrick, a high-ranking officer, said that he owns multiple guns that family members had passed down to him. Another officer said that the only guns that he owns were gifts that he has never fired and keeps out of sentimental attachment. The rural family tradition of gun ownership was also a focus of an interview with Henry, an officer in his 20s who patrols an especially isolated part of the county where cell phone service is unreliable, officer backup can take up to an hour, and residents are distrustful of outsiders and the police. Though he was born and raised in the area that he patrols, he said it took two years after he joined the police before community members began to trust him again. Henry said that he grew up with guns in his home, but that they were keepsakes from his grandfather. His family never fired them, nor did they store “ammo” in the house. When he was 10 years old, his father let him shoot one of the guns, but Henry insisted that his father’s goal was explicitly to teach his son to respect firearms, learn how to properly use them, and be safe. He viewed his gun use as similar to most people in his rural community where wide-open spaces allowed for more freedom to shoot guns and experiment with other aspects of boyhood mischief: “The rural upbringing played into it because that’s just what little hillbilly kids did. They shot their .22s. They shot their daddy’s shotgun. They filled pop bottles up with water and shot them and watched them explode and stuff. That’s what we did because we had space to do it in a rural setting. Obviously, there is space to do stuff like that.”

Although much of this imagery (i.e., children shooting bottles with a shotgun) might seem patently unsafe to urban residents, officers said that rural parents typically take steps to ensure safe gun usage. Greg, another senior officer, also mentioned responsible parenting when discussing his childhood socialization into rural gun culture. He acknowledged that guns can present dangers to children, but asserted that good parents ensure that their children know how to handle guns so they will be safe when hazardous situations arise:

I remember probably being three years old, four years old, sitting on the floor with my dad as he was cleaning guns, and he would show me how to tear them apart, how to make sure they were safe. When you hear about the seven-year-old who shoots his friend? Those are the kids that are [taught], “Don’t ever touch that, no matter what.” You know? And kids are going to do it in spite, but [what] if they were properly trained? I’m talking about their parents. If they’re going to have those type of weapons in their house, god forbid a kid ever got a hold of

it, at least it would be nice to know if they did, they would be trained to make sure they are unloaded, and that kind of thing.

Matthew also defended the merits of gun-oriented rural parenting. Like many officers, he specifically brought up the comparison to urban parents, arguing that they are less responsible than rural parents. He asserted that city people are not usually gun owners, so they simply lack the knowledge and skills needed to teach their children how to be safe:

If you grew up around firearms and firearm safety, which every common father—I'm not going say "good" but "common" father's—going to teach their son or daughter gun safety. They don't want them blowing their foot off or their arm off or their hand off. So that's not going on in the city because they just don't have guns. . . . Where[as] I think rural people are more responsible, and that's probably going to bite me in the ass later, because I know there are a few cases [of rural people handling guns irresponsibly]. But I think that your crime rate in the country—the rural areas—is less than what [it] is in the populated city areas.⁸

Many officers held the conviction that rural parents are more accountable for their children's safety because they socialize them into firearm fundamentals in order to proactively prevent accidents. In this way, gun knowledge and responsibility are part of rural pride and identity.

As these quotes indicate, most officers articulated an idealized view of rural people as responsible gun owners. In defending young rural children's gun socialization, many officers raised the topic of inferior parenting in cities, assuming that urban families do not have the knowledge to teach children to use a gun properly. Furthermore, many officers revealed exaggerated and negative views of cities and connected these to their general rejection of gun control. For instance, some officers made the point that cities with strict gun laws have high rates of gun-related violence. One officer admitted that when he thinks of cities he imagines "the South Side of Chicago right now where 10 people are being killed every day." Another argued that gun violence in rural places is not as bad as in Detroit or New York, and mentioned that when

⁸Firearms-related crime rates are higher in cities of 250,000 or more (Firearm and Injury Center at the University of Pennsylvania 2011).

watching the television news in a nearby city, “every single day there is a shooting.” Jacob, one of the younger officers, expressed the opinion that existing strict gun control policies in crime-ridden cities are ineffective:

L.A. has some of the strictest gun laws. You can't have a magazine with more than ten rounds. It doesn't matter. . . . You still have gun violence every day in L.A. There are still gang members getting shot every single day, and they have the most strict gun laws. Washington, D.C. and New York City [off-duty] police officers aren't even supposed to be carrying handguns in their city, and they still have gun violence.⁹ It's just not gonna help.

Overall, officers clearly embraced their association with rural identity and its idealized view of guns as a central part of rural life. Moreover, many statements suggested that their symbolic rejection of gun control was linked in their minds to urban identity that they wished to clearly define as separate from their rural identity.

Theme 2: Police Identity and Distancing from Enthusiasm for Guns

The tension between rural and police identities becomes evident in officers' discussions of their feelings about guns. Despite their early and deep socialization into rural gun culture, police officers' occupational socialization has altered this aspect of their rural identity. Changes in the officers' standards for rural identity set them apart from upstanding rural citizens even as they also recognized subcategories among rural residents. Most officers in our study would be considered gun enthusiasts by some measures (Kohn 2004), yet officers we interviewed frequently distinguished themselves from other rural citizens they know and cited their experiences on the job as the main reason that they have become less interested in guns than they once were. For instance, Adam, a midcareer officer, said that though he understands the passion for guns and hunting, he does not identify as a hunter anymore. Similarly, Henry said, “I don't hunt anymore. When I did hunt, it wasn't avid. Every gun I have has a purpose. It's really minimalistic gun ownership for the most part. It's [guns] all a tool to me. When I was younger

⁹The 2004 Law Enforcement Officers Safety Act (LEOSA) allows off-duty officers to carry concealed guns in their jurisdictions and in all 50 states and U.S. territories with some restrictions, such as the rule that one cannot carry a concealed weapon in a federal building.

and shooting [it] was a lot more fun to me back then for some reason. . . . To be a member of the NRA? I think you have to be some right-winged fucknut.”

Police work is dangerous, and as a result, officers learn to distance themselves from people in their environments who pose a risk (Terrill, Paoline, and Manning 2003), to the point that police live what has been called a “schizophrenic existence” (Brown 1988:9). Exposure to guns while on the job separates police officers from other rural citizens, and the high incidence of gun ownership in rural communities does influence officers’ thinking. Emphasizing the prevalence of weapons in rural places, one officer said: “Ninety percent of them have guns somewhere. If it’s not on them, it’s in a gun cabinet or a case. That’s always on our mind. . . . If you don’t [have guns], then you’re not from around here.” Thus, contact with the dangerous side of firearms resonates with control concerns of police identity and constitutes a source of worry that would not necessarily be expected from the perspective of rural identity.

During our interviews some officers struggled to reconcile their rural and police identities as they explained their views on guns. For instance, Jacob initially objected to the questions asking whether his job has affected his gun control views and argued that increases in gun violence stem from nongun issues, but then he said: “In my line of work [my views on guns] changed a little bit because there’s a lot of people that have guns that I don’t think should have them.” Gary, an officer and military veteran, voiced support for rural gun culture when he said, “This is rural America; *everybody* was brought up on the right to bear arms.” He also pointed out that gun violence is less frequent in rural areas than in large cities. However, he then returned to his police-oriented view that gun violence “is a problem *everywhere* in the country.”

The same officers who described the role of guns in their childhoods, families, and rural identities changed their tone when we began to ask about their work experiences and guns. For instance, in the quote at the beginning of this article Kent acknowledged that his rural upbringing in a state known for gun culture had fostered a respect for firearms that continues to influence his views, but he also said that work-related dangers have led many of his colleagues to develop a more practical orientation toward guns. Kent said that his position as a high-ranking police official caused his personal opinion on gun control to evolve so much that he now considers guns to be lethal weapons that are used against human beings and therefore require control, and he believes that laws should prohibit some populations from owning them.

Paranoia, vigilance, and a suspicious nature are not only stereotypical characteristics of police officers but are also hallmarks of their workplace-related psychological distress (D. Carter and Radelet 1999). Many officers we spoke to described these stressors and how experiences with gun-owning citizens have exacerbated them. Gary said that police socialization has increased his cynicism toward average citizens, especially those owning high-powered, large caliber weapons: “I’m probably jaded [persuaded] more toward stricter regulations, just because I’ve had idiots that have no idea what they are doing with a firearm, and pull them out on calls, and just do stupid stuff.” Judd, a senior officer, admitted that working in law enforcement has led him to become paranoid, a state that he partly attributes to the fact that rural residents are known for having an abundance of firearms. Judd said that he has an ever-present fear of potential death, worsened by encountering citizens who are likely to be armed. He said that people who carry concealed weapons are required to disclose them to police and usually do, but then he revealed how extreme and taxing his level of suspiciousness is:

You still have to sit and think, “Okay, this person has a firearm. What’s their mind-set?” You don’t always know what their mind-set is. So that reflects back to, [police] always having a plan to kill anybody you meet. We’re sitting here right now. What if you pull that thing [female interviewer’s pen] out and try to stab me with that? I’m thinking, before we even sat down here, “How quickly am I going to be able to get my firearm out and put a round in your head?” That’s just the way I live. I don’t know *who* wants to kill me. Pretty much everybody wants to kill me. I have a badge. I mean, you never know.

In general, officers acknowledge that their police identity has suppressed aspects of rural identity related to the enthusiastic and idealized aspects of gun ownership. Specifically, while our first theme revealed officers expressing an idealized view of gun ownership, comments here suggest that they personally believe that their police identity has distanced them from it.

Theme 3: Support for and Rejection of Specific Gun Control Measures

Embracing their rural identity, the officers in this study universally supported gun rights at a general level rather than gun controls. Nevertheless, when questioned more specifically, almost all expressed support

for some gun control measures. The types of gun controls that garnered the most support from our sample were related to expanded background checks and training. All police viewed stricter background checks as an important step toward increasing safety of citizens and police. Officers we interviewed stated their hope that stricter background checks will prevent felons, domestic violence offenders, and those whom one interviewee called “foreigners” from purchasing firearms, though they were most concerned about the mentally ill. Currently, the federal background check form has a self-report item that asks potential gun buyers, “Have you ever been adjudicated mentally defective (which includes a determination by a court, board, commission, or other lawful authority that you are a danger to yourself or to others or are incompetent to manage your own affairs) or have you ever been committed to a mental institution?” (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives 2012). Darryl, a senior officer, noted that a mentally ill person simply has to check “no” on the form in order to purchase a large caliber automatic weapon.¹⁰ He believes that mental illness is the major weakness in the current federal system, asserting that criminals will still be able to access firearms, but that gun violence could be greatly reduced by keeping guns away from the mentally ill. Henry went so far as to argue that the first step in expanding background checks should be loosening HIPPA laws.¹¹ In his eyes, lawmakers should reduce HIPPA protections so that background checks would flag even minor and common mental health issues, such as panic attacks and depression.¹²

Many officers in our sample also voiced support for more gun control legislation increasing the required amount of training. In the state in which we conducted our study, citizens are required to take a gun safety class only if they seek a concealed carry permit. Officers’ views started with a fundamental asymmetry: Civilians in the state must take an eight-hour course to qualify to carry a concealed weapon in public, but the police academy requires officers to take at least four months of firearms training. According to Kent, 75 percent of the bullets police shot at the range must hit a target, and if officers fail, they have to

¹⁰Only a small fraction of people with mental illness meet the federal standards for inclusion in the gun database (Tanfani 2013).

¹¹HIPPA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996) protects the privacy of individually identifiable health information.

¹²About one in four U.S. adults suffers from a diagnosable mental disorder each year (National Institute of Mental Health 2014). In 2009 40 percent of U.S. adults with serious mental illnesses did not receive any treatment (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 2010).

retake the course. Several officers referenced their experiences comparing police and civilian training when discussing the inadequacy of the state's gun safety training classes. For instance, Gary worried that civilians who have only a few hours of training are allowed to carry the same weapons as military and law enforcement officers who have completed many months of training:

It's like a one day course right now where you basically just show up [and] do some basic familiarization stuff. Like, don't point your gun sideways when you're loading it 'cause if you're on a firing line there are people standing next to you, and if you accidentally pull the trigger, you could shoot them. And they make sure you understand the basic mechanics of it, but they don't touch on marksmanship. And every firearm is different, mechanically. They don't go over cleaning the weapon properly, and how to clean it safely, and just the basic mind-set behind using a firearm. The military and law enforcement? They have, like, four months of boot camp or academy where that gets drilled into you every day, and you still have people screwing it up at the end. Civilians go out and take an eight-hour course, and they're expected to be able to maintain [a gun] safely. You've got guys that have been training for four months, and they're still making stupid mistakes with a firearm. I don't think people should be able to go to an eight-hour course and carry the same firearm.

Judd gave an account of one of his recent calls for service:

A kid who has a concealed carry permit, who's been through a gun safety class, had a .380 firearm, was cleaning it—him and his buddy cleaning it—put it back together, puts a fully loaded magazine in it, chambers a round, and then says literally, "I didn't want to chamber a round." So he racks the firearm back. A bullet ejects. Anybody that knows anything about guns and has been through a gun safety class knows that with a magazine in, another round is going to rechamber [in the gun]. He completely lost his mind and forgot that it chambered a round. Needless to say, he shot himself.

Incidents like these lead officers to conclude that current gun safety training requirements are ineffective for the average citizen and show how officers' work has led them to regard themselves as separate from even ordinary rural citizens on issues related to guns.

Megan, an officer for five years, believes that it is inconsistent and hypocritical to require hunters to take a safety class to get a hunting license but not require training to purchase a firearm. Indeed, though many officers consider rural citizens to be responsible and safe gun owners, several actually argued that *all* people should be required to take training classes whether they own a gun or not. Also notable is that officers view rural residents both as responsible gun owners, like themselves, but also as unsafe and insufficiently trained to own and use firearms. The tension in these views is clear: Police seem to want to view themselves as similar to other upstanding rural residents, but they realize that their experiences as police have led them to hold a high standard about gun owners' minimum threshold of competence, one that many upstanding rural residents would reject.

Beyond increasing background checks and firearms training, other types of gun control laws elicited less support. Wyatt, an officer in his 30s, noted that ordinary citizens need gun rights because many criminals obtain guns in ways that gun control legislation would not prevent. Even with regard to school shooters, he observed, "It's not like they went through the process, or they were prohibited from carrying a gun. They got it on the black market or took it off somebody that is a good, outstanding citizen gun owner."

Consistent with rural identity, officers were almost universally united in their support for concealed carry rights for ordinary citizens despite their reservations about training. Many justified their views by contrasting rural life with stereotypes about the worst aspects of cities. For instance, Judd noted:

I'm a firm believer of concealed carry. I think that if there were more [people with] concealed carry [permits, then] there would be less crime. Some of these big cities that are banning guns altogether? Look at the crime rate. Look at the crime rate of Chicago. I mean, it's what, an average of two to three murders per day in Chicago? So, yeah, I think that the criminals know, "Hey, I'm going to go up here and mug grandma, or I'm going to rape this chick over here." They would probably think twice if they thought, "Oh, this person might have a gun."

Officers were also mostly against reinstating a ban on assault rifles. They argued that these kinds of guns are not the problem; the public is misinformed on this issue, and such a ban would have no effect on gun violence. Roger, a senior officer, blamed media misrepresentations of

guns and claimed that the term “assault” weapon merely refers to a rifle that has been around for 60 years. Vic agreed and said, “Convicts are still going to have assault rifles and don’t care. You’ve probably heard this a thousand times already. Really, why would you penalize a law-abiding citizen whenever convicts are running loose with whatever arms they can gather?” However, Gary offered a different view and said that he strongly opposes assault-style weapons: “There is absolutely no reason that people should be able to go out and purchase AK-47s and M-4s and stuff like that. That’s stuff that civilians just have no need for whatsoever.” Gary went on to say that military and law enforcement officers are the only people who should have access to assault-type weapons and that the only reason a civilian would need a high-powered weapon is if “you’re planning on knocking off a 7–11.”

In sum, officers supported some very strict gun controls (i.e., background checks, training) but were more gun rights-oriented in other areas (i.e., concealed carry, assault weapons). Consistent with the cynicism about government attributable to both rural and police identity, most officers were pessimistic about the potential for government to enact useful gun regulation. However, one officer, Matthew, suggested a way forward: “I think they’re [politicians] are a long way from solving that problem [gun-related deaths], a very long way. They need to come up with something that the public is going to agree with. If they start trying to get too tough and take too many rifles away, the public’s gonna be very angry with it, and it’s just not gonna go over well.”

Discussion

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first qualitative U.S. study of rural police officers’ views on gun control. Previous literature on gun control focuses almost exclusively on the general public’s opinion rather than on the police perspective. We contribute to the scholarly understanding of this timely and important discourse by examining the intersection of two identities central to the debate: rural place identity and police identity. We find that: (1) officers embrace a rural identity that implies support of gun rights over gun control; (2) police work experiences have caused them to distance themselves from aspects of rural identity, in effect changing their standards for defining rural identity to deemphasize guns as they have lost interest in guns over time and have dissociated from their gun-enthusiast peers; and perhaps, most importantly (3) rural police officers incorporate both identities, as they almost universally advocated for some specific gun control measures consistently with police values for situational control, but rejected

others as part of ideological views about freedom. The findings suggest a nuanced understanding of policing and gun control, show how gun-related attitudes can be explained through an identity perspective in a rural context, and have implications for understanding gun control debates as well as for our understanding of how individuals negotiate multiple identities.

Research Implications

Overall, our findings fit well with the idea that individuals engage in identity change in order to accommodate conflicting aspects of important identities (Burke 2006). The language of associational embracement and distancing introduced by Snow and Anderson (1987) seems to capture how each identity exerts influence and also gives way to some extent to enable the officers to achieve a feeling of internal consistency among their identities. In emphasizing their affinity with rural communities, officers clearly engaged in what Snow and Anderson (1987) called “associational embracement” of rural identity and its corresponding view of gun rights. Officers in our sample work and live within a “gun culture” that Kohn (2004:4) described as “a geographic locale where gun ownership is prevalent and where people are socialized into gun ownership and ‘pro-gun’ values.” Rural citizens perceive guns as an important, functional, and positive aspect of life, so advocating for gun rights is a way to extend support and validation for rural identity as a whole. Officers described their belief systems about guns as tied to a sense of rural decency and insider belonging (see Young [1993] for a description of authentic rural cultural identity) and recounted their personal histories with guns as essential to a “proper” rural childhood. Theorists have also pointed out that social identities have meaning mainly in contrast to other identities (e.g., urban vs. rural; Tajfel and Turner 1979). Officers’ support for gun rights differentiates them from urban and suburban residents, whom they perceive to be misinformed, untrained, and dominated by worries over firearms as instruments of violence and destruction. Our interviewees consistently contrasted rural upbringing with that of urban and suburban residents, whom they view as lower on the cultural hierarchy with regard to childrearing. Just as urban residents may hold simplistic and negative views of rural populations, rural officers stereotyped the city with regard to guns. Indeed, the framing of the gun control debate itself (i.e., *gun rights* versus *gun control*) illuminates the distance between rural and urban–suburban identities on this issue. Future research should address these issues. A comparative study including both urban and

rural police officers to contrast narratives would be especially informative.

Officers' descriptions of their current relationship to guns and gun owners can be seen as a form of "associational distancing" in which one seeks to dissociate from some aspects of a group (Snow and Anderson 1987), in this case changing their rural identity standard to attain consistency with their police identity (Burke 2006). Here, officers distanced themselves not only from guns, but also from the larger category of "gun nuts" and gun enthusiasts within their social network of family, friends, and neighbors. This distancing facilitates their embracement of their role as reasonable and competent police officers, wherein guns are regarded as threatening to police values to be able to control situations they encounter. Given the general consensus that police identity is very strong, future research should consider how it modifies other social identities beyond race (Leinen 1984) and sex (Martin 1980).

Officers' apparent redefinition of rural identity to deemphasize guns in some ways contradicts idealized views of rural gun owners as universally competent (Celinska 2007), yet it also suggests that rural police might reframe their gun attitudes to emphasize the overlap between police identity's value of being able to control situations and rural identity's value of individualism and taking care of oneself (Ching and Creed 1997; Oliver and Meier 2004; R. Spitzer 1993)—both of which share underlying relationships to masculinity (Loftus 2010; Mackay 1993; R. Spitzer 1993). Seen in this light, the views of rural police could be regarded by the officers themselves as indicating a very strong rural identity due to their extraordinary competence with firearms. Officers' tendency to support some types of gun control while rejecting others suggests an integration of rural and police identities through mutual accommodation in identity standards to arrive at a consistent overall system (Burke 2006). Although police officers obviously differ greatly from the homeless individuals studied by Snow and Anderson (1987), the goals of homeless individuals' identity work—self-respect and dignity—have clear parallels in this study. Consistent with a need to command respect and serve effectively as police professionals, officers regarded expanded background checks and increased firearms training requirements as rational and necessary, often arguing for wide-reaching measures such as outright prohibitions on gun ownership for anyone with even a mild history of mental illness, as well as advocating for mandatory firearms training for all citizens *regardless of whether they own a gun*. In sharp contrast to these views but fully consistent with a need to maintain self-respect and dignity in a community where gun ownership is viewed as a natural part of responsible citizens' lives, they

expressed mixed support for banning assault weapons and no support at all for limiting concealed carry rights beyond instituting additional training. Thus, officers integrated rural and police identities into a remarkably consistent set of “rural police” views on gun control.

We believe that their attitudes can be understood in light of identity research showing that people routinely modify standards associated with individual identities while striving for consistency in their overall self-concept (Burke 2006). Officers’ support for gun controls was tied to threats to their ability to control situations they face as police. Interestingly, however, police in our sample seemed to define such “threats” less as criminal than as incompetent (i.e., untrained) or unstable (i.e., mentally ill). These definitions deserve notice because they are not clearly represented in existing surveys of police executives (Thompson et al. 2006, 2011), but could easily be added in future research. In contrast, officers’ stated opposition to gun control was based on their rural pride and belief about gun rights. Here, they dissociated themselves from the institutional aspect of police identity wherein officers can be seen as symbolic agents of big government or “gun grabbers.” Hence, similarly to many rural citizens, rural officers support gun rights. Future research might examine other potential indicators of a distinct rural police identity. More generally, our research suggests that one way that individuals might reconcile multiple identities is by embracing combinations of dimensions of the identities that minimize their own inter-identity conflicts.

Policy Implications

Rural officers’ explanations of which specific gun control laws they support and their reasons for doing so provide insights into the barriers to gaining public support for gun control. Our findings suggest a need to reconsider the focus on urban places in our understanding of gun-related policy issues and recognize the distinct cultural meanings that guns hold for rural residents. Robert Spitzer (1994) points out that gun control is a form of social regulation, and in rural places where gun culture thrives and crime is low, residents may perceive that the stated reasons for changing gun policy are disconnected from rural problems. Guns have played such a personal and sentimental part in rural residents’ family and community lives that many people distrust discussions of guns that exclusively focus on their role in crime and overlook their importance as markers of rural culture and decent upbringing. Our research thus suggests that policy solutions regarding gun control should be culturally sensitive to the positive cultural meanings that

guns have for rural populations. Progun activists already understand the power of appealing to local organizations. Goss (2008) argues that the antiregulatory movement effectively mobilizes citizens by working at the national, state, and local levels. Whether gun control activists could similarly localize their message remains an open question.

Limitations and Additional Directions

Our study consists of qualitative data collected from a single rural police department. Although the department appears to be similar to many others in its size and rural focus (Reaves 2015), we obviously cannot rule out the possibility that police in other rural departments would respond differently. Future research is certainly needed to examine the generalizability of our findings. A second limitation is that, despite interviewing over half of the department we studied, the total number of individuals in our sample is modest. Obviously, future research with a larger sample and that compared police from urban, rural, and suburban locations would be welcome even if it is difficult to imagine gaining funding and access for this highly politicized topic (Kelderman 2015).

In conclusion, our research shows that rural police officers have views about gun control that reflect aspects of both rural and police identity. Given the paucity of research attention granted to rural place identity and police views of gun control, we hope that our work can inspire scholars with a number of different interests. Considering the importance of gun rights—gun control debates to the future of U.S. society, we hope that others will take the nuanced views of our rural police as a starting point to further explore common ground between constituencies that rarely find it.

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